No Paths Are Bound

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/34816549.

Rating:
Explicit

Archive Warning:
Graphic Depictions Of Violence

Category:
M/M

Fandom:
天官赐福 - 墨香铜臭 | Tiān Guān Cì Fú - Mòxiāng Tóngxiù

Relationships:
Hua Cheng/Xie Lian (Tian Guan Ci Fu), Feng Xin/Mu Qing (Tian Guan Ci Fu), Pei Ming/Shi Wudu, He Xuan/Shi Qingxuan, Ling Wen/Yushi Huang

Characters:
Hua Cheng (Tian Guan Ci Fu), Xie Lian (Tian Guan Ci Fu), Feng Xin (Tian Guan Ci Fu), Mu Qing (Tian Guan Ci Fu), Bai Wuxiang, Xiè Lián's Parents, Wu Ming, Jun Wu (Tian Guan Ci Fu), Qi Rong (Tian Guan Ci Fu), Láng Yíng (Tiān Guān Cì Fú), Original Characters, Mei Nianqing, Pei Ming (Tian Guan Ci Fu), Ling Wen (Tian Guan Ci Fu), Shi Wudu, Shi Qingxuan, He Xuan (Tian Guan Ci Fu), Wei Ying | Wei Wuxian, Lang Qianqiu, Quan Yizhen, Yin Yu (Tian Guan Ci Fu), Ban Yue (Tian Guan Ci Fu), Lan An (Modao Zushi), Lan An's Cultivation Partner (Modao Zushi), Jiang Chi (Modao Zushi), Pei Su (Tian Guan Ci Fu), Shen Yuan | Shen Qingqiu, Yushi Huang, Heaven's Eye (Tian Guan Ci Fu)

Additional Tags:
Basically a retelling of the novels, Hurt/Comfort, Horror Elements, Internalized Homophobia, Hong-er plays a much bigger role earlier on, major novel spoilers, Mentions of sex work, Very minor fenglian, Graphic Violence, Torture, Suicide Attempt, Implied/Referenced Suicide, Fan art included in chapters, when I say slow burn i mean 65k words in u get (1) smooch, implied sexism and abuse of power, mdzs references all over the place, basically everyone falls in love with Xie Lian at one point or another, Yin Yu needs to unionize against Hua Cheng’s capitalist oppression, Implied Sexual Content, gender fluid characters, Cunnilingus (Beefleaf),

Vaginal Sex (beefleaf), sexual assault (not of a main character), Domestic Violence, Demisexuality, Edgeplay (accidental), References to SVSSS, implied childhood sexual abuse (not of a main character), Hand Jobs, Anal Sex, Oral Sex, Pregnancy (not of main characters)

Language:
English

Series:
Part 1 of MXTX - Retellings, Part 1 of No Paths Are Bound + Extras

Stats:
Published: 2022-04-13 Completed: 2022-09-08 Words: 1,158,737
Chapters: 152/152

No Paths Are Bound

by Cataclysmic_Calamity

Summary

Xie Lian found something in himself that he thought was gone—worn away with every mistake he had made.

Faith.

His arms opened, and the child was hesitant—but eventually, he fell into them, his body trembling with silent sobs.

"I remember you," he whispered again, voice breaking as Hong-er clung to him.

I remember you.

I remember you.

I will always, for as long as I live, remember you.

(A re-telling of TGCF where Xie Lian has his cursed shackle placed in his eyes, blinding him. And yet, through all of his struggles; there is always someone watching over him.)

(MULTIPLE TRANSLATIONS AVAILABLE)

Notes

This is, once again, a story that started as a thread fic on twitter—if you want to keep up with current updates, you can find me on @cataclysmicevie !

- Translation into Português brasileiro available: No Paths Are Bound [Tradução Pt-Br] HIATUS by AceSpadey
- Translation into Українська available: Й ти не звідаєш перепон (No Paths Are Bound/UA/UKR) by seishei
- Translation into Polski available: No Paths Are Bound [tłumaczenie PL] by Leanaz
- Translation into Français available: No Paths Are Bound (FR) by HuaHuaChengCheng
- Translation into Español available: No Paths Are Bound (Español) by Islaofnofucksgiven

- Translation into Русский available: Никакие Запреты Неведомы (No Paths Are Bound) by Lissaart, WitchDiff
- Translation into Türkçe available: No Paths Are Bound || Türkçe Çeviri by essizSalatalik
- Translation into Italiano available: Nessun Percorso È Vincolato (No Paths Are Bound) by Paradise_sky

Table Of Contents / Disclaimers / Additional Information

Chapter Summary

> Given the length and breadth of this story, an informational chapter seems necessary. This will explain what the story is, how it works, as well as give you helpful information as you navigate the fic. You don't have to read, it is skippable, but may be helpful.
>
> This has three Sections:
>
> Frequently Asked Questions
>
> Table of Contents
>
> Spotify Playlists

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

FOREWORD

I know this informational chapter can seem like a little bit much, but with how long this work is (and the limitations placed on tags by Archive of Our Own), it's necessary to make sure people know exactly what they are getting into before they read this story! First, I want to say thank you for stopping by! While this has become my most popular work, I certainly don't take any readers for granted, and I'm grateful to anyone who takes the time to read this monstrosity! Second, while I am aware that this story has become widely read across the TGCF fandom, I do ask people to remember that this was written in ten months, while I was in university. I am not a professional, and while I worked very hard on this story and am proud of it, it is not perfect. I humbly ask that anyone who reads it manage their expectations accordingly. This was a labor of love, done with the utmost respect to MXTX and the beautiful story they created. Even if you do not read the subsequent FAQ, I ask that anyone who reads this understand that this story is not a supplement or a replacement to the canon storyline, it is a love letter to it. Thank you again for stopping by, and I hope you enjoy the story.

By Heaven Official's Blessing, No Paths Are Bound!

Evie

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:

Is this a fan translation of Tiān Guān Cì Fú?

No. This is not a fan translation, and this should not be considered canon to TGCF. This story re-tells the events of TGCF with elements of canon divergence, and should be treated as a *canon AU*.

Can I read this story without having read the novels?

That is not recommended. This story covers **most** of the canon timeline, but it does so in a different order. We pick up from **Book Four**, and use a linear timeline rather than the novel's flashback system. If you begin this story without having read the novels, you **will** spoil yourself for most of book four. Also, while most of the fic still uses exposition and explains lore, there are **some** canon events that are not explained in the story, presuming that you have already read the novels. This will lead to confusion. Furthermore, this story expands heavily on canon lore and inserts new characters, and if you have not read the books, the canon and non canon elements will confuse you.

> **PLEASE NOTE: I read the novels prior to the official english translation through Seven Seas, so when I say Book Four, I am referring to the original Web Novels, of which there are five. If you are judging by the English translation volumes, you should wait until at least Vol. 6 of the Seven Seas release in order to avoid spoilers for the fourth arc of the series. This story goes in chronological order, so after that point has been passed, you will be spoiler free up until the arc that is going to be covered in Seven Seas volumes 7-8, but this arc is highly canon divergent in this story and holds very few similar plot points.**

Can I read this story without reading Mó Dào Zǔ Shī?

Yes. There are no spoilers from *Mó Dào Zǔ Shī* in this story. That being said, it does include quite a bit of lore from MDZS. However, you do not have to read MDZS to understand this lore, it will be explained within this story. There are also allusions to SVSSS, but beyond understanding the basic premise of that series, you do not need to know anything else.

Can I print/book bind this story?

Yes. You may print or book bind a copy to have at home, but it may not be used for commercial profit.

Can I translate this story?

If it is credited and I have given you permission, then yes.

Can I create fan content inspired by this story, and if so, can I have it included in the fic?

Yes. I am extremely flattered whenever anyone makes additional content from my writing, and as long as I am credited I do not mind. This includes any form of creative content. If you write a fic inspired by this one and would like it to be listed as a related work, as long as it's clearly derived from this story, it will be approved! I also allow inclusion of my original characters in fan art and stories, as long as it's credited. I also try to link as much fan art inspired by this story within the fic as I can, but I only do so if I have your written permission as the artist. I have had people express that they would like to share fanart from this story but do not have a twitter. If you prefer another platform but would still like to have your artwork included, feel free to leave a link in the comments, or reach out to me at cataclysmiceve1@gmail.com, and I am happy to work with you! It's always an honor to know my writing inspired someone else's creativity, and I'm always happy to celebrate other creators when possible!

Are all of the relationships tagged prevalent in the story?

Hualian is the central couple of this story. However, a significant amount of time is spent focusing and expanding on other characters and relationships. Beefleaf and PeiShui get a **lot** of screen time once we move into content from **Book One** onward. FengQing is also prevalent throughout the story. LingHuang does not become relevant until later, but all of these side couples play serious roles within the story, they have their own arcs and individual scenes, and they are not only mentioned briefly, hence why those relationships are tagged.

Should I be concerned about the sexual assault related tags?

This story heavily discusses themes of grooming, child abuse, and sexual assault. There are scenes that depict sexual assault. However, these scenes are always warned for ahead of time within the beginning notes of each chapter, and you do not need to read them to understand the story. There is also a scene where, involving a relationship that has themes of dubious consent, the sex results in a pregnancy (this does not happen to Hualian.) If I ever fail to tag something appropriately, please tell me in the comments and I will adjust. It's important to me to make this story as accessible as possible for anyone who wants to take the time to read it! Furthermore, neither Xie Lian nor Hua Cheng are sexually assaulted in this story, nor do they experience Childhood Sexual Abuse, these events are experienced by other characters within the story.

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The 800 Year Gap: Chapters 14 - 39

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Book Two Content (Seven Seas Vol. 2) : Chapters 63 - 65

Book Three Content (Seven Seas Vol. 3-6) : Chapters 66 - 112

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Book Five Content (Seven Seas Vol. 7-8) : Chapters 116 - 142

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Q & A / Post-Word: Chapter 152

SPOTIFY PLAYLISTS

(Offset count by 1 for informational chapter)

This story has a lot of playlists associated with it that you can listen to while you read if you want!

First is the official No Paths Are Bound **Playlist,** which has tracks that correspond to every chapter of the fic, and updates as the story does.

Here's the tracklist, and it's corresponding chapters:

Ch. 1: *King, You Found Me*

Ch. 2: *Through the Eyes of a Child, Ugly, This is How You Fall in Love, July*

Ch. 3: *Sorrow, Now Comes the Night, Swallowed By the Sea, Saturn, Leaves from the Vine*

Ch. 4: *Remember Me, It's Quiet Uptown, Dancing With Your Ghost, Echo*

Ch. 5: *My Mistake, Bad Friend*

Ch. 6: *Haunted, Gravity*

Ch. 7: *The Devil Within, Become the Beast, O Death, My Love Will Never Die*

Ch. 8: *The Archer, Appointments*

Ch. 9: *How Villains Are Made, Paint it Black, If I Killed Someone for You*

Ch. 10: *Glass Heart Hymn, Control*

Ch. 11: *The Times, They are a-Changin', Order 66 Theme*

Ch. 12: *Heavenly Father, Landslide, Stop Crying Your Heart out, Epiphany, Evermore*

Ch. 13: *Cover My Eyes, Best of Me, Found/Tonight, Wait for Me (Reprise)*

Ch. 14: *Eye of the Needle, Bloody Tears (epic version), Don't Get in My Way, Trials*

Ch. 15: *Maps, Wolves*

Ch. 16: *Hunt You Down, The Waltz of the Bone King, The Devil's Whisper*

Ch. 17: *Bad Dreams, Jenny of Old Stones*

Ch. 18: *Holy, Tolerate It, The Last Butterfly*

Ch. 19: *True North*

Ch. 20: *Smoke Signals*

Ch. 21: *Bad Moon Rising*

Ch. 22: *New Years Day*

Ch. 23: *All Too Well (10 Minute Version)*

Ch. 24: *Blood On My Name*

Ch. 25: *Comes and Goes (in waves)*

Ch. 26: *Dear Friend Across the River*

Ch. 27: *Come Away to the Water*

Ch. 28: *Let You Down, Survivor*

Ch. 29: *Dark in My Imagination, Iron*

Ch. 30: *Graveyard*

Ch. 31: *A Sky Full of Song*

Ch. 32: *For What it's Worth*

Ch. 33: *The Chain, Look Who's Inside Again*

Ch. 34: *Wanderer's Lullaby, Stories*

Ch. 35: *I'm Trying (Not Friends)*

Ch. 36: *Ba Sing Se*

Ch. 37: *Wu Ji*

Ch. 38: *Shang-Chi Main Theme, Blackest Crow*

Ch. 39: *Something I Need, Thus Always to Tyrants*

Ch. 40: *Immortal*

Ch. 41: *Yi Hua Yi Jian, Fall on Me*

Ch. 42: *Crazier Things*

Ch. 43: *Ghost*

Ch. 44: *Death Wish*

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Ch. 46: *Sociopath*

Ch. 47: *I Hope You're Happy*

Ch. 48: *1000 Times*

Ch. 49: *Falling*

Ch. 50: *All That You Are*

Ch. 51: *The Hills*

Ch. 52: *She Used to be Mine, The Night We Met*

Ch. 53: *Chaos is a Ladder*

Ch. 54: *The Wondersmith and his Sons, The Home We Made*

Ch. 55: *The Devil is a Gentleman*

Ch. 56: *The Beast*

Ch. 57: *Flames*

Ch. 58: *Nothing is as it Seems*

Ch. 59: *Runaway*

Ch. 60: *Who Are You*

Ch. 61: *Body Bag, Wasteland, Baby!*

Ch. 62: *Happier than Ever - Edit, Let Me Go*

Ch. 63: *Good Girl Winnie Foster*

Ch. 64: *Run, Perfect - Stripped*

Ch. 65: *Mercury*

Ch. 66: *Autumn*

Ch. 67: *Epic III, Fairytales*

Ch. 68: *Yellow, Infinity, Through Heaven's Eyes*

Ch. 69: *I Scared All My Friends Away, When the Party's Over, 85%*

Ch. 70: *Tear in My Heart*

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Ch. 72: *Afterglow, Heavenly, Turn out the Lights*

Ch. 73: *To the Gallows*

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Ch. 76: *Suspiria*

Ch. 77: *No Time to Die*

Ch. 78: *For the First Time in Forever (reprise)*

Ch. 79: *Swan Lake - Epic Trailer Version*

Ch. 80: *Never Let Me Go*

Ch. 81: *Enemy, Ready As I'll Ever Be, Double Crossed*

Ch. 82: *I Was Wrong*

Ch. 83: *The Confrontation, The Last Agni Kai, Dear Theodosia*

Ch. 84: *Surface Pressure, Older than I Am, Adelaide*

Ch. 85: *Drown, Casualty, Trauma, Waste This, Monster, Illicit Affairs, Favorite Crime*

Ch. 86: *The Successor, Xion, Goodbye, What Could Have Been, Requiem, Dear Theodosia (reprise)*

Ch. 87: *Hear Me Roar, Light of the Seven, Losing Your Memory, If I Die Young, Arms Tonite*

Ch. 88: *Meet Me In the Woods, High*

Ch. 89: *Better Man, Hold My Girl, [Wen Qing] Woodland*

Ch. 90: *The Mask*

Ch. 91: *Angels (Acoustic), i wanna be your girlfriend*

Ch. 92: *The Kids Aren't Alright, Ways to Go, Lotta True Crime*

Ch. 93: *Bastards, Dear John, I Think I'm OKAY*

Ch. 94: *Lightning Crashes*

Ch. 95: *Pokerface*

Ch. 96: *Falling In Love, Bad Liar*

Ch. 97: *Lay All Your Love on Me*

Ch. 98: *Till It Happens to You, abcdefu (angrier)*

Ch. 99: *STFU!!*

Ch. 100: *Lotta True Crime*

Ch. 101: *Gimme, Gimme, Gimme (A Man After Midnight), Hayloft*

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Ch. 103: *Serial Heartbreaker*

Ch. 104: *The Man*

Ch. 105: *Invisible String*

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Ch. 107: *Little Dark Age, Leave Me Alone*

Ch. 108: *I Did This All For You, Bruises*

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Ch. 110: *All of Your Lies, Mr. Forgettable, Sweet Dreams*

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Ch. 118: *Feeling Good*

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Ch. 120: *Fake It, Masquerade*

Ch. 121: *Marjorie, Night Changes (slowed), Kiss it Better, Your Ex-Lover Is Dead*

Ch. 122: *Hellfire, There Isn't Any God, A Little Piece of Heaven*

Ch. 123: *Hell's Coming With Me, Ain't No Crying, Power, Friction, We Will Rock You*

Ch. 124: *Hold My Hand, Take Me Home*

Ch. 125: *No One's Here to Sleep, The High Seas, Demise of a Nation*

Ch. 126: *Not That Big, Gasoline, Headlights*

Ch. 127: *Washing Machine Heart, Darkest, Mikasa vs. Warhammer Titan, Ashes*

Ch. 128: *Tough to Be a God, Holding Out For A Hero, Rapid As Wildfires*

Ch. 129: *The Mad King, My Condolences, Monster*

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Ch. 145: *Come to Me, Lover*

Ch. 146: *Light of Love, Love, Heaven*

Ch. 147: *Not Easy, 7 Years*

Ch. 148: *Don't Take the Money, Mirrorball, The Great War*

Ch. 149: *As it Was, Life You Lead, Greek Tragedy*

Ch. 150: *In Your Arms, Carry On, Sweetest Devotion, Mastermind*

Then, there are playlists that correspond to **specific arcs** within the story:

- **The Kiln / Mount Tonglu**
- **Guoshi Fangxin**
- **The Black Water Arc**
- **The Water Masters Arc**

Then, there are playlists for **relationships** within the story.

- **Hualian**
- **BeafLeef**
- **Fengqing**
- **Peishui**

Finally, there are playlists for **characters** within the story.

- **Xie Lian**
- **Hua Cheng**
- **Mu Qing**
- **Feng Xin**
- **Wu Ming**
- **The White Clothed Calamity**
- **Shi Qingxuan**
- **He Xuan**
- **Shi Wudu**
- **Pei Ming**
- **Ling Wen**
- **Yushi Huang**
- **Quan Yizhen**
- **Yin Yu**
- **Ren Song / Shuo (Original)**
- **Zhao Beitong (Original)**

Chapter End Notes

> This will be updated with additional information as the story progresses, if you would like to have anything added to the FAQs, feel free to leave a comment! Thanks for taking the time to read this story!

I Remember You

Chapter Summary

You can find the Russian Translation of this story HERE

Chapter Notes

Songs From this chapter: King, You Found Me

The bandages over his eyes create a natural disguise—and there are days when he's lucky, and people decide to offer charity. Enough for him to have a hot meal.

What little remains of his skills from cultivation allows him to navigate somewhat—enough for menial work.

People let him help with the harvest, tend to farm animals—but that work comes and goes.

Eventually he finds one of his own shrines in a remote village, worn down and abandoned.

It feels fitting.

Local farmers give him work—and when they can't, he goes hungry.

He used to spend many nights hungry as a child, refusing food due to his delicate palette—but this is different.

This is cold, gnawing hunger—laying on the floor of his shrine, waiting for sleep to spare him from the ache.

But then…someone starts bringing food.

The first time he wakes up with a plate of fruit beside his head, he's too hungry to wonder. Maybe a farmer took pity, sent one of his children out to leave a lame beggar something to eat.

He devours them with little pride, even the berries that he used to loathe as a child.

But every morning, there's a plate.

Often in the evenings too, when he returns from a day of working himself to the bone in the fields.

Fruits. Meats. When there's bread, Xie Lian sheds a few grateful tears.

After weeks of this—his curiosity gets the best of him.

He's curled up on the shrine floor, turned on his side—feigning sleep.

And the moment he hears the soft *clink* of a plate hitting the stone floor, he's quick as a viper, rolling over, snatching out until his fingers wrap around someone's wrist, and he hears a soft gasp.

"Who are you?"

He doesn't receive an answer.

"Why are you helping me?"

He can't imagine a reason—maybe for the occasional kind gesture, but this is…

That's when Xie Lian notices how thin the wrist in his grasp is. That the person is trembling—probably from the God's strength.

He lets go, almost ashamed. "I'm sorry, you don't need to be—"

The figure scrambles away before he can speak more, left alone on the stone floor, hand outstretched.

"…Afraid," he finishes, somewhat bitter.

From then on, the food is left on the shrine steps—never too close.

Xie Lian still feels a presence, sometimes. He'll come back and find the floor swept. One day—there's a blanket. Nothing extravagant, but far better than sleeping with thin, torn rags.

Part of him wonders if Feng Xin disobeyed his orders and came to find him, but…

Even if he had disobeyed, Feng Xin wouldn't hide from him. And that arm—it belonged to someone younger. That much he's certain of, it couldn't be someone beyond their mid-teens.

But then who would be helping him now, and why?

When the entire world *hates* him—has forgotten him.

Often he can feel someone watching, hanging in the distance—never daring to approach.

Xie Lian sits up from where he was gathering stones by the edge of a stream, slowly turning his head in that direction.

He can't see the eyes on him, but Xie Lian can feel them.

"…I know you're there," he calls gently. He hears the soft rustling of leaves, the snap of a twig, like the stranger is about to leave—and his voice takes on a panicked edge, "Please—!"

The noises stop, and his voice wobbles.

"*Please*, don't go—I…"

He's…*lonely* .

Xie Lian can't remember the last time he had someone listen to him when he spoke. What it felt like to have someone by his side.

It's pitiful, really.

He hangs his head, waiting for the youth to flee, but…

Now, he hears the sounds of them cautiously creeping closer.

They don't say a word—but when they're close enough, Xie Lian reaches out, tugging at the hem of a shirt sleeve, soft and worn.

"…Why are you here?"

It's a simple question, but the ache in his voice adds so much weight to it.

The voice that answers is that of a young man.

"…To serve his highness."

Xie Lian's expression freezes—and now he's the one flinching away, trembling.

He thought he had become accustomed to the shame that came from falling so low—but in the end, he had only taken comfort in anonymity.

"You…know who I am?"

The voice sounds a little more certain—almost cocky. If Xie Lian wasn't struggling between emotions—he would have been endeared.

"I would know Dianxia anywhere."

The title makes him flinch again, shrinking towards the edge of the stream. "Don't…you shouldn't call me that…"

He senses the boy starting to retreat again, worried that he might have offended the god—and Xie Lian grabs that sleeve again, clinging tightly.

"Don't go," he repeats, his voice trembling. "*Please*, don't go."

"…" Instead of answering verbally, the youth kneels beside him.

Xie Lian shudders with relief, fingers tightening in the fabric of his shirt—and he repeats himself once again.

"Why are you here?"

"…" he can hear the confusion in the boy's tone, "To serve—"

"*Why?"* Xie Lian presses, his voice raw. "I can't give you anything now."

There's a silence—and part of Xie Lian wonders if the boy hadn't realized that until now. That maybe he thought this was all some sort of self imposed penance. After all, what could he know of cursed shackles—and now, he'll leave.

Beneath the bandages, Xie Lian's eyes fill with tears.

He'll leave. He will. Xie Lian *knows* he will. Everyone did. And the ones who didn't—he pushed them away a long, long time ago.

There's no one left now.

He's trembling, when the boy answers.

"...I don't want anything."

At first, Xie Lian doesn't believe him. He's cautious—distrustful, like a wounded animal.

The boy still comes every day. Brings the food directly, morning and night. Quietly tells the god about current events when he asks.

He catches the boy praying sometimes—never kneeling, head bowed as he stands before the shrine altar.

Xie Lian reminds him that he can't answer. That in this state, he can't even hear the child's prayers—his tone more than a little bitter.

He can't see the smile on his face.

"That isn't why I pray.”

Xie Lian's brow furrows, and the smile on the boy's face is invisible to him, but it carries more faith than a god has ever known.

"Dianxia already answered this servant's prayer once, that was enough."

Xie Lian pauses, staring in his direction blindly

When did he...?

"...What did you pray for?"

The boy doesn't look up, hands still clasped in prayer. "An answer."

The memory pricks at him, and his fingers twitch as he strains to remember. "...To what?"

"A reason to continue living in this world."

Xie Lian's breaths halt.

He hasn't forgotten that day. It was only a few years ago, after all—but still...

"What was the answer?"

The boy's reply is simple, but it robs Xie Lian of his ability to speak.

"You."

How foolish he had been, back then. Thinking he could save everyone. That he could be...

That Xie Lian could be anyone's reason for living. After the damage he's done, all through his own selfish arrogance...

And believing in him hasn't brought the boy very far. No—he's spending his days bringing a fallen god scraps to survive.

That isn't a reason for living.

Maybe it's an excuse. An obligation. But it's nothing worth believing in.

When he finally finds the ability to speak, Xie Lian's voice is thick with so much self pity—it makes him sick.

"...I guess it wasn't a very good answer, was it?"

For once, the boy's reply is sharp.

"I don't want a different one."

Xie Lian can't understand it, but it's the reply that the child has always given.

'Forget about me.'

'I won't!'

'Don't bother with me anymore.'

'This one won't leave Dianxia's side—even if I get lost, I'll always come back.'

He never believed him. Always thought that the boy would change his mind—but he never did. Even now, after months of this.

Xie Lian asks, not for the first time—

"Who are you?"

The boy has never answered before, always demurred. Called himself a believer. A servant.

The reply doesn't come as easily this time. He hesitates.

And eventually—like the answer might horrify him, he mumbles it under his breath. If Xie Lian's ears weren't so sensitive by now, he wouldn't have heard—

"...Hong..."

The god's eyes widen instantly.

"...Hong-er?"

Silence follows—and all Xie Lian can hear are the boy's trembling breaths. They sound a little wet, laden with the occasional sniffle, and eventually—

"...Dianxia remembered me?"

His voice isn't smooth, stubborn, or cocky.

It's small, awed—thick with tears.

In truth—it was a memory that Xie Lian had almost forgotten, with the chaos that followed it. Normally, when he thought back on the boy—it was when he was angry with Qi Rong. Or when he would occasionally wonder what became of him.

Xie Lian had assumed the plague took him.

The fact that it didn't—that means that the small, terrified child that he caught in his arms that day, the boy who clung to him later, bleeding and broken, sobbing that he wasn't cursed—became a killer.

Xie Lian's salvation clearly hadn't offered him much, but...

"I remember you," he whispers, lips trembling.

Xie Lian finds something in himself that he thought was gone--worn away with every mistake he had made.

Faith.

His arms open, and the child is hesitant—but eventually, he falls into them, his body trembling with silent sobs.

He isn't alone—his god is shedding tears of his own. Slipping from underneath the bandages over his eyes, making shining paths down his cheeks as he holds Hong-er in his arms.

"I remember you," he whispers again, voice breaking as Hong-er clings to him.

Xie Lian believes him.

He believes that—out of everyone else in the world—this child might see what others don't. That he knows how it feels to be alone, broken, and scorned.

Xie Lian holds the boy until he falls asleep in his arms, stroking his hair.

Handsome

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on my twitter and the current updates of this fic here.
>
> Songs for this chapter: Through the Eyes of a Child, Ugly, This is How You Fall in Love, July

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Xie Lian begins to believe that Hong-er won't leave.

That trust is terrifying at first, but it grows with every passing day. The boy keeps his distance when Xie Lian needs it–but he's always there.

He accompanies Xie Lian to the fields, always insisting on taking the harder work for himself.

Xie Lian learns where the food was coming from when he realizes that many of the people in town already know him. That the boy had already been doing work here and there–giving Xie Lian food that was meant for himself.

He's stern, then, about making Hong-er keep his own share.

The meat came from hunting—a tedious task, one that forced the boy to resort to learning how to make traps and snares.

Xie Lian may not be good for much these days—but he mends a discarded bow, carefully teaching the boy how to use it. He doesn't notice the way Hong-er's fingers tremble when he adjusts them on the bow string, teaching him how to adjust his grip.

Xie Lian's thoughts are always occupied with Feng Xin in those moments. Missing him, missing Mu Qing, but...

He was useless to them, anyway. A burden.

When Hong-er makes his first shot, striking a rabbit in the eye, he crows with victory, jumping up and down. "Did you see me, Dianxia? I—"

He freezes, awkward, horrified by his own thoughtlessness, and—

Xie Lian burst with laughter, throwing his head back, clutching his belly

"No, but it sounded impressive!"

He can't remember the last time he laughed without wanting to cry.

The boy's anxieties ease when his god's hand lands on top of his head, ruffling his hair.

"Well done, Hong-er."

He beams, his face a picture of happiness itself.

The boy becomes quite the hunter—to the point where meat never becomes a problem. Xie Lian isn't much help with the cooking—but he can remove the pelts, sitting with Hong-er by the fire, telling him stories. The boy listens with rapt attention, never missing a single word.

They bring the pelts to town in the morning to sell–or, with time, Xie Lian learns to sew them into a better pair of boots for Hong-er. He never complained—but the months are getting colder, and Xie Lian can sense that he's getting taller–his old things probably didn't fit.

They honestly aren't special–but they're sturdy. You would think that Xie Lian gave Hong-er his weight in gold, with the way he responds—

And in moments like that, the god doesn't feel useless.

The nights grow cold, and Hong-er is still sleeping on the steps of the shrine.

It worries Xie Lian. His own body is sturdy, even in his banishment. It can handle a little cold, hunger, or injury—but Hong-er is still mortal.

It frightens him. And the prospect of the boy falling ill fills him with dread.

Xie Lian doesn't want to be alone again.

Each night for a week, he tries to coax him into sleeping inside—near the fire, at the very least. Hong-er comes in to tend to it, stoking the flames so his god won't catch a chill in the night—but he always leaves.

In the end, Xie Lian only finds one solution.

"Hong-er?"

He always appears with near immediacy when the god calls, "Dianxia?"

"I'm cold."

The teenager rushes forward, quick to stoke the coals, adding a little more kindling from the pile he chopped that morning, but—

"It's no good," Xie Lian sighs, forlorn. "Could you just..." He slides over, making room on the bamboo mat for one more, "Sleep here?"

Hong-er is frozen, his expression a mask of tempted longing, guilt, and anxiety that the god can't see. "This one should really..."

"Please, Hong-er?"

He swallows thickly.

"I'm still cold."

The first night, he's as stiff as a board, sleeping on the very edge of the mat. Xie Lian isn't sure if he actually sleeps at all. The second and third nights are like that too, but...

Eventually, he starts sleeping with his side lightly pressed against Xie Lian's back.

With the intention of helping the god keep warm—even if he never relents about getting under the blanket with him. It isn't perfect–but he's inside, near the fire, and Xie Lian sleeps easier.

He's never shared a bed before—and he finds comfort in it now.

It isn't lonely.

Over time, he scolds Hong-er enough times for using his title that the boy eventually starts calling him, 'Gege.' Shyly at first, like he's worried Xie Lian might find it overly familiar—but the god never seems to mind.

Banishment stops feeling like such a punishment, now.

There's joy in watching Hong-er grow. He's still a gangly teenager, just like he was the first day Xie Lian tried to touch him in the shrine—but he's gaining weight, starting to get a little taller.

He whines with embarrassment when his voice starts cracking, going silent.

But Xie Lian finds it endearing, pleading for the teenager to stop being so shy—after all, the silence can often become a little too much for him—and, however awkwardly, his companion always relents.

And after everything he's done, Hong-er still expects nothing in return.

It bothers him, when he needs Xie Lian's help. He sulks for an entire afternoon when the god has to help him fend off a group of teenage bullies from the next village over—and sure, it must be embarrassing to be saved by a blind man, but...

It seems to run deeper than that.

He always lunges in front of the god at the first sign of danger, often only to find himself pulled behind Xie Lian as he deals with whatever small-time criminal or low level demon has decided to cause them trouble. And after, he always falls into an ill mood for hours at a time.

Eventually, Xie Lian comes to understand: Hong-er wants to protect him.

It seems a little silly—after all, there's little left that could hurt the god now, but it makes him smile.

That's when he starts teaching him more than just archery.

He notices that the teenager isn't completely without skill–that there's clearly already some experience already there. Hong-er explains he was a foot soldier in the war—that he picked up a few skills, here and there.

Xie Lian smiles sadly.

It explains his skills, yes.

It also explains why the plague spared him. And the knowledge of that—the things Hong-er must have had to do, when he was still so young...

It hurts to think about.

(Xie Lian forgot–forgets so often, now—that he was young back then, too.)

They might be sparring with sticks—but the boy shows a strong natural inclination for offense. Xie Lian comments he would be suited to sabers—and something about that makes the child smile.

The next time the god has to defend him, and Hong-er is left scowling—Xie Lian smiles, reaching down to ruffle his hair.

He doesn't have to reach as far down now, as he did before.

"If you train hard enough, one day you'll be able to return the favor and save me next time."

That doesn't make the sulking go away–but it certainly seems to light a fire under the teenager.

Xie Lian also comments at some point, with a forced tone of cheerfulness, how much girls like that sort of thing. Having skills like that will help Hong-er find a wife one day.

Statements like that always seem to make the teenager scoff, and Xie Lian isn't surprised. He was that age once. Things like romance seemed far off, silly. The only thing that seemed to matter was his cultivation.

The whole thing feels so ridiculous now.

"I don't want a wife."

Xie Lian smiles faintly.

Of course, he feels that way now. And the fallen prince is selfishly happy about it while it lasts. He doesn't want Hong-er to be alone. Doesn't want him to have nothing, but—

Part of him not having anyone else—it means he still needs Xie Lian.

He's often ashamed of feeling that way. He should want Hong-er to have people in his life that love him. Xie Lian should want the teenager to grow into a man, to have a life of his own.

But growing up—that might mean outgrowing Xie Lian, too.

That terrifies him.

Xie Lian wants him to be happy. The affection he's developed for his companion in the last year is deep—meaningful.

He doubts that Hong-er realizes it, but Xie Lian has come to adore the boy.

But he's so afraid of being alone again, fumbling in the dark.

Still, he smiles.

"You'll change your mind, one day." He reaches out to ruffle Hong-er's hair again, something that always used to make the boy preen happily.

But he shrinks away from it now. Irritated with being treated like a child.

The child Xie Lian desperately wants him to always be.

"I won't," he mumbles, stubborn. "I don't need anybody but dianxia."

Oh, Xie Lian feels so *horrible* for the happiness in his chest, the relief. That even if those are the words of a child—it means Hong-er still *is* one.

That Xie Lian gets to feel needed for a little longer.

But there are things he can't see. Xie Lian finds himself wondering–after all, the boy is sixteen now, he must be watching girls, even if he doesn't approach.

Which ones does he like? Is he shy about it? Does he want to talk to them, but doesn't know how?

Xie Lian is utterly useless in that regard—he's never wanted anyone in such a way. He's been on the receiving end of want and desire many times—but such things never interested him, and...

He was so far above everyone else, back then. He never allowed anyone to reach for him.

Xie Lian makes soft inquiries, needles him about it in a teasing voice, smiling softly. Hong-er always sits against the opposite wall of the shrine, curled up into a ball—and Xie Lian never sees the way the boy watches him, cheeks flushed, biting his tongue.

The god is kneeling on the floor, weaving. It's a skill he's picked up over time—one that he's developed a fondness for. It's slow, peaceful. Hong-er will quietly indicate which color of thread he's holding, and the god uses the threads to create pictures in his mind's eye.

And as Xie Lian works, he presses with a gentle smile, "Have you really never pictured it? You must have some kind of idea of what sort of girl you want."

(Maybe if Xie Lian has some idea, he can brace himself for abandonment when such a creature appears.)

"What if it isn't a girl?"

The prince falls silent—and he can hear the human's heart beating faster, likely afraid of the judgement, possible rejection he might face for admitting such a thing.

Xie Lian isn't ignorant of the fact that there are men who love other men. There were moments when he...

When he said he never *really* wanted someone before, that was true. But he was still a teenage boy, even when he was training and focusing on his cultivation.

He would feel flashes of warmth, at times—especially when he found himself looking at Feng Xin.

It felt shameful.

Not knowing why the sight of his friend's body would bring this flooding heat in his gut—but knowing that he shouldn't be feeling that way.

It frightened Xie Lian at the time. He knew that Mu Qing caught him looking more than once.

His other friend never said a word—but he reacted with quiet disgust. Resentment, even. And it only made the shame worse.

But Xie Lian pushed the feelings down. Recited his sutras. And eventually–they stopped.

His friendship with Feng Xin was never affected, the other teenager never knew what Xie Lian had been feeling, but...

Xie Lian knew then, cultivation was his only option forward in life.

That it gave him an excuse not to look at people. And even if he was different, he...

No one would ever know. He would never become a source of shame for his parents, if he never had a wife or children.

When a man chooses to forgo women for no reason, people whisper. When he does it out of a devotion to faith, people admire him.

No one ever considered Xie Lian's choice of cultivation paths to be intentional. It was just the method that Guoshi happened to practice.

With that, Xie Lian didn't feel like he was lying or hiding from anyone. Only himself. His pride made such things necessary, back then.

He never quite forgave himself for being different. But as his life became dominated by other problems, other worries...there was no room left for those feelings. And after that, he was alone. He never found himself needing to think about it again—he nearly forgot.

But now...

When he remembers the shame—the quiet fear that used to consume him at night, nearly hyperventilating as he fought the feeling between his legs—denying it, whispering to himself that it wasn't like that, that there was nothing wrong with him.

He doesn't want that for Hong-er.

Xie Lian isn't blind to what it means to be worshipped. Knows that if he tells the boy something is so, that Hong-er will believe it with all of his heart.

If Xie Lian could have done that for himself, he would have been spared so much shame.

"...That doesn't change anything."

He keeps his chin held high, even as his fingers tremble slightly, struggling to pull the threads together. "Loving someone is the most beautiful thing a person can do."

Hong-er's eyes never leave his face, he hardly even breathes.

"Man or woman, it's still meaningful."

The silence that follows is one of petrified hopefulness, and when

Hong-er speaks again, he does so with a cautious happiness that breaks Xie Lian's heart.

"...Does gege really mean that?"

He's well practiced now, when it comes to smiling through pain.

"With all of my heart."

Hong-er's fingers are digging into his shins through the fabric of his pants, his eyes as wide as they can possibly be.

Even now, he has no hope of his affections ever being returned—but now, he knows that they wouldn't be a source of disgust.

That it isn't something shameful.

He swallows thickly, hugging himself a little tighter, because—

Loving someone—Hong-er, loving someone, no matter *who* that someone is—

Xie Lian thinks it's something beautiful.

Hong-er doesn't love quietly. He can't. He loves with every breath, with every part of him.

He's always been over—emotional, lacking in self control. He can't stop himself from feeling things, they just consume him.

And when loving someone is everything that he is, having the world tell him that love was shameful—

It made every part of him feel shameful. Sinful.

And how could he ever expect love from god, or even just acceptance—when with every bone in his body, Hong-er knew that he would always be a sinner.

His tears fall silently—but they don't come from sadness.

"Is it a man?"

The boy looks up with a start, and Xie Lian smiles.

"If there was someone you wanted, I mean?"

He's quiet, blinking until the tears stop, waiting for his breathing to become a little more even before he answers—

"It doesn't matter to me, either way."

Xie Lian tilts his head to the side.

"Man or woman," Hong-er explains. "They're the same to me."

Xie Lian pauses, considering–and eventually, he smiles. "I see." His fingers are a little steadier now, weaving the threads together. "But when you picture the sort of person you want, you must imagine something, right?"

Knowing the god can't see, Hong-er allows his eyes to drift over Xie Lian's shoulders, the long curtain of dark tresses that pool on the ground around him.

"...Hair..." He mumbles, his face hot.

"Hmm?"

The boy is rarely so tongue tied.

"I like...longer hair, I guess."

Xie Lian's smile is patient, affectionate. "Hong-er—*most* people have long hair."

The teenager squirms, pressing his legs tighter against his chest. "But...it has to be soft," he mumbles. "Shiny. Not everyone's is like that."

Well, that *is* true.

"What else?"

"Gege..."

He sounds so *embarrassed* , Xie Lian can't stop his smile from widening just a little. It's sweet—no, it's cute, actually. Unexpected, from a young man who rarely ever seems shy about anything.

"Tell me, please?"

The teenager rubs his cheek with a quiet groan.

"...Not short," He admits slowly, "but not too tall either."

"That's a bit of an odd description..."

"Well, it's fine if they're taller than me right now," Hong-er explains without thinking, "I'm still growing."

He pauses, realizing how odd that sounds, adding in a rush—

"Hypothetically."

It's a credit to Xie Lian's own stupidity when it comes to these things that he doesn't realize, laughing softly. "For someone who didn't want to talk about this, it sounds like you've thought about it a lot."

"I haven't," Hong-er whines, sounding horribly sheepish. "Really!"

The prince's smile is good natured. "Anything else?"

"...Smart," Hong-er's chin presses against his knees. "Strong. Kind. Brave. Those things are the most important."

Xie Lian's smile falters, just a little. "...Those are some pretty high standards, Hong-er."

The teenager shrugs, sounding completely unbothered. "I'm not worried about it."

"Finding such a person might be difficult."

The sheepishness seems to be retreated, replaced by that stubborn sense of certainty—

"I'm really not worried about it, dianxia."

Xie Lian frowns.

Some selfish part of him is happy—after all, Xie Lian has seen a little bit too much of the world by now.

He knows that someone kind, intelligent, brave, and generous—they aren't probably don't exist.

(If this was only about hair and height, things would be easier.)

But he finds himself caught between relief, and...not wanting Hong-er to be disappointed, when he doesn't find such a person.

After all, the only person Xie Lian can think of that might check all of those boxes would be Hong-er himself—and he's a rare, precious thin.

Xie Lian often suspects that the teenager has the potential to ascend—with each passing week, he becomes more and more sure that he will.

And when he does, he won't need Xie Lian anymore. He'll have his own purpose for living—he won't need the things that he did before.

And then, he'll be alone again.

Maybe, if he was a little less selfish, he would order Hong-er to leave his side. He'd have a better chance of ascension that way. Or, at the very least, he might find someone—man or woman—to share his life with.

Hong-er deserves that.

But Xie Lian is a coward, and he can't. He's learned what it feels like, to sleep next to someone every night. That he doesn't need fine silks or golden palaces—just for someone to listen, when he speaks. To laugh with him.

And he's so, so afraid of giving that up.

He does notice that the boy never shows interest in talking to people his own age. He never makes friends in the village—even when Xie Lian reassures him that it's alright, that he can go and enjoy himself.

Hong-er always refuses, remaining rooted to his side like ivy on stone.

Even when he does relent to Xie Lian's demands to socialize even a little, making small conversations with the other teenagers when they're in the market selling animal pelts, or walking back from the fields–Xie Lian notices something.

Hong-er doesn't like being touched.

One of the other boys will give him a playful smack on the back, and Xie Lian can sense the venom in Hong-er's glare in response. Girls smile and fawn over how strong his arms are—but when they reach out to touch him, the teenager jerks away sharply.

It gives the god pause.

Ever since the day he learned his companion's name–he's always been affectionate with Hong-er. Well…what Xie Lian would call affectionate, anyway.

He grew up in a palace, tended to by servants. His parents loved him, but physical shows of love were rare, given sparingly.

The fact that Xie Lian is prone to ruffling the boy's hair (less now, since Hong-er seems to dislike it), giving him the occasional hug, even...is a sign that the prince has come to view Hong-er as something close to family.

Now, he wonders if the teenager is only tolerating it.

He becomes much more careful with his touches, more than aware of the imbalance of power in their relationship. Hong-er worships him—and if something makes him uncomfortable, Xie Lian knows the teenager won't tell him.

He has to be more thoughtful, more considerate of him.

Xie Lian never realized how much it would upset the boy. Not at first—but eventually, as weeks of this passed, and Xie Lian smiled, congratulating him on a job well done—but not reaching for him, patting his head, or pulling him into a hug—

Hong-er can't stand it anymore.

He's gotten so good at controlling his voice, hiding his feelings from his god as best as he can. Even when his hands are balled into fists at his sides, trembling with emotion.

"Gege?"

He glances up from where he's gathering firewood, a gentle smile in place, "Yes?"

But now—Hong-er can't hide the pain in his voice; the fear.

"Has this servant offended you?"

Xie Lian's face falls.

It's been months since the boy called himself a servant.

"No," he shakes his head, setting down the wood in his hands, "why would you say that?"

Hong-er hangs his head, almost ashamed to vocalize it, because if he gives voice to the reason for his worry, the god might begin to understand why he...what he really...

(In that sense, he's vastly overestimating Xie Lian's understanding of such things.)

“…This one never expects anything of his highness,” Hong-er mumbles, and Xie Lian’s frown only deepens—because the teenager is always reverent of him, but when he’s upset, such reverent words are usually a sign that he fears rejection.

“I know, Hong-er.”

The boy swallows hard.

“…Gege has been far away from me lately.”

Xie Lian tilts his head to the side, thinking about it. He’s always been prone to fits of daydreaming—but that isn’t new. He doesn’t think he’s been quiet, either. “…I don’t understand what you mean?”

Hong-er’s hands tremble.

“…This one means it literally,” he mumbles, heart beating halfway out of his chest, expecting the worst sort of answer, but nothing could hurt quite so much as thinking his god was angry with him. “…Physically.”

Xie Lian pauses, his lips forming a perfect ‘O.’

“Hong-er…” The teenager doesn’t look up, and the god is caught in place, stumped. “That…wasn’t because I was angry with you, you hadn’t done anything wrong.”

It’s a relief, but Hong-er still shrinks.

“I just…thought you were getting too old for that sort of thing,” Xie Lian admits.

That makes the young man freeze, eyes snapping up with confusion.

“..Too old?”

Xie Lian laughs a little awkwardly, rubbing his hand against the side of his neck. “You seemed…like you didn’t want to be treated like a child anymore. And you never let anyone else touch you—”

“That’s different,” Hong-er never interrupts him, but now he does—his voice sharp, words coming out in a rush. “I never mind when gege touches me!”

“…” Xie Lian frowns, glancing away from him, his stomach twisting with anxiety. “You don’t have to say that, I wouldn’t…” He lets out a heavy sigh, “I wouldn’t be upset with you for telling me that something made you uncomfortable. I would only be upset if I found out you didn’t tell me, because you didn’t want to upset me.”

As a prince, he was used to people lying to him about such things.

Mu Qing did that the most, and it created this overwhelming sense of anxiety after—when Xie Lian had lost everything.

He doesn’t want to be lied to, while the ones who follow him build up silent resentment. If he’s crossing a line, he wants to know, so he doesn’t end up…

Alone. Again.

“I’m not lying,” Hong-er pleads, his voice low, frightened—but forcing himself to speak out none-the-less. “If gege doesn’t want to touch me, I…I don’t expect it. But if he does…”

Xie Lian bites his lip, hesitant.

“…I…do,” he admits. “It’s hard, when I…”

In most ways, he’s adjusted to life without his sight. There’s still the occasional trip up—but in a practical sense, Hong-er has bridged nearly all of the gaps.

But it’s hard, when you can’t see the person beside you. Something as small as the weight of Hong-er’s hand, it…

The amount of comfort it brings Xie Lian is hard to describe. The gentle reassurance that he isn’t alone. That someone is there.

“…When I can’t see the world the way everyone else does,” Xie Lian finishes. “But it’s alright.”

He forces a smile, bright, but strained.

“I don’t need Hong-er to force himself—”

He can’t finish the sentence—and then, he’s just frozen with shock.

A pair of arms have wrapped around him, holding him tightly—and Xie Lian is hesitant at first, realizing—he's never really been held before. Not like this.

Hong-er is clinging to him—not so different from the day he told Xie Lian his name, but…

He's Xie Lian's height now. The god hadn't realized.

How did he grow so *fast?*

And instead of weeping in Xie Lian's arms, accepting his reassurances—it's actually the opposite.

Xie Lian is slow, hesitant to lay his head on the human's shoulder, cheek pressing against the collar of Hong-er's shirt.

The only other person he was probably close to like this was his mother—and instead of silk dresses and perfume, his face finds threadbare cotton, and…

Hong-er smells like the forest. Pleasantly earthy, familiar—like home.

Xie Lian's eyes are closed beneath the bandages—and still, they sting.

He misses his mother. Misses his friends. Misses the way things were.

But he would have missed these arms, even if they never held him.

They're trembling with hesitation—like he's worried about Xie Lian's reaction, half expecting to be shoved away. But…

When Xie Lian's arms move—it's only to wrap around the boy in return. He doesn't weep, no, but he sags, allowing the teenager to bear his weight.

Having one of his senses sealed, means every other sensation becomes all the more important.

Xie Lian learns to love the sounds of the birds in the trees—the rush of wind through the grass. The sound of Hong-er's breathing, learning to trace the way it changes with emotion.

He becomes keenly aware of different smells, good and bad. He can track a demon for miles—and certain perfumes give him such terrible headaches, he can barely stand to be in the same room.

But Hong-er's smell—it soothes him. Puts him at ease at night, when he tries to sleep.

Taste—well, he was already unlucky in that sense, but hunger has cured a sensitive palette. He's a little spoiled these days—only has to eat what his companion cooks for him, and that, he never minds.

But Xie Lian never realized how much he would come to adore touch.

He always hears Hong-er coming, but the boy has taken to greeting him with a gentle squeeze of his shoulder. When he feels Xie Lian get tense, he always reaches for the god's hand, squeezing softly.

His fingers are rougher than Xie Lian's, longer than they used to be—familiar.

There was a time where he could barely seem to stand sleeping beside him, shrinking to the far side of the bamboo mat. Now, Xie Lian falls asleep each night with the young man's warmth against his back. It's never too intimate—just a constant reminder of his presence.

He has nightmares, sometimes.

He used to wake up alone, trembling, covering his hands with his mouth, whimpering against the dark.

Now, he awakens to arms wrapped firmly around him, a voice whispering into his hair—

"They aren't real, dianxia."

Xie Lian's eyes stare, unseeing

His breaths are shallow, unsteady. He's pathetic. A frightened, broken shadow of the man that he once was.

When did those arms become so strong?

"It's just a dream."

Xie Lian's lips tremble, and the shadow of a feeling stirs inside of him—one that he's quick to push down.

He notices all of the little ways that his companion was touching him before—when he wasn't paying attention.

Xie Lian has gotten pretty good at navigating without his sight—but he still stumbles when he walks an unfamiliar path, and when he does, Hong-er is always there.

Catching him by the elbow, one hand on his back to steady him. “Careful, gege.”

One of his favorite things in the world is combing Xie Lian’s hair—he still laughs with child-like delight whenever the god agrees, spending hours carefully working through every single tangle.

He even learns some of the fancier styles that the prince used to wear—even if Xie Lian no longer has the fancy hair pieces or pins that he used to. The god smiles with assurance, assures the boy it isn’t necessary, but…

It makes Hong-er happy, so he could never tell him no.

He isn’t quite as skilled as Mu Qing used to be—but far more gentle, to the point where Xie Lian ends up slumped back against him, purring like a contented house cat.

(He never sees how flushed Hong-er gets, the breathless way he smiles, like he’s been given a precious gift.)

Seasons pass, and Xie Lian hasn’t thought about his cultivation. He learns to forget the way his name sounds from anyone but Hong-er’s lips.

Part of him wonders if he’s being a coward, hiding from the world. Hiding from his mistakes.

He has moments of guilt, shame, and sorrow.

What about the people who looked to him? Everyone that he let down? What of his parents? He doesn’t even know where they are now—and he knows Feng Xin wouldn’t have allowed any harm to come to them, but he…

How can Xie Lian justify allowing himself to be happy?

It takes him time to realize that’s what the feeling inside of him is, whenever he has Hong-er by his side. This lightness when he hears the teenager’s voice, dropping lower with every passing week, becoming that of a man.

He used to spend each day silently worrying.

Fretting over how to hide his weaknesses. How to be someone worth following. Because if he wasn't—Hong-er would leave. That was just assured. One day, it would happen.

After a year together, Xie Lian is starting to realize that it won't.

That this is more than happiness.

Xie Lian begins to recognize it as love—knowing that it isn't the romantic kind. After all, Hong-er is still just a boy, yet to live a life of his own. But…Xie Lian does realize that he's given the teenager something through their companionship.

Comfort, stability—guidance.

And for someone who grew up without a home, without a family… being with Xie Lian has allowed him to finish out those latter childhood years with someone who cared for him.

Xie Lian knows he gave him that. And he'll always be grateful for what the young man has given him, but…

Part of loving someone is wanting what's best for them. Even when it isn't what you want. Even if it hurts.

Xie Lian knows, Hong-er will follow him for the rest of his life if the god doesn't stop him. And while this is more happiness than Xie Lian could have hoped for…

Hong-er could have more. He deserves more. He *should* have more.

For so many months, Xie Lian would cling when the boy shrunk away, begging him not to leave. Now—he's encouraging him to do just that.

To move on, to have a life of his own—to stop wasting his life on Xie Lian.

The suggestion that it could be a waste always makes the young man angry.

"Have I ever told gege that I wanted to leave?"

"No—"

"Does gege want me gone?"

Xie Lian swallows thickly, shaking his head. "No, it's not about wanting you gone, Hong-er, I—"

"Then I'm staying."

They've never argued before—Hong-er never dared to contradict him. But the one thing they never agree on is the one thing that he can never back down from:

That Xie Lian is worth it.

And it makes the god so *frustrated* , because Hong-er is throwing so much away.

"Do you even UNDERSTAND the kind of life you could have?!" Xie Lian snaps one day, hands balling into fists. He's never raised his voice to the boy—not like this. "You—do you have ANY idea how special you are?!"

And god, he's so *stubborn* .

"If I'm special, it's because of—!"

"Don't you dare say it's because of me!" He stands quickly, his weaving forgotten—tossed aside. "I—I've barely given you anything, Hong-er! If anything, I've slowed you down. Every good thing about you—it's in SPITE of me, can't you see that?!"

He's cursed everyone in his life.

His family. His country. His people. He'll curse Hong-er soon too, if he isn't careful.

How, *how* could he be this selfish?

When the boy speaks again, his voice is small—and to Xie Lian's horror, hurt.

"…How could you say that it's nothing?"

The god freezes, falling silent.

His eyes grow wide, and he realizes how that sounded. Whatever he meant, even if he didn't intend it, he—

'Take me as your reason.'

He can't see how wide Hong-er's eyes are, but he can feel the waves of hurt coming off of him.

'If you can't find a reason to live, live for me.'

In the intervening years—Xie Lian had forgotten where they started.

That when Hong-er was the one that was downtrodden, alone—told that he was cursed, Xie Lian was the one that lifted him up. Those words, which often seem so foolish to him…

They define Hong-er's entire world.

And now Xie Lian is practically spitting on that. Telling Hong-er that it meant nothing. That his reason—it's actually meaningless.

When he realizes that—the god's heart fills with nothing but shame and self loathing, and, against his own teachings…

He falls to his knees.

"I'm sorry," He chokes, arms wrapped around himself as he hangs his head with shame.

As a prince, he was always told to hold his head high. That he never needed to bow before anyone.

The first time in his life that he kneels like this—it's for anorphan. Someone with nothing.

"Hong-er, I—" He gasps, fighting back tears, "I'm so sorry!"

But he isn't kneeling on his own for long.

He's in a familiar set of arms, taking shame in the comfort he finds in being held, knowing he's the last person to deserve it.

Hong-er doesn't acknowledge his apologies.

He just repeats the one thing he always has—that he won't leave. That he won't ever want to.

This is where he wants to be. And Xie Lian can never understand it.

He reminds the young man that he could ascend—and Hong-er scoffs, not believing in that possibility. And even so…

"If the heavens are too stupid to want dianxia, why would I want anything to do with them?” He huffs, arms tightening around Xie Lian’s shoulders, “I wouldn’t fit in, anyway. I have better taste.”

The disgraced official smiles weakly, choking out laughter. “Shameless.”

But his hand comes up to rest in Hong-er’s hair anyway—not ruffling it like he used to, just stroking gently, and Hong-er hums in acknowledgment, leaning into his touch. “Gege always forgives me for it.”

Xie Lian could forgive him for anything—Hong-er makes it so easy to do.

But he makes other points—ones that aren’t so easy to deny.

That Hong-er won’t be able to find someone if he spends his life like this, caring for a blind man in a dusty, forgotten shrine. He won’t have a family of his own.

“I don’t need more than this.” He repeats every time.

Xie Lian doesn’t accept that quite so easily. After all—he knows why he chose his own path, but Hong-er…he isn’t a prince, and he doesn’t have the exact same…predicament as Xie Lian.

There’s no reason that he couldn’t find a partner. That he couldn’t be happy.

When the god presses him on that point, eventually—Hong-er offers a reply that makes him stop, his eyes a little wide underneath the bandages.

“What makes you think anyone would want me?”

Xie Lian freezes, his face a mask of confusion.

“…I don’t understand what you mean.”

Hong-er’s voice is wry—but the security beneath it is real. It runs deep. “I’m not like you, dianxia.”

“…” Xie Lian laughs quietly, tilting his head to the side, “You don’t need to tell me that we’re different people, Hong-er, but that doesn’t mean—”

“I’m not beautiful.”

Finally, the god falls silent.

The implication that Hong-er finds him beautiful isn't lost on him—and his feelings around that are…complicated.

There was a time when Xie Lian always felt beautiful. The world was always telling him so.

And how far did that beauty get him?

When things got ugly, what did the beauty of his face bring him? Did it keep his believers behind him? No.

To love something only for the beauty of it is cheap. Xie Lian learned that the hard way.

"…Do you only follow me because you find me beautiful, Hong-er?"

He doesn't answer verbally, but Xie Lian can feel the movement of him shaking his head from how vehement it is.

"Then why do you think that such a thing could stop anyone from loving you?"

Xie Lian suspects that the young man's worry isn't founded as it is.

He might be blind—but he isn't *deaf* . He's heard girls sighing and fawning over him when he walks by in the street. Oddly enough—many whisper about the fact that he looks dangerous, which Xie Lian finds odd. He can't imagine the teenager that way, but—

'Dangerous' isn't the same thing as *'ugly* .'

It used to amuse him. Lately, it's been less funny, even though he can't place why…

"Most people aren't like me, gege."

Oh.

Xie Lian's lips quirk up, somewhat wry.

The first compliment the young man is willing to give himself, and it's only to justify why no one could ever love him.

He moves a little closer, pulling his arms back. Hong-er came to sit back before, when he was comforting Xie Lian, leaning back against the stone wall of the shrine.

The god sits up a little, his expression serious.

“Alright, let me see, then.”

“…” Hong-er stares back at him, confused—half wondering if the god is about to pull the bandages off and say, *‘surprise, I was just testing you this whole time!’*

But he doesn’t. He moves closer, not really thinking about, well…

The fact that the action leaves him straddling the teenager’s lap. Not pressing against him, he’s up on his knees, but…

Hong-er’s breathing quickens, and his heartbeat pounds, hands trembling and balling up in his lap.

He’s only seventeen, after all—and this—

It’s a *lot* .

Xie Lian’s palms press against his cheeks, leaving him even more mortified by the heat there—but the god doesn’t comment on that. Instead, he brushes his thumbs over the bandages, his voice tinged with worry.

“…Are you hurt, Hong-er?”

He remembers the boy had bandages before.

But both times, he was already injured. Does he…wear them all the time?

It’s quiet, and when the teenager answers, his voice is small.

“…No.”

Xie Lian frowns, tugging at them gently, “Can I?”

His breathing is shallow, and his head is spinning, but…

Hong-er nods.

He’s careful, unwinding the bandages that cover most of the right side of his face, setting them down on the floor beside them. The boy stays perfectly still, trying to make it easier, but…

Xie Lian's heart aches when he feels how the young man is shaking. How nervous he is.

(Of course, bless him, Xie Lian is *completely* misinterpreting the reason for the nervousness.)

His fingertips begin the slow, purposeful process of tracing Hong-er's face. It's different from the little boy he remembers.

His jaw is a little more square, his cheekbones sharp.

He has soft, full lips that quiver under Xie Lian's thumbs, trying so hard to be good, to keep still for him.

His chin is slightly pointed—probably from a need to gain weight. His eyes are evenly set, with long lashes, fluttering like butterfly wings beneath his touch.

Finely shaped brows, bangs that fall into his forehead so often that Xie Lian has to delicately push them away. Hong-er's hair is slightly more coarse than his own, a little unruly—but Xie Lian doesn't dislike it.

If anything, it makes him smile fondly.

There are also things he can't see. The way Hong-er's chest is heaving—just how dark and flushed his skin has become, pupils blown.

He can hear the fast breathing, the rapid heartbeat, but—

He doesn't see the way the teenager is staring at his lips, how close their faces are.

His nose is long, thin—there's a slide crookedness to it and a bump in the bridge, like it's been broken many times before.

There's texture on his skin, but not from teenage acne, like what Xie Lian might have expected, no…

They're scars.

Numerous, some of them deep.

But those things aren't ugly.

Xie Lian has learned to scoff at things that are gleaming, unblemished, and new.

He was, once. Still is, in many ways—this body constantly erases any reminder of his past.

The small signs of wear and tear on the teenager’s face—they’re a story.

One that he doubts Hong-er would ever be willing to tell—but they aren’t ugly.

The teenager’s breaths are shallow as he watches the god’s face, waiting for Xie Lian to laugh it off awkwardly, to give a kind, but fake compliment—or say something about Hong-er’s personality, but…

The smile never leaves his face. It only softens, deepens with a warm kind of affection that Hong-er has only known from his god’s lips, and he murmurs—

“Handsome.”

Hong-er’s rushed, unsteady breathing halts—and Xie Lian leans forward, thumbs stroking over his follower’s cheeks

He’s never done more than hug Hong-er, always careful to keep some degree of separation there. And this—it's the sort of touch he’s always dreamed of receiving from his god—the kind he’s always been too ashamed of wanting to ask for.

The god’s lips press against his forehead

“My handsome, brave Hong-er.”

The teenager lets out a shuddering sigh, his eyes flooding with tears.

It doesn’t sound like a lie. He knows it must be, but—it sounds so *sincere* .

He doesn’t believe him.

Hong-er squeezes his eyes shut, allowing Xie Lian to hold him tight.

He’ll always believe in his god. Follow him to the ends of the earth, no matter the cost. No matter what Xie Lian says or does. Hong-er’s faith is blind. Unending.

But he doesn’t believe it when Xie Lian says that he’s handsome.

Brave, yes. Hong-er has always been brave.

It’s easy to be brave, when you’ve already lived through the worst of what the world can do.

But Hong-er knows that he’s ugly. He’s always been ugly. That’s why all of this happened. Why he…

‘My Hong-er.’

Oh, *oh …*

Even if one word was a lie, he…

‘My.’

My.

Please…

Did he mean it like that?

The teenager’s heart is still beating unsteadily later, when his god is sleeping in his arms—one hand still resting over the boy’s cheek, light, fond.

Please, did he really mean that?

Even if he isn’t handsome, could Xie Lian…have meant the rest?

Could he, someone with nothing—no luck, wealth, power, not even a name—

Could he be worthy of even belonging to someone like him? Deserving? Certainly not. But in some act of madness…could Xie Lian want that anyway?

Then, movement in the night cuts through his thoughts.

Xie Lian was born a prince. Rose to become a god. Then fell again. And in all of that time—and the years that would follow—he would say that his happiest year was when he had nothing. When he was penniless and lame, sleeping in an abandoned, dusty shrine.

Not because of any shining moral platitude, or grand realization about how wealth and fame meant nothing, no—

Just because of the boy that was sleeping beside him. The boy that believed in him. The boy that saved him, who stayed beside him.

Xie Lian should have made him leave.

He should have remembered what he was. What loving him could do to a person. The damage his mere presence could cause.

But he didn't.

He was so desperate for companionship—for someone to care, and Hong-er's devotion was like a drug. It made him relax—and it made him forget.

For the first time in months, he wakes up alone.

Chapter End Notes

> Happy Halloween! Make sure you give thanks to our local ghost king, and say happy birthday to Yiling Laozu!
>
> 🎃👻

A Ghost Fire Burns Cold

Chapter Notes

> Content Warnings for this chapter: non-graphic depictions of violence, sensory horror elements
>
> Will be linking fan art to the chapter later, so feel free to come back and check that out!

The blanket is carefully tucked around him—but when Xie Lian sits up, he can smell the smoldering ashes of the fire.

Hong-er never allows it to get that low.

He turns his head, pushing his hair back, calling out—

"...Hong-er?" There's no answer.

"..."

The god stumbles to his feet, struggling to pull his hair back as he walks around the shrine—he had gotten used to having someone do it for him again.

"Hong-er!"

The silence is vast—and it frightens him.

Something is very, very wrong—he can feel it.

He makes his way out of the shrine, so worried, he often forgets the obstacles in the path that he long since memorized.

He falls. Scratches his palms, his knees, his cheeks. No one catches him now.

"..." His hands begin to tremble, and he calls louder. "Hong-er!"

He isn't by the stream. Isn't on the path they always take through the forest. Xie Lian loses track of how many times he falls over, pausing to whimper for a moment when he twists his ankle so hard, he feels something crack—but he can't stop looking.

What if something happened to him? What if he's trapped somewhere, and can’t call out to him? Why would he leave without waking him up? Why wouldn’t he wait? He’s never done that before, what if he—?

Xie Lian freezes, his heart clutching with terror.

What if he just…left?

After all, Xie Lian gave him plenty of reasons the night before. The things he said— how ungrateful he was, how pathetic and self pitying…

‘How could you ever say that?’

“…” Xie Lian covers his mouth, shoulder’s trembling with shame.

What if, when he had time to think, he…

…Decided he couldn’t forgive him?

What if he heard Xie Lian’s reassurances that he wasn’t ugly, saw how pitiful the god was…and decided he didn’t need him after all?

What if Xie Lian’s words finally sank in? What if he listened?

The god hunches forward, hyperventilating.

That was what he wanted, wasn’t it? Shouldn’t he be happy, if that’s what happened? Is he really such a coward? Were his hopes for the boy so empty? Was his love for the boy that selfish? Has he not changed at all? He—

No .

Xie Lian’s fingers tear at his hair, head spinning.

If this was a year ago, he would have believed it. He would have fallen to the ground, despairing, feeling sorry for himself.

Xie Lian’s jaw locks with determination.

“He…” His voice is unsteady—but filled with the certainty that Hong-er gave him.

“He wouldn’t leave me.”

Xie Lian trembles, but he repeats the words. Each time he falls over, or finds himself taking the wrong path.

He wouldn't leave me.

He wouldn't leave me.

He would NEVER leave me.

It took so long for Xie Lian to believe that. Hong-er worked so *hard* to convince him.

He won't spit on that by giving up on it so easily now. The boy doesn't deserve that. He believed in Xie Lian, no matter what...Xie Lian won't give up on him now.

But part of believing that comes with an even more terrifying question:

If he wouldn't leave...why isn't he here?

The panic builds, and as Xie Lian ticks off more and more spots, eliminating the possibilities one by one, terror grips him.

"HONG-ER!"

He screams now, breathing hard, slipping and falling *again* , landing on his hands and knees, a bramble gauging his cheek.

Where is he?!

Blood is dripping down from his chin, but he doesn't bother to wipe it away.

Something does, though. Well—it tries. This cold, fluttering pressure against his cheek. Xie Lian flinches away, not recognizing it at first, his chest heaving as he looks around, disoriented.

"Hong-er?" His voice is trembling, weak. "If—If it's you, I won't be mad, just *please* answer me, I can't take this..."

That pressure bumps against his cheek again, but when Xie Lian reaches up—he finds nothing.

A sob rips from his chest.

"If this is a game, it isn't funny..."

Hong-er has hidden from him before. Playfully—and never too far, allowing Xie Lian to find him by sound and scent alone. Then, it was fun. This—this isn't fun.

Xie Lian doesn't hear anyone breathing. There's no human heartbeat but his own.

Something cold brushes against him.

A sob rips from his throat again as he flinches away, whipping his head around, "Hong-er—if it's you, I'm—just stop it, I'm—" He hunches inward, trembling like a leaf. "I'm scared!"

There's no cold now—but no one answers him either. Xie Lian stays still for a moment, shivering.

His breathing slows—and no matter how hard he listens, there's nothing but the natural sounds of the forest. But when he breathes in, he catches a scent he had almost forgotten.

Spiritual Power. But...why here?

He reaches out, fingers trembling—and something lands in his palm. Light, fluttering like a flame—but cold.

Xie Lian's eyebrows furrow as he brings his hand in, raising it towards his face— And there's that cool brush against his cheek again.

A...ghost fire?

The god frowns, his mind racing.

What is a ghost fire doing all the way out here?

They're far from any battlefield. There aren't any cultivators or merchants nearby using them as wares. How...?

Xie Lian pauses, shaking his head quickly, snapping himself out of it. He doesn't have time for this.

The god pushes the flame away, rising to his feet.

"Hong-er!"

The fire follows so persistently, even when Xie Lian apologizes—explaining that he isn't here for him. If it's looking for peace, it needs to find someone else to help, Xie Lian doesn't have time.

And now, he needs something that he doesn't have;

Eyes.

He was so proud in the beginning—too proud. Fleeing from any outstretched hand, from those who wanted to help him. He only was able to accept it from a stranger. Someone with nothing to lose.

Now, he's pounding on every door in the village, crying out— "Help me! Please!"

Hands trembling, breathing so hard, he can barely speak. "Oh god, please—help me!"

The farmers have come to know him over the last year—and so have their families. They drift out, watching the Taoist—whom they all viewed as the kind, but unfortunate local invalid—with concern.

"What's wrong, kid?"

"Did something happen?"

"Where's that friend of yours?"

The mention of him forces a panicked cry from Xie Lian's chest, and he shakes his head weakly. "I-I don't know—I can't—I can't find him!"

A local merchant frowns, rubbing his chin.

"Leaving a blind man to fend for himself…" He glances Xie Lian over. His cuts and bruises, the limp, shaking his head. "How shameless."

Xie Lian can't glare, but his eyebrows knit together as he whips his head in the man's direction.

The villagers have only ever known him to be soft spoken, with a sweet temper. It's startling now, the way he stomps over, grabbing the man by the front of his shirt— nearly lifting him off of the ground.

And he *snarls* .

"Don't talk about him like that!"

He gives the man a violent shake. "Don't EVER talk about him like that!"

"Easy, son, he didn't mean—"

They fall silent when they see how the young man is trembling, even in his anger—his voice breaking.

“He wouldn’t leave me!”

Xie Lian can feel it in the eyes watching him: Pity.

He lets the man go, taking an unsteady step backwards, lips quivering as he repeats himself—

“Hong-er—” he stumbles, “He wouldn’t leave me!” Someone catches him now—

But not the person that he wants.

The farmer gives his shoulders a reassuring squeeze. “He’s right.”

Everyone watches him, and the man clears his throat, “Those two worked my field every day last harvest—that kid was completely devoted to the little priest here.”

Xie Lian chokes back a sob. “He wouldn’t have left.”

There’s murmuring in the crowd—and then, everyone is looking.

They comb through the forest again—the shrine. The river. The path back towards town. Every time Xie Lian feels that cold brush against his cheek, he shoves it away— too impatient to feel sorry for the spirit.

“I can’t help you!” He snaps. “Find someone else!”

His voice is hoarse from screaming Hong-er’s name, but he doesn’t stop. Doesn’t give up, even when it starts to get dark, when the air gets cold enough that he can see his breath.

There’s mention of stopping for the night—but when they see that Xie Lian won’t stop…they stay.

His ankle is swollen—his feet are bleeding. As the cold sets in, his teeth start to chatter.

They press for him to go home again, to wait until morning—and each time, Xie Lian refuses.

Xie Lian doesn’t have a home to go back to, not until he finds Hong-er.

The night deepens. He walks further. Calls out until his voice is almost gone—and he never gets an answer.

Until he does.

"...Gege?"

His head whips to the side, heart leaping momentarily, but...

It's not the right voice.

It belongs to one of the farmer's sons.

Xie Lian wipes at the blood on his cheek, almost dry now. "What is it?"

"We..." The young man is hesitant, and...he doesn't sound like he's giving good news.

"We found him."

"..." Whatever color remained in Xie Lian's face slowly drains away, and it was cold before, but now...

It feels like there isn't any warmth left in the world. Like the sun died at some point after slipping beneath the horizon, never to rise again.

It won't make a difference to Xie Lian if it ever does.

"Where..." he can't keep the fear from his voice, "Where is he?"

The young man doesn't answer verbally, just takes him by the arm, leading Xie Lian back down the path.

There's a gentleness to the way he handles him, like one would with a wounded bird. "Where—?"

"He's here," another villager answers, and—

Xie Lian can hear people crying.

He stumbles forward, falling to his knees, only caught by two of the farmers, until he...

He feels it.

His hand comes into contact with a boot on the ground—and Xie Lian feels an unnamed part of him break.

Xie Lian knows those shoes.

He made them.

There's denial left in there, somewhere. Some hysterical thought that his friend could still be out there somewhere, wandering around without shoes, but...

He scrambles forward, hands frantically making their way up— Xie Lian knows those hands.

He's held them so many times.

A strangled whimper tears out of his throat, and when his hands reach for the body's face, he—

Xie Lian learns something.

Heartbreak isn't a metaphor. It's literal.

He felt it, the moment his heart died. More than a broken bone, more than a lost limb.

He knows that face.

The shape of that jaw. The curve of that mouth. The small bump in that nose. The—

The scars.

Xie Lian glances around—wondering if there's an earthquake or, for one wild moment, if he's ascending again. The ground won't stop shaking. But—?

Oh.

That's just him.

He's shaking.

Everyone falls silent, unsure of what to say, and then—

There's screaming.

Distantly, Xie Lian wonders why no one is looking for who it is.

Someone might be hurt. They might need help. He sees the farmer's son move, only to be held back.

Oh.

That's just him.

He's screaming.

His grief isn't pretty. He doesn't fall to his knees and weep beautifully in someone's arms.

Xie Lian howls, loud enough that the heavens must hear him.

Good.

He wants them to.

He wants the entire world to stop. Wants the sky to shatter. Wants the pain to explode out of him.

That would be easier than this.

When he was a child, he was horrible at being told, *'No .'* He only ever heard *'maybe .'* Kept his hopes up, even in vain.

He always thought things would turn out okay for him, in the end.

Xie Lian believed in happy endings, big and small.

It made it hard for him, when the answer didn't change. He struggled to accept it. He'd whine, ball his fists up and cry.

Like that could fix it. And usually, it did. Crying almost always got Xie Lian what he wanted.

But this isn't throwing a tantrum to his mother.

No matter how much he screams and cries, he won't get what he wants. No one is going to pop up with a sympathetic smile, and make the pain go away. What Xie Lian wants—no one can give to him.

No one can give Hong-er back to him. He's just gone.

That's it. That's the ending. Xie Lian can't let him go.

He finds himself kneeling on the ground, clutching Hong-er against him. The body has already gone stiff and cold.

He presses his ear against the teenager's chest—and only finds silence.

He still smells the same. Death hasn't taken that yet. Like the forest. Fresh, comforting, familiar.

Xie Lian's face is soaked with tears. Like home.

When the fury of it leaves him—there's only emptiness. Grief is a cannibalistic construct. It hollows you out, leaves you empty. Numb.

When he speaks, it's rasping—dull. "...How did it happen?"

No one seems to answer him, and Xie Lian hugs Hong-er a little closer, pressing his cheek against the teenager's shoulder. Like he used to, when he was hurting.

Back then, Hong-er would be holding him.

Hold me, he thinks desperately, blinded with pain.

Why isn't he holding me?

After a long stretch of silence, he glances around—not seeing, not really—but retracing his steps.

"...I already looked here," he mumbles, petting Hong-er's hair. It's in his face again. He'll have to comb it when they get home, the boy always forgets.

"He wasn't there before."

"...We moved him," one of the men explains carefully, watching the young man with sympathy—and wariness.

Xie Lian stares ahead blankly, trying to understand—but he can't. "Why?"

More silence follows, and Xie Lian holds the body closer. Why won't anyone answer him?!

"...It was better for you not to find him that way," one man finally answers, and Xie Lian—

He doesn't understand.

Hong-er is already—

He's already gone.

What could be worse than that? What could they possibly need to shield him from?

The silence stretches until Xie Lian can't stand it anymore, his face contorted with emotion, "ANSWER ME!"

He doesn't speak like a beggar, or a blind man. He does it with the authority of a king—the wrath of a god. Several farmers take a step back, but one remains by his side.

"...I'm so sorry," he murmurs, one hand landing on Xie Lian's shoulder. He flinches.

He doesn't want to be touched. The only hands that he wants are limp against his side. Cold. Unmoving.

"The lad suffered."

No one wanted to tell him, but there's no avoiding it.

Up until that moment—it never occurred to Xie Lian that it was more than a horrible accident. That he had wandered off in the night for some reason, fallen, and had been

unable to get help.

At worst, maybe he was attacked by an animal. Or...

Xie Lian asks again, trembling; "How did it happen?"

Because he knows...Hong-er wouldn't have left without waking him up. How did Xie Lian even sleep through it to begin with? The boy was quiet, and Xie Lian was comfortable enough with him to sleep soundly, but...

His heart wrenches with guilt.

How...How was Xie Lian not able to keep him safe?

He *knew* how fragile human life was. He was too terrified of the boy getting sick to even let him sleep on the stairs.

How did this happen?

The tears won't stop falling.

How did Xie Lian allow this to happen?!

"...Someone hurt him," the farmer murmurs, his terms intentionally vague, and Xie Lian's expression slowly begins to change. After all—

It's not like he can see the condition of the body, not really. He only touched Hong- er's hands. His face.

Now, he starts to look.

In the only way that he can.

His hands are trembling and unsteady as they slide down the boy's chest, over his stomach—and now...Xie Lian notices what he was too frantic to feel before.

Small tears in his clothes. The familiar texture of...of dried blood.

'He suffered.'

Xie Lian was a soldier for many years. A master with most blades. He recognizes blows from a sword by touch alone.

But when he starts to probe at the wounds, most of them are shallow. Only one of them was deep enough to be fatal.

This wasn't as simple as suffering. Torture.

Hong-er was tortured.

'I don't want anything .'

Xie Lian's face sinks forward until their foreheads are pressed together.

'Gege—did you see me?'

If the teenager were still alive, his ribs would be cracking from how tightly Xie Lian is holding him.

There's something cold against his hand again.

Xie Lian doesn't have the energy to address it directly--just swats it away without a glance.

There's a question in his mind—one that he can't seem to fathom.

"...Why didn't you scream?" He mutters, clutching the boy's hair.

If he had, Xie Lian knows he would have heard. He would have come. He would have saved him.

So, why didn't he? He must have known that doing so would have been his only chance. He was childish about it when Xie Lian tried to protect him, but he never...he never would have...

And then, Xie Lian knows.

Not all at once. It comes to him slowly. Like remembering you left something behind when you're already halfway out the door, but you're not sure what. You think, toss it around in your head, but you never realize until you're already gone, and...

Then it's already too late.

Xie Lian knows why Hong-er wouldn't have screamed.

If he thought it was something Xie Lian couldn't save him from.

If he thought Xie Lian trying to save him would put the god in danger.

He would have endured anything in silence, for that.

"...I don't know if you were aware of this," one of the farmers pipes up, sounding...hesitant. "But there's a tattoo."

Xie Lian blinks slowly, all of the fight drained out of him, "...What?"

"Do you think he...had any criminal ties? I don't know, maybe...He had some enemies?"

Xie Lian shakes his head, fading into this calm kind of numbness. "No, he...he wasn't a criminal," the god explains. He started rocking at some point, he doesn't remember when. Like Hong-er is asleep, and the prince is just trying to keep him comfortable.

"He..."

Xie Lian feels his voice break, feels more tears fall. He knows he's doing those things, and at the same time—it feels completely removed from him.

"My Hong-er was a soldier."

It's quiet, then—and no one really knows what to think of the phrasing, but...they leave it be.

Finally, one of them speaks again—choosing his words carefully. "Soldiers can have enemies too, lad."

Xie Lian knows that better than anyone.

"Do you know if he had any?"

Xie Lian leans back, and for the first time in years—he mourns his sight.

He just wants to see him.

The face in his memories is a child. He—

Xie Lian wants to see the young man he crew into. He wants to see what his smile looked like. He wants to know what Hong-er's eyes looked like, when they looked at him.

More than touch, sound, or smell. Xie Lian wants the rest of it. And now, he'll never get it.

His fingers are so careful, so loving, as they smooth the front of his shirt. As he brushes his bangs away from his face. They're really a mess today. He'll—Xie Lian feels himself starting to tremble all over again. He'll have to comb it when they get home.

No matter how many times he reminds the boy, he always forgets. He—

His breaths are coming faster, on the verge of hyperventilation.

He always wants to play around with Xie Lian's hair, but he never remembers to fix his own.

"Kid?" The voice sounds like it's coming from far away, like Xie Lian is at the bottom of a lake, and someone is calling out to him from the water's edge. He looks around, disoriented, and the farmer asks again — "Did he have any enemies?"

"...No," Xie Lian whispers. "But I do."

Xie Lian knows who did this. And he knows why. There are no questions left to ask. "...Should we take this to the authorities? Maybe they can—?”

The laugh that rips out of Xie Lian is hollow. A reflex. There's no mirth.

"No," he mutters. "They can't do anything."

No one can end it. There's no winning against it. No escaping it. Xie Lian tried.

There's quiet discussions of how to deal with moving the body back down—but Xie Lian shakes his head.

"I'll carry him." His tone leaves no room for discussion.

But there is one thing...

One thing that he doesn't understand.

"Why did you move him at all?" He mutters, shaking his head. After all—it didn't do much good. Xie Lian found out, anyway.

That silence is there again, but when he lifts his chin in warning—he doesn't need to shout to get an answer.

"...We didn't move him far," one of the men murmurs, and Xie Lian frowns, fingertips digging into Hong-er's back.

"I already came this way." Xie Lian mutters, his eyebrows knitting together. "And he wasn't here."

If he finds out they're lying to him, even a little, he'll...

One of the younger men, standing just a few feet away—shudders. And when he speaks, he sounds haunted.

Like a man that's seen something that no one should.

"We just...took him down. That's all."

Xie Lian doesn't move. Not for a long time. Doesn't think. Doesn't speak.

That phrase just echoes through his head, over and over again.

Took him down.

Took him down .

Took him down .

His voice sounds so calm. Like it belongs to someone else. "Where was he?"

No one wants to answer—but there's an understanding that they don't have a choice. "Up...there."

Xie Lian lifts his chin. It's almost comical, since—obviously, he can't see. But they're in a forest. The answer isn't complicated.

"..." His fingertips drift down, brushing over Hong-er's throat.

Xie Lian doesn't ask anyone anymore questions after that.

No one else touches him. Even if they wanted to—Xie Lian won't let him go.

It's slow, carrying him down the mountainside. He's limping, cold, and tired—but he doesn't stumble. Doesn't dare drop him.

The villagers are kind enough to give him space. They don't ask questions. He's alone with him for a time, sitting on the floor of the shrine. It—

It felt like a home, before. One that they made together.

Now, it feels like a tomb.

Xie Lian's fingertips never stop caressing his face, silently trying to memorize it.

"...Handsome," he whispers.

"You didn't believe me, did you?"

His lips press together tightly, but nothing can stop the tears from falling. They never seem to stop. Xie Lian wishes he could find the part inside of him that makes him feel—and just cut it out completely.

It would be better than this.

But Hong-er was handsome. Even if he didn't believe it. Even if Xie Lian never got the chance to see him completely.

He—

Xie Lian shudders, clutching him closer.

Hong-er was beautiful. In the way that fireworks are beautiful. Burning bright in the sky, sparkling all around.

But they're always gone too fast. Before you really take it all in—and there's only smoke left behind.

"...I'm so sorry," He mumbles, wishing he had something better to say—as though—

As though anyone could hear him, anyway.

"I—” The sobs start again, wracking his frame. They don't stop for a long time.

"I should have made you leave, I..." He curls up around him, noticing--at some point, Hong-er got taller than him. Wider in the shoulders. And he didn't...

It's hard to speak through the tears, but he tries--he won't get the chance again.

"I messed up," he chokes, rocking back and forth with the teenager in his arms, remembering.

Hindsight has always been cruel to Xie Lian. So horribly unfair.

There were so many warnings. Even if what happened to his family, to Xianle wasn't enough...

The Guoshi warned him.

That day, when he told him about Hong-er's fortune. Making the offer for Xie Lian to apologize, or for one of the boy's senses to be sealed.

How the boy was born under the shadow of a curse as it was. That he-- That he wouldn't survive to adulthood.

How could Xie Lian...

How could he forget that? How could he sleep through it? How could he be so careless, allowing a human to get so close to him?

Why did he think, just because the war was over, that the rest of it was? How did Xie Lian let this *happen* ?

"I was selfish..." He whispers. "...because I loved you too much."

And he should have told him that. Xie Lian can't explain now why he didn't.

Maybe because...the emotion felt a little too human, and there were already so many things about the prince that made him less of a god. But...

Honger worshipped him anyway. And Xie Lian—he was always so afraid that, if he gave the boy one reason too many to realize that he wasn't special, that he was actually just...

A weak, miserable failure. A coward. So painfully, painfully human...

He thought Hong-er would leave.

And Xie Lian was so terrified of that. He had grown addicted to the sensation of being wanted. Of no longer being alone.

Xie Lian couldn't admit that Hong-er had worked his way so deeply into his heart, that having him ripped out now has left him shattered at the foundations.

There's a sharp sensation of cold pressing against his back. Xie Lian doesn't have the strength to push it away now.

He just whispers apologies to him, over and over. That he loves him. That—

That Xie Lian won't forget him. No matter what.

'You...remembered me?'

Each memory is hard to piece through, but he tries. Fights to tuck each one into his mind, wishing that he had more. Wishing—

That they'd had more time.

Eventually he falls silent, listening to the sounds of wood being moved outside, the rustling of straw.

It's a cruel echo of the past, when Hong-er would return from an afternoon of gathering firewood, stoking up the fire.

He won't ever walk through that door again—and this firewood isn't for keeping them warm in the night.

The villagers are building a pyre.

Xie Lian wishes he had more to give him—but there's nothing. He wishes now, that he'd had something left that he didn't pawn—that he didn't have to lay his final companion to rest in bloody, torn rags.

When he fumbles through their things—he does find one thing.

An earring.

Small, round; a coral bead.

"...I..." Xie Lian bites his lip, rolling the trinket around in his palm. He gave one away. That couldn't be here, but this...

"I lost this," he whispers, trying to understand how it could be here, *why* it would be here—and he—

He remembers.

The day he lost it. It was the day he met...

The smile that crosses his face is half agonized—half adoring. He reaches behind him, fumbling blindly until he finds Hong-er's hand, squeezing it gently.

"Shameless," he whispers.

A farmer is kind enough to lend an old set of robes—still better than what he had, but he's apologetic.

It seems to be in poor taste, after all—burning a young man in the robes of a bridegroom. Like a cruel reminder of the life he never got to live.

The life Xie Lian stole from him, with his cowardice. His selfishness. His carelessness.

He reassures the farmer that it's a kind gesture—and that it's fitting. After all—red was a part of his name. And...Xie Lian would like to think that the color hides the signs of blood.

It takes time to change him into the new clothes—a woman from the village offers to help, but Xie Lian stubbornly refuses.

He won't let anyone touch him. Not ever again.

The body under his hands isn't that of a gangly child. Not the little boy who felt so light in his arms.

Even when he fell from the sky—catching him then felt so easy.

These arms are strong. Xie Lian knew that. They felt strong when they held him. Tears sneak down his cheeks once more.

(Why isn't he holding me?)

It's the body of a man. Someone who could have been... So much more.

When it's finished, Xie Lian lifts him into his arms again—carefully descending the steps of his shrine—

Their shrine, really.

—one last time. He won't come back here again. Won't be able to stand the memories.

He's so careful, laying Hong-er down.

He smooths the robes over the young man's chest—straightens his sleeves, carefully folds his arms over his stomach.

He—he's fairly sure that the boy never had his ears pierced, so he tucks the earring against one of his palms, curling his fingers in around it.

"...You were always so silly," he whispers, fingers trembling for a moment, where they hold Hong-er's hand. "If you had asked, I would have given it to you."

But maybe it wasn't about that. Maybe it was just...

Wanting a piece of Xie Lian, when Hong-er knew he couldn't stay.

Xie Lian understands that now. He doesn't think he's ever understood anything so much in his life.

Normally, he would ask before doing such a thing, but—

Xie Lian knows that he's the only one who will mourn the child. That, in a way—he was the boy's family.

He takes a lock of hair, carefully cutting it away with a knife before tucking it into his sleeve. There's no more stalling now, so he just...

Leans in, whispering something into the young man's ear. No one else hears it—no one else is meant to.

It's only for them.

Then, he has to let Hong-er go.

He has to step back, sinking to his knees as one of the villagers comes forward, laying a torch over the straw at the bottom of the pyre.

There's heat against his cheeks, as it begins to burn—but to Xie Lian, everything still feels cold.

He slowly winds the lock of hair around his finger, the wind playing through the folds of his robes.

Xie Lian spent his entire human life trying so hard to become a god. Chasing immortality for the fame, the glory. Because it felt like his destiny. Because he...

When Xie Lian knew nothing about the world, he thought that he could save it. That he could change it.

He couldn't even save one boy.

When he was chasing immortality, he didn't understand what it was. What it meant.

The flames crackle, and snap, casting shadows across his face This is what immortality is.

It's not divine statues or worshippers. It's not fame or glory. That's godhood—and godhood doesn't last forever.

It's kneeling before the pyre of your very last believer. Alone. Knowing that even this isn't the end—even if you wish it was.

For the first time in his life, Xie Lian truly longs for death.

He resents every single one of his heartbeats. It feels like a timer, measuring the growing time between now, and when Hong-er's heart stopped.

He doesn't know how long he sits there.

Doesn't know when the snow started falling, but before long, it's all around him—in his hair, settling on his shoulders. His nose stings from it--but all of that seems so far away.

Xie Lian doesn't move until the flames burn down into embers, and hissing as snowflakes land.

Then, he begins the slow, deliberate process of collecting the ashes, sweeping them into a small red pouch. It's slow work—tedious. He burns his fingertips more than once.

He never falters—not until what remains of Hong-er is carefully sealed away, clutched tight in his hands.

Only one villager remains now—a young girl, watching Xie Lian with an odd mixture of curiosity and pity, her shawl clutched tightly around her shoulders.

Eventually, she asks—

"Just what was that boy to you?"

It takes Xie Lian a long time to answer, his head bowed. The reply he offers is deceptively simple.

"We loved each other."

Xie Lian spent far too long presuming that Hong-er's devotion was purely worshipful. And that was why Xie Lian could never tell the young man how deeply he had come to care—because to Hong-er, he was more.

More than a human being. More than small feelings like love or attachment.

It all seems so empty and silly now.

Hong-er loved him.

Xie Lian's fingers tighten around the pouch in his hands. He isn't crying anymore—he doesn't think he has any more tears left.

He loved Hong-er.

He wasn't suffering, when Hong-er was with him. He was happy.

And because of that, someone took him away.

Xie Lian leaves the village the same day. He finds a small leather cord, using it to hang Hong-er's pouch around his neck. He doesn't look back.

The Ghost fire follows.

At first, it’s hard for Xie Lian to know. It doesn’t have the energy to do more than just trail behind him—and the god isn’t looking for another presence, isn’t trying to detect the scent of spiritual energy.

Xie Lian only realizes it’s there when it bumps up against his back. He flinches from it—stumbling, almost falling over.

Finally, he whips around, glaring blindly. “Would you just—!”

Then, he stops.

Xie Lian cannot see the flame in front of him—can’t even feel any warmth from it.

And even without the shackle around his eyes, grief blinds him.

He could only focus on one thing at a time, before. Finding Hong-er. And he couldn’t give the little flame much thought, then. He was so afraid. Trying to deny what he knew, in his heart, had happened.

And when he found the body, there was only grief. It swallowed him whole. Now—the pain is still there. It’s overwhelming. Suffocating, even.

But when Xie Lian reaches out, fingers trembling—the fire rushes straight into his palm, tingling against his skin.

He’s afraid to ask. He’s so, so afraid of being wrong. But...

“...Hong-er?” He whispers.

It’s almost too much to hope for. The young man was a soldier, yes—but he didn’t die on the battlefield. And while he had the potential to cultivate...he never had the chance.

It’s possible that his spirit could have formed like this—but a very, very slim possibility.

The Ghost Fire doesn’t answer.

“...” Xie Lian waits, waits, and waits. Until his hopes slowly fade again, and his lips twist into a bitter frown.

Hong-er would answer him. No matter what he had to do.

Xie Lian let's go, turning away—and when he speaks, his tone is frigid. "If you're not him, then get lost."

For a time—he doesn't feel it again. Part of him starts to wonder if the little creature actually listened.

But there's the occasional brush against his palm. The scent of spiritual power on the air when he breathes in.

His jaw clenches.

At first—he's so resentful of the creature. Xie Lian can't figure out why it's haunting him with such determination—

Unless it's him.

And if it *is* him, Xie Lian can't understand why it won't tell him.

It's been a long time since the god had to travel alone. He isn't used to it anymore.

It doesn't necessarily hurt, when he falls. The sting in his hands and knees is nothing compared to the void in the place of the arms that used to catch him.

It isn't exactly unbearable, going hungry. The constant ache in his stomach is just…

A painful reminder of the mornings when he would wake up to a plate of fruits, not knowing who left them there.

He falls asleep hungry these days. He wakes up hungry.

Times are difficult. Work is hard to come by for an able bodied man—non-existent for a blind man.

People aren't as charitable as they used to be.

If he finds a barn to sleep in, he's lucky. More often than not, Xie Lian finds himself curled up in a ditch on the side of the road.

It could be worse. He wears an extra robe these days, over his own.

It used to be Hong-er’s.

Not the one from that day. Xie Lian burned the bloody clothes in a separate pile from the pyre.

He had grown out of this one, towards the end. Xie Lian had been planning on letting it out a little for him—but he never got around to it.

It still smells like him.

But some nights, it can’t keep the chill from sinking past his skin.

Xie Lian trembles, curling into a ball as the snow falls around him. He won’t die, no matter how cold he gets.

He isn’t that lucky.

He clutches the pouch around his neck, fingers stiff, remembering.

How he used to lie, just to get the boy to come inside from the Shrine steps.

The way he had to coax him into sleeping beside him.

There’s no lie in Xie Lian’s voice now as he trembles, curling into the tiniest ball that he can, whispering into the night—

“S…so cold…”

He can’t see the way the ghost fire rushes to his side, pressing against the front of his robes—burning so brightly, with everything that it has, but…It’s no use.

A ghost fire always burns cold.

I Don't Believe You

Chapter Summary

> "Do you have an unfulfilled wish?" He murmurs, tilting his face forward, "Something...keeping you here?"
>
> "Yes."
>
> Xie Lian lets out a soft breath. Well—that's something he might be able to help with, if it's something simple. At least he can try.
>
> "What is it?"
>
> The spirit bounces again, cool flames lightly brushing against the prince's nose.
>
> "I still have someone precious in this world."

Chapter Notes

> If you want to hear more about this story, find me on twitter, and follow the current updates of this story here!
>
> Fan art will be linked at the bottom of the chapter, please support the artists for their hard work! And to the artists, thank you so much for making such beautiful artwork, it's so special to me!
>
> Evie

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Traveling is slow, when he's like this–and for the first few weeks, he doesn't have any particular destination in mind. Planning ahead means having any form of motivation, and he...

Eventually, the thing that sharpens his focus is fear.

He knows who hurt Hong-er. He knows why.

When he lays alone, in the dark, shivering from the cold–he knows why.

Because Xie Lian was...looking back on it, if he had taken a moment to step away from his own self pity, he was healing. Having Hong-er by his side–

It had been saving him, bit by bit.

But Hong-er isn't the only person capable of doing that. He isn't the only person in the world that cares about Xie Lian.

Now that the god knows what level that creature is willing to stoop to in order to get to him...he has to know.

Did that thing find his parents? Or Feng Xin? Or Mu Qing?

Slowly, knowing it might be impossible to find them in this state, knowing that Feng Xin would have hidden them well...

The crown prince returns to Xianle.

Unlike every other traveler on the road–his shadow burns in the dark, gently floating along.

Each time the Ghost Fire brushes against him, Xie Lian asks the same question, fingertips trembling as they cup the spirit in his hands.

"Hong-er?" He pleads, pressing the flame to his forehead, lips trembling. "Is that you?"

He pleads, but it never answers.

For a time, Xie Lian assumed that was because the spirit didn't have enough power to speak. But if that were true, how could it have followed him for so long?

It's easier to be recognized here, in familiar territory–and the royal family is still being hunted.

He resorts to using a silk band to wrap the lower half of his face–in this state, with his eyes covered, barely any part of his face is visible.

Many take pity on him. Assume he was a casualty of the war. Some think he's a survivor of the plague.

They toss the beggar scraps.

One night, no matter how hungry he might be–he can't force himself to stomach the stale, crumbling chunk of bread in his hands. He tosses it away, taking shelter from the rain--settling down beneath a bridge. Maybe he'll find sleep tonight. Maybe he won't.

He breathes in through his nose--and he senses it there.

Spiritual power.

"..." He lifts his hand without speaking–and just as it always does, the Ghost Fire flies into his palm, nuzzling against his skin. In another life, the gesture would have made Xie Lian smile.

Smiling doesn't come easily anymore.

He tries again–Xie Lian doesn't know why–asking the same question that he always does.

"Hong-er?"

This time, he isn't surprised when he gets no reply. Just...tired.

In a moment of frustration–he shoves the spirit away.

He curls up into a ball, pulling his robes tighter around him. It's not much—but he's gotten better at keeping himself warm these days.

"If you aren't him, then why are you here?" He whispers, desperately wishing the creature would leave him be.

This hurts too much.

He keeps finding himself hoping, against everything in his body telling him that he shouldn't, that Hong-er's voice will answer.

How cruel a thing to pray for. That his loved one won't Rest In Peace. Hong-er deserves that.

He—

"Your Highness."

Xie Lian goes perfectly still.

The voice isn't one that he immediately recognizes—faint, breathy. More like if a breeze could form words.

As is the way with most spirits of such a nature, but still, Xie Lian clings onto some small shred of hope.

"...You know me?"

The Ghost Fire bounces lightly in his palm. "Of course, I know you!"

There's a childlike eagerness to it. One that feels so eager, the hope in Xie Lian's chest swells, and he tries *again* , desperately praying for an answer.

"Is it you, Hong-er?" Silence.

For the first time in weeks, Xie Lian feels his eyes sting. It can speak, but it won't answer to that name. It—

A set of tears slip down his cheeks as the last little bit of hope in his chest is snuffed out.

It isn't him.

It isn't Hong-er.

If it was, Hong-er would answer him.

But then...why is this spirit following him?

For a moment, he wonders if it's a soldier from Yong'an, taking the chance to taunt him, but...It's been following Xie Lian since he left the village, far from their borders —and it doesn't feel malicious.

Then, he realizes—and the god's mouth fills with the bitter taste of shame.

Xie Lian was probably the only cultivator around for miles. With the war over, many were dead—and those who weren't fled to peaceful kingdoms, better lands for spiritual cultivation.

The poor thing was probably just looking for someone to help it move on, and Xie Lian ignored it

"I'm sorry," he mumbles, wiping at his cheeks, "I'm sorry, I'll..."

Xie Lian swallows thickly, thinking about all the weeks he left the spirit to trail behind him, silently waiting for him to stop and look.

"I'll help you now," he sits forward, and brow knitting in concentration.

He performs a quick service—it's the first time he's thought about anything close to his cultivation in months—and gives the fire a soft push, encouraging it to float back up into the air, to pass on.

And still..

The little fire comes right back down, landing in his palm.

"..." Xie Lian frowns, struggling to remember what could have gone wrong—why it's still *here* . "...Did I miss a step?"

"No," he jumps when the spirit replies again, airy words whispering through the stillness of the night, "dianxia didn't do anything wrong."

His frown only deepens as he breathes in again, fingertips gently curling around the fire as he brings it closer.

It's interesting—most docile ghost fires are freshly deceased, too scattered to have a real consciousness, much less speak.

The ones that can are notoriously skittish—aware of how defenseless their spirits are, how easy it would be for them to be dispersed.

But this one is different.

It speaks clearly—shows strong awareness, and yet, it's perfectly content to sit in the palm of Xie Lian's hand.

Even when his fingers squeeze around it—so close to a movement that could crush it —the spirit doesn't even flinch. If anything, it presses closer.

And when Xie Lian probes closer, he finds something else there—trace amounts of another spirit, this one...

Distinctly demonic.

"...Did someone curse you?" Xie Lian murmurs. "Is that why you can't move on?"

He doesn't have enough spiritual power to deal with something like that. Maybe Feng Xin or Mu Qing could, if Xie Lian could manage to find them.

"No," the voice answers softly. "That isn't why."

Xie Lian frowns, wanting to ponder the matter more, because if the rite was performed correctly, that the spirit should have—

"I'm the one who didn't want to leave," the voice echoes slightly, barely audible over the patter of the rain. "That's all."

There's a painful pang of fondness in Xie Lian's chest.

He's developed a particular appreciation for that kind of blind— almost psychotic— level of determination.

"Do you have an unfulfilled wish?" He murmurs, tilting his face forward, "Something…keeping you here?"

"Yes."

Xie Lian lets out a soft breath. Well—that's something he might be able to help with, if it's something simple. At least he can try.

"What is it?"

The spirit bounces again, cool flames lightly brushing against the prince's nose.

"I still have someone precious in this world."

"…" Xie Lian's lips press together tightly, holding back an emotional response. "I see. Is it your wife?"

"We were never married," the voice replies easily. "In fact—I'm not sure that they knew how I really felt."

The god frowns, raising an eyebrow.

With that kind of devotion? To linger on, even in this form?

What kind of blind fool would fail to take notice? "How could that be?"

Who could fight so hard to linger on for someone who didn't even realize how much they cared?

Just how beautiful must such a person be?

The flame wobbles in the air for a moment, shying away from Xie Lian's hand— almost sheepish.

"I…didn't know how to tell them, dianxia," the voice whispers. "I was afraid."

Oh.

Xie Lian's chest *aches* .

He reaches out again, pulling the spirit back in—never minding the cold. “I understand,” he replies, more sincere than he’s ever been in his life.

He made the same mistake, over and over again. Sometimes, he thinks—if their positions had been reversed, he might be a ghost fire too.

Xie Lian couldn’t have left Hong-er alone. Even if he...

Even if he was too much of a coward to tell the young man what he felt. Or the depth of it.

After taking a moment to compose himself, he manages to ask;

“What is your wish, then?”

It doesn’t sound like a problem with a simple answer, but maybe...

“I want to protect them.”

That, Xie Lian cannot help with. No one can.

No one can protect anyone in this world. He’s learned that lesson over and over again now.

“...But you don’t belong in this world anymore,” he whispers. “What of it?”

Xie Lian’s lips twitch.

He knows it isn’t him. He does.

But there have been several moments talking to this spirit when Xie Lian has felt the echoes of him. Faint reminders that hurt as much as they make him smile.

(Shameless.)

“If you stay, you won’t be able to Rest In Peace,” he points out gently.

“I pray to never Rest In Peace.”

Xie Lian’s lips tremble—and he can’t seem to figure out whether or not he wants to laugh, or cry.

He feels that way more and more often now.

"If your beloved knew you couldn't Rest In Peace because of them...they might feel guilty about it," he tries again in vain.

The spirit doesn't seem particularly troubled. "Then, I just won't let them know why I haven't gone."

How childish. They make it sound so simple.

"...Anyone would notice something like that sooner or later," Xie Lian points out.

No one could ever be THAT blind.

When the spirit replies, it's voice is dry—almost a little sarcastic, like it's muttering under its breath and doesn't ACTUALLY intend for the god to hear.

"You would be surprised."

Xie Lian pauses, raising an eyebrow—but the fire continues on like nothing was said at all;

"I just won't let them find out that I'm protecting them either."

"..."

Even now, knowing that this isn't the boy that he loved—Xie Lian can't stop his heart from feeling a little moved by the depth and sincerity of such devotion. But...

This man clearly died young.

In a time such as this—it would be from the war, or the plague. Either one, Xie Lian is responsible for.

And given how friendly the spirit is towards him, how quickly he recognized him—he must have been from Xianle.

"...The war took you away from the person you love."

He whispers the words with a ringing sort of finality, knowing them to be true. "...I'm sorry I didn't win."

He forgot what this guilt felt like. Hong-er made it so much easier to live with. The ghost fire presses closer, nuzzling against Xie Lian's cheek.

Thunder rumbles.

“To die for you is my greatest honor.”

Xie Lian’s lips tremble once more.

It’s something they used to cheer over and over again, drilling the words into young men sent to fight for Xianle;

“To die in battle for the crown prince is the greatest honor for a Xianle soldier.”

It seems too shameful now, to teach boys who were little more than children such a thing.

As if they could ever understand what dying truly meant.

He doesn’t notice the fact that the spirit never said anything about dying in battle— only dying for him.

Two very different things.

Xie Lian fills in the blanks on his own, eyes swimming with tears. You would think he would have none left by now—but he always seems to find more.

“I’m sorry,” he chokes, letting the spirit go, “forget me.”

The cold flares near his face, like the flame is burning brighter. “I won’t forget, your highness.”

That, Xie Lian very much doubts. The world has such a short memory for beautiful, shiny things.

That’s all he ever was. A beautiful, unobtainable object. And the moment he stopped shining so brightly, he was tossed aside.

Everyone will forget.

“I am forever your most devoted believer.”

That makes Xie Lian recoil, scrambling back until his shoulders press against the stone supports of the bridge.

“...No,” he mutters, shaking his head. “I’m sorry, but you’re not.” The fire drifts closer, “I am.”

Xie Lian cringes away.

His hands tremble, clutching at the pouch around his neck.

“My—My most devoted believer…” His voice is so fragile.

Xie Lian remembers a time when he would speak, and the world would listen. Now, he can barely raise his voice over the rain.

He hunches forward, holding Hong-er.

The sob that tears from him comes from somewhere so deep, the sound itself is painful against his ear.

“He’s *gone* .” Xie Lian croaks, tears slipping down his cheeks.

The Ghost Fire tries to slip into the circle of his arms, to press against him, but the god won’t allow it.

He hugs his arms closer, shrinking away, trembling all over—and when the voice speaks again, there’s a clear note of distress.

“I AM your most devoted believer, dianxia.”

Xie Lian whips his head back and forth, unable to ever accept such a thing. “No!” Even if he could—

No one could take Hong-er’s place. Not now. Not EVER.

The ghost fire is so stubborn, repeating it over and over again, until Xie Lian can’t stand it, snapping a question when he already knows what the answer will be.

“Are you Hong-er?!”

Silence.

Xie Lian’s smile isn’t happy. It never is—not anymore.

“Then you’re not.” He mutters, shaking his head. “And you should forget about me.” “I won’t.”

The young man gnashes his teeth together, and now, he’s trembling from frustration.

“People who believe in me—” Xie Lian lifts the pouch in his hand, trembling from how tight his grip has become, “They end up like

THIS!" He cries. "Either they forget about me, or they die alone, in pain—and I can't even PROTECT them!"

Thunder crashes again, even louder now.

For a moment, there's only silence—and Xie Lian begins to wonder if maybe...he's managed to scare the spirit off. That's probably for the best, he—

"Well, dianxia doesn't have to worry about me dying." The tone is, once again, dry—but playful.

He—?

Xie Lian, in spite of everything, barks out a surprised laugh.

"I—You!" Then, he catches himself—and he turns his head away, feeling like a spiteful child, refusing to allow himself to be cheered up.

He doesn't want to laugh. He doesn't want comfort. *"Shut up!"*

He tucks Hong-er back into his shirt, bowing his head once more. "You'll forget me— or you'll end up destroyed—so just go!"

The voice isn't so playful now—and the fire stays close, even if it won't touch him again. "I won't."

Silently, Xie Lian begins to weep. "You will," he croaks.

There was only one person who thought all of this was worth it. That Xie Lian was worth it.

He's gone now.

Xie Lian failed him. Just like he's always failed everyone else.

The Ghost Fire hovers just over his head, like it's afraid to touch him now.

When it speaks again—it's voice isn't so cocksure and stubborn. It's pleading—with an edge of desperation that is almost familiar.

"Dianxia, believe me!" Coldness brushes against his hair, and Xie Lian flinches.

The voice is so much smaller now, unbearably sad.

“...please, believe me,” It pleads, and Xie Lian can’t see the way it trembles—how it burns just a little dimmer when the god sinks down to the ground, curling into a small, shivering ball.

“...I don’t believe you,” The god whispers. He can’t.

He doesn’t even believe in himself.

It takes him months, but he finds his family.

Or, more accurately—they find him.

Xie Lian is sitting on the side of the road, taking slow, reluctant bites of a stale, slightly molded bun. It’s objectively horrible, but...

It’s been four dates since he had anything at all.

He hears the occasional sets of footsteps, ox carts rolling by. There’s a town, two miles down the road. No one bothers him—eventually, if he waits long enough, there’s usually someone willing to toss a coin or two, or maybe offer a ride on the back of their wagon.

Now—he feels pressure on the back of his shoulder—then, hears the words— “Your highness?!”

At first, he whips his head around out of habit, ready to snarl the words, ‘go away!’ Because that stubborn little spirit is *relentless* , but—

He knows that voice.

“...” His lips tremble. “...Feng Xin?”

The hand on his shoulder is warm, strong—and when he hears that voice again, Xie Lian’s chest bursts with this overwhelming flood of emotion—

“It’s me, your highness.” Relief. Comfort. Safety.

Oh god, it’s—it’s actually him.

It’s been nearly two years since they’ve seen one another—and the guard is startled by how much his prince has changed in that time.

He’s so thin, pale—hair completely loose and unkempt. Nearly unrecognizable from who he used to be, but—

That isn’t the most startling thing.

Xie Lian was never quite so stiff as the king, or out of touch as the queen. He was kind, empathetic—but there was always some degree of decorum to him. A poised air that came with being born into royalty.

Now the young man throws himself into Feng Xin's arms, biting back tears. "You're *okay* ," he whispers, holding on so tight, his friend lets out a pained grunt.

"Of—Of course I'm alright, your highness, but—you're forgetting your strength—!" Oh, right.

He hasn't touched someone living since...

Xie Lian's smile dims, but his grip loosens.

When it does, Feng Xin leans back, getting a better look at the prince's face—and when he does, he frowns.

"...What happened here?" He mutters, gently probing a bruise under Xie Lian's right eye with his fingertips.

The god thinks on it, squinting.

"I think...it must have been from when I got robbed yesterday."

Well, 'robbed' being a loose word. All they did was rough him up a bit and take the food he had managed to scavenge—

(Hence why he was desperate enough to eat a molded meat bun.)

"You were robbed?!"

Feng Xin sounds almost dumbstruck—and infuriated. "Who would rob a blind person?!"

"..." Xie Lian let out a tired snort, his voice dry— "You would be surprised."

It's happened more than once.

Feng Xin pauses—then he frowns.

He can't ever remember his friend sounding so... Bitter. Utterly cynical.

The guard frowns—and instead of probing the bruise now, he's cupping Xie Lian's cheek, gently brushing his hair back beneath his ear.

For Xie Lian, who has already been completely robbed of one sense—going so long without touch has been...difficult.

The only contact he's had since that night with Hong-er has been the cold brush of the Ghost Fire against his skin, or the feeling of a fist crashing into him.

So this—this small show of physical affection has the prince immediately leaning into it, shivering.

Feng Xin frowns, trying to understand the change in behavior. "What—? OW!"

He jerks away from Xie Lian with a glare, looking around—and the prince sits there, looking around, trying to understand what's going on. "Feng Xin?!"

"It's alright, just..." He rubs the side of his head.

"A ghost fire just slammed into me," the former Junior official glances around until he finds the thing, glaring—and Xie Lian sighs.

"Oh—don't worry about him."

Feng Xin glares at the green flame hovering a few feet away from him, "Why?!"

"He won't hurt you," Xie Lian sighs.

"...Not from lack of trying," Feng Xin grumbles, still rubbing his head.

The fire hovers closer to Xie Lian's head, and Feng Xin swears—the way it bounces in the air almost seems taunting.

"Pervert."

The official's eyes widen sharply, reaching out to snatch the spirit. "You little—!"

The moment Xie Lian senses his friend snatching for the Ghost Fire, his expression completely changes.

He uses one hand to pull the little fire close, his other smacking Feng Xin's arm away. "Don't hurt it!"

“...” The guard stares. “...Your highness...”

He takes in how quickly the prince is breathing, how tightly he’s holding the little fire —and the fact that the spirit seems perfectly content with it’s predicament, despite the fact that Xie Lian could crush him at any moment.

“...Are you ATTACHED to that thing?”

“...He’s just...” Xie Lian coughs, clutching both arms around the little fire. The cold used to bother him—but it’s getting warmer outside these days, and Xie Lian’s gotten used to it. “He’s annoying and stubborn and stupid, but...he’s just...”

Feng Xin is staring like he’s lost it.

“...A silly little guy,” Xie Lian finishes, nodding rather seriously.

He can’t see Feng Xin’s expression, but he can hear the incredulousness of his tone. “...Your highness...”

Xie Lian hums, parting the ghost fire absentmindedly, like the little freak was ACTUALLY scared. “Hmm?”

“...Have you been drinking?”

It’s hard to read Xie Lian’s expression when so much of his face is covered—but when Feng Xin looks closely, he can see the shape of an awkward smile beneath the silk band around the lower half of his face.

“Ah...not...not purposefully?”

Feng Xin leans in and sniffs—and there’s definitely a hint of alcohol hanging around the God’s body. “What is that supposed to mean?!”

The smile on Xie Lian’s face isn’t awkward anymore—just bitter. His tone is equally so.

“I take whatever people give me, Feng Xin.”

The first couple of incidents were cruel jokes. Hand a cup of liquor to a blind man and tell him it’s water, just to watch him choke.

Xie Lian was so thirsty once, he didn’t bother to smell first—and he did.

Hong-er caught someone trying to do that a few months ago.

He broke the man’s nose, even when Xie Lian tried to laugh it off, saying no harm was done.

Xie Lian still remembers how surprised he was by the strength in the boy’s hand when he gripped the god’s wrist, stopping him from raising the cup to his lips.

His skin feels hot now, when he thinks about that moment–but the god couldn't tell you why.

All he knows is that remembering the teenager fills his heart with this miserable sort of ache.

Up until now, Xie Lian had never needed to mourn someone. Grief is...a learning process.

It's sort of like having a broken bone. He's alright, when he doesn't think about it. When he doesn't move around too much.

But when he remembers Hong-er, thinks about the things that he loved about him, it's...

The pain can be so jarring, sometimes–it almost frightens him. But he also promised that he wouldn't forget him, so...

"...What about your cultivation?"

The prince glances up, suddenly remembering that he was in the middle of a conversation. He isn't used to talking to people anymore–he's out of practice.

"What?"

Feng Xin frowns.

"If you've been drinking–how are you supposed to cultivate properly?"

It isn't as easy to shrug it off with Feng Xin as it would be with anyone else--he's Xie

Lian's best friend, after all...and they practice the same method.

The prince grimaces.

He never said that he had been drinking habitually, never even implied it, but...

Feng Xin seemed to gather that passers by are more likely to give Xie Lian liquor than water. After all--they're still recovering from a drought.

(A bitter subject, obviously.)

"I...Uh..."

Xie Lian doesn't have the heart to admit the truth: that he hasn't thought about cultivation at all. Not in months.

When they went their separate ways--the idea was that Xie Lian was going to be focusing exclusively on that. It was the only way he could get Feng Xin to allow it.

To be fair: in part, Xie Lian did have such intentions, he just...

He had no idea how hard it would be, all on his own. And when he was with Hong-er, he just...

"I've...switched cultivation methods," he mumbles, rubbing his cheek. "Alcohol doesn't factor in anymore."

Feng Xin raises an eyebrow, "Which method are you using now?"

"..." Xie Lian's chin dips lower, and he mumbles something under his breath.

(The *'winging it'* method.)

His friend leans forward, "What was that?"

The Ghost Fire lurches from Xie Lian's arms with a sudden jerk.

It's so sudden, Feng Xin doesn't have a chance to react before it smacks straight into his forehead with a surprising amount of force, sending the junior official sprawling. "He said to mind your own business!"

Xie Lian watches the scene (well, stares in the general direction).

"...That isn't what I said," he mumbles, somewhat cluelessly–reaching over to snatch the ghost fire up again when he senses Feng Xin lunging. "I said not to hurt it!"

Feng Xin glares, an angry red mark already forming on his forehead. "That thing is a MENACE!"

“He’s going through a lot,” Xie Lian mutters.

“Like what?!”

“Oh, I don’t know,” the god responds dryly, his tone suddenly sarcastic, “the afterlife?”

That shuts Feng Xin right up, his cheeks slightly flushed, and the Ghost Fire trembles in Xie Lian’s arms...

...Almost like it's laughing at him.

"That isn't an excuse to body slam people!"

"He doesn't have a body," Xie Lian reminds him helpfully. "And you're the older one."

Well *that* just makes Feng Xin feel like a scolded child.

"If you want to fight someone, you can pick someone your own size."

Xie Lian says it pleasantly, but the implication is clear–if Feng Xin actually did want to hurt the spirit, he would have to go through Xie Lian first.

And, well...

They always used to joke that the prince could take on an entire battalion blindfolded, with one hand tied behind his back--but there was really nothing comedic about it.

And Xie Lian still has both hands, even now.

"...I won't bother him if he doesn't bother me."

Feng Xin is grumbling, crossing his arms over his chest, and to the man's faint disgust...Xie Lian is actually *petting* the little spirit.

"Be good," he mumbles, somewhat stern.

And the way the fire bobs up and down—it's almost like it's nodding.

Xie Lian smiles, looking up. "It won't bother you."

Feng Xin seems doubtful of that, crossing his arms over his chest, but...he sighs, looking Xie Lian over. "What–?"

Before he can ask, the prince interrupts him, "Can you take me to my parents?" He murmurs. "Are they alright?"

Feng Xin lets out a sigh.

"...Yeah," he mumbles, pushing himself to his feet, reaching down to take Xie Lian's hand, "I can take you to them."

The prince pauses, a little startled by the feeling of someone else's hand in his own. It's been...

He swallows thickly, allowing Feng Xin to help him up. ...It's been so long.

His hand is larger than Xie Lian's, warm–fingers slightly rougher than his own, but... Not the same as the hands that helped him up before.

The Ghost Fire floats along behind them as they walk–and Xie Lian can't see but...

It looks a little dejected.

Feng Xin isn't bad, as far as guides go. (It's not like Xie Lian has a broad frame of reference.) He doesn't let the prince fall, always catches him on every stumble, but...

Xie Lian is realizing now, how careful Hong-er was, how gentle.

Always holding him by the wrist and elbow, always attentively looking in the path ahead for possible obstacles, warning the prince to step over. And if Xie Lian did stumble, Hong-er would catch him with both arms before Xie Lian's weight could come down in the slightest.

Feng Xin is attentive too–but gentleness doesn't come to him as easily. When he catches Xie Lian from a stumble, the grip on his wrist becomes bruising. Sometimes he'll accidentally twist it...

All of this makes Xie Lian sound ungrateful--he isn't. He just... Xie Lian just misses his...his...

...His Hong-er. That's all.

The fact that the prince has become so quiet hasn't slipped Feng Xin's notice--not in the slightest. And, carefully, he starts to ask the question that had been on his mind before.

"Your highness?"

"...Hmm?"

"What..." Feng Xin glances him over, "...What happened, while you were away?"

"..." Xie Lian's relieved for the silk band around his face now–it hides the way his lips tremble. "I...was in one of my shrines," he murmurs. "In the north."

There's more to it than that.

Feng Xin can tell. It's not that Xie Lian was vain before. He...actually did have moments of vanity, but he was never above getting messy when the situation required it.

But right now, Feng Xin's prince looks like he's completely forgotten what he once was.

He doesn't speak in the same way–his personality is...It's changed.

"What happened, while you were there?" Feng Xin's voice is rarely gentle–but it always is for him. Patient might be a better word--either way, Xie Lian always feels safe to take his time to respond.

And it does take Xie Lian time. Several minutes of walking–but Feng Xin doesn't ask again. He knows that his prince is thinking about it.

"...I met someone...very special to me," Xie Lian explains carefully. "And we...became quite close."

Feng Xin's eyes widen slightly.

It's no small thing for Xie Lian to become close with anyone. That was the part of Mu Qing–

(He grits his teeth now, even thinking of that name.)

That was the part of Mu Qing that always infuriated Feng Xin. Always too absorbed with himself to understand the actual situation.

Xie Lian is kind. He's always been sweet tempered–but people often mistake that for openness, and it isn't. He was raised to understand that everyone was below him, Mu Qing wasn't wrong about that, but...

He was also raised to understand that people would always want things from him. It was rare for Xie Lian to let his guard down.

And as his guard—no, as his best friend–Feng Xin never did either. Even less so.

The fact that he took Mu Qing under his wing was highly unusual.

It took time. But once he started to view the boy that started as a mere servant as an actual companion...his admiration and respect for Mu Qing were obvious.

Well, to everyone but the man himself.

And even that took quite some time. Years, in fact.

So, the thought that someone could become so close to him, so quickly, particularly when Xie Lian was in such a vulnerable state...

It's shocking.

"...Where are they now?" Feng Xin questions, and this time, the silence stretches for so long that he feels like it won't end.

Long enough that he starts to glance over Xie Lian again–and now, he notices the leather cord around the prince's neck, the small pouch dangling from it, and he reaches without thinking. "What is–?"

Xie Lian yanks out of his grip, both hands clutching the pouch tightly.

For a moment, he doesn't speak, his breaths quick and shallow, shoulders trembling.

He can't–

He can't let anyone else touch him again. Not–Not ever again.

Feng Xin is silent, watching as the prince struggles to compose himself.

The answer to his question is obvious, now.

In a rare show of perceptiveness, he doesn't ask anything more.

He doesn't take Xie Lian to the King and Queen immediately, no–seeing him in such a state would be too upsetting. There's a mountain stream, near their hiding place–clean, private.

The Ghost Fire zooms off the moment that Feng Xin begins the process of helping Xie Lian out of his robes, swerving behind a tree.

Feng Xin stares after it, as he helps his friend bathe.

"...That is the *weirdest* spirit I have *ever* encountered," the guard mutters.

Xie Lian doesn't disagree–but the smile on his face is a little too fond not to be called endeared.

"He's...unique."

"Why is he so obsessed with you?"

"...I think obsessed is a strong word," Xie Lian frowns, but...Feng Xin finds it pretty appropriate. Finally, he shrugs.

"He...was one of my believers, when he was alive."

"..." Feng Xin focuses on scrubbing his hair, only grunting in response. He's slightly more generous with the little ghost fire after hearing that, however.

He struggles with Xie Lian's hair, after all–there's so much of it.

Eventually he has to settle for the only hairstyle he's really mastered—a high, tight ponytail. It doesn't look too bad on the prince, actually—it reminds Feng Xin of when they were still boys, training under the Guoshi on Mount Taicang.

It makes him look younger. Softer.

(If they still WERE those boys, Xie Lian would have whined about how the weight of his hair tugged on his scalp—that Feng Xin pulled it too tight, but...he's missed his friend too much to complain.

Eventually, he asks about where Mu Qing is—and Feng Xin's response is hesitant.

“...He left, your highness. Not long after you did.” Feng Xin mutters, helping Xie Lian into a clean set of robes. They belong to his friend—much too big for him, but...

It’s been months since Xie Lian felt clean. Taken care of.

Xie Lian is quiet, thinking that over. “...Did he say why?”

Feng Xin stares at the shape of the prince's back, wishing that he could read him the way that he used to. There's a blankness to him, now.

But Feng Xin is honest with him, as always.

"He didn't think his staying did much good for anyone." He mutters.

Which is exactly what Mu Qing said at the time—but Feng Xin has never described it that way until now. Typically, he's a little less...generous.

"...I see." Xie Lian murmurs, his shoulders a little straighter—his tone is complicated, straddling emotions. "That's...good."

Feng Xin stares, unable to fathom how that could be a...good thing. "...You think so?"

Xie Lian nods, reaching for the pouch. He set it down on the river bank while he was bathing, memorizing the spot—and when he feels Hong-er against his chest, he breathes a little easier.

He doesn't explain why—can't bring himself too, but—

'At least...he's safer, this way. '

When he's dressed, he's still thin—but far more presentable than he was when Feng Xin found him on the street—

And he does something odd. Odd for him, anyway.

He grabs Feng Xin's hand.

The young man pauses, half convinced that Xie Lian just wanted them to go ahead and get moving, and this was his way of asking Feng Xin to show him the way, but—

Xie Lian hasn't moved yet, and his head is bowed.

"You...were taking care of them alone, all this time?"

Feng Xin just nods at first, the movement stiff—before he remembers that he has to answer verbally, when it comes to Xie Lian. "...Yes, your highness."

Xie Lian is gripping his hand so tightly, it's almost painful.

“...Oh, Feng Xin,” he murmurs, his voice heavy. Sorrowful. “I’m so sorry.”

His friend pauses—unsure of how to respond, and just...stunned.

It’s not something that Xie Lian would have ever thought about before. Much less apologized for. Of course, Feng Xin stayed, even when Mu Qing left.

Those were his orders. Simple as that.

And maybe, if the last year of his life hadn’t happened, Xie Lian wouldn’t have thought about it that way at all.

Wouldn’t have known how it might feel to be alone, when everyone else has left you. To feel forgotten.

Xie Lian spent so long worrying about Hong-er’s future, wrestling with the guilt of stealing it away from him—knowing that the boy would follow him to the ends of the earth, if Xie Lian never stopped him.

Now, he’s realizing he never once thought of Feng Xin’s future before.

His position in the royal household was prestigious, he was groomed and selected for it from boyhood. Their futures—they were always so closely intertwined.

There was so much Xie Lian was going to give to him back then—he never gave much thought to how much Feng Xin did for him.

But that isn’t true anymore.

Xie Lian can’t give Feng Xin anything at all. He’s—

The prince is quiet, the entire walk back.

He’s only a burden, now—and Feng Xin is too loyal to discard him. And Xie Lian knows, if he had learned his lesson...he would make his friend leave.

Before that thing comes back. Before Xie Lian is crawling through the woods, screaming his name.

Before Xie Lian is standing before his funeral pyre.

He forces smiles, when he sees his parents. Demurs when his mother crows over how thin he’s become. Chokes down her…‘cooking.’

It's hard for them to see him this way, and...even if Xie Lian can't 'see' them, it...isn't easy for him, either.

He can hear the slight wheeze to his father's breaths—the faint bubbling from his lungs. When he asks Feng Xin about it, his friend tells him it's been ongoing.

When he asks his father—the man just scowls, grumbling something about how, compared to what's happened to Xie Lian, a little cough is nothing.

He isn't sure if the King means that as a way of saying, *'Worry about yourself, not me,'* or, *'You're the weaker one.'*

Later, when the man has already gone to bed, and Feng Xin is busy cleaning the dishes from dinner, Xie Lian finds himself sitting with his mother, leaning his cheek against her shoulder as she rubs his back, stroking her fingers through his hair.

"My sweet boy..." She hums. "I missed you so, so much..."

The last time Xie Lian was in someone's arms like this, they were Hong-er's. There's a soft, maternal familiarity. He takes comfort in it, but...

God, he misses what he's lost.

"...I'm sorry I was gone for so long," he whispers.

The Queen doesn't guilt him for that. Unless Xie Lian was arguing with his father, she never made him feel sorry for anything.

Her palm presses against his cheek, stroking the bruise under his eye, and still—she doesn't ask.

But she does have one question.

"Something's hurting you," She murmurs. "More than before."

And it was hard to imagine, before, that anything could hurt more than the shame of failure. Of banishment.

Xie Lian didn't know anything back then. He bites his lip.

It's the first time he admits it to another soul; "...I loved someone."

Xie Lian doesn't tell her exactly what he means. Doesn't think he ever wants her to know that part of him. But the raw edge to his voice is enough to convey the gravity of his emotions.

Her arms tighten around him when she hears his voice crack. “And…they died.”

He doesn’t say more on the subject—but when she reaches for the pouch around his neck, she’s the only person, now, or ever, that Xie Lian allows to touch it, her fingertips brushing over the worn, fabric surface.

“…They were with you, while you were gone?”

Xie Lian nods, his words thick with emotion, “They took care of me.”

The Queen stares at the pouch for a long moment, finally asking; “What was their name?”

He hasn’t said it out loud in what feels like ages now. “…Hong-er,” he whispers.

She squeezes the pouch gently. “Thank you, Hong-er.”

That night, cautiously, his voice laden with embarrassment, he asks Feng Xin to sleep in his room. They used to do that when they were children—

(Xie Lian was always a coward, when it came to his nightmares.)

—Feng Xin doesn’t complain about it now, either, perfectly comfortable to make a spot on the floor in front of the door.

Maybe there’s some comfort in not being alone, but…Xie Lian realizes now, how different it is from having someone sleeping in the bed beside him.

Colder.

He wakes several time in the night, just to look over and make sure that his friend is still there. That he didn’t sneak off somewhere in the night. That he isn’t screaming in pain somewhere, with Xie Lian sleeping right through it.

Xie Lian doesn’t have a word for this feeling.

This constant, recurring terror that he can’t seem to escape from. He’s always trying to outthink it now, to get a step ahead of it, so he won’t have to stop being so afraid anymore, but…

But Xie Lian is always afraid.

It’s easy to be afraid, when you’ve seen what the world can do.

When Mu Qing comes to visit, months later—he’s clearly surprised that the prince doesn’t seem to have a single unkind word to say to him. Didn’t seem to trust it, not at first.

He asks Xie Lian the least about the time on his own—but his question cuts the closest to home.

When he hears that Xie Lian met someone, and he lost them, he simply asks— “Were you in love with him?”

‘In love with him.’

Xie Lian always knew that Mu Qing suspected, but…

He doesn’t seem disgusted now. Not in the way that he was before.

Xie Lian holds himself tighter.

“…I don’t know,” he mutters, wishing…they’d had more time. That he’d had the chance to see Hong-er grow more. If Hong-er could have met Xie Lian when things were still…

“…I think I…I think I was,” he admits.

(Later, he’ll know that telling Mu Qing was a mistake.)

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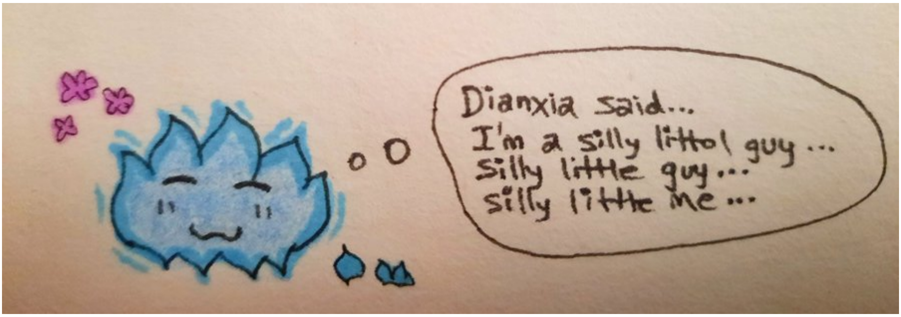
Dianxia said...
I'm a silly littol guy...
Silly little guy...
silly little me...

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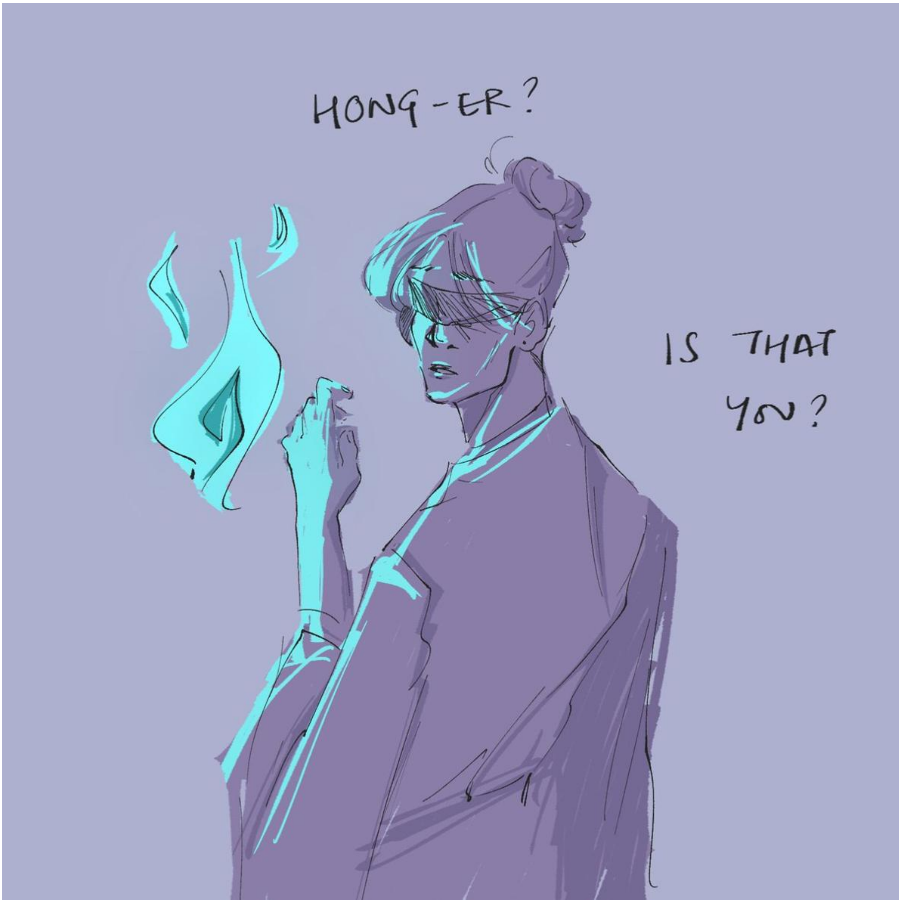
HONG-ER?
IS THAT YOU?

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Chapter End Notes

> Thanks again to everyone for making such beautiful artwork! There's more that will be linked in future chapters, but Ao3 will only let me link so much, unfortunately! See you tomorrow, Evie

All a Spirit is

Chapter Summary

> “...Have you ever done this before, your highness?”
>
> Xie Lian shakes his head vehemently, still trembling with shame.
>
> “No,” he whispers, voice dry and cracked. “Never.”
>
> “...” One official pats his back, almost sympathetic. “Don’t worry, your highness.”
>
> Xie Lian shivers, shrinking in on himself.
>
> “We won’t tell anyone.”

Chapter Notes

> TW// for chapter: no sexual assault happens, but there are moments that could make people with SA related trauma uncomfortable. There are also mentions of sex work that are not positive, but these are not a reflection of my (the author’s) feelings on Sex Work, but rather a reflection on the historical mistreatment of those who do perform sex work.
>
> you can find me (and this fic) on twitter at @cataclysmicevie
>
> Thanks!
> Evie

The passage of time isn’t a healing thing now. Not like it was before. It drags on—and Xie Lian isn’t really getting better, he’s just learning to fake it more and more.

No one mentions a word about a man in mourning robes, or the curses that follow him.

Xie Lian doesn’t find happiness again, that would be too difficult. But he finds stability. He starts to feel safe.

And it only takes one incident to rob him of that all over again.

When he’s sitting on the mountain side one afternoon, fiddling with threads between his fingers.

Feng Xin is in town again, trying to make money busking. He won't let Xie Lian go along, or try to help. A blind man shattering boulders on his chest wasn't the draw that Xie Lian thought it would be.

There's only one real way Xie Lian could make money these days.

Someone stops him to offer most times, when he's in the city. If Feng Xin isn't around to punch the person in the face, the ghost fire usually is, slamming into them until they fall to the ground.

Xie Lian has never really considered it. He's strayed from his cultivation, but…

For a long time, he didn't even understand what people like that were actually *asking* for. He had no experience with that sort of thing to begin with, and…so much of it is innuendo.

The look in someone's eyes, the curve of their mouth, the twitch of an eyebrow.

The first time he got a grasp of the fact that when someone used *that* tone, it meant something inappropriate, was back when he was still with Hong-er. A man passing through the village had been trailing after him in the market, mentioning something about wanting 'stress relief.'

Xie Lian had been a little annoyed by the man's persistence, but he kindly explained a few sutras that always helped him with his anxiety.

The man did not find that answer particularly satisfactory, and amended the request to wanting, 'company.'

Xie Lian found that rather sad.

He knew what it was like to be so desperate for companionship—but he was also busy at the time. The chores for the day had barely been started, and Hong-er was still waiting—

It wasn't until the man mentioned 'paying' for company that Xie Lian's interest was caught.

He'd been halfway out of the market, allowing the man to lead him off by the time Hong-er found him—and when Xie Lian explained what he was doing, caught wind of what was going on.

At first, Xie Lian didn't understand the young man's anger. But when he did…

There was shame.

That even then, he was still so ignorant of the world that Hong-er, still practically a child himself, knew more about such things than him.

That the stranger thought Xie Lian was…that he would…

Xie Lian recoiled from the idea, back then.

It went against everything he was raised to believe. It felt—

It felt beneath him.

But he wasn't hungry every day, back then. His father wasn't sick—getting sicker by the day. Hong-er was helping, yes—but that wasn't the same as watching Feng Xin work himself to the bone.

It wore him down. And now, he's thinking about it.

Sitting alone on the mountainside, while Feng Xin works in the city below. Demeaning himself in a different way, a way that isn't an option for Xie Lian.

He toys with the threads in his hands.

Xie Lian hasn't taken up weaving again. Not since Hong-er was around. It's hard, now, when he tries. He remembers the way the boy used to lay on the ground beside him while he worked, curled up but he fire—head resting against Xie Lian's thigh, listening as the god told stories…

Maybe Xie Lian could make money through that, Hong-er always said he was good at it, but…

Hong-er said that Xie Lian was good at everything—and now, the god knows that isn't true.

But when he thinks of the other option…he's frightened. He—

He doesn't want to.

Then, there's a sound stirring him from his thoughts.

At first, Xie Lian thinks it's an animal—but when he listens, he doesn't feel a heartbeat, or detect anything breathing nearby. The closest thing is a sparrow, thirty feet away...

Then, he breathes in, slow and deep.

It's there—the tell tale scent of spiritual power. Stronger than what he's been used to, though not by much.

"..." The god tilts his head to the side, outstretching his palm—but there's no cool, flickering presence of the ghost fire. "...Is something wrong?" He calls out.

There's no answer.

The Ghost Fire is usually with him—only wandering off sometimes. It can't come inside the small house that Xie Lian and his family have been staying in, his mother has always been frightened of spirits, but...

Usually, if Xie Lian calls out, it always comes.

But when he breathes in again—the spiritual power is still there, meaning that whatever it is, it's closer.

Xie Lian didn't hear anything move.

A demon or a goblin would make some sort of noise—and the presence doesn't have the dirty sort of smell he associates with that.

There's a shift in the air in front of him—like something's standing there. It doesn't have a scent, a heartbeat, a single breath for Xie Lian to track. Just like...a ghost.

The prince's pulse skips, and his breathing halts.

Even now, he can't learn his lesson.

"...Hong-er?"

He can't let go of the hope that, some day, the boy he knew will answer him again.

That Hong-er will come back to him.

No one answers now, but the further Xie Lian's fingers outstretch, they brush against something.

A set of fur lined boots. Xie Lian—

He knows those shoes.

Instantly, his eyes are swimming with tears.

Xie Lian made them.

“Hong-er?!” He croaks, lurching forward, reaching, and when he finds a hand, fingers intertwine with his own.

Now, the tears are slipping down his cheeks. He knows those hands.

He’s held them many times before.

A sob rips from him.

A ghost couldn’t fake this. Not so perfectly. It’s—

It’s him.

Oh god, it’s really him.

Xie Lian’s hands are trembling so badly, Hong-er’s fingers have to tighten around his to keep him steady, but—

But why won’t he answer?

The god pulls, trying to get him closer—and the boy comes so easily, sinking down to his knees before him.

“W-where were you?” He whispers, reaching. “I-I thought you were —”

When no ghost appeared to answer his call for months on end, Xie Lian thought... He thought his friend was at peace.

And he knows, he should have been glad. But now...

For the first time in so long, he’s happy. A tear stricken smile on his lips as he reaches up to cup the boy’s cheeks, to tell him everything, everything he should have before—

What his hands find isn’t a face.

Not the square jaw, pointed chin, or slightly crooked nose that Xie Lian remembers. Not the scars, or the bandages that once covered them.

Xie Lian's fingers come into contact with something cold and hard. A mask.

Half smiling, half crying. He screams.

It's immediate, bloodcurdling, his entire body recoiling as he tries to scramble back, but those hands wrap around his wrists—

The grip, like shackles.

They drag Xie Lian back in, even as the young man cries out, desperate to get away—

"I never left."

Xie Lian's sobs aren't happy anymore—they're petrified. And—and so angry, because —

He's wearing Hong-er's boots.

Underneath that mask, he's probably wearing Hong-er's face.

And there's nothing that Xie Lian can do about it.

The grip on his wrists tightens—

It hurts.

Xie Lian struggles, uses all of the strength he has left—and even with the shackles, it would be enough to throw a human man so violently, landing would be fatal.

Now, it feels like a paper boat fighting the current of a river that has burst its banks.

The scent around him isn't mild anymore—the spiritual power is overwhelming, and so demonic, it nearly makes him gag.

And the voice that's speaking now; it—it isn't Hong-er's.

It's low, cruel—mockingly saying the words that used to bring Xie Lian the most comfort.

"Oh," one hand lets go of his wrist, but the other is perfectly capable of keeping Xie Lian in place, even as the god thrashes and cries, reaching toward to cup his face, "my poor, poor crown prince..."

His thumb strokes down Xie Lian's cheek. Hong-er's thumb.

Xie Lian sobs.

"Don't be afraid..." The voice croons, fingers curving around Xie Lian's jaw—only to grip it tightly when the prince cringes away, leaning closer.

If not for the mask between them and the prince's panicked struggling, it might be mistaken for a moment between lovers.

"I will never leave you."

Xie Lian isn't fighting anymore.

He's frozen, trembling in Bai Wuxiang's hold, tears falling silently from his cheeks. The calamity wipes them away—so, so tenderly, crooning—

"No matter what happens, I will never leave your side."

The first time Xie Lian longed for death, it was because he wanted to see someone again. Now, it's out of a need to escape.

Living with the knowledge that this will never, never end.

"...Kill me," he whispers, limp in the calamity's grip, "...please, just kill me."

For a moment, there's just silence. And the response—it's oddly baffled. Like, somehow, white no-face has finally been surprised by something.

In any other situation, Xie Lian might find it funny.

He's reacting like a child, smashing a beloved toy against a wall, over and over again —only to be surprised when it breaks.

"...I would never," The figure murmurs, his grip on Xie Lian's jaw digging in even tighter.

It hurts.

Xie Lian's eyes squeeze tightly shut under the bandages.

"Why?"

The calamity hums, and Xie Lian cringes when he can feel the cool edge of the mask brush against his cheek. If it weren't there, the touch would be...intimate.

"Because one day, you'll come to my side."

As he says this, he lets go of Xie Lian's other wrist, reaching. The prince can't imagine what he wants, what he'll do. In part, he starts to think he might not care.

It feeds on his fear. His reactions. If he's going to suffer anyway, why give him one?

But it isn't that easy.

Not when Xie Lian realizes what that hand is reaching for.

Hong-er.

The sound that rips out of his chest couldn't be described as a snarl—it's more aggressive than that. More like a howl of protective rage, reverberating through the otherwise silent forest.

And he shouldn't be strong enough to push the creature away, but when Xie Lian shoves at him with all of the force that he has, it surprises Bai Wuxiang enough to make the calamity stumble back.

"DON'T TOUCH HIM!" Xie Lian shrieks, scrambling backwards. "Don't EVER touch him!"

The calamity pauses, hand still outstretched. Slowly, his head tilts to the side.

"...Such a stubborn child," he murmurs, watching Xie Lian, curled up against the base of a tree, clutching the pouch to his chest. "That little insect is gone now."

The god flinches.

"He has nothing left that he can give you," his voice is still so taunting—but almost like he doesn't mean to be. "What are you still holding onto?"

Xie Lian doesn't see that the creature is reaching for him, fingers inches from his face.

"...He gave me more than you ever could," he mutters, nails digging into the pouch, clutching it with all of his might.

Those fingers stop—inches from his cheek.

When Bai Wuxiang speaks again, his voice is even colder than before.

“I suppose we’ll have to see about that.” And just like that, he disappears.

No voice. No hands. No overwhelming presence of spiritual power. Just…nothing.

And when Xie Lian can hear the sounds of the forest again, the birds singing, the babbling of the brook—he realizes the calamity must have set an array around them

There’s a faint whistling noise in the air, like something whipping through it at great speeds—and Xie Lian nearly jumps out of his skin when he feels something slam against his chest, thinking for a moment that the calamity came back, that it’s an attack—

But it’s just cold.

“Dianxia,” Xie Lian’s eyes relax slightly under the bandages as the Ghost Fire presses close to his chest, it’s voice quivering with distress, “Dianxia—!”

“I’m okay,” he whispers, knowing he sounds like the opposite. He’s trembling, his voice is still quivering. “I-I’m alright.”

The little spirit wobbles under Xie Lian’s fingertips when he tries to smooth it, rising up until it can press underneath the god’s chin.

“I tried to get to you,” it whimpers. The voice is stronger now, than it used to be. Less like the wind, but still distinctly inhuman.

“But I couldn’t get through. No matter how hard I tried, I…”

Xie Lian shivers when the cold presses against his throat, but he doesn’t complain. It —

It’s distinctly more comforting than the touches he was feeling moments before.

“If you had, he would have dispersed you.”

Xie Lian points out, his voice calm—matter of fact.

It seems to distress the creature almost as much as the idea of not being able to get to Xie Lian at all—but not out of a fear of being dispersed, no. Xie Lian can't sense any fear in the spirit at all.

Brave little thing.

And with it's bravery, Xie Lian feels a little more pathetic.

This little creature is ashamed, because it's too weak to protect him.

Xie Lian feels even more shame—because how weak could he be, for a ghost fire to believe it needs to protect him?

In the weeks that follow, Bai Wuxiang doesn't show his face again. Xie Lian warns Feng Xin, who listens with a grave level of seriousness.

"What does he want with you, your highness?"

Xie Lian can't bring himself to answer.

His father's coughing gets worse. Feng Xin is gone in town longer with each passing day, and the money he brings back becomes more and more scarce.

Xie Lian's mother tries to say she isn't hungry to pass her portions of food off on him when there isn't enough.

Eventually, the prince feels those rigid, hard lines inside of him begin to bend and blur.

His pride is practically gone—and while he might be willing to die for what's left of it...

That's not the same as being willing to watch as his father dies a slow, humiliating death.

When he sees the King wiping blood from his chin one evening, he wakes up that morning decided.

He's going to do it. Even if he's frightened. Even if he doesn't want to.

When he gets ready to leave for town that morning, he tells his mother he's meeting with Feng Xin.

And as he makes his way down the mountain path, he pauses, fingertips reaching for the pouch around his neck.

"…" his lower lip wobbles slightly, thinking of how the young man would have reacted to this.

But—

Hong-er isn't here.

Xie Lian has to remind himself of that. Hong-er isn't here anymore.

And if Xie Lian doesn't do something, his father won't be, either.

Still, he…

His fingers tighten around the pouch.

He doesn't want to have Hong-er with him, when he does it.

"…" Xie Lian lifts his palm, and as always, the Ghost Fire comes.

"I need you to do something for me," Xie Lian murmurs, feeling the flame vibrate in his hand, listening eagerly.

"Anything, Dianxia."

He's so careful, like he's handling glass—and he tucks the pouch into the hollow of a tree, hiding it beneath fallen leaves.

"Watch this for me," he murmurs. "Keep it safe, until I come back." The little spirit hesitates, hovering in front of his face.

"Please," Xie Lian whispers.

"…Where are you going, your highness?"

The prince swallows thickly, and he doesn't explain.

"You said anything."

The spirit hovers, not answering, and Xie Lian wraps his arms around himself, his pleading once again—

"Please." He bites his lip. "It's something very precious to me."

"…" Slowly, the Ghost Fire sinks into the hollow of the tree, resting over the pouch of Hong-er's ashes.

"Yes, dianxia."

The smile on Xie Lian's face is grateful, but it isn't happy.

It never is. Not anymore.

"Thank you," he whispers.

Feng Xin washed and brushed his hair just the night before—his ponytail is neat, if not extravagant.

And his robes, well...They're clean, at least

Xie Lian worries that, in this state, he might not be able to attract very much interest. He was a great beauty once—but he's had no way of gauging that in quite some time.

He could be hideous now, for all he knows, but...

He had no reason to worry. He finds an offer fast.

For more money than he expected, too. A local merchant, who seems just a little too eager about the whole thing, but...Xie Lian has no way of knowing that.

And beggars can't be choosers.

"...A face like that, and you're working off the street?" The man muses.

He managed to coax the young beggar into taking off his bandages—a verification of quality before purchase, after all.

He didn't bother with the blindfold—he actually likes that, it adds something to the whole thing.

Now, he strokes Xie Lian's cheek.

"Such a waste."

The prince fights back the urge to gag. Smiles pleasantly.

It's just work. It's just a different kind of work than what he's used to, that's all.

"I could introduce you to a few of the brothel keeps in town, if this goes well. Better money, that way."

Xie Lian forces himself not to flinch. "That would be very kind of you," he murmurs.

The man mutters something about a referral discount, and Xie Lian's smile becomes just a little bit more strained.

He agrees not to do it in town—he's married, after all, couldn't risk that. But he has a hunting lodge, just through the woods. Private. Secluded.

Xie Lian supposes he should be grateful that it isn't a back alley, or the forest floor. Money is exchanged, and the man starts to lead him along by the wrist.

He tries not to think too much. To be brave.

But the walk through the woods is long, and he—

Xie Lian is frightened.

He doesn't know the man's name, doesn't even know what he looks like. He's never had anything like this, and now he's about to give that away for money that he once would have considered pocket change.

He doesn't want to do this.

Xie Lian doesn't have a word for what it is, to force himself. Doesn't know why the prospect is so horrific to him, when the alternative seems equally horrible, but—

"Are you cold, or something?" Xie Lian pauses, baffled— Oh.

He's trembling.

"...Oh," He can hear the grin in the man's voice as he leans closer, toying with Xie Lian's ponytail. "Are you a virgin?"

This time, Xie Lian can't stop himself from flinching—but the man doesn't seem to care.

"That explains it..." he muses, "Don't worry, friend."

His breath hits the side of Xie Lian's ear as he leans in, speaking next to his ear:

"I'll be gentle."

Something about that makes a piece of Xie Lian snap. The part of him that could shut up and bear it. That could tell himself that he wasn't afraid.

Xie Lian scrambles away.

"Hey?" The merchant crows, "No need to be like that, I was just playing—"

"I can't do this," Xie Lian mutters, shaking his head, hair whipping around him. "I—what?"

"I'm sorry," he gasps, still backing away, fighting down the beginnings of a panic attack.

"But I don't want to do this."

He's unfamiliar with this path—doesn't see the tree root sticking up before he's falling backwards over it, landing hard.

The merchant doesn't seem amused now. "In case you forgot—I already PAID for you."

Xie Lian grits his teeth.

If he's the sort who thinks that he can force him—he's going to lose more than just his money, "I'll give it back—"

"I don't want it back, I want what I—"

"Your highness?"

Both men freeze, and Xie Lian's blood feels like ice, his stomach plunging into a free fall.

Oh. Oh no.

At first, Xie Lian thinks he's only a little unlucky. That he's been interrupted by some random citizen that happened to recognize him without the bandages. That would be humiliating enough.

When Xie Lian breathes in, he knows he overestimated his luck.

Heavenly Officials.

Their spiritual power isn't strong enough to be ascended gods from the upper court, no, but...

Obviously, they know who Xie Lian is. He hangs his head.

At first, they're all horribly sympathetic. Gallant, even. Assuming that the situation was something much more sinister.

One of them throws a robe around Xie Lian's shoulders to help with the shivering. Two of the others go to restrain the man, to summon the authorities, ignoring the prince's weak protests—

But eventually, the merchant gets a word in.

"I wasn't forcing him! We had an agreement!"

Suddenly, the other officials grow silent, and Xie Lian—he still can't seem to stop hanging his head with shame.

"The tease just backed out and tried to fleece me!"

If Xie Lian had called the man a liar, the officials probably would have believed him, but...

He doesn't.

Suddenly, all that concern begins to turn, and...

Even after the merchant flees, Xie Lian can feel the judgment. The disgust. Maybe even a little bit of glee.

"...Have you ever done this before, your highness?"

Xie Lian shakes his head vehemently, still trembling with shame.

"No," he whispers, voice dry and cracked. "Never."

"..." One official pats his back, almost sympathetic. "Don't worry, your highness."

Xie Lian shivers, shrinking in on himself.

"We won't tell anyone."

It's a small mercy. Living with the knowledge that any of them know, it's... It's already hard enough.

When he returns home, he doesn't speak for the rest of the night. Not to his parents. Not to Feng Xin. Locks himself in his room. Doesn't sleep. Doesn't eat.

He only thanks the ghost fire when he returns to the tree to collect Hong-er.

He feels so lost now. Unable to help. No one needing him. He doesn't dare try that again, not after that disaster, but he...

The longer he thinks about it, there is one thing that he could do. Maybe not for money. Maybe it won't help his parents, but...

Ever since that day in the forest, when Bai Wuxiang appeared...

Xie Lian doesn't want to be tricked again. Not like that. It was too horrible.

He wants to ensure that no one can ever do that again. And of course, the easiest solution would be destroying Hong-er's ashes, but...

He can't bring himself to do that. He never could.

The next easiest thing is performing a summoning. Making sure that his spirit isn't lingering anywhere. Xie Lian already knows that it isn't, that if it was, Hong-er would have returned to his side, but—

He needs peace of mind.

He doesn't have the spiritual power required to perform the ceremony. If he had, he would have already done so a long time ago, but...

Now, he's determined, and he tells Feng Xin that he's going to cultivate.

Not for so long as before, just a few days.

Feng Xin eagerly agrees, just happy that Xie Lian wants to leave his room.

He worries over Xie Lian going alone, but the prince has no such concerns.

A small flame bobs behind him as he takes the road away from the mountain, never straying far.

He always has company.

"Dianxia? Dianxia, what happened that day?"

The little spirit never stops asking—and Xie Lian never answers.

Eventually, he finds a mountain with dense spiritual energy—most auspicious. The sort of place he could have drained with ease, back when he was a god.

Now; it's more than enough for what he needs.

He sets down his bag, sitting on the ground, cross legged.

The ghost fire hovers around, clearly a little bored, before eventually landing on top of the prince's head, smoldering.

Xie Lian almost smiles—but he needs to focus. "...dianxia," it whines.

Xie Lian's lips twitch. "Hush."

"Why are we here?"

He clucks his tongue softly, "You're here because you followed me."

The fire rolls around on top of his head for a moment. Pouting, Xie Lian realizes. "Why did dianxia come here?"

His amusement fades

"...To find someone important to me," he murmurs, lifting the pouch from around his neck, carefully setting it in his lap.

If the person can be found, anyway. More than likely he can't.

He doesn't have food or gold to use for an offering—so he uses a few drops of blood instead.

The ghost fire swirls around, hissing with upset when he slices his finger, and Xie Lian rolls his eyes.

"Settle down," he murmurs, "it's barely a scratch."

Particularly for someone that has run himself through with a sword before. Compared to that, Xie Lian doesn't think anything could really hurt anymore.

(He didn't know anything, back then.)

Even if it isn't painful, however—Xie Lian's blood is no small gift. It's that of an ancient royal bloodline, blessed by the heavens, even now.

If Hong-er is still around to feel it—it should give the spirit enough power to come to him. Enough power to speak.

This part of cultivation was never Xie Lian's specialty—Mu Qing was always better at dealing with ghosts and spirits alike.

(Feng Xin always said it was because he was just as bitter and twisted inside as they were, and Xie Lian told him that was mean.)

But a summoning ceremony like this shouldn't be too difficult, with all of the spiritual power around.

He goes through the steps—already having everything he needs. Hong-er's ashes, the lock of hair.

Someone who mourns him.

He feels the heat from the small array he drew on the earth as it slowly burns away, telling him the magic is in effect—and Xie Lian calls, one more time:

"Hong-er?"

If he's here, in this world, he'll answer. Xie Lian knows that. Knows with every fiber of his being. If he doesn't, that means he...he...

Silence.

Xie Lian's frown slowly deepens, his lips trembling slightly at the corners.

The Ghost Fire hovers.

"...Dianxia?"

Xie Lian should be happy. He knows that. Hong-er—he's—

Where he is, Bai Wuxiang can't hurt him again. Can't use him to hurt Xie Lian anymore. He—maybe Xie Lian couldn't have saved him, but...

One tear slips down his cheek. Just one this time. He has less tears to offer, now. Hong-er doesn't have to suffer anymore.

The smile on Xie Lian's face isn't fake, no—but it hurts so much more than if it was. "...You're really at peace," he whispers, fingers tightening around the lock of hair. "I'm glad."

And yet...he's also jealous.

When he thinks about what the Ghost Fire told him, the first time they spoke. ‘I still have someone precious in this world.’

It just sounded…so much like something that Hong-er would have done. And while Xie Lian scolded the ghost fire for it, he wishes…

Oh god, he wishes…

The Ghost Fire hovers over the array for a moment, quiet. Xie Lian can’t remember when it moved over there, but…since it didn’t work, he supposes it doesn’t matter.

“Dianxia…” Xie Lian doesn’t look up, just nods in acknowledgement. “…you said this person was special to you?”

The prince nods, his gaze pained, but fond. “Oh, yes. He was.” Xie Lian tucks the lock of hair back into the pouch, placing it back around his neck. “He always wanted to keep me safe.”

The spirit sounds almost petulant, now. “It doesn’t sound like he did a very god job.”

There’s not a quicker method in the world to bring a frown to Xie Lian’s face. “He did his best. Always.”

And when Xie Lian remembers how well taken care of back then—even if he wasn’t in a palace, or dressed in jewels—he felt far more treasured then, than he did as a prince.

“But you’re always unhappy now,” the Ghost Fire grouses, sounding…equally unhappy, somehow. “If he was any good, how could he leave you like this?”

“…” Xie Lian hangs his head, hands balled into fists in his lap. His voice is sorrowful— but firm. “He never would have left me.”

The Ghost Fire hovers, silent for a long while. He never asks Xie Lian anything about his life before. Other than the first time they spoke, they’ve almost never discussed anything too serious, and now…

“…What happened to him, then?” The spirit asks quietly. Xie Lian bites his lip.

“…I couldn’t keep him safe,” the god whispers, hanging his head. “I couldn’t protect him.”

“You shouldn’t have had to!” The answer is so quick, so pointed—it startles him. When he looks up, he can feel cold emanating—like the spirit is burning brightly.

"...You said he wanted to protect you," the Ghost Fire explains, slowly dimming. "He probably would have been ashamed...if he became a burden to you."

He's never spoken this much before—not so passionately, or in such long sentences. Xie Lian didn't realize, but...

He's been getting stronger, hasn't he? Probably strong enough to take an actual form, soon.

When he does, he'll probably be able to go and find his beloved again. That—

That makes Xie Lian happy for him, even if he's...a little sad. At some point, he... became fond of the spirit.

He'll miss him when he goes. After all—everyone always does.

"...Part of caring about someone is wanting to protect them," Xie Lian murmurs. "And if one of us was the burden—it was me."

"Dianxia could never be a burden to anyone." Xie Lian almost smiles.

"He said that, too."

It's the most he's spoken about Hong-er to anyone. It...almost doesn't hurt as much, to talk about it with the little Ghost Fire. It...feels like he understands.

When it speaks again, it's voice isn't petulant anymore. It's...deeply sad.

"You should forget about him, dianxia."

The suggestion startles him, even if the spirit clearly didn't say it maliciously.

"...I won't!" He cries, clutching the pouch around his neck. "I promised!" "He would feel bad, if he knew you were still sad about him..."

Xie Lian locks his jaw. "It's not like he'll ever know."

Stubbornly throwing the little spirit's words right back at him. Maybe it's a little immature—but the creature seems to get the hint.

"...If he really loved you, dianxia—he wouldn't want to be something that causes you pain."

Xie Lian pauses, because...

He never said that Hong-er loved him.

What Xie Lian said implied devotion, yes. Loyalty. But not love. Not in the way that the spirit clearly meant it.

His brow furrows. "How did you...?"

Those questions leave his mind, though, when he hears the sound of approaching footsteps.

"Ah, now THIS is a most auspicious spot for cultivation! You always find the best places!"

Xie Lian listens as several other officials crow with agreement, an entire group of them coming up the mountainside.

By his hearing, there must be over thirty of them.

"..." Xie Lian huffs out a sigh, tilting his head back. It's not ever *fun* to see heavenly officials these days. Not when his body is like this—and especially not when the memory of his last encounter is still swirling inside of him, but...

He'll leave them alone.

He just needs a moment to rest, then he can slink off. After all—he hasn't performed a ceremony like that since he was banished, and he did manage to absorb a little more spiritual power than he intended. He just needs to...

"Your highness?"

Xie Lian lets out an irritated sigh.

Of course, they already found him. It's like the universe is resentful of the idea that Xie Lian might get a moment's rest.

"...Hello," he mumbles, forcing his voice to sound more pleasant than he feels. "What are all of you doing here?"

Several officials squirm with discomfort. “...Cultivating, your highness.”

Xie Lian is starting to notice—no one uses that title like they actually mean it. Not anymore. It sounds almost...

His stomach sinks.

Mean. It sounds mocking, somehow, even if...they—they probably don’t intend it that way.

“...I see,” he smiles, attempting to keep his tone lightly amused, like this is all just... normal. Nothing sad or uncomfortable about it. “I didn’t realize that cultivation had become such a social event these days.”

The air feels tense. At first, he doesn’t understand why.

“And what are you doing here, your highness?” One official asks—and the forced smile on Xie Lian’s face becomes even more artificial.

“...I was also cultivating,” he mutters, not wishing to explain that he...

There’s an expectation among cultivators, to leave the dead in peace. To perform a summoning ceremony for personal reasons, not official business...would be considered inappropriate. Selfish, even.

Xie Lian already knows that it was.

Somehow, his answer causes more of a stir.

Maybe they think the idea of him even trying to cultivate at this point is silly. That most officials never ascend again after being banished, even when they have their sight.

Xie Lian doesn’t disagree. He also finds it unlikely—but he doubts they could blame him for trying.

He waits—assuming they’ll get to their own business if he’s quiet, then, after a moment of rest, he can make a peaceful retreat. They won’t bother him, Xie Lian, he —

He doesn’t want to cause trouble for anyone.

Apparently, he overestimated the kindness of his colleagues.

After a few minutes of standing off on their own, quietly speaking among themselves —

(Xie Lian couldn't pick many words out—it's overstimulating for him, when so many people speak at once.)

—one of the younger junior officials approaches. "...Your highness..."

"...Yes?"

The man squirms, glancing back at the crowd of cultivators behind him—and several give him thumbs up, or shooing motions of encouragement. "...Given how...strong, your cultivation method is...don't you think it's a little unfair to the rest of us?"

Xie Lian almost laughs. Unfair.

In all honesty—if he was anywhere close to the cultivator that he used to be, he would have absorbed all of the spiritual energy on this mountain before they arrived.

And they still seem to think there's enough for thirty of them. How is he a threat?

"...Don't worry," Xie Lian mutters, his shoulders becoming slightly tense. "I never planned on taking more than my share."

"That never stopped him in the old days," one official mutters, his tone a little bitter.

'Maybe you should have been a stronger cultivator in the old days'

The bitterness of that thought honestly surprises Xie Lian—and he's glad that he managed to keep it quiet.

"...With so many of us," the official explains, crossing his arms, squirming slightly, "even you just taking your share, it would be..."

The Ghost Fire hovering next to the fallen prince—it has a surprisingly menacing presence, doesn't it? But...

Not worth worrying over.

"..." Xie Lian can't stop himself from being a little irritated. "If you were worried about such a thing, why cultivate in such a large party?"

"We weren't expecting to run into you," Another official speaks up. "It was fine, when it was just going to be the group of us."

Oh yes, because one blind cultivator *really* pushes the situation over the edge.

Finally, Xie Lian can't play dumb anymore.

"...are you asking me to leave?" He mutters, somewhat incredulous—and he's stunned when no one contradicts him.

It's—

Xie Lian knows that he hadn't actually planned on cultivating at all. That this argument is, to some extent, moot.

But the rudeness of it all—it stuns him. "...Be reasonable, your highness—"

Xie Lian barks out an incredulous laugh, "How—how is any of this reasonable?!"

After everything he's been through in the last two years. After everything he's suffered —they couldn't even leave him be? For such a *small* thing?

He's allowed so many things to go unchallenged, endured so many indignities—and he—

He's sitting here, alone, mourning someone precious to him. And they're upset, because he might take some fractional amount of Spiritual Power from them.

How petty. How *selfish* .

"...I'm not leaving," he answers—his tone not so friendly anymore. "I was here first."

He might just go ahead and drain the entire place at this point. They don't deserve it. How—

How disgraceful, for those representing the heavens to behave in such a way.

"Your highness," a voice sighs, exasperated by his stubbornness. "Don't make this more difficult than it has to be. We aren't asking."

Oh.

The smile on Xie Lian's lips holds more bitterness than he would have thought himself capable of.

Are they giving him orders, now?

Xie Lian probably wouldn't have had the words to express his anger, before. But he's been left to stew in his own sadness for too long—and he—

He can't help but remember a boy, all alone in a shrine, shouting as a group of children taunted him. Telling them to go away.

That he could take on all of them, if they wanted to fight.

Xie Lian's chest twists with grief.

What a brave, stubborn child.

Worth far more than any of the officials before him now.

"...You know, there's something my Guoshi used to tell me when I was a boy," Xie Lian murmurs.

One of the officials glances at the others—irritated by how much time they're wasting arguing—but his companions silently gesture for him to tolerate it.

Let the little disgrace crow his head off, he'll have to leave anyway.

"He said the best judge of a man's character was in how he treated those below him." Xie Lian explains.

Even when he was so far, far above everyone else—he never treated anyone like this. Never once.

"How many of you begged, before, just for the chance to stand in my presence?" His tone is low—dangerous.

You could cut the tension in the air with a knife—but Xie Lian hasn't had enough. They don't understand. They're still so focused on their small, stupid, selfish little lives.

"How brave," he drawls, and—

Xie Lian doesn't even sound like himself.

"It only takes thirty of you to tell a blind man to get out of the way," a quiet laugh bubbles up in his chest. “The standards of the heavenly court must be so high these days, to accumulate such a *generous* and *graceful* group like yourselves.”

“There’s no need for this,”

The official that originally spoke to Xie Lian still seems to want to resolve things without more of a dispute—but even his tone is a little bit offended. “Haven’t you already offended the heavens enough? Why make things worse for yourself?”

“I’m not offending the heavens.”

Xie Lian lifts one hand in front of his face, picking at the dirt beneath his nails— bravado, really. He can’t see it—but it provides this air of elegance, of calm— something he hasn’t tried to project in years.

“None of you have ascended. If you were, you wouldn’t be here.”

The prince tilts his head, listening to the stir among them. “I was lifted from this earth by the hand of Jun Wu himself. I’ve stood directly by his side in the Grand Martial Hall. Has he ever met even one of you? Does he know any of your names?”

He’s learned where to punch.

“You *dare* to speak that way?” One of them snaps, taking a step towards him, “Look at the state you’re in, before you start speaking as though you’re better than anyone!”

“I was better than you,” Xie Lian replies calmly. That’s just a fact.

“I was better than any of you. Each of you could consume an entire place like this on your own, a hundred times over, and you still wouldn’t reach as high as I did.”

Xie Lian knows how far he rose. He felt every bit of it’s height when he crashed back down.

“And I still fell.”

The silence is filled with a mixture of offended anger—and now, anxiety, from the idea that Xie Lian is instilling in their minds.

“The only difference between me and any of you, is time.”

They’re just as arrogant as he used to be, after all. It could happen to any of them.

The ghost fire bounces around him in an excited little circle as he speaks, like it's silently cheering on every word that he says.

"...If your highness thinks he's anything like the rest of us," one of them sneers, "he overestimates his own importance."

Xie Lian smiles faintly.

"Make me leave, then," he calls out—only to be met with silence. "If I'm so weak, compared to the rest of you—make me leave."

There's an air of hesitance. Maybe, because they all find it distasteful to fight a blind man, or maybe—

Because even like this, in a fair fight, none of them could defeat the Crown Prince of Xianle.

The knowledge of that must be a bitter thing to swallow.

It couldn't be about his blindness, however—because one of them has no qualms about taking advantage of that.

A palm shoves against his back—and the official must have jumped to get behind him, because Xie Lian didn't hear any footsteps—

Not expecting the blow, he looses his balance, falling to his hands and knees on the ground.

"..." He gnashes his teeth together. "You—!"

"Oh, thank the heavens," one of them calls out, speaking over him. "It's you. Could you PLEASE deal with him?"

Who—?

Xie Lian freezes, when he hears the voice speak out.

"What's going on here?"

Oh.

His heart squeezes hopefully.

It's—It's Mu Qing.

“He’s being completely unreasonable!” One of the officials whines. “We already explained to him why he needs to go, and he’s been insulting all of us! Disgraceful!”

Xie Lian’s hands ball into fists as he struggles to his feet, listening as Mu Qing’s footsteps approach.

“Is that true, your highness?”

Well—the insults part, yes. But Xie Lian can’t bring himself to feel bad about that.

“...” He reaches out to grab Mu Qing by the sleeve, taking comfort in his friend’s presence. It’s—

It’s alright. He isn’t alone now. Mu Qing—

He’ll help him.

“...I was here first,” he explains, knowing that he wasn’t wrong. That they were being unfair. And—And he—

Xie Lian leans closer, lowering his voice so only his friend can hear—

“I wasn’t here to cultivate,” he murmurs, “I was just—I was just trying to read him.”

Xie Lian can’t see the look on Mu Qing’s face—how the young official is clearly struggling between emotions—and when the former servant speaks again, he also keeps his voice low.

“...Him?”

It’s a testament to how much he trusts Mu Qing, when Xie Lian takes his hand— bringing it up to the pouch around his neck.

He knows his friend will understand. They talked about it. Mu Qing—he knows how important it is. That Xie Lian wouldn’t lie about such a thing.

“...” There’s a long pause as Xie Lian waits for his friend to tell them—to scold the other officials for how awful they’re being. And once he does, Xie Lian can leave, and be done with this whole thing—

“...Your highness,” Mu Qing’s tone is strained, “don’t make this difficult.”

Xie Lian doesn't react at first—and he doesn't know how hard it is for his friend, to watch the slow realization dawn on his face, his mouth twisting with hurt—and—

And disappointment. "...What?"

Mu Qing doesn't push him away, he still allows Xie Lian to hold onto him, but...

"...they obviously aren't going to let you cultivate here," Mu Qing mutters, squirming with discomfort. "So why stay, and make a big scene about it?"

Xie Lian's expression is frozen, his stomach churning with shock. Mu Qing—

He knew.

He knew how important it was.

How—

How *could* he?

"You..." Xie Lian's voice wavers for just a moment, and Mu Qing grimaces. "You really —?"

A voice speaks out—and Xie Lian's blood goes cold.

"You really had the nerve to say that we're the same as you." The color drains from the fallen prince's face.

It's—It's the—

It's one of the officials, from that day. Why—why didn't he SAY anything before? Xie Lian, he never would have said ANY of that if he had known—

"Even if one of us fell, we would never resort to something as low as selling our own bodies," the official sneers.

Xie Lian doesn't see the way the Ghost Fire goes completely still by his side, frozen in the air.

He doesn't see the way Mu Qing's expression changes from one of emotional conflict to offended fury, because—at first—

He really *was* going to defend the prince.

Because that—that was just too far. To insult the man like that, when he would NEVER—

Xie Lian lets out a choked sound.

Low, horrified—and humiliated.

“You—” his voice trembles, then breaks. “You said you wouldn’t tell anyone!”

Mu Qing’s jaw slowly drops, eyes going wide.

In that moment—it’s all too much for the prince to stand. Even if he can’t see the look on his friend’s face. Even if he doesn’t know how disgusted the officials around him must look—

He can’t bear it.

He lets go of Mu Qing, turning away—and he flees. At first, the Ghost Fire doesn’t follow.

It’s still silent—but burning so brightly, one of the officials has to squint, covering its eyes. Normally, it would draw more attention, but —

They’re all a little distracted by what was said, just now.

They don’t see it.

The way it slowly hovers around the group, taking a moment beside each one.

(Memorizing their faces.)

Xie Lian makes it halfway down the mountainside when he trips, stumbling and landing hard on the ground, rocks and twigs tearing at his hands and knees.

He doesn’t wince.

He’s gotten used to falling, by now. No one catches him anymore.

Xie Lian sits up, pressing his hands against his face. It—

Even if he could ever manage to ascend again, how could he ever show his face now?

His fingers tremble, clutching at the pouch around his neck.

The one comfort, in all of this, is that Hong-er doesn't have to see him like this now. As much—as much as Xie Lian trusted him, when the young man said he would never leave him, that he would always believe in him...

He probably never realized how much lower Xie Lian could sink. Even if he—

"Your highness?"

The sound of Mu Qing's voice brought him such comfort, only a few minutes ago.

Now, it makes Xie Lian cringe.

His friend creeps closer to where the fallen god is on his hands and knees, head hanging low.

It's...hard, seeing him like this.

"..." He takes a deep breath, kneeling down. "You shouldn't make scenes like that, when you're still like this." One palm rests against his back—and he doesn't ask about what was said. "Do you still need to try to summon him? I can—"

Xie Lian cringes away from him.

"Don't—" he sobs, scrambling away, "Don't touch me!"

Mu Qing hasn't moved, his hand still frozen in the air from where it was resting on the crown prince's back. "What—" he sputters, his eyebrows knitting together. "Your highness, what did you expect me to do?!"

"You—" Xie Lian shakes his head, and the tears pouring down his cheeks—for the first time in months, they aren't from sorrow. They're bitter—angry, and betrayed. "You KNEW how important it was! I-I *TOLD* you about him!"

And Mu Qing still wouldn't help him. Not even then. "That's why I—"

"I don't CARE why!" Xie Lian snaps, whipping his head back and forth, "It doesn't make a difference!"

Because he needed Mu Qing, and his friend didn't…he didn't… After a pause, in a small voice, his friend asks—

"Was it true?"

Xie Lian freezes, trembling.

"What that man said back there—was it true?" His tone is cautious, not angry—like he—

Xie Lian's nails bite into his palms.

Like Mu Qing pities him.

And Xie Lian he—

He really can't take much more of this.

"What," he mutters, his voice thick, "did you *expect* ?!"

It doesn't matter if Xie Lian actually did it or not. He didn't stop that day because he thought he was above it. Xie Lian knows now that he isn't above much of anything.

The only thing between him, and that, was that he was afraid. And Xie Lian regrets that now.

Because if he hadn't made a scene back then—those officials never would have known about it to begin with. He would have been able to buy more medicine for his father.

Xie Lian can't try to tell Mu Qing that he never stooped to that, because he did.

He's much lower than anyone in a brothel—because he didn't have the grit to actually do it. He was…too much of a coward.

But that doesn't stop him from lashing out now.

"LOOK at me," he smacks a hand against his chest, glaring in Mu Qing's direction.

"You were the one always treating me like I was so naive, like I didn't know anything about the world—did you EVER think about how I was going to survive?!"

After all—he can't get normal work anymore. He can't even busk. Mu

Qing must understand that.

This wasn't unforeseeable.

Once everything was pawned, there really was nothing left for Xie Lian to offer. Except...Except for the one thing that his banishment had left intact.

Beauty.

God, how Xie Lian has come to resent the fact that he was ever once called beautiful.

"I didn't..." Mu Qing sputters.

"When I left, I thought Feng Xin..." He starts, then stops, shaking his head. "I thought he would tell you, I left because I thought I—"

"I don't CARE about that," Xie Lian moans, shaking his head, "He told me—and I—"

It's a kindness that he can't see the hurt in Mu Qing's eyes. There are so many ways that a man can be blind. Xie Lian—

Even when he had his sight, there were so many things he could never see.

"I was HAPPY, when I heard that you left!" He sobs, wrapping his arms around himself.

Because it would be better for everyone, if they left him. Because it meant that Xie Lian couldn't drag him down, too.

"It was a relief," he weeps, "So, just go!"

Mu Qing doesn't respond at first, not until the prince shoves at his arm, over and over again.

Because he can't stand this. He really can't take anymore.

"Just LEAVE!" Finally, he does.

Silently, without another word.

Xie Lian takes some time before he moves again, curled up on the ground, weeping. The embarrassment—the self pity—

He really can't take it.

There's a familiar brush of coldness against the back of his head.

Xie Lian shudders, hands covering his face.

"You—you heard too, didn't you?" He whimpers, legs curling in against his chest. Like he's still a child who can crawl under the covers in his bed, and hide away from the world.

"You'll—you'll leave now too, won't you?"

The Ghost Fire presses close against his head, burning gently.

"Never," the voice whispers, slowly rolling over until presses against Xie Lian's hands, bumping against them until they lower from his cheeks.

The coolness of the flames soothes his skin—burning from humiliation. It brushes against his lips, dry and cracked.

The closest thing the prince has ever had to a kiss, coming from the flames of a ghost fire.

Xie Lian's shoulders shake as he cries even harder.

"Please," he begs, "stop—stop believing in me!"

Maybe if he did, there would be no one else in the world that believed in him anymore.

Then, when his shrines and temples burned, as the world moved on, Xie Lian could fade away. This body wouldn't sustain him anymore.

It wouldn't hurt anymore. He could rest.

The Ghost Fire never leaves. Just caresses his face, soothing the flushed pain from him until Xie Lian is too tired to cry any longer, his breathing starting to slow.

"I'm sorry, dianxia," the voice whispers. Xie Lian stares ahead, unseeing.

"I'm sorry—but I can't."

After all—you can't ask someone to stop being what they are.

And believing in Xie Lian— That’s all this spirit is.

The Most Beautiful Eyes

Chapter Summary

> Eventually, those fingers drift back up over his face.
>
> His thumb strokes over the space between Xie Lian's eyes, tracing down over his cheekbone, "...I can't remember the last time I saw your eyes," he admits.

Chapter Notes

> TW// again, this chapter involves negative attitudes around sex work. Also, there is more content that could be triggering for anyone who has experience with sexual assault, as well as a serious violation of consent depicted that does not rise to the likes of rape, but could be very disturbing for some readers. Please read with caution!
>
> You can find me (and the rest of this story) on twitter at @cataclysmicevie !

Xie Lian doesn't speak a word to Feng Xin, when he returns. Barely acknowledges either one of his parents.

Somehow, he's even worse than he was before he left.

There's not a single moment of relief, after that.

Before, when Hong-er was still by his side, he taught the prince how to fall in love with something as simple as being touched. How comforting that sense could be.

Now, Xie Lian learns that touch is something to be feared. At first, he thinks it's something as simple as being taunted.

When he doesn't hide in his room, he'll find a quiet place by the mountain side. The shade of a tree, the bank of a stream.

Occasionally, he'll hear the voice of one of his parents or Feng Xin—come to comfort him.

Sometimes he'll feel his friend's arm around his shoulders, or his mother's hands on his face—and he'll relent. He'll reach out for comfort.

When he does, he only ever finds the surface of that mask. Laughing at him. Sobbing with him.

Every single time, Xie Lian screams.

With time, it becomes clear that this isn't being taunted. It's even worse than being hunted like an animal, no—

Xie Lian is being haunted.

Worn down, bit by bit. Until he can hardly stand to leave the house at all, but...

When he's there, he hears the whispering. Between Feng Xin and his parents. The worry.

He asks Feng Xin, voice shaking with sadness, if his friend doesn't believe him. If he thinks Xie Lian is succumbing to madness.

Each time, his friend tells him that isn't true. That he believes him.

But Xie Lian is still afraid.

One afternoon, when he walks back to the house—he hears shouting.

All too familiar shouting, actually. Two voices combining together to make a reminiscent din of anger.

"You have a lot of nerve, showing your face here!" Xie Lian pauses, one hand on the doorway.

Feng Xin—he sounds so angry. And when Xie Lian fumbles his way inside, feeling for the edge of the table—he feels something surprising.

Sacks of rice. More than they could afford over several months. How...How could they—?

"Don't get so high and mighty with me!"

The sound of Mu Qing's voice makes him freeze.

Why—? Why is he here?

"Especially not when I'm here to help!"

Feng Xin crosses his arms over his chest, and when he sees that the prince has returned, he steps in front of Xie Lian protectively. "Who said anyone WANTED your help?"

Xie Lian opens his mouth to tell Mu Qing that it's fine. To thank him for the rice, even —anything to make him go. Before—

"How can you say that, after what he had to do?!" Mu Qing snaps, and Xie Lian— Oh god.

He feels Feng Xin stiffen with confusion, and his lips tremble. "What the hell are you talking about?!"

Xie Lian tries. He tries to speak up. To stop it before it starts, but— "Mu Qing, I—"

"You're SO damn stubborn, you'd let him sell himself before you would take help from me?!" Mu Qing snarls. "You hate me THAT much?!"

Sell himself.

Feng Xin is frozen, and Xie Lian's face twists with agonized shame.

"He..." The guard's voice, normally so steady, so certain, is unsteady. "Sold..." he shakes his head, gritting his teeth, "You're LYING!"

Mu Qing glances back and forth between Xie Lian and Feng Xin, realizing.

"You didn't..." His expression falters when he sees the pain in the prince's face, "You didn't tell him?"

He doesn't have the chance to say more before Feng Xin shoves his chest hard. "GET OUT!" The guard barks. "LEAVE!"

"I didn't—!" Mu Qing protests, "I was just trying to—!" He freezes at the sound of Xie Lian's voice. Low, quiet.

"Listen to him, Mu Qing." His eyes widen, then narrow.

"You know—I—" he shakes his head, trembling. And Xie Lian knows —has always known, that when his friend feels hurt, he hurts back. He expected that, but...

"I really felt bad for you, when you told me about that guy you fell in love with," Mu Qing hisses, and Xie Lian's entire demeanor changes. "I guess it must be a relief that he never had to see this, isn't it?"

Xie Lian always knew that Mu Qing had a tendency to lash out. *'Were you in love with him?'*

He saw it many times before. And even when he told his friend to leave just now, Xie Lian had been expecting some sort of harshness in response but—

'I...I don't know. I...I think I was.'

Xie Lian didn't expect it to hurt this much.

And it runs so much deeper than just insulting Xie Lian. Or belittling his feelings.

'The guy you fell in love with.'

'The guy.'

Feng Xin hasn't said a word—and the walls in this place are thin. Xie Lian would be surprised if his parents hadn't heard.

He was able to give Hong-er a gift, before he died. To use the belief the teenager had in him to instill one thought—

That loving someone was the most beautiful thing a person could do. That man, or woman—it didn't change anything.

That it wasn't something to be ashamed of. It's a gift that no one has ever given Xie Lian.

That part of himself—the part that he knows never desired a wife, that would always disappoint his family—he was never able to accept it.

Xie Lian didn't think he was asking for much. He didn't expect anyone to accept it.

He wasn't trying to share his life with a man. Or even being open about the desire to.

The only thing he wanted was to keep that part of him to himself. To be spared from the judgment that came with people knowing.

He spoke to Mu Qing about it, because he already *knew* .

He saw the way Xie Lian looked at Feng Xin, all of those years ago. And when he never said anything, when he asked that question later —

Xie Lian thought it meant that his friend accepted him. Maybe he was disgusted before, and he didn't understand it—but he accepted it.

Xie Lian was wrong.

Now, that part of him is dragged out in the open. Ugly, terrified, and exposed.

And it feels so cruel. Too cruel.

So cruel, that Mu Qing probably didn't intend it. Deep down, Xie Lian knows that his friend isn't like that.

Or—well, he *used* to know that.

The silence has stretched on for so long, when he speaks, neither of his friends hear him at first.

Mu Qing is wide eyed, trembling with nervous energy—his expression a mask of regret, but too stubborn to back down, and Feng Xin feels like his throat is stuffed with cotton.

"Wh—?"

Xie Lian repeats himself, and the other two young men fall silent. Shocked by how flat, and angry the prince sounds, and—

"What the *fuck* , Mu Qing."

—neither of them have ever heard Xie Lian swear before.

They both stare, jaws hanging open.

The silence doesn't last.

Xie Lian's hand fumbles for the table, finding a small ceramic bowl.

To his credit, even when he can't see, he still nails Mu Qing right in the cheek, so hard that it shatters on contact.

"GO AWAY!"

"I didn't—!"

Whatever Xie Lian can get his hands on, he hurls in Mu Qing's direction.

“I DON’T CARE WHAT YOU MEANT!” He roars, for once in his life, moving in a blind fury. “JUST GO!”

He doesn’t realize that his friend has left until Feng Xin catches his arm, telling him to stop.

Xie Lian drops the apple in his hand (yes, he really was using anything as a weapon by then), hanging his head.

If it wasn’t for Feng Xin holding him up, he would have fallen to his knees. He’s already shaking.

It hurts.

Xie Lian doesn’t say a word.

His parents haven’t come out to question the commotion, the way they normally would have. That’s telling enough.

They probably don’t know what to say. Or maybe, they just don’t want to speak to Xie Lian at all.

Xie Lian would understand. After all, they invested so much in him. In his training. In building so many temples in his name. Just...

Just to watch it all come to nothing, and to learn, all along, that Xie Lian was hiding something like this.

That even when he was a god, even when they were so, so proud—he was still living with this shame.

Finally, when Feng Xin speaks, his voice is cautious. “Your highness...” Xie Lian grits his teeth, a shudder running through him.

“...What did he mean?”

His shoulders slump.

“What was he talking about?”

Xie Lian—

“Your highness!” Feng Xin cries out, reaching out as he flees.

He really can’t take it.

Can’t take being in that house any longer. Can’t take the questions.

Can’t take the looming claustrophobia creeping in all around him, the suffocating feeling of judgment that comes with being known.

The violation of it all makes him want to scream.

The Ghost Fire follows him at first, asks him what happened. Xie Lian pleads for a moment, just a moment, to be left alone.

If it wants to help, it can make sure no one bothers him.

For once, the spirit doesn’t argue. It leaves him be.

Xie Lian collapses on the side of the stream, splashing water over his face.

For the first time in years, even the bandages over his eyes feel suffocating—so he rips them away, leaving his face completely bare.

He gasps down the fresh air, trying to find a way to calm down.

He reaches up, trying to loosen the ponytail Feng Xin pulled his hair into the day before—it’s too tight, he can’t—he can’t stand it—

In his desperation, he snaps the ribbon holding his hair in place, sending it tumbling down over his shoulders, completely loose.

That’s fine.

Water streams down his chin, making the shorter pieces of his hair cling to his forehead. He shivers, wishing the cold would bring more clarity. Part of him wishes that he hadn’t sent the little spirit away, it —

It’s always been good at calming Xie Lian down.

He hears footsteps

He can’t bring himself to look up, just hunches over, hoping that whatever it is— whoever it is—they’ll have the sense to just leave him alone.

Honestly, he’s surprised the Ghost Fire wasn’t enough to deter them. He doesn’t doubt the little creature gave it’s best effort.

But when the person drops down beside him, and he hears who it is—Xie Lian just shrinks a little more, turning his head away with shame.

“Your highness…” Feng Xin’s voice sounds…

Complicated. Xie Lian can’t piece the tone apart. He’s too frightened to do so.

“…you shouldn’t run away before you give people a chance to talk,” he murmurs.

Xie Lian swallows thickly, wishing he—wishing he didn’t care so badly about what Feng Xin thought.

Wishing the idea of his friend thinking less of him didn’t hurt so badly—because Xie Lian, he…

He’s always thought the world of Feng Xin.

“I didn’t want to talk about it,” Xie Lian mutters, his voice hoarse.

Feng Xin is quiet, and Xie Lian doesn’t know what he wants. Part of him just wants to be alone, and—

Another part doesn’t want Feng Xin to leave.

“Your highness,” Feng Xin finally speaks again, and when he does—his voice is so gentle. “Was it true?”

Xie Lian hangs his head, strands of hair hiding around his face—fingers curling in the soft earth of the river bank.

“…Yes,” he whispers, trembling. “It’s true.”

It was so easy to tell someone else to be brave. To smile in Hong-er’s direction and tell him that it doesn’t matter. That it doesn’t change anything.

But it does. Oh god, it does.

Because if Xie Lian had spent the last six months of his life mourning a woman, he never would have felt the need to hide it.

If he had been born a woman instead of a man, he never would have taken so long to realize that what he had felt back then was love.

He never would have learned to hate every part of him that wants. To associate desire with a constant fear of rejection and judgement.

“…How long have you known that you were…?”

Feng Xin sounds—strained. And Xie Lian assumes it must be from discomfort. Maybe even anger.

Some frantic part of Xie Lian doesn't—

He doesn't know whether to laugh, or cry.

'Oh, I don't know, when was the first time you took your shirt off in front of me?'

Of all the people in his life, Feng Xin has always made him feel the safest.

He's also the last person in the world that Xie Lian would ever want to talk to about this.

"...A long time," Xie Lian mumbles, unwilling to place it on a firm timeline, he—

He just...

"Your highness..."

The prince pauses, because...Feng Xin doesn't sound angry. Or disappointed. He sounds...sad.

And Xie Lian can't stand the thought of that. Can't stand the idea that the part of him that loved Hong-er is something that makes his friend miserable.

"...You should have told me."

Xie Lian swallows thickly, and he nods.

"I know," he whispers.

After all—it was selfish. To let people follow him so far. To give up so much. All for this projection of a person who wasn't real.

Someone who was hiding something like this, all along.

He must be so hurt. He must feel so lied to. He'll leave now, he—

Fingertips brush over Xie Lian's cheek. Gentle. Never with anyone else, but always with him. Slightly calloused, particularly on the second and third fingers, where he holds his bowstring.

They push strands of hair behind his ear, slow, with—

With tenderness.

Xie Lian *breaks* .

He hangs his head, letting out a low, agonized sob. Because—

Because he's *so* scared, and he wants Feng Xin to stay, to tell him it's alright, that he doesn't hate him. That Xie Lian isn't as horrible as he feels.

"I—I was scared," he chokes, leaning into his touch. "Feng Xin—I was so scared, I..."

It's easy, when that hand pulls him in, letting Xie Lian rest his head against the guard's chest.

It's easy to cry his heart out when Feng Xin's arms wrap around him. To wrap his arms around his friend's back, clinging.

"You don't need to be scared," he whispers, their cheeks bumping together as he rocks Xie Lian in his arms. "Not when I'm here."

Xie Lian sniffles, staring blankly at the darkness in front of him.

That was something he used to say, when they were small.

Xie Lian always had nightmares, even as a little boy. He would run to his parents bed, crawl in between the king and queen before he could rest again.

As he got older, he got sheepish. Felt like he should be brave enough to sleep alone by then.

But there was something a little less embarrassing about having Feng Xin sleep on the floor next to his bed, whispering back and forth about what monsters they were going to pretend to hunt the next day.

And when Xie Lian woke up, whimpering with fear, Feng Xin would be there. Grasping his hand in the dark, whispering—

'Your highness, you don't have to be afraid.'

Xie Lian clings closer, struggling to catch his breath.

'Not while I'm around.'

“…I’m sorry,” he whispers, unsteady. “I’m sorry for not trusting you. I-I should have.” Feng Xin doesn’t answer immediately, fingers stroking through his hair.

It almost feels like when Hong-er used to comb it. Enough so for Xie Lian to relax, his eyes going half lidded.

Eventually, those fingers drift back up over his face.

His thumb strokes over the space between Xie Lian’s eyes, tracing down over his cheekbone, “…I can’t remember the last time I saw your eyes,” he admits.

Xie Lian pauses, swallowing hard.

He hides both of his shackles, but this one is the most unbearable for him to have seen.

It’s the same dark, interlocking pattern, stark against his skin—

And his irises are so pale. Sightless, watching the world blankly.

The angle of Feng Xin’s hand subtly encourages Xie Lian to lift his head, even when he wants to hide.

A thumb brushes just beneath his lashes.

“You always had beautiful eyes,” Feng Xin admits.

Xie Lian pauses, lips frozen, unsure of how to react.

“I…what?” He whispers, struggling to understand why—why he would say something like that. “Feng Xin, I—”

There’s movement, the pressure against his mouth, soft warmth. For a moment, Xie Lian doesn’t know what’s happening.

It’s just—what—?

And then, once he realizes there’s movement, gently encouraging him to relax into it, he understands.

This is a kiss.

Ghost Fire attempts at comfort aside, this is the only kiss Xie Lian’s ever been given. And Xie Lian…

His fingers tighten in the back of Feng Xin's shirt, trembling. ...He wants to cry.

Because there's a rush of euphoria that comes with the idea of not being rejected by someone you love. Of knowing that you don't have to be alone.

But this isn't what he wanted.

Xie Lian wanted his friend. He wanted to feel safe. He wanted someone to tell him that it was okay, he didn't—

The tears haven't stopped falling down his cheeks.

Xie Lian didn't *want* this.

Beauty.

God, how Xie Lian resents the fact that anyone ever called him beautiful.

And now, with this slow, sinking sensation, Xie Lian understands.

For him, this is what acceptance has always looked like.

Conditional.

People accept things about him, but only because they want something in return. And, after everything Feng Xin has done...

Is it really that much to ask?

Can...Can Xie Lian even justify saying *no* ?

When he feels Feng Xin stiffen and frown against him, he realizes that he must have stayed still for too long, that his friend must realize...

And if he does, is he—

Is Feng Xin going to leave him?

He starts to pull away, and in some frantic move of desperation, facing the prospect of being completely alone—

Xie Lian tries to kiss him back.

Clumsily, fingers weakly grasping at the back of Feng Xin's shoulders, breathing heavily through his nose.

This is enough, right?

Feng Xin's fingers tighten in his hair, pulling him closer, and the tears fall faster.

It's fine, right? It—

(It hurts.)

After this, they'll be even. What's this, compared to being alone again?

(It hurts. It *hurts* .)

Teeth scrape against him, making him jump, and Xie Lian... He realizes:

Feng Xin is crying.

Xie Lian's hands slide up from his friend's back, unsteady, reaching up to cup his cheeks.

There's wetness there, which is strange. No matter how emotional things get, Feng Xin doesn't like to cry in front of others, but—

He's laughing, too.

And then, in a moment of startling clarity, Xie Lian remembers:

Feng Xin would never hurt him. Never.

He isn't like that.

And this—

That mouth smiles against him, fingers digging in as they drag Xie Lian closer, taking what they want.

This hurts.

(It hurts. It *hurts* .)

His hands slide down from Feng Xin's face, flattening against his chest, giving it a hard shove—making their lips part, leaving Xie Lian panting and shivering, fingers drifting back up, and he—

He already knows what he's going to find, before he ever feels the mask.

“...” Xie Lian squeezes his eyes shut, no longer trembling with fear. Or shame.

There comes a point where you become so accustomed to a feeling, it means nothing to you anymore.

Xie Lian lives, eats, and breathes fear. It doesn’t paralyze him anymore.

The rage is new.

It twists and curls inside of him like a beast with a mind of it’s own, until the god is surging forward, tackling the masked figure to the ground.

It lets him.

He straddles it, bringing his fist down over and over again, until his knuckles are split and bleeding.

It lets him.

“LEAVE!” Xie Lian shrieks.

There was a time when he was considered to be the most dangerous swordsman of his generation. A thing of grace. He made battle into an art form.

This isn’t art. This is something far more base to human instinct.

His nails claw at every bit of exposed skin he can reach. He grips both sides of the creature’s head, slamming it down into the earth until the ground rumbles, until there’s fractures in the rock beneath him.

“JUST *LEAVE!”* He roars.

Under the onslaught, the mask cracks.

Xie Lian trembles, his hands clutched around the creature’s throat, desperately wishing this wasn’t useless. That it could end.

That it could all just be over.

“I’ll never leave you, your highness,” the calamity croons, it’s tone sweet and mocking, speaking with ease.

Xie Lian sobs, hearing it mimic the inflections of Hong-er's voice. So, so cruel.

"YOU ALREADY TOOK HIM!" The god cries, shaking the monster like a rag doll. "What more do you WANT?! What more could you POSSIBLY DO?!"

"..," Bai Wuxiang doesn't raise his voice, no.

"...You don't actually know what happened that night, remember?"

He doesn't actually sound like a man being strangled, in spite of it all.

"Would you like me to show you, dianxia?"

Xie Lian's hands tighten around that throat until it's crushed, mangled under his fingers.

It's still laughing.

And then, it's gone.

There's no one underneath him. Nothing between his fingers. No laughing.

Xie Lian's alone, on the ground—screaming.

The sounds of the forest slowly return. He didn't realize they had stopped.

The stream starts flowing again.

The sun starts sinking below the horizon.

Clouds gather, like a storm is slowly moving in. Something cold slams into his chest.

Xie Lian doesn't react this time.

"Dianxia..." It whispers, and Xie Lian knows, from the tone—

It saw.

It doesn't say anything more than that. Just whispers his name, over and over again.

But it saw.

What Xie Lian allowed that thing to do to him. What he did out of fear and desperation.

How pathetic he is. "..."

The prince rises to his feet, swaying, unsteady. Unwilling to go back home. Having nowhere else to go.

But this time, when he breathes in—there's something there. A trace of spiritual power. Demonic.

Xie Lian's eyes snap open, then narrow into a venomous glare.

A trail.

When he starts following after it, the ghost fire is there—pressing hard against his chest. As hard as it can.

"Dianxia," it whispers, "don't go there."

Xie Lian shoves it aside, shoulders trembling with rage.

There's nothing more it can do to him. Nothing else it can take.

Xie Lian doesn't care about what it wants anymore. Doesn't care if it kills him. Or humiliates him. Or tricks him.

He just wants this to be over. To stop being hunted like an animal.

The longer he walks, the stronger the scent becomes. He doesn't know how many miles it is.

Eventually, the storm comes. Thunder rolling overhead, the breeze rolling through his hair. The rain starts to fall in thick, fat drops, quickly soaking him to the bone.

There are more Ghost Fires.

Xie Lian doesn't know how. He certainly didn't call them.

They're in his way.

"Move." He mutters, shoving at them as he stumbles through the forest path.

They make a dark procession around him, gleaming against the dark—illuminating the dips and shadows of his face.

“MOVE!”

There’s a coldness by his cheek, and that voice again—

“Don’t go there.”

“...” His fingers snatch out, catching the Ghost Fire between his fingers. As ever, it doesn’t flinch—just sits calmly in his palm, and Xie Lian hisses—

“If you don’t get out of my way, I’ll disperse you.” He glances around blindly.

“All of you!”

The threat is enough to make nearly all of them scatter.

Except for one.

Xie Lian’s grip is still loose enough that the Ghost Fire could have slipped free, if it wanted.

“...Leave,” he whispers, “just leave.” The flame doesn’t move.

“I won’t.”

Xie Lian’s breathing is ragged, uneven.

“E-Even if I was going to disperse you?!” He whispers. “You would still stay?!”

“Even then,” the voice replies. Not a shred of hesitation. “If Dianxia is the one to do it, this one will never mind.”

The god shudders.

“What about the person that’s so precious to you?!” He snaps, letting go. “Have you just forgotten about them?!”

They’re what’s keeping in his world after all, aren’t they?

And he would just let Xie Lian disperse his spirit. Just like that?!

“I’ll never forget them.”

The reply is so simple, but Xie Lian finds it maddening.

“Then how could you let me do that?! Why?! Why would you be okay with me doing that?!"

After a moment, it whispers—

"I am forever your most devoted believer."

Xie Lian clenches his teeth, his throat tight.

"No!"

He shoves the creature aside, clutching the pouch around his neck as he walks deeper into the night.

"You're not him!" He cries, "I asked you so many times—you're not him!"

Hong-er is at peace. Xie Lian tried every way possible to call to him. And he knows… If Hong-er could hear him, he would have answered.

And as much as he's come to care for this spirit, as kind as it has been —

Xie Lian isn't ready to believe in someone like that again. He isn't ready to allow himself to have that kind of faith.

It hurts too much.

The Ghost Fire repeats itself, this time louder, more frantically as Xie Lian makes his way through the path.

"I am forever your most devoted believer!"

Xie Lian shakes his head, pushing forward. He's not. He's just—he's just not.

"No," he mutters, barely audible over the rain "You're not!"

"Dianxia," it pleads, wailing out against the night, "believe me!" Xie Lian doesn't weep, even if he wants to.

"I don't believe you."

He doesn't believe in anything anymore.

Eventually, he stumbles across a temple. The steps are worn, overgrown, but… He knows, after a moment's examination, it's one of his own.

Worn down, dilapidated, but the entrance plaque is all too familiar.
“...”

When he breathes in, the scent of demonic power is strong.

He was meant to come here, he knows.

It’s a trap.

Xie Lian knows that, too.

But it will find him, if he runs. He’ll fall for it again, and again, and again.

He might as well fall into it now, when he knows it’s coming. Xie Lian sits, and he waits.

It Hurts

Chapter Summary

> “There’s a cure, you know.”
>
> There’s stirring throughout the room. A ghost fire bumps between bodies, desperately trying to break through, but—
>
> There are too many people. It’s too chaotic.
>
> “What?!”
>
> “To human face disease,” Bai Wuxiang explains calmly. There’s a rush of whispering in the room. “Ask him, he knows.”

Chapter Notes

> TW// this chapter contains graphic depictions of violence, torture, horror elements, and moments that could be triggering for victims of sexual assault and violence. There is once again an expression of derogatory attitudes towards sex workers, please read with caution.
>
> You can find me and the rest of this story on twitter at @cataclysmicevie !

The Ghost Fire hovers nearby, quiet—but fretful.

Watching as more travelers begin to wander in.

Each one of them caught by the storm, side tracked, looking for a place to take shelter.

The Ghost Fire watches, one by one, as the temple starts to fill up. Slowly, Xie Lian starts to feel worry.

It was one thing, jumping into the trap on his own. Why are there so many other people here?

Are they in danger from it now, too?

No-face hasn’t been focused on tormenting anyone but Xie Lian in so long. Why pull others into it now? Not his loved ones, but people Xie Lian doesn’t even know?

Then, he hears the screaming.

The panic sweeps through the room as whispers and cries leak through.

Faces. Human faces. It’s—

It’s back.

Oh god—

It’s back!

The Ghost Fire watches, as his god calls out, trying to calm them. Telling them not to run. That something much worse is waiting outside.

It watches, it wishes, and it prays.

Prays for a body. For hands that could pull his beloved from this place. For the strength to stop this.

“Dianxia,” it whispers.

It knows.

“Leave this place.”

Xie Lian frowns—shaking his head. “I can’t leave these people.” The fire prays.

Because it knows what’s coming—in such cruel, vivid detail.

But even it did not know everything.

It’s prayers go unanswered.

Xie Lian is crowded in, stepping backwards until his hand catches the edge of an altar.

No divine statue. A cracked entry plaque—but still, an altar.

There are hands on his shoulders, then—broad, heavy. And a voice in his ear—

“I said I would show you, your highness,” a familiar voice whispers.

Xie Lian freezes.

"Do you still want to see?"

He opens his mouth to scream, and a hand clamps over his jaw, silencing him.

Xie Lian can feel the mask press against his cheek, the voice crooning in his ear, "I'll let you in on a little secret—"

His fingernails scrape against Xie Lian's jawline.

"—I never laid a finger on the boy."

His eyes widen, brows knitting together in distressed confusion.

He can feel Bai Wuxiang smile. "Well, not until he was already dead. I don't touch humans directly."

Xie Lian supposes that must be true. It never came after him in his human life. Only —

Only after.

But the rest of it—

Xie Lian wrenches his head until his mouth is free.

"Liar!" He chokes, whipping his face around to glare, "Every word that comes out of your mouth is a LIE!"

"..." Fingertips stroke his cheek, and there's a sigh.

Like an exhausted parent, on the verge of punishing their favorite child—after giving them so many chances.

"Alright," he sighs, hands pulling Xie Lian back. "I'll show you, little one."

Show him.

Show him—?

He's forced to sit upon the altar, and he hears Bai Wuxiang's voice call out, calm— almost bored, but easily heard above the nervous din of voices.

"There's a cure, you know."

There's stirring throughout the room. A ghost fire bumps between bodies, desperately trying to break through, but—

There are too many people. It's too chaotic.

"What?!"

"To human face disease," Bai Wuxiang explains calmly. There's a rush of whispering in the room.

"Ask him, he knows."

Quietly, Xie Lian can't help but wonder whose face he's wearing now.

After all—no one has commented on the oddness of the mask, or recognized him as the white clothed calamity.

It must be someone that would hurt him, if Xie Lian could see it.

Maybe Guoshi. Or Feng Xin.

Hong-er, Xie Lian eventually decides. That's what would hurt him the most.

It must be the illusion of Hong-er's arms now, holding him down. Slowly, people begin to question.

What could it be? How could he know?

And if he knows, why wouldn't he tell them?

"It's not a cure," Xie Lian tries to explain, his voice strained; "it's a curse. You don't want it—"

"How can you make that decision for us?!"

"Who do you think you are?!"

"My child is here! I don't care what I have to do, tell me how to save him!"

The god sags.

He's forced to tell them the truth—the horrible, awful truth, that he learned many years ago:

"Murder," he croaks, limp in Bai Wuxiang's hold.

Silence falls across the room.

“You have to kill someone, to be immune to the disease.”

A horribly clever solution.

The debate begins. People don’t show the worst sides of themselves at the first opportunity. It takes a little coaxing. They have to feel like the situation gives them permission.

Xie Lian hears a sword being thrown to the ground with a clatter.

He listens as Bai Wuxiang explains that he won’t die, revealing Xie Lian’s true identity.

He listens, as they toss the idea back and forth. As they debate, whether or not his torture is worth their salvation.

Listens to the sounds of the Ghost Fire struggling to get to him. He bites his lip, shoulders trembling.

‘Leave,’ he mouths, not wanting the spirit to see what he knows is coming. But the prince already knows—in this moment, in a twisted turn of timing—

The Ghost Fire won’t leave him.

It won’t ever, ever leave him.

A human mouth presses against his jaw, and Xie Lan can’t stop himself from convulsing, trying to flinch away—even as he feels a sadistic smile in place.

“It stormed that night too, do you remember?”

His lips tremble.

“Stop it!”

“I’m not the only one who has been hunting you.”

Bai Wuxiang explains patiently, watching the scene before him with quiet, fascinated glee.

“Someone else was too—very successfully, after all…” His thumb caresses over Xie Lian’s mouth.

"He already knew your face quite well."

His eyes are wide, horrified.

"...Who?!"

"A former believer of yours," Bai Wuxiang explains. "You're familiar with him. Someone eager to...distance himself from family ties."

Nausea builds in his throat.

Someone who already hated Hong-er. Someone the boy would have already feared.

"I gave him this choice, too."

Xie Lian struggles, but it's fruitless.

"He didn't take so long to decide, I'll admit," the calamity muses. "But we'll reach the same destination, in the end. We always do."

"...What's the point of this?" The god whispers.

The grip on his chin tightens.

"You're a slow learner, your highness," the creature hisses. "And I'm not a patient man."

"What—" Xie Lian thrashes, "What am I supposed to learn from any of this?!"

"How people are," the crowd is getting louder now. "The things they'll do, when given the chance."

"Qi Rong—" Xie Lian spits that name with nothing but content, "Is the WORST of what people can be, not—!"

"You sound so confident, speaking for the common man," Bai Wuxiang smiles, pushing Xie Lian's bangs from his forehead. "But this is Qi Rong's world, not yours."

The young man trembles, and his tormentor continues—

"The world is filled with nothing but Qi Rongs. If he was so horrible—why didn't your parents to something about him, before?"

Xie Lian opens his mouth, then closes it.

“As I recall…” Bai Wuxian cradles him in his arms.

“The one who once wore this face—he dragged him in a sack behind his carriage once, didn’t he?”

Xie Lian’s face contorts at the memory, and—

And at the confirmation that, at this moment, Bai Wuxiang is wearing Hong-er’s face.

“I already know he’s disgusting,” Xie Lian snaps. “You aren’t teaching me anything—!”

“You really didn’t think about it, did you?” Bai Wuxiang sighs, petting Xie Lian’s hair —and the prince falls silent. “You just saw the end result, and only saw one person’s hand in the situation.”

He clicks his tongue.

“How childish.”

The Ghost Fire snarls, finally reaching the altar—only to end up batted away, like one might swat a fly.

“How many people watched, you think, when he placed that boy in the sack? How easy was it for you, when you came across it, to realize what the man had done?”

Xie Lian’s eyes fill with tears at the memory. It was gut wrenching then—but even more so now, when the boy has become so much more to him than a passing impression.

When he knows the young man he would become.

“There’s a phrase I’ve always liked,” Bai Wuxiang muses. “It takes a village to raise a child.”

A single tear slips down his cheek.

“It also takes a village to fail one, don’t you think?” The calamity smiles. “Other than yourself, do you think a single person ever showed that boy kindness?”

“Enough—” Xie Lian croaks, trembling.

“When it was said and done with, who was punished more? Qi Rong, for nearly torturing a boy to death, or Feng Xin, for stopping him?”

Anger twists in his chest at the memory, and Xie Lian fights it, knowing—knowing that's what the creature wants him to feel. That it's all...

That it's all a trap.

"The mother that raised you—she also raised him, didn't she?"

Xie Lian recoils.

"And in the long run—who did the world scorn?" Bai Wuxiang muses. "Qi Rong, or you?"

Finally, the god's face freezes. "Who did they curse?"

Oh.

"Him, or you?"

It hurts.

For a moment, just a moment—someone speaks out for him.

"Are all of you really considering this?!" The man cries out, surveying the crowd with disbelief. "You're so scared, you'd take the word of a madman and do something like that?!"

There's a stir.

"The prince confirmed it!"

"Some of us have children here, we don't have a choice!"

"How could you blame us?! After all, you heard him—he won't die!"

Xie Lian's heart lurches with hope, but Bai Wuxiang only smiles, petting his cheek.

"Wait," he murmurs in Xie Lian's ear. "Listen, to what men do."

"You really think we're wrong for wanting to save ourselves?! What are you, suicidal?! You really wanna die?!"

The man speaking sounds almost familiar, but Xie Lian struggles to place him. It... sounds almost like one of the farmers he used to know. Back in the old days.

"I don't wanna die," the man mutters, shaking his head. "But I don't wanna live like that, either! Even if he is a god, that doesn't mean you should—!"

"You really think you know what kind of person he is?" A voice sneers, and Xie Lian.

He cringes, nails biting into his palms. That voice, he recognizes very well.

The merchant walks towards the front of the room, "You know how he's been getting by, since he fell from grace?"

The room suddenly falls silent.

"I can tell you exactly how," the servant glares, "and you shouldn't feel sorry for him!"

The prince's breathing slowly begins to pick up as he hears the sword being lifted from the floor, the slow drag of the metal edge of the blade against stone.

"If the rest of you are willing to die for a whore, that's your business—but I'm not!"

Shocked murmurs echo.

To their credit, there's a pause—they wait for the prince to deny it.

When he doesn't the mood seems to change, and Xie Lian hears Bai Wuxiang murmur, "I told you. I told you so many times."

Xie Lian opens his mouth to tell him that it doesn't matter, that he won't—

Slice!

He's too shocked to stop the agonized cry that slips from his lips, pain radiating from his abdomen.

It's a hesitant blow, from someone who clearly isn't used to wielding a blade. Once he realizes it isn't deep enough, it slams the rest of the way through, and—

Xie Lian chokes.

Blood slips down his chin. The calamity wipes it away, still rather calm, whispering—

“I told you.”

The blade is yanked out with a wet sound, clattering to the floor.

Everyone stares, too shocked to move, but they all watch as the merchant turns on his heel, walking away.

He’s able to walk from the temple without fear. To return to his life, knowing that he won’t be haunted by the disease that looms over them.

And...why shouldn’t they?

Xie Lian can hear it, in the voices bubbling around him.

Why shouldn’t they save themselves?

“Here,” Bai Wuxiang says, rising to his feet. Several of the travelers look over at the limber youth, dark hair falling over his shoulder as he reaches down, fixing each of Xie Lian’s wrists to a set of chains, dangling from the ceiling. “I’ll make it easier for all of you.”

No one questions why the chains were there to begin with, in the altar of a temple. No one questions how the young man knows all of this, no.

The only thing anyone asks is—

“Aren’t you going to want a turn yourself?”

“Oh, no,” the young man smiles, hopping down from the altar.

“I’m already immune,” he walks to the side, leaning against a stone pillar. He crosses his arms over his chest, like he’s about to watch quite the show. “I just want to watch.”

No one questions that, either.

Xie Lian hears someone picking up the sword again, and he whimpers.

Before the blade hits, he hears Bai Wuxiang chuckle, because he has one more thing to add.

“Also—just so you know—it’s not a permanent solution.”

The blacksmith standing wards the front pauses, the sword hovering over Xie Lian's chest. "...What?"

The calamity grins.

"But the more he suffers, the longer it lasts."

Xie Lian's eyes look up to the ceiling blankly, hands trembling, straining against the manacles around his wrists.

He remembers the shallow wounds, all over Hong-er's body. The way only one of them was fatal.

Torture.

He told him, he would show Xie Lian what happened that night.

Bai Wuxiang told him.

And he was right—Xie Lian is a slow learner. Not from a lack of ability, but from a stubborn refusal to admit it when he's wrong.

Wrong about the world. Wrong about people.

It hurts.

But that's okay. Xie Lian gets many, many chances to learn that night.

A hundred chances.

Some of them just slam the sword in, whimpering out apologies when he cries out, sobbing with pain. Xie Lian learns to be grateful for that.

Others—

Others take their time.

It will always surprise you, the things people will do. The things men will do, when they think the situation permits it.

Xie Lian can't see the cuts coming. Doesn't know which direction the pain will come from next. He cringes from every touch, trembling, terrified.

Not alone.

There's a coldness that occasionally rushes towards him, trying to place itself between him, and the swords.

It's shoved back—or, Xie Lian sobs, begging it to leave. Knowing that it won't. It never does.

At one point, it manages to knock a man holding the sword to the ground.

It rushes into the curve of Xie Lian's neck, trembling. He can feel it now—more cold than it's ever been, waves of energy pouring off of it.

Poor thing—it must be burning so brightly.

And while the calamity seemed bemused by the little spirit at first…

It watches the way Xie Lian dips his chin, pressing his cheek against the flames. The quivering of his lips as he whispers to the creature.

Even now, finding some small form of comfort. It isn't so amusing. Not anymore.

The prince chokes, when the Ghost Fire is snatched away.

"Don't!" He cries out, even as a sword plunges into his side, his screams echoing off of the temple walls. "DON'T HURT IT!"

"…"

Bai Wuxiang isn't wearing the brat's face anymore. Standing in the middle of the room as the floor becomes slick with blood.

His sleeves are white, billowing, the white of his mask illuminated with a hellish green haze. All of the other torches in the temple have blown out.

The only light now comes from the flame in his palm, burning with the force of a small sun.

Stronger with every passing moment.

None of the remaining humans seem to notice, anyway.

Everyone with a conscience left long ago. The ones that remain are scavengers, opportunists, tearing at a bleeding, wounded animal that can't run.

Bai Wuxiang drags his thumb over the flames in slow circles. The way one might do with a small kitten, or a wounded bird.

"Your highness," he muses, watching the utter anguish in the young man's eyes, "there was something else—something I didn't tell you."

Xie Lian doesn't lift his head now. Doesn't ask—but that's alright. He'll tell him anyway.

"I did touch him, after he was dead." Bai Wuxiang muses, holding the Ghost Fire closer in front of his face. "Not the hanging," the calamity muses.

Xie Lian shudders.

"That was a family affair."

The Ghost Fire rumbles—and the calamity holds on tightly.

"...He had no desire to Rest In Peace," Bai Wuxiang explains. "And with his nasty little habit of interrupting our lessons..."

He squeezes tighter, so tightly, that the flame flickers. "I made sure he never would again."

It's intentionally vague. Cruelly so.

Xie Lian's teeth chatter, hunching around the next slam of a blade, this time into his lower abdomen. "You...dispersed him?"

Bai Wuxiang smiles, and he offers no answer. Allows the pain and sadness to fill the crown prince like a flood. Squeezes the spirit in his hand viciously.

From then on, it's relentless.

The humans remaining are given free reign. Bai Wuxiang watches with amusement as one reaches between Xie Lian's legs, faintly surprised that, even now, men think of such things.

Animals.

He waits until Xie Lian is trembling with absolute terror.

Before the man can do much more than that, he lets the ghost fire go.

The little creature hurls forward with such viciousness, the man is knocked back down the steps—at such a vicious angle, the landing snaps his neck.

The calamity snatches the ghost fire back between his fingers, listening as it snarls. “Not that kind of pain,” he muses—directed towards the men who remain.

Xie Lian doesn’t know why the calamity would bother to spare him from that. It’s never shown mercy before.

But what comes after isn’t exactly mercy, in the end.

His body won’t die.

Even when the wounds seem to outnumber the parts of him that are intact.

At some point, his throat is cut—and then, Xie Lian can’t even scream. Can’t cry, or beg.

But in his mind, he wails.

Help me.

Help me, help me, help me.

Help me, help me, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help me!!!!”

No one will help.

No one can.

In the distance, Xie Lian hears screaming, and he knows it’s not him.

Don’t hurt it. Don’t—

Please, don’t—!

One final, choked moan rips from him—then, he can’t make a single sound.

But still, it hurts.

Xie Lian’s mind swirls in and out of consciousness, everything slipping into a haze. He hears the screaming. Hears laughing. Endless, horrible laughing.

And still, it hurts.

It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts…it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS!!!!

Why can't I die?

He's longed for death before. In a quiet, exhausted way. Because the grief was too painful. Because it felt as though he had been fighting on for so long.

Xie Lian didn't know anything, back then. Now, he silently begs for death. Pleads.

He prays.

Desperately—to the one person he can think of that can help him that might still care. That might still save him.

Jun Wu.

He screams for him soundlessly—and Xie Lian doesn't even scream for salvation. Or forgiveness. He doesn't pray for revenge, or justice.

He prays for death.

Begs for Jun Wu to take back his immortality. To let him slip away.

Even if Xie Lian could survive this, he doesn't want to. Doesn't want to live with the memory of this in his body.

Doesn't want to go on, knowing that this is what Hong-er felt.

He doesn't cry anymore.

Tears of blood stream down his cheeks.

Eventually, the pain fades into nothing. Constant, unending static across his skin. Layer upon layer of it blending together.

He's sightless. Soundless. And god, he wishes he could lose the feeling of touch.

Xie Lian faintly remembers that there was a time when he enjoyed being touched— and now, he can't bring himself to understand why.

Bai Wuxiang smirks, watching as the Ghost Fire in his hand burns to a fever pitch, murmuring—

"You should be grateful to me, you know."

He purrs, watching Xie Lian sag in his chains, a god, sacrificed to the cruelty of his own people. Fitting, Bai Wuxiang thinks.

The finest self portrait he's ever painted.

"Without me...your story would have been so *boring* ."

The Ghost Fire sparks, raging brighter.

He could have just been a lone soldier, dying alone and abandoned on the battlefield.

"Tragedy builds character," the calamity explains, eyes lingering on the corpse of the man the ghost fire killed, an hour before. "Look at the role you got to play. Beautiful, isn't it?"

The fact that he was able to kill a human being, even in just a spectral form—it's impressive. Implying a future as a savage ghost. Maybe even something more, eventually.

"You never got to know the prince as a child...a shame," he adds as an aside, "he was completely charming."

The fire is vibrating between his fingers now. If Bai Wuxiang was smart, he would disperse it. But...he's curious.

He wants to see what this little thing can do. Call it an experiment. "Built golden palaces. Cried from nightmares, and..."

The calamity steps closer.

He gives the ghost fire a better view of his beloved, limp, nearly unrecognizable.

"...a love of fairy tales. That's rather fitting, isn't it?"

After all—those stories always seem so shining, so beautiful—

But there are always such gruesome origins underneath. Such tragedies.

The walls of this temple were once made from gleaming white marble. Now, every inch of them is stained with splatters and streaks of red. A baptism.

Primed for rebirth.

“And look what I did to you.”

The ghost fire trembles.

Before, he wouldn’t have been important enough to be a named character. Not even in a supporting role.

Now, the little flame is something straight out of the pages of a fairy tale.

“A hideous little creature…desperately in love with a princess,” the calamity pauses, smirking.

Well. Not quite a princess. But the child said such things made little difference to him, didn’t he?

“And all it would take for them to be together, would be if she could know his name.”

It really does sound like a fairy tale. Something straight out of the pages of folklore. “But he can never say it out loud.”

Because Bai Wuxiang took his name.

When Hong-er awoke in the forest, hovering beneath his own dangling body, watching his boots swing overhead—he was snatched into someone’s palm.

Disoriented. Defenseless.

The curse was powerful—with just as much force as that of the shackles on the prince’s body.

Maybe even more.

Each time his beloved asked him, called for him—

‘Hong-er?’

‘Hong-er, is that you?!’

'Please, Hong-er—I'm scared!'

It was hell.

He couldn't answer.

But there is one thing that will always baffle the white clothed calamity—from now, until the end.

This creature—it's deeds can never be known. Not anymore. The prince will never recognize his first love. Will never know the aches and trials this spirit endures.

There will never be acknowledgement. Never be a reward.

He thought, when the child realized that—it would break. That it would fade away.

Now, it burns brighter than ever before.

He wasn't there that day, years ago, standing in a worn down shrine, listening to a god cry out—

'I can't give you anything now!'

And he never heard the child answer, his voice solemn, devout—

'I don't want anything.'

A god who constantly hunts the prayers and loves of worshippers like a half-starved beast will never understand those who pray without expecting an answer.

Will never understand that the truest form of salvation often stems from the act of belief itself.

And that—that is something this spirit can't stop doing. It can't stop believing.

It burns so bright, the calamity lets it go with a start.

Believing in it's god...

The howl that rips through the air is so powerful the stone foundations of the temple begin to rattle and shake.

Even without an answer. Even if he never knows why the spirit hasn't gone, or that it's protecting him—

That's all Hong-er is.

Thunder crashes, and with it comes the explosion.

So loud, so powerful, it rattles half of the mountain with it, incinerating every living human left inside, leaving even their bones as piles of ash.

Rain pours down, the roof now reduced to rubble, scattered for miles.

The wind howls, scattering the human remains to the air, carrying them off into the night.

It's pitch dark now. No torches. No starlight. No ghost fire.

The only illumination comes from occasional crashes of lightning—showing a scene from a child's nightmare.

A temple in ruins. Streaked with blood, slowly being washed away by the downpour. A god, sacrificed upon his own altar. Before him, his last believer.

There's a lone figure in the middle of the scene. A tall, dark haired youth—dressed in black.

The rain doesn't touch him. It doesn't dare.

Boots click softly against the flagstones, wet, cracked—stained by the blood of the deity they were hewn to worship.

The figure kneels before the fallen god. A deviation from teachings—but the youth isn't kneeling to worship.

He is kneeling in penance.

When he clasps his hands in prayer, head bowed—for the first time in many years, he prays for something in particular.

Strength.

Strength at any cost. Strength in any form.

Strength to destroy his enemies. Strength to avenge his god.

Strength to protect him.

Even if his god doesn’t know why he isn’t resting in peace. Even if he doesn't know why he hasn’t gone.

Even if he doesn’t know that this servant is protecting him.

For him, this man will survive anything. For him, he will become invincible.

The rain pounds as the thunder roars.

The youth prays for strength. But there is another prayer, one that is always on his lips, rattling against his teeth, repeating with every pulse of a heart that no longer beats.

He prays to never Rest In Peace.

The howl of the wind steals the words he utters, lost to time; “I am forever your most devoted believer.”

Disillusionment

Chapter Summary

When Xie Lian lost his godhood, he knew—watching as the world went dark. Falling to his knees, clutching at his eyes like a frightened child, whimpering at the unfairness of it all. And what did he know then, of the world being unfair?

When Xie Lian lost Hong-er—he knew. Even if it took him so long to accept it. The first time he called, and received no answer—some part of his heart knew. Knew that Hong-er would never leave him. That the world had suddenly become so frightening, because he was no longer in it.

It took him two days, to realize that he lost Feng Xin.

Chapter Notes

TW// once again, this chapter contains mentions of negative attitudes towards sex work, and it also displays some nuanced / subtle undertones of homophobia. Read with caution.

You can find me (and this story) on twitter at @cataclysmicevie

Xie Lian doesn't know how long it takes him to wake, but when he does—he's alone. Not wearing the same robes as before. These are clean, not stained with blood.

A kindness from his tormentor. One he can't bring himself to understand.

It takes a long time for the young man to move. He lays on his side, hands clenched into fists in front of him, eyes staring widely—blankly.

He waits for more pain to come. Assumes that it can't be over yet. That the moment he moves, the blades will return to his skin.

Cautiously, he sits up—waiting for something to lurch out, to break him open again.

His hand drifts down over his stomach, knowing that he should find a mangled mess of flesh—but it feels smooth. Unharmed.

The memory of it is still there, churning under his skin.

After a time of sitting there, waiting, Xie Lian realizes that the calamity won't come back. That there's not a single living thing in a mile radius.

Bai Wuxiang won't come back. Not now. Xie Lian's lips tremble as he rises to his feet.

Not when he's gotten what he wanted.

Slowly, he makes his way back down the mountain, hands floating loosely by his sides, stumbling along the path.

His foot catches over the edge of something substantial, sending him sprawling— something he's long since gotten used to.

When he fumbles out, feeling for what tripped him—he finds a boot. Not shoes that he knows, this time.

There was a time when such a discovery would frighten him, leaving him shivering and alone, in the dark.

Now, he's calm, hands patting over the body, investigating.

He finds a slightly rounded stomach, fine clothes—a heavy sack of money at his side.

His fingers find the telltale signs of dried blood—killed by a sword. Xie Lian's mind drifts to the blade at his side, left behind after they—

The prince's shoulders tremble, hunching in. ...After they took what they wanted.

But fangxin didn't do this—a saber did. And when Xie Lian feels for the man's hand, finding one of the rings on his fingers—he knows who it is.

The merchant.

'If the rest of you are willing to die for a —'

Xie Lian grits his teeth.

'—that's your business, but I'm not!'

Before he rises to his feet, he takes the pouch of money, coins tinkling in his grip as he attaches it to his waist.

Robbing a dead man's body. Disgraceful. Something that would have repelled him, before.

But there are worse things.

Xie Lian knows that, now.

He slowly drifts down the path, unsure of how long the walk home will take. Unsure if he even wants to go home, now—but there's nowhere else to go.

And after an hour of walking, he notices—

There's no Ghost Fire following him.

He stops walking.

"...Hello?" He calls out, lifting his hand up, waiting for the little creature to fly into his palm—just as it always has.

Nothing comes.

The prince stands there for a moment, the slow realization dawning on him.

It—Bai Wuxiang, he—

"..." Xie Lian hangs his head, trembling.

'Don't— DON'T HURT IT!'

He remembers the screaming at the end. The screaming that wasn't his own—and he knows.

Knows what Bai Wuxiang must have done.

'I'm forever your most devoted believer.'

The prince's eyes burn hot with tears that don't fall.

'Your highness—believe me!'

Couldn't he...

'I don't believe you.'

Couldn't he have just lied, to make the poor thing happy? To bring it some small measure of peace? He—

‘I pray to never Rest In Peace.’

Right.

Xie Lian swallows thickly, remembering what the spirit said. The person it lingered on for.

“...I’m sorry,” he whispers into the air, not sure who he’s apologizing to.

The little spirit, for not listening. It’s beloved, for Xie Lian’s actions leading to it being dispersed, or...

Or maybe even himself. Because this—

This pain is, in large part, self inflicted.

Xie Lian’s fingers drift up to the pouch around his neck, quivering. Wishing he wasn’t such a slow learner. That, after all of this pain, he could manage to learn his lesson—

Then he freezes, finding that the weight of the pouch has changed, his chest seizing with panic.

Someone touched it, he—

Xie Lian’s heart pounds as he drops to his knees, lifting the pouch from around his neck, fingers shaking so badly, he can hardly open the draw string.

Scattering someone’s ashes—it’s an unthinkable thing. But...

Bai Wuxiang would. To hurt him.

He could have done anything to Xie Lian while he was passed out, to the ashes around his neck—and the prince wouldn’t have been able to do a thing to—

His fingers probe inside the pouch, and at first, his stomach plunges when he doesn’t feel ashes there.

Then, he pauses.

The lock of Hong-er’s hair is still there—along with a stone.

Heavy, round, and smooth. The texture of it feels almost like polished obsidian. And Xie Lian doesn’t know *how* he knows, but—

His fingers curl around the stone, squeezing tightly.

This is Hong-er. It's—it's him.

The god couldn't explain why the ashes changed form, but now...

He's too tired to give the matter much thought.

The lock of hair, stone, and leather cord replace the pouch around his neck, resting against his chest with a comforting weight.

Xie Lian begins to walk again.

Walking feels longer, when you're alone. Feels slower, when you don't actually want to go anywhere. He has no way of knowing how long it takes, just that his toes have started to wear down and bleed inside of his boots.

Trying to move his body feels like plucking at marionette strings, pulling on something that isn't quite connected to him anymore. His limbs jerk and obey clumsily—but there's so much regenerated bone, muscle, and sinew, it—

Most of it isn't him anymore.

This is a new body, regrown from ashes. Unscarred, unbroken.

But the heart beneath still remembers. And the numbness that takes over him now isn't new. It isn't reborn—it's overstretched. Leaving his mind feeling like paper, worn down down to the thinnest point.

Easy to tear.

Xie Lian didn't memorize the path, the number of steps between that place, and home. He doesn't realize that he's made it back until he feels a set of hands on his shoulders, Feng Xin's voice angry in it's worry—

"Where WERE you?!" He leans down to examine the prince's face.

"You were gone for TWO days, we couldn't find you, we didn't know if you had—!" He cuts himself off, shaking his head, fingers trembling where they grip his friend's shoulders. "You—you can't just run off like that, and not tell anyone where you're going!"

Oh.

It was two days.

Xie Lian doesn't look harmed—if anything, he looks better by Feng Xin's examination than he has in quite some time. His face is clean—hair has clearly been combed, pulled up into the half up, half down style that he hasn't worn in months now. The robes are simple, but new.

But his face isn't right. If Feng Xin was being honest with himself, he would be forced to admit that his face hasn't been right in quite some time, but...

It's smooth now. Dull it's lack of emotion. Like it may as well be a mask.

"Don't worry about it, Feng Xin."

His friend looks him over—and Xie Lian can't see the frantic worry in Feng Xin's eyes, his knuckles white from how tightly he's gripping Xie Lian's shoulders.

Then, he's pulling the prince in, clutching him so fiercely, Xie Lian can feel his newly formed ribs groan in protest.

"How could you ask me not to worry?!"

Feng Xin's voice comes out hoarse, and Xie Lian—he knows all too well, why that is. He's heard his own voice like that before.

From wandering a forest for countless hours on end, crying out the name of someone you love, always met with...

Silence. Horrible, terrifying silence.

Xie Lian stares ahead, expression blank as Feng Xin clutches him, his heart pounding as his terror slowly begins to ease, because—

What Mu Qing said—Feng Xin knew, from the look on Xie Lian's face, how humiliated he was. How horrified.

When he left like that, without coming back...and he stayed gone for so long...

He'd never done that before. Not without at least telling Feng Xin where he was going, and why.

And given how...serious it all was, it made the guard wonder, made him worry that… his prince had…

Xie Lian feels his friend hug him a little tighter, the action bringing his face just a little closer against Feng Xin's shoulder, breath hitting the side of his neck. The larger man's nose brushing against his cheek.

He didn't feel it, at first, the fractures left inside. There was just numbness, and now—

'You always had such beautiful eyes.'

Now, he remembers that breath on his cheek. Those hands on his back, taking what they wanted. And he knows, it wasn't this person. Wasn't his friend.

Feng Xin would never hurt him.

But those hands did.

He can still feel the memory of that mouth on his. Xie Lian still knows now, just how much he would be willing to do, to keep this man's affection.

To make Feng Xin stay.

These arms have always protected him, at any cost. No matter the enemy. Here, he was always safe.

Now, for the first time—Xie Lian cringes away from them. Don't touch me.

"…" Feng Xin is left standing there, watching as Xie Lian turns away from him for a moment, expression hidden—but he can see the way the prince's shoulders shake.

Oh god, please, *don't touch me.*

"…Your highness?"

When Xie Lian lost the war, he knew. Maybe there was denial when they reached a turning point—but when the battle was over, there was no debating that. He knew, the moment his kingdom was taken away, and his title became…

An echo. Not a name.

When Xie Lian lost his godhood, he knew—watching as the world went dark. Falling to his knees, clutching at his eyes like a frightened child, whimpering at the unfairness of it all.

And what did he know then, of the world being unfair?

When Xie Lian lost Hong-er—he knew. Even if it took him so long to accept it. The first time he called, and received no answer—some part of his heart knew.

Knew that Hong-er would never leave him. That the world had suddenly become so frightening, because he was no longer in it.

It took him two days, to realize that he lost Feng Xin.

To know that now, no matter what he does, when those arms hold him—he'll always have to reach up, terrified that he might find a mask.

The cruelty of it had to sit inside of him and fester before Xie Lian saw the damage.

Feng Xin watches, clearly waiting for some sort of explanation, for Xie Lian to tell him what's wrong. Where he was. Why Xie Lian won't let his guard touch him now, but...

The prince reaches for the pouch at his waist, holding it out.

"Take this," he murmurs, eyes half lidded.

His friend immediately moves to obey, examining it carefully—surprised when he feels the heavy weight of gold in his palm.

"...Your highness..." He frowns, glancing up, eyebrows knitting with confusion. "Use it to get medicine for my father," Xie Lian mutters, staring past him.

Feng Xin looks back down at the pouch, then back up at him, fingers tightening until his hand begins to tremble—and he asks slowly, cautiously—

"...How did you get this?"

Xie Lian pauses. Feng Xin sounds so concerned. Borderline horrified. He—

Oh.

That's what he thinks.

The prince's expression is unchanging, but the words that come out of his mouth startle Feng Xin.

Not just the crudeness of them, but the frigidity of his tone. It's like—

"Are you asking me if I got on my knees for it?"

It's like listening to a stranger speak. Not his friend. Not Xie Lian.

Feng Xin stares, his jaw hanging open—and Xie Lian smiles.

Not happily. It's sideways, sharp. Filled with emotions that seem so alien on his face.

"I didn't," he laughs, but—

To Feng Xin, it looks like the prince might want to cry.

"I stole it."

"You...you what?!" The guard chokes, not knowing which is worse. "How—how could you resort to such a thing?!"

"He didn't need the money anymore," Xie Lian mutters, rolling his eyes, "and he didn't deserve it, either."

It's a muttered aside, half under the prince's breath. Feng Xin's eyes narrow.

"Who are you to say that?!"

Of course—Feng Xin means it in the sense that it's impossible to know a man's personal situation. That stealing with a justification like that isn't a justified act at all.

'Who are you, to say that?' Xie Lian flinches.

Who is he, to say what a man deserves. Who is Xie Lian, who once sat in judgement over all, to judge a man that would have taken him by force, if given the chance. Who saw his mind and body as factors to be weighed within the scope of a business transaction.

Who is Xie Lian, to judge anyone?

"...He was dead," the prince explains coldly. "My father is alive. Are you going to buy the medicine, or not?”

Feng Xin sputters, more riled now than he’s ever been without Mu Qing in the room. “You stole from a *dead man?!”*

‘He stole from me first.’

That’s what Xie Lian wants to say, even if he knows that it isn’t true—it feels like being honest. Even if he doesn’t have a word for what that man took from him.

Xie Lian feels like he’s been robbed of everything inside him, stripped bare.

Feng Xin takes two steps away from him, looking down at the pouch—then shaking his head. “This—this isn’t you,” he mutters, tossing the money onto the table—like he’s so disgusted by it, just holding it is too much for the guard to bear. “Something happened, you’re not yourself!”

Xie Lian lets out a low laugh, louder than the one he let out before, shaking his head. “Yeah, Feng Xin!” He lifts his hands, gesturing around them. To the house they’re staying in. Crumbling, forgotten.

“Something—” the prince snorts, pointing at his eyes, “Something happened!”

The guard pauses, then locks his jaw with a familiar sense of stubbornness. “You never used that as an excuse to act like this before!”

“An excuse?” Xie Lian repeats faintly. “I don’t need an excuse,”

The words on his lips aren’t his own, but they feel like it, now:

“The world is like this!” He exclaims, and when Feng Xin protests, says that people aren’t like that, Xie Lian looks away, his lips twisting into something dark. Angry.

“You’d be surprised,” the prince mutters, fingers trembling in his sleeves, “by the things that men will do.”

“The world hasn’t changed,” Feng Xin shakes his head, “and you were—” “I was *naive* .”

“You were supposed to be better than the rest of it!” His friend cries, voice trembling with—

With disappointment.

Xie Lian's voice is shaking too.

"Well, I'm *not* , Feng Xin."

After a moment, he repeats it again—voice soft, ringing with finality.

"I'm not."

"..." The silence grows, and Feng Xin fears what will happen, if it reaches it's breaking point, "Your highness—"

"I'm selfish," Xie Lian mutters, head hanging low. "And cowardly."

With each word he says, his voice build in volume and momentum, like he's finally confessing this ugly crime that he's been carrying around all this time:

The crime of being human.

He was born human. When he ascended, he was human. When he fell—he was so horribly human.

"I was petty, and arrogant—and so self righteous!" He cries, remembering how many soldiers lined up, shouting with all that they had that dying for him was their greatest honor.

What a joke. What a *lie* .

Even the cheapest blade will look like a treasure if placed behind glass. Then, the minute it's taken out, the minute it's given use—it breaks.

Some things are better left ornamental.

"At least now, I don't look like a fool!" He turns around, wrapping his arms around himself—thinking of how laughable he must have seemed, to those who knew better.

"At least—at least I'm not crazy!"

There are so many different ways to be blind. Xie Lian took his punishment with grace, at first—like he thought suffering beautifully might bring redemption.

Then, he learned to fear the dark. To resent the cruelty that came with

it.

Eventually, he saw what he had always been blind to. Things that you can never see, looking down from heaven's view.

It only becomes clear when you're far down below, glaring up through the cracks in the floorboards.

Then, you see the world as it really is.

The world is—

“If you were so crazy,” Feng Xin cuts through his thoughts, voice torn between anger, hurt—and so much disappointment, it makes Xie Lian's skin crawl from the nausea, “What was I, for following you all this time?!”

There is no lifetime, in which those words wouldn't hurt. *‘What were you praying for?’*

He never laid eyes on the boy, after he was sent from Mount Taicang. But the scene is so clear in his mind, sound creating cathedrals of memory in his sightless gaze.

‘An answer.’

He can almost imagine the way Hong-ear must have smiled, back then. *‘What was it?’*

‘You.’

What was Feng Xin, for following him?

What was Hong-er, for dying for him?

What was the ghost fire, for following him so far, just to be dispersed?

Xie Lian used to think that grief was a learning process. Something you could adapt to. Outsmart, even.

Grief is a bone that always heals warped. One that you have to re-break, over and over again, as the rest of your body desperately tries to outgrow it.

He's cracking open again, unable to resolve his loyalty, his desire to honor Hong-er's memory with the shame he feels now.

Following him—it—

It can only be a mistake.

It only leads to shame, death, and ruin.

Feng Xin doesn't see the way he clutches at the stone hanging around his neck. If it was a normal rock, it would have crumbled under his touch, but it remains firm.

Warm.

"...Stop, then."

Feng Xin is frozen, not understanding what he means.

Xie Lian's fingers ache on the sharp edges of the stone, but somehow—they never bleed.

'I should have made him leave me.'

Xie Lian couldn't, back then. He was too selfish.

Because he loved the boy too much.

Xie Lian won't bury Feng Xin. Won't stand before his pyre, and spend a lifetime trying to justify his own mortality in the face of his failures.

"Stop following me, Feng Xin."

There's shocked silence. Filled with hurt, denial, and...reluctance.

It's hard to leave a blind man.

"Did I ever say that I wanted to stop following you?" He protests. This argument has been the two of them chasing one another up a staircase, only to throw the door open at the top, and realize that there's only open air waiting for them.

Feng Xin doesn't want to jump.

'Have I ever told gege that I wanted to leave?'

Xie Lian's lips curl. He'll push him, then. "I just did."

It hurts.

"I want you to go, Feng Xin." He murmurs, packing every ounce of sincerity he has into his words. When he turns his head, he smiles over his shoulder.

It’s the last sight Feng Xin will have of the prince for countless years to follow. Smiling, eyes filled with unfathomable sadness, encouraging him. “I mean it.”

Xie Lian didn’t think anything could hurt anymore—but this does.

“...You don’t mean that,” Feng Xin starts, but...

That face, that—the face that Feng Xin has always admired. Often in ways that he should have been ashamed of. Taken as his family. His future, his purpose—

It contorts into something he doesn’t recognize.

Something filled with hurt, anger, and...Resentment.

“You can’t help me.”

His tone isn’t gentle anymore. It’s bubbling with emotion, like a cat with it’s claws extended, swiping at anything that gets too close. “You can’t help me, you can only JUDGE me, so just GO!”

He’s screaming by the end—which is easy to do, when he can’t see the pain he’s causing

Feng Xin calls silent, hands balled into fists at his sides, head hanging low. Xie Lian glances around, breathing hard, unsure if he needs to say something worse, what he has to do, to make him go, but—

“...I’m sorry,”

Xie Lian freezes, realizing—

Feng Xin is crying.

His heart squeezes in his chest, and—he can’t move, he can’t breathe.

The last time he heard his friend’s voice like that, it wasn’t him. It was someone wearing him like a mask.

But Feng Xin isn’t laughing now, and this isn’t an illusion. This isn’t a trick.

Xie Lian did this.

“I’m sorry,” he repeats, slightly more composed—but his voice is still thick with tears, even as he fights to maintain his dignity, “that I couldn’t be more useful to you, your highness.”

Xie Lian is silent, listening to the sounds of Feng Xin exiting his life.

Gathering what little belongings he still has. Taking the money—the money that Xie Lian stole—to buy medicine for his father. Leaving it on the table.

Xie Lian sits on the floor, knees against his chest, silent.

He doesn’t see the way Feng Xin stops behind him—hesitating.

It’s been so many years since they met. They’re so far now, from where they started.

Two boys, so small, beaming at each other—shaking hands, and making the solemn promise.

One, to lead—the other, to follow.

Xie Lian doesn’t know that, even now, Feng Xin still bows to him.

One hand reaches out—gentle.

Never with anyone else, but always with him.

Just as it brushes the back of Xie Lian’s head…

He flinches.

Feng Xin’s fingers curl back in, and he draws his hand away.

“Take care of yourself, Xie Lian.”

He hears footsteps, then the door slam. When it does, he allows himself to sob.

To slump forward, palms against the floor, and weep.

Not as much as he used to. Not from as deep inside. Xie Lian can’t find those places in his heart anymore. They’ve become hollowed out, unrecognizable.

This is quiet.

This is brief.

And still, with the pain of separation, comes relief.

He's glad.

Even if it hurts, he's glad that Feng Xin is gone. It means he's safe.

One less thing to worry about.

Slowly, he rises to his feet. Feels around for the table, finding the shape of the medicine with his palm.

It has to be brewed in a tea—something Xie Lian would have struggled with before, but now, even as he has to feel around for the flint to start the fire, he doesn't struggle.

It's difficult, feeling his way down the hall with one hand, holding the cup steady with the other.

And when he opens the door to his parent's bedroom, only one voice answers him. "Where is Feng Xin?"

Xie Lian pauses, fighting back a frown. "...Gone. Is mother not here?"

"She went to the river," the king replies flatly, his voice slightly sour.

Xie Lian's eye twitches.

That's to say that she's doing the wash, again—by herself. An act that often leads to her coming home with her hands split and bleeding, no matter how many times Xie Lian tells her that he doesn't mind doing it himself.

And his father is too proud to even call it what it is.

He'll just say that she's gone to the river, like she might be taking a stroll, or enjoying the afternoon.

"...Here," Xie Lian mutters, one hand bracing against the wall as he walks closer, holding out the cup. "Take it."

There's stubborn silence.

"...What is it?"

His son bites back a sarcastic response, pushing it forward more insistently, “Medicine—for your chest.”

“Where did you get it?”

There’s a note of suspicion in his tone—and Xie Lian’s chest tightens with frustration. “Feng Xin picked it up in the market today.”

“And where did he get the money for it?” His tone isn’t cautious, like Feng Xin’s was before.

There’s no attempt to spare his feelings. Xie Lian’s fingers tighten around the cup. “From me.” He answers, his tone clipped. There’s a pause, then—

“I don’t want it.”

Xie Lian’s eyes squeeze shut. “Stop being stubborn,” he mutters, shoving the cup forward—

And a hand swipes out, batting at him until the tea goes crashing to the floor, clay shattering, it’s contents forming a small puddle.

“I said I don’t want it, dammit!”

Xie Lian hangs his head—not out of shame, but out of an effort to hide the building cloud of anger across his expression. “That was an entire dose,” he mutters. “There’s only enough for two weeks—”

“I didn’t ask you to get any medicine for me,” his father’s voice—it’s so... It could be self loathing, but it just sounds...irritated. Resentful, even.

And that—

“Whatever you did to get that money for Feng Xin—it was a waste.”

There’s condescension, there.

Xie Lian won’t take that.

Not from him.

“...Don’t take this out on me,” he mutters.

His father won’t stop grumbling, to the point where Xie Lian is fairly sure that the old man doesn’t hear what he said.

“Stubborn child, never listening—always getting these ideas and going off on your own without asking—!”

BAM !

Xie Lian’s fist slams against the wall.

“When in your life have you EVER listened to anyone?!” He snaps, his fist coming back covered in plaster and dust.

“What are you—?”

“I’m not the reason that you’re here.” Xie Lian’s voice is dark with frustration.

His relationship with his father has always been…complicated. They were both so arrogant, back then. Both so stubborn.

Xie Lian knows that he was wrong, now. Self righteous. Self important.

His father clings to a facade of dignity, as though the fall of Xianle was his own personal martyrdom. Something that happened to him, personally.

Not something he participated in, or, in his own way, caused.

“…Well,” his father retorts, sounding just as hurt, frustrated, and defensive as Xie Lian feels—

“You certainly didn’t help, did you?”

The prince doesn’t flinch the way he would have before. Doesn’t bow his head.

“I tried,” he mutters, hands balled into fists by his sides. “I didn’t cry about *‘acts of god’* and expect my people to accept going hungry!”

It’s a resentment he’s carried in his heart for so long, from the very beginning. Xie Lian tried.

He went to his father, and he *tried* .

Maybe the people hate him for failing—he’s accepted that.

But they hated his father even more in the beginning, for doing nothing.

“You’ve seen it for yourself now, you stubborn child—” his father huffs, incredulous, “—even a god himself couldn’t have stopped such an outcome!”

“That isn’t an excuse for not trying!” He shakes his head, “That isn’t an excuse for feeling sorry for yourself, for how MISERABLE your life is, when there are still people trying to help you!”

“How, even after all of this, are you STILL such a spoiled child?!” Xie Lian barks out a surprised laugh.

He always felt like he had to hold back in his arguments with his father. To try and be an obedient, respectful son—fulfilling some sort of expectation.

But his father...

He heard every word that Mu Qing said that day. About selling his body. About—

About *‘the guy’* Xie Lian was in love with.

His own contempt claws its way out, bursting from his lips eagerly, after how many times he’s bitten the words back.

“And you’re still a stubborn, selfish old man!”

The King’s eyes widen.

“If you REALLY think I went through all of that, just to get this medicine for you—”

(And he almost did, even when he was so afraid. When he didn’t want to. Enduring more humiliation than the king could possibly imagine.)

“—you would waste it like that?! For what?! *Pride?!”*

Xie Lian throws his hands out, all around them—at this shack that they’re living in, at the world around him, and he—

“LOOK WHERE THAT PRIDE HAS GOTTEN YOU!”

He’s never shouted at his father, never like this—and now that they’ve started shouting, they don’t stop.

“AND YOU COULD JUSTIFY BRINGING FENG XIN INTO THAT?! WHAT OF HIS PRIDE?!”

Xie Lian does flinch, now—but he doesn't back down.

His anger didn't start with his father, but now it's been sparked—and the seeds placed in his chest that night have begun to sprout, bearing fruit.

"Don't act like you EVER cared about Feng Xin before you NEEDED him!" Xie Lian snarls, "Do you even REMEMBER how you treated him before?! What you made him do?!"

"That's—"

"I would rather be a spoiled, stubborn child all my life than EVER be like YOU!" His fists tremble.

"Where's QI RONG?!" He rages, feeling like there's a fire trying to rip out of his chest. Like, if he screamed loud enough, he could breathe fire.

"I—what? This has nothing to do with—!"

"How many EXCUSES did you make for that monster?!"

Xie Lian slams his fist into the wall again, hard enough for the entire wall to crack, and the ceiling to rattle. "He threw a little boy in a SACK and dragged him behind his carriage like an ANIMAL!"

"He was still—"

"You wouldn't even treat an animal like that!"

Xie Lian cries, trembling from rage, hurt, and regret.

'It takes a village to raise a child.'

Qi Rong wasn't the picture of stupidity and madness his parents always pretended that he was. He was always pushing boundaries. Testing.

He knew what he could get away with.

"And what did you do to him?!"

Not enough, they both know that. Not nearly enough.

"But you made Feng Xin break his OWN arm for it, didn't you?!"

“He was still family, Xie Lian,” he can’t see his father’s face. But there’s a strain now, in his voice. Something like remorse.

“He carried the name of the royal family of Xianle. We had to—”

“Where was he, then, when it got hard?!” Xie Lian sneers, feeling more scorn than he ever knew himself to be capable of. “Where is our ‘family’ now, when you need them?!”

Xie Lian knows where he was, after all.

“And then, when you had nothing, who was it who stayed to look after you?! After your wife?! How can you LOOK at him, much less SPEAK of him without dying of shame?!” Xie Lian steps forward, shards of clay crunching under his boots.

“You think I never apologized to Feng Xin?”

His father mutters—and while there is shame in his voice, he’s still defensive. Still living in a world where, somehow, nothing is ever his fault.

It’s always Xie Lian’s fault. For not listening. For being too stubborn. For being too childish. Never his.

Xie Lian won’t take it.

“We had the chance to talk about quite a bit while you were gone,” the King continues. “Things you wouldn’t know about.”

“...” Xie Lian’s nails bite into his newly healed palms—hard enough that the skin opens again. “I learned things while I was gone, too.” He whispers.

His father doesn’t speak, watching him with some mixture of worried frustration— wanting to ask—to ask—

To ask his son what happened, to make him return home like this. “That boy,” Xie Lian continues, his voice low, “the one in the sack—”

“Xie Lian, it’s been so long,”

His father sounds tired. “You need to let it go.”

“...”

Xie Lian’s lips tremble as he reaches up, clutching the stone around his neck.

How…could he ever possibly let go?

“His name was Hong-er,” Xie Lian whispers. “Did you know that?”

The King remains silent.

His son isn’t wearing the bandages over his eyes, now—the cursed shackle glaring back at him. And if his pride would allow it, he—

The King would admit that whenever he looked upon the thing, he only ever saw his own shortcomings. His own failures.

Never Xie Lian’s.

“A child in your care almost murdered a little boy,” the prince whispers, his voice trembling with emotion, “and you never bothered to learn his name.”

“…That’s part of being a king,” His father mutters. “If I memorized the name of every orphan that passed through my door—”

“He found me,” Xie Lian interrupts him, his voice small now. There’s anger in there somewhere, but it’s mournful. Trapped beneath so many layers of loss. “When I was alone. He took care of me.”

More, in many ways, than Xie Lian’s own family ever had.

A boy with nothing.

More attentive than a palace full of servants. More loving, in so many ways, than the home that had raised him.

“Do you know what happened to him?”

There’s silence, and Xie Lian half expected silence, but—

“Let it go, son.”

That answer is worse, somehow.

“…Qi Rong.”

Xie Lian’s voice trembles. “He found him in the middle of the night. He—he cut him so many times,” His father stares with slow, building horror—from Xie Lian's words, but—

From how haunted his eyes are, shining with tears, agonized from the memories lurking behind them.

"I-I couldn't tell you how many it was," Xie Lian explains, "I got too…I couldn't count them all—but he tortured him."

"That couldn't be—"

"How could you tell me that it couldn't be true?" His son whispers.

The king falls silent.

"He hung the body after."

"Xie Lian—"

"My—Hong-er was already dead," he chokes, the tears finally falling, and his voice—it breaks. "That part was—it was for *me* ."

Because Xie Lian knows Qi Rong. Knows how his mind works.

How funny he must have found it, the idea of Xie Lian desperately looking for the boy…

Only to walk past him, over and over again. Walk under him.

Xie Lian hates him. Hates him so much, that it's almost more than he hates Bai Wuxiang. Maybe it is more. He can't tell. Not anymore.

All he knows is that his heart holds more hatred than he thought he was capable of.

"If you want to say this was an act of god, fine" he hangs his head, "if you want to blame me for the war, the plague—I don't care anymore."

"Xie Lian—"

"But m—" his lips press together, so tightly that they tingle and pulse form the lack of circulation, "Hong-er—that was you."

'It takes a village to raise a child.'

"If you had / *just* / done the right thing," Xie Lian chokes, his chest twisting and coiling like a snake, squeezing the life out of him, "he would still be here."

'It also takes a village to fail one.'

The prince turns his back on his father

"...I'll bring another dose in the morning," he mutters, his voice flat, too emotionally exhausted to fight him anymore. "If you're too disgusted to take it for me, at least do it for mother. She doesn't deserve to watch you suffer like this."

He didn't know, then.

Most of the time, you don't know that you're saying goodbye. It sneaks up on you, snatches things from under your nose. Doesn't let you know that you're losing them.

It teaches you to hold onto things. But Xie Lian—he's a slow learner.

His mother returns after sundown. "Son?"

He doesn't look up from his seat by the fire, can barely withstand the relief he hears in her voice.

"Oh, thank the heavens—you're home! We were so worried, I—" She stops, setting the wash on the floor.

"...Where's Feng Xin?"

Xie Lian holds himself tighter.

"He left."

He can see the confusion on her face in his mind's eye. Can hear the way that she pauses, wiping her hands off on a cloth before making her way to his side.

"That doesn't sound like him. When will he be back?" He holds himself a little tighter.

'Take care of yourself, Xie Lian.'

It still feels like he can hardly breathe, like there's this awful weight on his chest as he whispers—

"He isn't coming back, mom."

Her shock is silent, but palpable. He can hear disbelief in her voice, when she asks—

“Did you two have some sort of fight?”

He doesn’t answer.

After a pause, she takes a deep breath, “Surely, he’ll come to his senses—”

“He’s still a young man,” Xie Lian mutters, not sounding very young at all. “How could we ask him to waste the rest of his life like this?”

His mother stares at him, her expression unreadable.

“...Sweetheart,” she whispers, fingers reaching out to stroke over his cheek.

He doesn’t flinch away. Not from her.

His mother’s touch—it could never frighten him.

“You aren’t yourself.”

Xie Lian doesn’t know who she’s remembering. Whether he’s like that person, or not.

Her thumb strokes down his cheek, tracing the drying tear tracks there—like she already knows. “Have you been fighting with your father?”

Xie Lian gently tugs his face from her grip, looking away. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I know he can be difficult, but...” The Queen sighs. “He doesn’t know another way to be.”

Xie Lian knows.

Even if he slams himself into that brick wall over and over again, expecting something to change—deep down, he knows.

“...It doesn’t matter,” he mumbles, his voice dull.

“Was it about what Mu Qing said?” The Queen presses.

Xie Lian braces himself, willing to explain—to her, at least—that no such thing ever happened—

“About the man?” His shoulders stiffen.

The king never said a word about it, in spite of what Xie Lian might have expected. And hearing her bring it up, now...

Parents are complicated. Placed so high above you, made into these infallible figures that dictate the bounds of a child’s world. But then, children get older.

They see more of the world. Sometimes, they have children of their own—and they learn.

No one is infallible.

For the first time in Xie Lian’s life, his mother disappoints him.

She does it by trying to comfort him.

“...We never have to talk about that,” The Queen murmurs, reaching out to squeeze his shoulders. The affection is still there. She loves him. Xie Lian knows that. But...

“It’s your business,” she pushes the hair from his face, tucking it behind his ears. “No one else needs to concern themselves with it.”

Xie Lian knows he should be grateful that she isn’t disgusted. That she isn’t casting him aside and calling him a filthy abomination.

It’s more than he hoped for, when he was a child. More than he assumed when he knew that she heard Mu Qing’s words.

On some level, he could even say that the absence of rejection counts as acceptance, but...God, Xie Lian wishes she would ask him about the man he was in love with.

He knew, standing in front of that pyre, that he was the only one who would mourn Hong-er.

But Xie Lian never knew how lonely it would be, having no one to share those memories with.

He wants to tell her how cocky the boy was. How easily things came to him. The way he laughed.

Xie Lian wants to explain how fast his heart was being that night, when he touched Hong-er’s face. That it felt like he might die, if he had to let him go in that moment.

He wants to ask her if that's normal. If that's what being in love feels like.

Xie Lian wants to ask her if you can fall out of love, once you've been in it. If it only happens once.

If it ever stops hurting, when you lose it.

Those questions, those feelings—they've been suffocating him for so long now, and he just—

Xie Lian just wants to talk to her.

But his mother didn't say he could talk—she offered the opposite.

She offered Xie Lian privacy. Allowed him to hide a potentially distasteful part of himself away. To love him in spite of it.

It's more than Xie Lian ever hoped for, but it isn't acceptance.

And it hurts.

Her fingers never stop stroking his cheeks—and eventually, Xie Lian swallows down that welling feeling of disappointment, of isolation, and tells himself not to be ungrateful.

People can do so much worse than this. Xie Lian knows.

And this hurt—it isn't inflicted maliciously.

"...That isn't the only thing that's been going on," his mother murmurs, stroking the crease between his brows between her fingertips. "I know it isn't."

Xie Lian swallows thickly, biting his lip. "...No," he admits. "It's not."

He leans his cheek into her hand, and he...

For a moment, Xie Lian wonders if he could tell her what happened. He knows—he knows she couldn't stand to hear what he went through, not...not really.

But he can't stand holding that memory on his own, either.

"...Something's...been going on," he whispers, his voice hoarse.

It feels like fumbling for a hand to catch him when he's falling. For one last attempt at rescue from…

Her hands press against his face a little more firmly, and when she speaks again—her voice is loving, but frank.

“I know what’s happening,” the Queen watches him sadly. “I’ve known the whole time.”

Xie Lian frowns, because he doesn’t see how she possibly could.

Her hands slip down from his face, finding his hands—giving them a tight squeeze.

“When you were a boy…” her hands aren’t soft anymore—they’re dry and cracked, bleeding in places.

“…Do you remember how much you loved building golden palaces?” Xie Lian almost smiles at the memory, even now.

Spending afternoons in his mother’s parlor while she met with guests, carefully stacking pieces of golden foil, but they were never big enough. Never grand enough.

At first, she had to force him to play—anything to keep him sitting still for more than a few minutes. Xie Lian was an over-active child, prone to playing make believe, climbing trees.

He scraped his knees so often, chasing butterflies—the Queen was beside herself.

Eventually, he came to love it, thrilling in the challenge—but it vexed him, too.

“…and you always cried so much, when they fell down.” The Queen’s thumbs brush over his knuckles. “You used to throw a tantrum over the breeze, it was so funny—”

“What’s the point of this?”

Xie Lian hangs his head, and he sounds—

He sounds so tired.

“…” His mother tilts her face forward, until her chin is resting on top of his head, wrapping her arms around him.

“Golden palaces are always going to fall down, my sweet boy,” she whispers, stroking his hair.

Xie Lian's throat aches, and his eyes sting. "No matter how hard you try."

All he can think of now, is how many nights he spent on Mount Taicang, holding up that pavilion. How much time and energy he wasted.

It fell, anyway.

"That's the natural consequence of building them."

"...I tried," he whispers, shoulders trembling. Saying it out loud—it almost makes the regret easier to bear. "Mother, I—"

Xie Lian swallows thickly, his voice small.

And, for the last time, the Crown Prince of Xianle allows himself to feel like a child. "...I tried *so* hard," he whimpers, trembling in her arms.

The Queen hums in his ear, one hand rubbing his back—the other, wiping the slow paths of tears trailing down her son's cheeks.

"I know, Xie Lian," she whispers.

The Queen used to say that she was proud.

"I know."

Xie Lian wants to tell her the rest. About all the other aches inside him, the ones that make everything else seem so far off, so distant.

But he doesn't.

So many of them are tangled up in Hong-er. In Bai Wuxiang. In his own failures, and she...

His mother doesn't want to know. Eventually, she speaks again—

"Are you hungry?" There's an odd quality to her voice—like she's trying to sound happier than she is, and Xie Lian can't understand the point in that.

Neither of them are happy. What's the point in pretending? "I could make you something—"

"No."

Xie Lian shakes his head, leaning away, "I'm…I'm tired." He mutters. "I just…need to sleep."

He hasn't slept since it happened. His body still needs time to…

Xie Lian doesn't feel like he can say the word recover. He doesn't think this is something you recover from, really.

The Queen's lips press against his forehead. "Sleep, then." He didn't think it was odd, then.

Xie Lian's entire life, his mother always sent him to bed with some mention of tomorrow. Telling him that she would see him in the morning. That everything would feel better by then.

She didn't say anything about tomorrow, that night.

Just kissed his forehead, whispered that she loved him—and to sleep well.

Xie Lian nodded—and he was too tired to say it back, dragging himself back to his bedroom, dropping down on the bamboo mat with a heavy thud.

It takes a long time for sleep to come to him.

He wakes up twice in the night, once, from a faint thud—but when he listens, he doesn't hear anything but soft creaking, probably from the dry rot of the wood in the nighttime breeze.

The second time, it's from a nightmare.

Being back there, in that place. Unable to move, unable to scream. Waiting for the next blade to reach him through the dark, cutting into him.

The piercing cry of the Ghost Fire, in what—

In what Xie Lian now knows, must have been it's final moments.

Dying—for him.

He trembles on the floor, curling in on himself, clutching the stone around his neck.

‘It’s not real, dianxia.’

Xie Lian lifts the stone to his lips, eyes squeezed so tightly shut, it almost begins to sting.

‘It’s just a bad dream.’

Hong-er used to say that, to comfort him.

Sometimes, that’s all it is. A bad dream. And then, you wake up in the arms of the boy that loves you.

Then, the world feels small. Manageable. Safe. But sometimes, you wake up alone. Sometimes, you don’t wake up at all.

Because it wasn’t a bad dream at all.

It was real.

The Joke's on You

Chapter Summary

> He takes a deep breath, pushing the door open. "Father?"
>
> There's no answer. It's almost quiet.
>
> Xie Lian knew there probably wasn't anyone else in the house already—there's no breathing, no heartbeat other than his own.
>
> Just creaking, this faint, wooden sound.

Chapter Notes

> TW// THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS SUICIDE AND SUICIDE ATTEMPTS / MENTIONS DEPICTED IN SOME LEVEL OF DETAIL. DISCRETION IS ADVISED.
>
> You can find me (and the rest of this story) on my twitter at @cataclysmicevie

It's quiet in the house, when Xie Lian opens his eyes.

He can't see the daylight, not really. But he can sense the warmth of it against his skin. Can feel his eyes sting from it when he stares directly towards the light for too long, even if the shackle doesn't allow him to see.

The house is quiet.

So, so quiet.

"..." Xie Lian sits up, rubbing at the back of his neck.

He must have slept for quite a long time—his shoulders are stiff. He has a slight headache. It's hard to wake on his own, when the light won't do it.

His mother usually helps him.

She must have wanted him to sleep in, after all of that, but...the prince frowns, shuffling to his feet.

"Mother?" He calls out, making his way through the bedroom door.

There's no answer.

Did she give his father his morning dose already? He needs to start as soon as possible.

Xie Lian didn't get the chance to mention it to her, the night before—he should have. He was just...

Distracted. There was a lot he didn't say—and he should have. He just... Talking is so much harder for Xie Lian now, than it used to be.

It won't get easier.

At first, he thinks she's gone to the river already, even if she already did the wash yesterday, it's the only place Xie Lian could think of, that she would be.

But when he listens, he realizes—

There isn't another heartbeat anywhere in the house. No breathing.

...Where's his father?

He hasn't been well enough to leave his bedroom in weeks, now. And even when he does—he can't go far.

Xie Lian drifts towards the back of the house, one hand on the door to his parents bedroom, opening his mouth, then closing it anxiously.

He meant what he said last night.

That doesn't mean that Xie Lian is proud of every word. Maybe he shouldn't be ashamed of what he said about Hong-er, or Qi Rong, but—

He shouldn't have called him a selfish old man.

Xie Lian knows that, and he's squirming with remorse.

His father is too proud to apologize for things. There was a time where Xie Lian was, too. Now...now, compared to everything else, 'I'm sorry,' seems like such an easy thing to say.

He takes a deep breath, pushing the door open. "Father?"

There's no answer.

It’s almost quiet.

Xie Lian knew there probably wasn’t anyone else in the house already—there’s no breathing, no heartbeat other than his own.

Just creaking, this faint, wooden sound.

The storm from the other night was pretty bad—it probably made the wood in walls a little less sturdy.

He’ll have to try and see how much money was left, after the medicine. Maybe it could be enough for some repairs. Xie Lian can help—but in this state, he can’t do the work single handedly.

The prospect is exhausting, but...he has to make an effort, now, with Feng Xin gone. Even if he doesn’t want to. Even when he just wants...

If he doesn’t take care of his parents, no one else will.

He walks back through the house, jumping when he feels something brush against his hand—a piece of fabric, soft cotton.

The prince stops a couple of steps away.

He brings his hand up, rubbing it against his cheek with a frown.

“...How late did she let me sleep?” He mutters, shaking his head.

Late enough for her to go to the river, finish the wash, and hang it up to dry, apparently. It’s a miracle that Xie Lian didn’t knock it all down.

Part of him wants to be irritated, because he’s mentioned that hanging things in the middle of the room can be a problem for him before—that it tends to trip him up, but —

Xie Lian’s starting to get too worried for that, and the situation is starting to feel all too familiar.

He walks out the front door, following the path down to the river.

“Mother!” He calls out, cupping his hands around his mouth, “Father!”

Maybe she gave him his morning dose, and he started to feel a little better? They used to love going on walks together, back in the palace.

But he tries the path to the stream. He takes every single trail his mother walks when she’s hunting for berries or mushrooms for dinner.

There’s nothing. No one answers.

And Xie Lian realizes, with this slow, sinking feeling—

He’s done this before.

A year ago, now. Did—?

The Prince stops walking, his heart slowly accelerating in his chest, fingertips twitching where they dangle by his side.

Did Bai Wuxiang do...did he do something to them, too? Is it—? Is it happening again?

His breaths quicken, and it feels—

It feels like the ground won’t stay still beneath his feet. Like it’s slowly starting to give out from underneath him. Is—is it an earthquake? Or some sort of spell? Or—

Oh.

Oh, that’s just him shaking.

He grits his teeth, turning back towards the house. Xie Lian—he—

He won’t waste the whole day looking by himself, not this time. He’s a slow learner, yes—but he knows that much. He’ll need to find the rest of the money to get any assistance. After all, the villagers here—they don’t know his family as well as the ones back in...

Don’t think about that, now.

Xie Lian tries to remind himself of that as he rushes back towards the house, hurrying to the kitchen table—and when he finds the pouch, he sighs with relief when he feels that there’s still some coins left. Not a lot—but enough.

Enough to get help.

He turns back towards the door, irritated when he feels that cloth brush against his hand again, because she’s done this so many times, Xie Lian doesn’t know how he hasn’t managed to knock over every single—

The prince freezes, when something bumps against his cheek. Not a cloth. Not laundry.

It—

Xie Lian stumbles backwards at first, his chest heaving as he glances around, raising his voice, “Is someone there?!”

No one answers, and when Xie Lian closes his eyes—he hears the same as he did before.

Absolutely nothing.

“Mom?” He calls out. “...Dad?”

Not mother. Not father. Those are the terms he started using, when he got older. When he left the palace to start studying on Mount Taicang.

It saddened his mother, who used to pinch his cheek, murmuring—

‘You always grow up too fast, my son.’

Someone’s here.

Her smile was so sad, back then—and she would squeeze him close, even as the little prince groaned in annoyance, pleading—

‘Don’t get so busy that you forget your poor old mother, alright?’

Someone is here.

Xie Lian can’t explain it. He doesn’t hear any sign of life, but—

Whatever bumped into his cheek just now, was human.

“...” Slowly, with trembling fingers, he reaches out, taking slow, cautious steps forward.

There’s only one heartbeat in the house.

No sound.

Just this slow, continuous creaking.

Something bumps against his fingers.

“...” Slowly, he turns his palm into it, curling his fingers around, and —

He takes someone’s hand. Cold, stiff.

But, even now—Xie Lian would know this touch anywhere. The one feeling he thought he could never flinch away from. That could never frighten him.

His mother's hand.

The moan that rips from his lips isn't human. It isn't even that of an animal, it's just—

Now, he realizes the creaking isn't coming from the walls.

It's above him, around him— but too close for that.

His other hand reaches up, trembling and—

He's holding his father's hand.

He drops to his knees heavily, palms trembling, trying to tell himself that it isn't real. That this is another trick. That he's going to wake up screaming, and he'll still be in that shrine.

Xie Lian won't be alone. He'll—

He'll still have a family, if he can just wake up. Oh.

He turns his head towards the door, numb.

Someone must have come from town, when they heard him calling. He didn't expect that. Stumbling upon the scene must have been horrific to see.

Xie Lian wouldn't know, but— There's screaming.

Blood curdling, unending screaming.

It's almost irritating, the longer it goes on. Xie Lian starts to tell them to stop, that it's hurting his ears, but—

Oh.

That's—that's just him.

He's screaming.

He couldn't say for how long.

Maybe long enough for his throat to become completely raw. For his head to pound.

He thought he didn't have the capacity to feel this anymore. He thought the pain had already filled him up, to the point where nothing else could hurt.

When Feng Xin left—Xie Lian thought that he had nothing else to lose. Took comfort in that, even.

But it never occurred to him.

In all of the years that he feared losing his friends, Hong-er, even a little Ghost Fire— Xie Lian never once worried about his parents, no.

He worried for their safety, as anyone would, but...

It never occurred to Xie Lian, not until this moment, that his parents might leave him

When he was begging Hong-er to leave, pushing Feng Xin away—smiling, telling Mu Qing that he was glad that he had gone.

Xie Lian had thought that he was alright with being alone. That it would be better that way.

But, on some level, he thought his parents would be there.

His fingers scrape against the floorboards, clawing deep gauges into the wood.

'He hung the body, after.'

Xie Lian lifts his head, trying to understand why.

All the ways they could have left—why like that? But—

He thinks he might know.

It's the knowing, that makes it worse.

Who told him, in the end, what happened to Hong-er?

A shoe bumps against the top of his head. Xie Lian ducks away, numbly murmuring an—

An apology.

His eyes widen—and then, they become dull.

This—this is an apology. A taking of responsibility. Xie Lian thought it was over, now.

No more traps. No more tricks. That the calamity had gotten what it wanted. That there was nothing left for it to take away.

When he made Feng Xin leave, the prince thought he was finally free from all of that. He was wrong.

'If you want to blame me for the war, the plague—fine, I don't care anymore.'

Xie Lian knew, when Bai Wuxiang told him those words, that it was done maliciously. He thought the intention was to make him angry. To make him hate.

To make him hate the world. Qi Rong.

But...

'But Hong-er—that was you.'

Bai Wuxiang didn't do this.

Qi Rong—he didn't do this either.

Xie Lian did this.

And maybe—

He rises to his feet—slowly, his knees wobbling beneath him.

Maybe that was the point, all along.

It takes a moment to bring them down.

He has to fumble around, dragging over a chair, tipped over on the floor.

(Probably the one they used.)

When he fumbles with the knot around his mother's neck, there's a faint realization, thoughts made num from the pain.

Oh.

That's where his silk band went.

Xie Lian lays them down, side by side.

For a moment, he wishes he could lay down between them and stop breathing too. Like he did when he was small, after he had a nightmare. Crawling into their bed, crying to his mother about how afraid he was.

Xie Lian—he forgot.

He forgot the way his father used to hold him, back then. Before the downfall. Before the war. Before the arguing. Before he left to cultivate on Mount Taicang.

Xie Lian forgot the way the King used to carry him on his hip, squeezing Xie Lian close when he said he was afraid.

Forgot how his father used to pet his hair, and tell him that it was alright, to be afraid sometimes.

That the world was a scary place.

Xie Lian could be afraid, for now—

His father would keep him safe, until he was ready.

The prince's face contorts with grief.

His fingers tighten around the silk band.

Xie Lian—

He looks up towards the ceiling, struggling to catch his breath.

He isn't ready.

It's hard to form the knot—his hands won't stop shaking.

It's hard, getting the band over the beam—he can't afford to stumble. No one will catch him, if he does.

Xie Lian knows, when he slips his chin into the knot that he's made for himself, that this won't do anything more than the sword laying on the floor—discarded in his panic.

Maybe, there would be some comfort—to go in the same way as

Hong-er.

But Xie Lian doesn’t think he could bear the reminder of that feeling. Of the sword being driven into him, over and over again. Of the screaming—of the laughing.

His feet begin to dangle, and Xie Lian prays.

As his chest begins to tighten with suffocation, he prays.

To the one god left that will listen to him. That could grant him mercy.

He prays to Jun Wu.

As the blood streams down his cheeks. As his feet twitch and his bones crack, Xie Lian prays for death. For relief. He desperately seeks an answer.

But a reply never comes.

At first—Xie Lian thinks that the band breaks.

It loosens around his neck, and he barely has the chance to choke out one word before he slips to the floor, landing between the bodies of his parents in a crumpled heap.

‘No!’

Oh god, no.

Let me die. Please, just let me die. His forehead slams against the floor.

Thud .

Let me die.

Thud .

The Crown Prince once dreamed of heaven. Of immortality. Looked down up the world, and told himself that he could save it. That he could change it.

Thud .

Let me die.

Oh god, please— *just let me die* .

What was all of it for? Why? Why fight so hard to reach him, just to drag him back down?

Thud .

Why? Why did Xie Lian try so hard?

Thud .

Let me die.

He did try. He tried *so* hard. Clawed his way up each stair to heaven—and hit every single one on the way back down.

Thud .

Let me die.

Tried to protect his people. Tried to save his kingdom. Tried to save—

'Golden palaces will always fall down, my sweet boy.'

Thud .

Xie Lian stops, his forehead pressed against the floor.

'That's the consequence of building them.'

Something presses against his hand—soft, smooth cloth. It slides over his skin, wriggling like a serpent.

"…" Xie Lian lifts his chin, red streaks of blood still dripping from his skin.

Such a thing would have frightened him, not so long ago. Left him cowering in fear.

Now, he lifts his hand—the same way he did before, waiting for a small, cold flame to come to him. To light his path in the night.

A silk band slithers between his fingers, slowly crawling up his wrist. Xie Lian doesn't need that light now.

He isn't afraid of the dark anymore.

When he speaks now—the voice that he hears isn't his own. It's that of a stranger.

A stranger’s voice, with a stranger’s body.

“...Ruoye,” he rumbles, making human speech sound like a cold wind.

That’s alright, he thinks.

Xie Lian doesn't want to be himself. Not anymore. “Come to me.”

The silk bandage crawls up his arm, over his face—before carefully winding itself around the fallen god’s face, taking its original place over his eyes.

Xie Lian fought so hard for the world, because he thought he could save it. For the first time that morning, Xie Lian hears voices.

Cheering, laughing voices.

He turns his head, slowly, numbly, surrounded by death. Someone is cheering.

His steps towards the doorway are slow, ambling.

It’s hard to walk, when you have nowhere to go.

A parade.

There’s a cheerful drumbeat. The shrill hum of flutes. People crying out in celebration.

‘Who did the world come to blame?’

Xie Lian’s fingers curl into fists.

“Long live the Kingdom of Yong’an!”

‘Who did they curse?’

His mouth fills with a bitter, acrid taste.

‘You, or him?’

“Long live the kingdom of—!”

‘Do you remember how you used to love building golden palaces?’

‘You—you were supposed to be BETTER than the rest of it!’

‘But you didn’t do much good, did you?’

‘I’ll show you, little one.’

‘When I left, I thought—!’

‘I don’t want anything.’

His hands ball into even tighter fists—but now, fangxin is there, trembling between his fingers.

Xie Lian doesn’t remember picking up the sword.

‘Dianxia—I don’t want anything.’

His sleeves are looser now, billowing.

And his face—it feels cold.

Xie Lian lifts his fingers, slow, trembling—

And he finds the surface of a mask.

Half laughing. Half crying.

His fingers drag over the surface, slowly falling back to his side.

“...” A soft giggle echoes throughout the room, echoing against thin walls.

The breeze stirs through his mother’s hair, fingers limply outstretched toward him. Her son cannot see it.

He throws his head back, and he laughs. Laughs until his mangled throat becomes even more raw. Until his stomach aches.

Until he cries.

This world is cruel.

It’s selfish. Stupid. It always takes. It always forgets.

This world is rotten, and Xie Lian doesn’t want to save it.

“...You won’t get off so easily,” he murmurs, stepping into the light.

The birds still sing. The sun is oppressively bright. Warm.

Xie Lian smiles.

Another giggle peals from him, as he walks back down the mountainside.

“I won’t let you get off so easily.”

Ungrateful. Selfish. So focused on their worthless, petty little lives.

What were they, compared to his? To his parents?

To Hong-er’s?

No.

Long live the Kingdom of Yong’an?

No. What a *joke* .

They aren’t better than him. They aren’t *luckier* . No one was. He was the highest. The most blessed among men. Chosen by god.

The only difference between them, and Xie Lian, is time.

But he doesn’t want to wait anymore. And he knows how to show them.

Xie Lian was a slow learner—but they don’t have to be.

His feet don’t stumble over this path—no. It’s one he’s walked for many years. Enough to know every dip and crevice.

It doesn’t take him long to find the battlefield.

Empty, desolate.

So many souls left to wander alone, forgotten.

Xie Lian won’t.

And he won’t let the world forget them, either.

He feels the resentment here, washing over him—sinking in. It can’t hurt him, now.

It’s nothing compared to the resentment already within the Crown Prince’s heart. Slowly, he asks a question with an inevitable answer.

“Do you hate?”

His voice is cold, echoing across the field.

“The people you died for,” his fingers tighten around fangxin, “have become citizens of a new kingdom now.”

He begins to hear the low, angry wails of the dead. “They have forgotten you. Forgotten your sacrifices.”

Xie Lian is trash. Filth. A failure. A theif. A whore.

Don’t take it from him—ask anyone, they’ll tell you.

But he never did that.

Never stooped so low, to forget the men who died for him. “And now,”

Xie Lian’s lips twist into a bitter, vengeful sneer.

“They cheer.”

The wind begins to howl as the spirits gather, swirling in the air, forming a tempest.

In the distance, Xie Lian can still hear the parade. The drums. The laughter. The singing.

“For the ones who killed you.”

In Xie Lian’s experience—his now broad, painful array of experience—

The most painful betrayals are always followed by thunderous applause. “Do you hate?”

They scream louder now, than ever before. Louder than the cheering, than the drums, than the songs.

Under the mask, Xie Lian’s lips curl into a snarl. “ANSWER ME!”

Finally, the screams form into words.

“I HATE!!!”

“I...I HATE THEM!”

“I WANT...I WANT TO KILL THEM!!”

Good, Xie Lian thinks. That’s good.

That’s what he needs.

He doesn’t want to build Golden Palaces anymore. “Come to my side.”

He wants to watch them fall. Wants to tear them to the ground with his own hands. That’s the point.

That’s the natural consequence of building them.

The spirits form a hateful, swirling mass—shrouding the sun.

Xie Lian couldn’t see it before, anyway. Good.

The weight of fangxin feels heavy in his hand. Ruoye slithers excitedly, beneath his mask.

The dead souls howl.

Good.

This—this is what he needs. He—

Behind him, there’s a voice. Clearer than the others—softer.

Gentle, almost. Xie Lian stops.

“Your highness.”

Underneath the mask, his lips tremble.

Some part of him that still aches, that still desperately wants to believe, senses familiarity somewhere in that voice. An echo of something lost.

It's deep, but youthful. The voice of a young man.

And it—it's almost like—

For the first time in so long, the prince almost calls out that name, whispers in hope, wishes that, after everything the world has taken, it will give something back to him.

"..." Xie Lian's teeth come together with a snap.

He's learned, now.

He was a slow learner. But he learned.

When he calls that name, no one will answer.

"...Who are you calling?" His voice is cold—unfeeling.

The ghost that kneels before him is tall, slender—dressed in black, hair pulled high and away from his face.

"You."

His head tilts up, looking upon the desolate, masked figure before him.

If the ghost's gaze showed pain, in that moment—not a soul would ever know. "I was calling you, your highness."

"..."

The calamity's fingers tighten around fangxin, and his voice hardens.

"I'm not him."

Xie Lian breathes in through his nose, detecting powerful waves of spiritual energy. More than any of the other ghosts around. Demonic, yes, but not foul.

It doesn't sting under his nose, doesn't make his eyes water, the way everything else around him does.

It must be a high level creature—a savage ghost, at the very least. Likely of similar strength to the creature that Xie Lian fought on Yi Nian bridge.

"I would know you anywhere, your highness." That voice is there again, tugging at his memory. "It is you."

It almost sounds like the ghost is trying to *remind* him of that, and—

Xie Lian's jaw locks.

He doesn't want to be himself. Not anymore.

"...Come to me," he orders, with the resounding authority of one who assumes he will have obedience.

The calamity lifts his hand, and immediately, he feels the ghost move towards him in response, laying his palm on top of Xie Lian's.

It's gloved in leather. Soft. Battle worn. The fingers are larger, longer than his own.

From what he can sense, the youth stands a head taller.

"..." Xie Lian's hand slides up a wrist—feels lean, corded muscle in the gap between the young man's glove and his sleeve, the bones of his wrist stark against his skin.

He's wearing armor. Xie Lian can feel the scales of it under his fingertips, well made.

There's a saber at his side, long and sharp. When Xie Lian's hands find his shoulders—they're surprisingly broad. Broad enough, that if he stood in front of the crown prince, he could completely shield him from an on-looker's view.

Finally, the prince reaches for his face.

Only to feel the hard, cold edge of a mask under his fingertips.

In spite of it all, Xie Lian's fingertips tremble, beginning to flinch away out of instinct, a fear that he's still ashamed to carry—

The ghost catches his wrist, it's grip strong, but—

But so gentle.

Xie Lian is silent, nostrils flaring as he fights to steady his breath, eyes wide underneath Ruoye, and...

That grip pulls his wrist down, firmly, but insistently—until Xie Lian can feel the shape of the mask's mouth.

Not half-laughing, half crying.

Not the face from his nightmares. The face that Xie Lian wears now. Just a smile. A small, simple smile.

Their faces are close enough now, that Xie Lian doesn't just smell the creature's spiritual power—

There's his natural scent, too. It's...

Xie Lian's heart stutters. It's *familiar* .

Like the forest after it rains. An earthy, slightly wild smell. Something that—

Something that reminds the crown prince so much of home. Not the place where he was raised, but the place he longs to return to.

"You..." He whispers, his voice unsure.

He doesn't ask what he would have, before. Can't stand crying that name out into the dark, only to have no one answer him.

Xie Lian is a slow learner. But he learns.

"...What's your name?" He rasps, heart pounding with an emotion he's come to loathe. It causes him so much pain.

Hope.

Even now, he gets no answer. To the point where his lip curls with frustration, hidden beneath his mask, and—

Beneath of the mask of the youth before him, lies an expression holding emotions too deep to be spoken.

"...This servant doesn't have a name, your highness."

His voice is strained, now—as though he has to spit out every single word.

Xie Lian doesn't worry about that, feeling that emotion inside of him deflate, leaving him even more empty than before.

God, how he hates hoping.

“...To be without a name is to be Wu Ming,” he mutters.

Wu Ming tilts his head to the side, silken threads of his ponytail slipping over his shoulder.

“Whatever his highness wishes to call me, I will answer to.” Wu Ming, then.

Xie Lian closes his eyes, taking a breath to steady himself. “Are you a soldier from this battlefield?”

"I am."

He responds so easily, without hesitation or difficulty. It's been so long, since Xie Lian had a conversation that didn't feel like some form of battle.

"What is your purpose in being here?" Again, the words fall as naturally as rain—

"To serve his highness."

"..." Xie Lian's mouth tightens at the corners, and he repeats:

"What's your name?"

His tone is harsh, suspicious, and after a pause, comes the reply.

"Wu Ming."

The prince is silent, for a moment. Distrustful, having learned to suspect a cruel trick in every act of kindness.

"...If I find out you're lying to me," he hisses, fangxin trembling in his grip, "I'll disperse you."

Wu Ming's smile matches the mask covering it. "His highness may disperse me at any moment he likes, but this servant will never lie to him."

Such powerful resolve...

In another life, Xie Lian would have smiled.

What a brave young man. Foolish, but...brave.

If he's a soldier that died on this battlefield—his reasons must be the same as Xie Lian's. And that, above all else, he can trust.

But there is something else the god must see to first.

Slowly, he pulls his hand back from Wu Ming's mask—and this time, the ghost lets him, stiffening with surprise when Xie Lian grasps his own hand in turn, bringing it against his chest.

To the stone that rests there, hanging from a leather cord.

"You know what these are?"

It takes a moment this time, but the ghost replies:

“Bone ashes, your highness.”

Xie Lian nods slowly. He would never let someone touch Hong-er before. Just—

(His stomach twists in faint, detached agony. Just his mother.)

But this is important, and it requires something that Xie Lian doesn’t have, something he can smell rolling off of this creature in waves: spiritual power.

“Can you sense anything from them?”

Wu Ming hesitates, his fingers carefully resting over the smooth, dark stone.

“...” Xie Lian can’t see the way Wu Ming bows his head—and even if could, the mask hides whatever he might be thinking. “...This was a believer of his highness’s,” the ghost answers calmly. “Utterly devout.”

In spite of everything, Xie Lian smiles, his voice weak, but pleased;

“Yes, that’s right.” Wu Ming’s fingers are so cautious, not brushing a single inch of Xie Lian’s skin, only resting on the stone itself. Even with gloves, he doesn’t dare. “What else?”

“...He follow—” For once, the ghost pauses, adjusting, “He followed his highness closely.”

Xie Lian nods. The memory of Hong-er ached inside of him, before. Remembering him felt like jarring a broken bone. Of cracking himself open.

Now, remembering the boy is the only thing that doesn’t hurt. “...Can you sense how he died?”

A pause, then—

“Yes.”

“Tell me.”

Wu Ming doesn’t answer at first, takes long enough that the prince has to repeat himself, his tone hardening, “Tell me.”

The ghost's head bows even lower, his voice mournful. "He was murdered." Xie Lian's silence is impatient, expecting. "…By a blade, your highness."

His gaze drifts down to fangxin, gazing up at the spiritual device through the blank stare of his mask, "The one by your side."

Xie Lian lets out a low sigh of relief at first, knowing now that the ghost really can sense it, then—

Then, his voice hardens with purpose. "And do you know who wielded it?"

There's no hesitation this time, only contempt—which confirms the prince's belief that Wu Ming knows exactly who he speaks of—

"Yes."

Xie Lian nods, sliding Fangxin into its sheath.

"Take me to him, then."

The Ghost kneels once more.

Head bowed, hand clasped over his heart in a promise.

(Trembling slightly, after his god grasped it.)

"I will die following your highness, I swear."

He wouldn't be the first one.

"…You're already dead," he replies coldly. "Start moving."

The Night Touring Green Lantern

Chapter Summary

> “Oh—it’s you!" His tone is jovial, and he can’t see from his seat at the head of the table, that the calamity’s hands are balled into fists. “I thought you had gone already,” he raises an eyebrow. The calamity replies calmly.
>
> “I answered your invitation, young master.”
>
> “...” Qi Rong frowns. “I...didn’t send you—”
>
> “You did.” The masked figure murmurs, stepping forward. Funny—Qi Rong remembered Bai Wuxiang being taller. Bigger. Maybe he’s less powerful now, after releasing the plague the way he did. Could be taking time to recover. “I was just slow to arrive.”

Chapter Notes

> TW// GRAPHIC VIOLENCE
>
> you can find me on my TWITTER and you can find the current updates of this story HERE

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The path is long.

They must be heading back towards the Imperial City. Xie Lian is surprised that his cousin would dare to hide in such a place, but, well...

He’s done quite a bit of dirty work for the new royal family, doesn’t he?

The road is crumbling in places, in desperate need of repair.

Xie Lian stumbles over a small pile of rubble, already throwing his arms out on instinct, his hands are permanently scraped now—

This time, someone catches him.

Before his weight can even be caught by gravity, there’s a hand grasping his elbow, another at the small of his back.

"This way, your highness."

Wu Ming is an excellent guide—attentive, careful. Xie Lian never has the chance to stumble again, finding the ground before him perfectly smooth and even.

Odd, given the disrepair that stretched behind them for miles.

He can't see the malevolence of Wu Ming's stare as he glares at the path ahead, broken bits of earth and stone shivering back into place.

His hand remains on the calamity's elbow, just in case—but it doesn't feel so much like a guide now as it does an escort.

A companion, even.

There was a time when it would have brought Xie Lian comfort, to have someone by his side.

Now, all it does is remind him of times past.

The hall he's brought to is finer than what he would have expected.

Then again, maybe he should have.

Qi Rong has always had a skill for kissing the boots of the most powerful person in the room, never caring for the head the crown rested upon, simply what it could offer him in return.

How many temples did he burn, before Xie Lian's enemies offered him such grace? How many of Xie Lian's believers did he slaughter?

it was part of what turned so many against him, in the beginning—that in the early days of his banishment, those who still dared to worship in his temples would be cut down where they stood.

He takes one step forward, then—

Then, Xie Lian stops, breathing in, smelling something that he hadn't expected:

Spiritual Power.

Not too strong, but in far greater quantity than the prince expected.

His brow furrows, only for Wu Ming to lean down and whisper beside his ear, “Ghost fires, your highness.”

“...” Xie Lian’s eyes narrow.

It’s not uncommon for cultivators or others who practice the mystic arts to use such spirits in ceremonies or spells.

Qi Rong has no such motivations. He simply has hideous taste in personal decor.

It explains why the hall is so cold now.

Over his head, dozens of green flames hang in spirit lanterns, casting the place in an almost acidic glow.

Wu Ming stares, the white jade of his mask doused in emerald light, blank gaze lingering upon the spirits.

Xie Lian might not have cared about such a thing before. Now, he clenches his teeth with disgust.

“Where is he?”

Instead of answering out loud, the hand on his elbow guides him forward. There are no servants—all having retired for the evening.

No guests. The master of the house can’t seem to obtain anything but prisoners.

Qi Rong sits all alone at the head of his table, lazily picking at the carcass of a roasted chicken. One that could feed an entire family on it’s own, in times like this. He uses one bone to pick his teeth, calling out to one of the fires overhead, his voice petty, grumbling—

“You’d think people could even manage to return an invitation these days,” he mutters, flicking the bone until it flies up into the air, smacking one of the lanterns, making it wobble. “The ‘nobility’ of this place wouldn’t know courtesy if it was shoved up their asses...”

After all, his auntie always taught him—even if you have no intention of going to a gathering, you always answer.

Qi Rong has never really had to answer an invitation, he’s never gotten one—after all, he has a habit of intimidating people.

“Honestly, I don’t even know why I—!”

The door opens with a creak, and when the young lord looks up—he sees two figures.

One tall, slender, wearing black. The other is shorter, slighter, dressed in white. Both wearing masks.

One of them, he recognizes, letting out a sound of surprise.

“Oh—it’s you!" His tone is jovial, and he can’t see from his seat at the head of the table, that the calamity’s hands are balled into fists. “I thought you had gone already,” he raises an eyebrow. The calamity replies calmly.

“I answered your invitation, young master.”

“...” Qi Rong frowns. “I...didn’t send you—”

“You did.” The masked figure murmurs, stepping forward. Funny—Qi Rong remembered Bai Wuxiang being taller. Bigger. Maybe he’s less powerful now, after releasing the plague the way he did. Could be taking time to recover. “I was just slow to arrive.”

White boots click softly against polished marble as he draws closer, closer, green flames illuminating his mask more and more as he approaches.

“I didn’t—”

“You did,” the calamity repeats. “Don’t you remember?”

The young man’s face freezes, squeezing with concentration. Straining to remember.

The white robed figure tilts its head to the side, “Would you like me to remind you?” It questions, voice friendly. Patient, even. “It was the last time you saw this mask.”

Qi Rong can’t remember anything like that, they parted on clear terms —

“I missed it at first,” the calamity explains, coming to a stop at the head of the table, next to the seat that Qi Rong occupied. “The others had to take him down for me. But that was what you wanted,” he questions, not unkindly, “wasn’t it?”

“...” Qi Rong stares, eyes narrow.

Slowly, he reaches out, like he means to touch the surface of that mask—but a black clad hand stops him, squeezing his wrist in a bruising grip.

“Hey!” He crows with a glare. “Who the hell do you think you are—?!”

The calamity places his palm against his companion’s chest.

“Let him go, Wu Ming.” His voice is soft. “I’m going to deal with him myself.”

“Your h—”

“Take care of the ghost fires,” the calamity gives him a gentle push. “Let them go.”

“...” Wu Ming drops the lord’s wrist, like he might discord a lump of trash. “...as you wish,” he murmurs

The black clad youth steps back, and Qi Rong stares at the white clothed calamity with newfound suspicion, after all—

He wasn’t like this before. Not even a little. It’s like...someone else entirely.

“...Is that really you?” He mutters, staring up at him suspiciously.

“You really don’t remember, Qi Rong?” The voice from underneath the mask echoes. “You invited me.”

“I—”

Finally, green eyes widen with understanding.

Because he does know this creature. He does recognize that voice.

But it isn’t by Wuxiang.

The figure reaches for it’s mask.

When the face beneath is revealed—at first, the only thing Qi Rong feels is shock. Then, his expression twists into a mask of amused glee.

“Cousin!” He barks, his laughter echoing throughout the hall, bouncing off the ceiling. “...You really did accept an invitation after all,” It's terribly amusing. "How many have I sent you, over the years?"

Too many to count. Xie Lian never answered those. He was always too busy, cultivating. Then, he was a god, and then—

Qi Rong smiles, all sharp teeth and sneering laughter.

And then, Xie Lian was nothing.

"I guess now you're not too busy for your little cousin, are you?"

Xie Lian's expression is just as unreadable as it was before he removed the mask, completely smooth. "...Did you know who it was?"

He barely pauses in his amusement, giggling, "Who?"

"The boy you killed," Xie Lian explains quietly, each word carefully formed. "Did you know who he was?"

"...I saw him following you," Qi Rong recalls, tapping his finger against his chin. "Then, once I saw that eye—well, it was pretty obvious he was the kid from before."

That eye.

What does he mean?

"You wouldn't know," Qi Rong smirks, "you never saw the little monster without those bandages that day, did you?"

He's always had a penchant for talking, even when he shouldn't, never paying attention to the other person's reaction.

"Count yourself lucky, it was disgusting—"

Xie Lian can't see the way Wu Ming pauses on the far side of the hall, holding a spirit lantern in hand, head bowed.

"Did you really never wonder why he had half of his face covered up?" Qi Rong laughs even louder now, snorting, no—cackling, "I'm surprised he didn't rip it out!"

He slaps the table, making his plate rattle against the wood. "That would have been better than making anyone look at that thing!"

"Enough."

Xie Lian's voice is low, venomous, but his cousin doesn't listen. He never listens.

"I thought you'd be thanking me, really!"

His cousin exclaims, sitting back. "That little freak, following you around all that time. Who KNOWS what sort of disturbing shit he wanted with you. He was probably one of those cut—"

Then, Qi Rong can't speak.

He gurgles and chokes, eyes bulging from his head.

Fingers are wrapped around his throat. Thin, elegant fingers, completely smooth to the touch, locked around him in an iron grip.

Expertly, index finger pressed down over his artery, thumb crushing down on his windpipe.

"It was a yes or no question," Xie Lian's voice is flat.

"I don't care what you thought about how he looked," his fingers dig in a little more, until he feels the muscles and tendons beneath his grip start to shiver and creak from the strain, "I don't care what you thought he wanted."

"C—Cousin, y—you—!"

"In your entire life, you have never had a single worthwhile thought," Xie Lian's voice is still calm, even now. "Why would I start caring about your opinions now?"

The young lord's skin is almost purple now, from the strain—but he still manages to look indignant, somehow.

Xie Lian lets him go, and he collapses forward, hands catching himself on the table, coughing. "Wh—when auntie hears about this, she'll—p-punish you—!"

"My mother is dead," Xie Lian replies woodenly. "And if she wasn't, she wouldn't care about what I do to you."

"She..."

It's almost infuriating to Xie Lian, to hear how small Qi Rong's voice sounds. How shocked.

"...She's dead?"

The creature has the nerve to sound *sad* .

"Normally, I might say that you'll see her soon," Xie Lian's lips twist into a sneer, "but that won't be possible for you."

Qi Rong pauses, staring up at his cousin in shock. Xie Lian wasn't wrong before.

Qi Rong isn't senseless, not understanding the consequences of his actions. He knows. He's careful, testing his boundaries.

When it came to his cousin, he never thought things could go this far.

Always thought, no matter what he did, Xie Lian would be forced to get over it. To move on and look past it. Everyone always did.

He never realized that he crossed a line until it was far, far behind him. "You—?"

A blade drops onto the table in front of him with a clatter.

"You recognize this, don't you?' Xie Lian muses, not needing to see the fear in his cousin's eyes to know. "You two are quite familiar with each other."

"..." He scrambles back so fast, his chair tips backwards, sending him sprawling on the floor. "You...you aren't going to!"

He chokes, pushing back on his hands, kicking with his feet as Xie Lian lifts the sword again, "You can't! You'll—" He's frantic, trying to think of a reason that his cousin should spare him, then—

"Gods can't harm humans!"

Of all things, he wasn't expecting Xie Lian to laugh. "I'm not a god," he smirks—

Qi Rong has never seen his cousin do that before, an expression so arrogant would have been ungrateful. Unseemly.

Xie Lian doesn't seem to care anymore.

"That's why you turned against me, remember?"

The human scrambles to his feet, trying to flee.

“You—you could threaten me and bully me before, but—!” He fights to keep the fear out of his voice, “You’re not the same anymore, you can’t—”

Xie Lian laughs even harder, now.

A single tear of blood drips down his cheek.

“Do you think I need my eyes to hurt you, Qi Rong?” Xie Lian clicks his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

“But I forgot—you normally attack women and children, don’t you?”

Or someone already rendered helpless by a calamity. Xie Lian knows his Hong-er could have handled Qi Rong easily, in a fair fight.

The prince knows, because he taught the boy himself.

“We’ll place the odds in your favor then, how about that?” Xie Lian’s smile is lopsided. “Wu Ming, give him your saber.”

There’s a pause as the black clad youth watches his god, face tilted. “Wu Ming.”

“Yes, your highness.”

The young man steps forward, placing the blade in Qi Rong’s hands—which are trembling so badly, they almost drop to the floor with a clatter.

“You…” He sputters, watching Xie Lian stalk towards him, “you would kill me over that little RAT?! I—I’m your family! My blood is—!”

Qi Rong stops with a pained yelp when something slices into his cheek, he— He barely even saw it move.

He sees it now, raised into an offensive position, held aloft like a natural extension of Xie Lian’s body.

It gives him pause, to see his cousin in that pose, because…

With a sword in one hand, the other clasping something against his chest, he—

He looks so much like the divine statues that stood in his temples. The same statues Qi Rong took the time to build, and later helped destroy.

But that face isn’t serene—it’s pulled into a snarl.

“I never once considered you my family,” the crown prince hisses. “I resented the fact that my parents ever forced me to tolerate you!”

Qi Rong attempts to deflect the next blow, but he’s three heartbeats behind the strike itself.

His right forearm sears with pain.

"My father thought you were a burden, and-–and my *mother* ?!" Xie Lian laughs again, this time a sly, snickering kind of cackle–

Clearly mocking Qi Rong's own laugh.

"She felt GUILTY for not being there for her sister before she died–she didn't care about YOU!"

Each time Qi Rong attempts to parry, or retort, there's another blow.

On his shoulders. His cheeks. His legs. Agonizing little slices–deep, but never too much to keep him off his feet.

"I-I KNEW you always looked down on me!! That's why I–!"

"Oh, *spare me."*

Xie Lian rolls his eyes, hair whipping about him as he moves. He makes battle into an art—a dance.

Not so different from that day, in a very different kind of parade, wearing a different mask. The screaming of thousands, and—

A boy, dropping into his arms like a falling star.

He doesn't see the way Wu Ming has taken a seat on the floor on the far side of the room. Legs pulled up against his chest, one remaining spirit lantern in his arms as he just...

Watches, white mask caught in an unearthly glow.

"I never HID what I thought of you!"

Xie Lian snarls. "Don't act SHOCKED, don't use it as an EXCUSE!"

"You–!"

"You didn't become this way because I was disgusted with you," Xie Lian's voice rises to a shout, "I was repulsed by you because you were a fucking ANIMAL!"

The next blow cuts deep into his hip.

Xie Lian is a little irritated, when he hears his cousin fall to the floor.

That's annoying. He forgot his strength. Got too upset. He wanted the man to stay standing, a little longer.

Qi Rong moans, weakly crawling backwards on the floor, pushing with one foot.

He can't move the other leg anymore–too much muscle and tendon was severed by that last blow. It dangles from his body, limp and useless.

"...But you knew that, didn't you?" Xie Lian mutters, lifting his chin, listening to pained breaths, strained whimpering. "What you were."

He stalks forward, letting the tip of fangxin drag against the marble floor, creating a low, shrieking sound.

"That underneath the wealth, the titles, and the fame—you were just a sick little *freak* . A bastard that nobody wanted. An orphan."

The tip of the blade comes to a halt, resting on the floor between Qi Rong's ankles.

"You weren't different from that boy at all–and he had my *attention* ," the prince sneers, shaking his head. "You couldn't STAND that, could you?"

"We weren't the same!" Qi Rong cries. "At least I wasn't DEFORMED–!"

He cuts himself off with a shriek when fangxin flicks upwards in a dark flash, blood pouring down the right side of his face as he drops Wu Ming's saber with a clatter, clutching the remains of his eye.

"Now you are," Xie Lian replies coldly.

Then, it occurs to him, head slowly tilting. His hair has come slightly loose in all the fighting, loose pieces falling in front of his eyes, shrouded by silk.

"You know something," the prince murmurs, "my father is dead, too." In the corner, Wu Ming stiffens.

Qi Rong chokes.

"W...what?! How did they—?"

Xie Lian doesn't answer him. He doesn't deserve to know. Let him wonder. Let it haunt him.

He's haunted others long enough.

"I'm no longer a god," he repeats. "Which means I no longer forfeit my mortal lands and titles."

Fangxin levels over Qi Rong's torso, gleaming wickedly in the light. "That makes me head of the Royal House of Xie, doesn't it?"

Laughable, now. To most, it means very little in the wake of the war.

But Qi Rong is a member of that house, and it means a great deal to him.

It's not like Xie Lian could ever be crowned king, now—not like he ever desired that path for himself to begin with.

But it does grant him with one ability—to take away the thing that Qi Rong treasures more than anything in the world. Even if he denies it, now.

"I banish you," Xie Lian smiles, no—he grins from ear to ear, like this is a moment he's fantasized about since childhood.

(In truth, it is.)

Qi Rong's lips tremble, and he tries to laugh, but the sound shatters and breaks as he crawls, blood trailing behind him.

"What?!"

"I banish you from the family," Xie Lian repeats slowly, enunciating every word clearly, "I strip you of your titles."

"You—!" Qi Rong sputters, blood shining against his teeth, and he–he's still trying to laugh, but there's a gleam of horror in his gaze. "You think I CARE?!"

Fangxin slices into his side, now—cutting a deep line across his ribs, drawing out a tortured moan.

"You do," Xie Lian murmurs. "Because now, you're just an orphan. No titles. No family. Maimed. A source of disgust and scorn to those around you. No one will even mourn you."

"Which leaves that boy above you."

Xie Lian doesn't say his name. Not here. Doesn't ever want the memory of that name on Qi Rong's lips.

His cousin chokes out a laugh, "Mourn me?! And who–who would mourn–?!"

"I did," Xie Lian cuts him off quietly. "I mourned him." He's still mourning him.

Part of Xie Lian thinks that he won't ever stop.

At first, Qi Rong thought that his cousin might have lost his touch, inflicting so many shallow, non-fatal blows.

Eventually, his true intentions become clear.

Xie Lian never cuts the same place twice.

He doesn't know how many times Qi Rong cut Hong-er.

Back then, he couldn't bring himself to count. Was too lost in the agony over what had been taken from him to take notice of such things.

But he thinks a hundred cuts must be enough.

He knows the experience all too well.

He's careful not to spill too much blood. Careful, to make sure that his cousin feels every single bit of it. Even as red splatters across Xie Lian's cheeks. Stains the whites of his robes, splatters across the walls.

Even when his cousin becomes unrecognizable, he feels it.

Xie Lian pulls fangxin back, the blade shining with blood, dripping to the floor in slightly congealed puddles.

"...Let me die," the young man whimpers, clutching his face. It was handsome, once. So similar to that of the prince.

Now, it's a bloody jack-o-lantern of flesh.

"Let me die!"

Xie Lian tilts his head back, letting out a long, satisfied sigh.

Qi Rong used to pray to him so often before. For horrible things. Filthy, hideous desires.

This is the first prayer of this believer that the flower crowned martial god is willing to answer.

But not quickly. Not in the way that Qi Rong wants.

"...Ruoye," he murmurs. The spiritual tool shivers around his face, squirming upon hearing its name; "Go."

Qi Rong can barely see straight, thinks he's hallucinating, when the silk bandage slithers towards him.

It isn't until the spiritual tool slides over his body, wrapping around his neck, that Qi Rong begins to scream.

"NO!" He cries blood pouring from him as he's yanked into the air, the other end of the bandage looping around one of the beams on the ceilings. "NononoNONONO!"

He's bleeding so profusely, it pours down below like rain. Xie Lian tilts his head back, listening to the patter of it falling.

"Not like this," his cousin sobs as the bandage tightens around his throat, his voice becoming weaker as he's hoisted higher, "Cousin—NOT LIKE THIS!"

CRACK !

The sound of his spine snapping is so loud, it grates against Xie Lian's ears.

Then, there's silence—and creaking. The patter of blood hitting the floorboards.

Come to think of it—this is the exact same beam he hung his ghost fires from, before.

The calamity waits.

Listens as the heartbeat overhead pounds, throbbing louder, louder, becoming unsteady, struggling as the brain loses oxygen, slowly losing function.

The blood pools beneath his feet, spreading across the floor, staining the soles of Xie Lian's boots.

Then, there's quiet.

He outstretches his hand, waiting, knowing--someone so malicious, so angry and hateful, could never rest in peace.

And eventually, slowly—he feels a small, flickering mass of cold land in his palm.

Xie Lian digs his fingers in, lifting his hand in front of his face.

He lets Qi Rong's soul quiver and tremble in his hand. Too disoriented and confused to speak. To know who or what he is.

But Xie Lian doesn't disperse him, no.

That would be too kind.

"Wu Ming," he murmurs.

After a moment, a slightly rasping voice replies—

"Your highness?"

"Do you still have one of the lanterns, or did you destroy them when you let the spirits go?" Xie Lian questions calmly, squeezing Qi Rong a little tighter.

"...I still have one," the youth answers.

Xie Lian smiles, the dips and shadows of his face cast in a green glow. "Bring it here," he orders.

He hears the slow, steady footsteps of Wu Ming's boots as he moves to obey him, coming to a halt by Xie Lian's side, opening the side of the lantern, so the prince can place the newly formed ghost fire inside.

Before he does, Xie Lian brings Qi Rong closer, directly in front of his mouth. "You were going to call him a cut sleeve, weren't you?"

Wu Ming watches his god, holding the lantern steady.

Xie Lian laughs quietly, two streaks of blood dripping down to his chin.

"I am."

The thought of anyone ever knowing—it terrified him, once. Made him think that the worst thing anyone could ever know about him, would be the part of him that had those desires.

There are worse things. Xie Lian knows that now.

Maybe he'll always be ashamed of the way he felt about Feng Xin. Maybe it will always hurt, that he couldn't talk to his mother about Hong-er.

But Mu Qing's words terrified him, that day. Robbed him of the comfort of having that fear and shame remain a secret.

Xie Lian doesn't feel afraid now.

He feels powerful. Like he's taking that part of himself back, now, using it to taunt Qi Rong.

"You were killed by a cut sleeve," Xie Lian muses, squeezing so tight, the spirit lets out a pained squeak. "Avenging another cut sleeve."

He's actually not sure if Hong-er counted, since he said he appreciated men and women. If anything, Xie Lian is slightly less respectable than him, but—

It's alright.

Feeling Qi Rong shiver with humiliation and anger in his palm is enough.

"And now," he turns to face Wu Ming, carefully placing the ghost fire into the spirit lantern, closing and sealing the latch behind it, "for the first time in your life, you're going to be useful."

The calamity lifts his head. "Ruoye, return."

Qi Rong's body falls.

It lands on top of his dining table, bleeding and broken, the remains of his dinner scattering across the floor.

The bandage wraps itself around Xie Lian's wrist as he lifts the mask back over his face, holding out his arm.

He doesn't have to say a word for Wu Ming to step forward, taking it. "Where would you like to go, your highness?"

"Is there still a market open, at this time?"

When the ghost nods in affirmative, the crown prince smiles.

"Sell it."

Beneath a smiling mask, there's a vindictive, fanged grin, fingers tightening around the lantern's handle.

"Yes, dianxia."

With one hand on his god's arm, the other holding the spirit aloft in front of him, the ghost leads Xie Lian from the manor, out onto the city street.

They make an odd pair. One dressed in black, the other in white, streaked with blood. Each in masks, arms linked in a way that seems almost intimate.

And before them, a green lantern, emitting a soft, green glow—swaying and flickering as it tours through the night.

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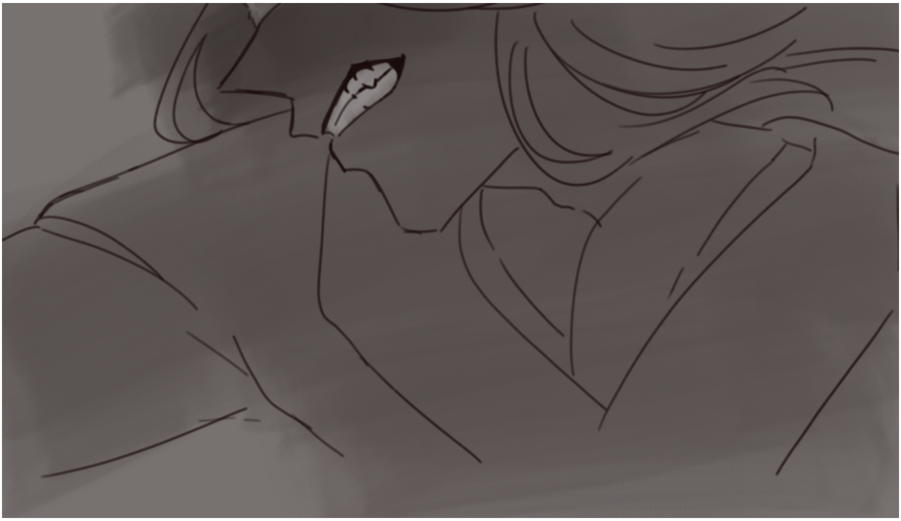

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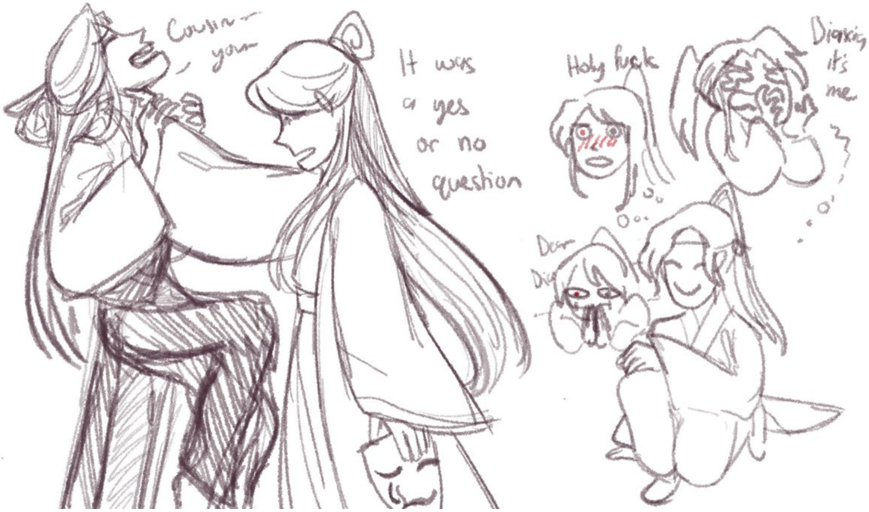
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It was a yes or no question
Holy fuck
Dianxia it's me
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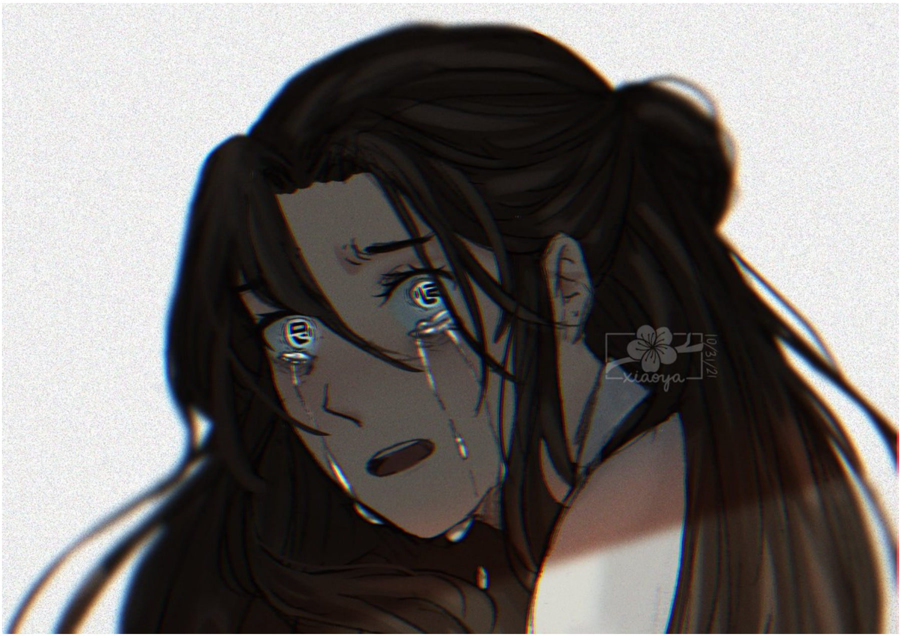
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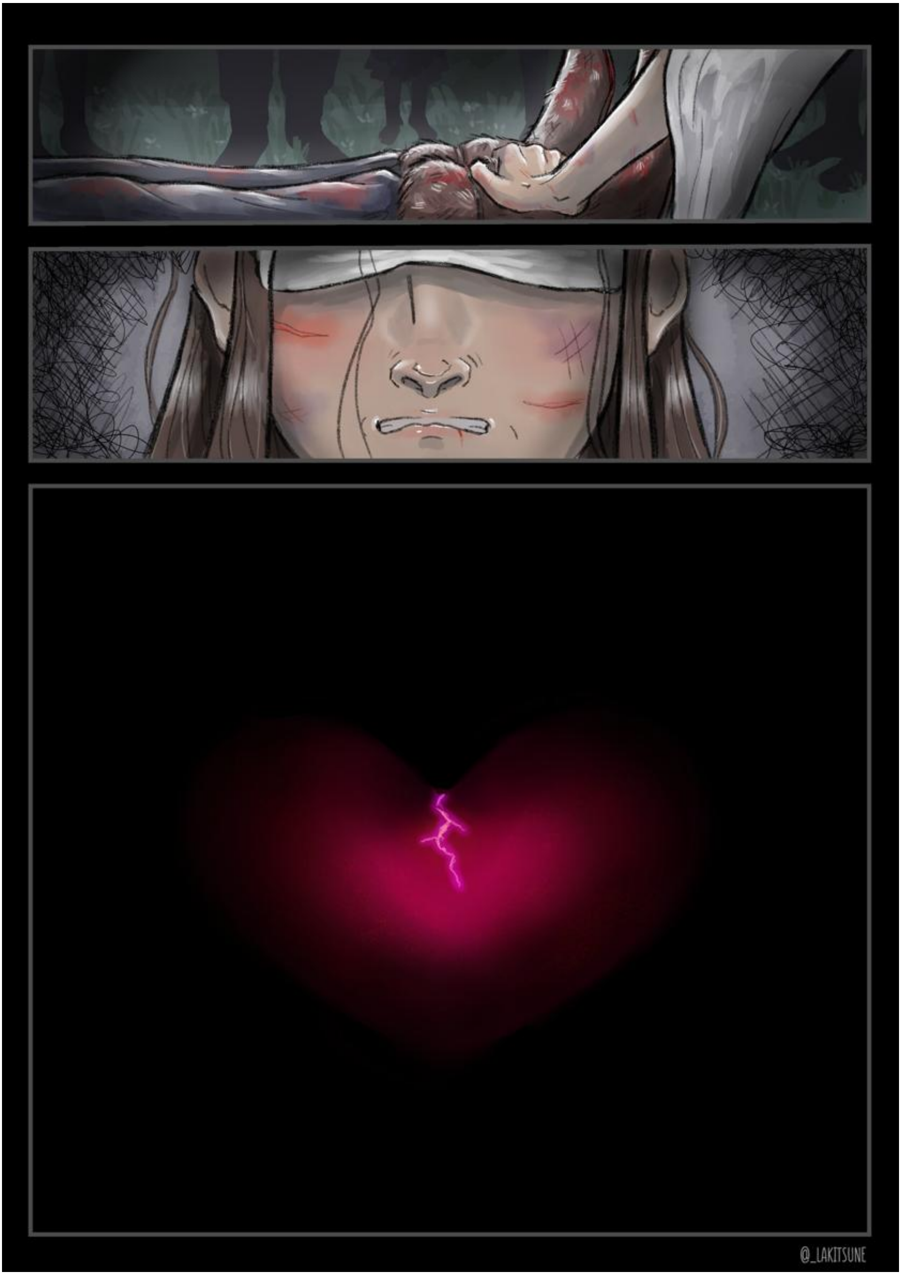
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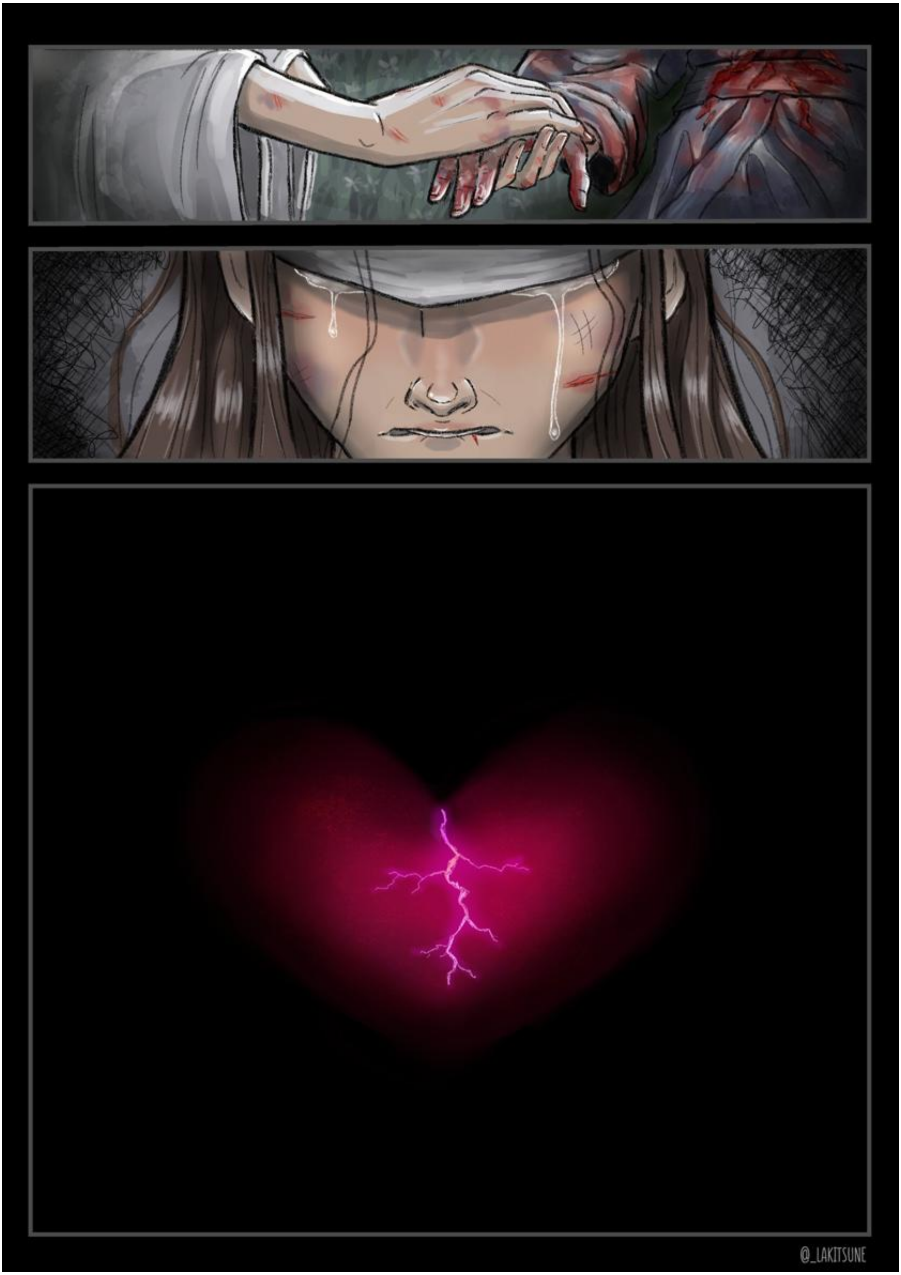
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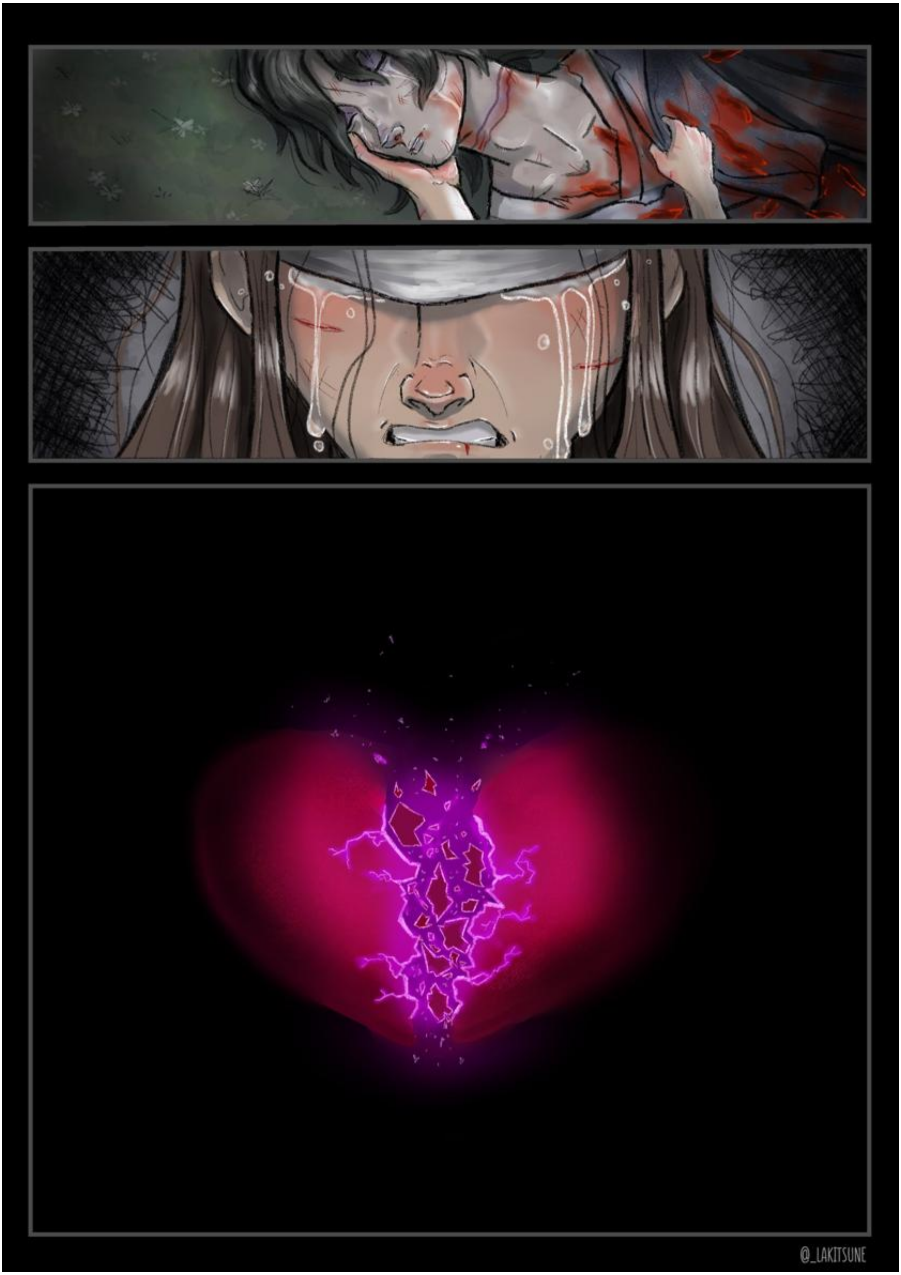
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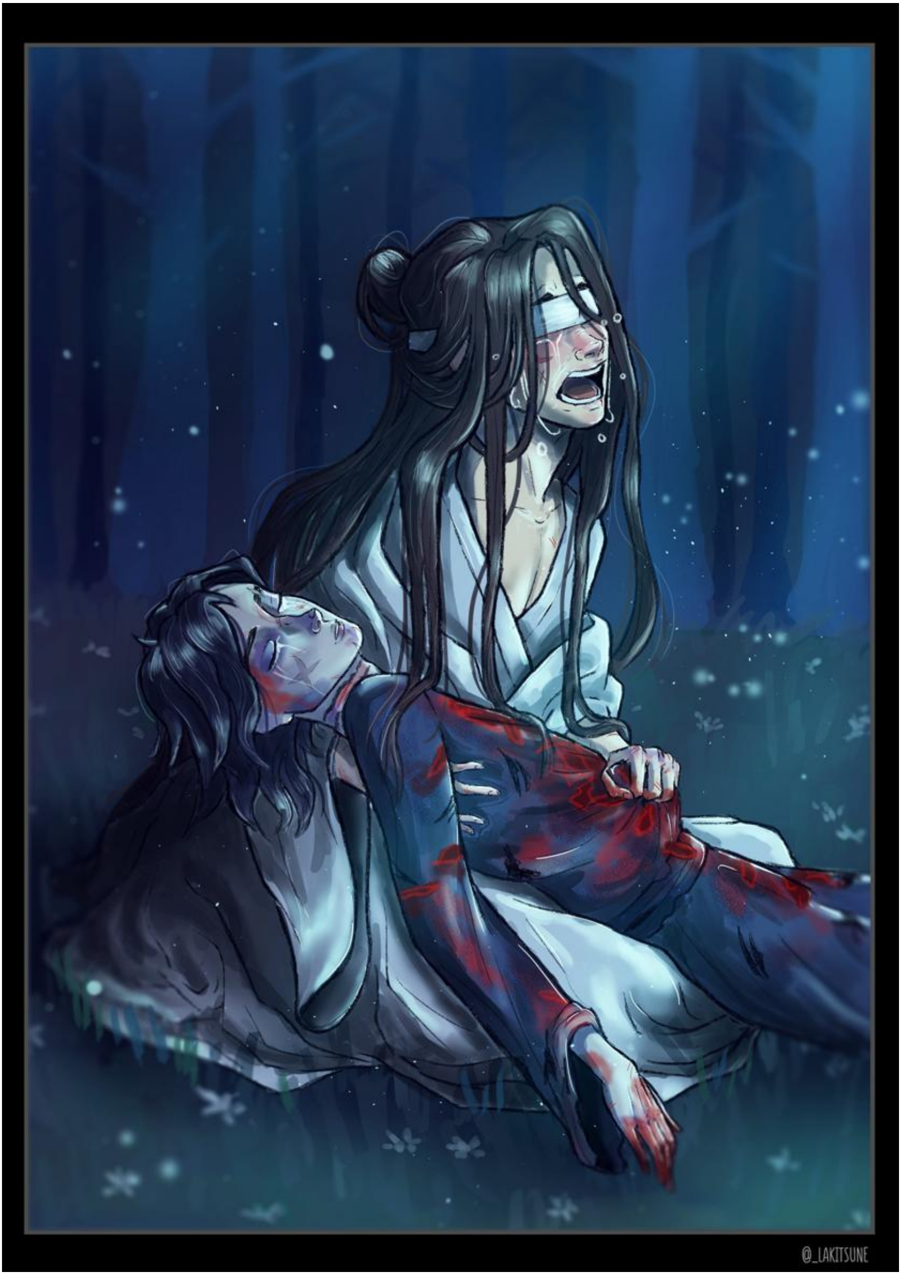

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TW// SUICIDE AND DEATH

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Chapter End Notes

> Thank you so much to the artists who have created work for this story, and for giving permission for me to document that work here! The best thing about creating anything is seeing other people react and get inspired by it, so ya'll mean a lot to me!
>
> Evie

Golden Palaces

Chapter Summary

He walks forward, fingertips trailing against the walls, then the doors—feeling the deep scars in the wood, left behind by the talismans that burned.

There's only one living thing in the throne room, panicked breathing, a shuddering heartbeat. A slow smile spreads over his face

"Were you worried, your majesty?" He calls out, his tone slightly jeering. He catches one shredded piece of talisman paper, fluttering through the air—holding it delicately between two fingers.

"You were trying very hard to keep out evil," the crown prince muses, head tilting.

The remains of the talisman ignite between his fingers, going up in a flash of smoke, ash crumbling in front of his boots.

"Has something been haunting you?"

Chapter Notes

tw// GRAPHIC VIOLENCE, SLIGHTLY UNHEALTHY ROMANTIC DYNAMICS, GORE, AND DEATH

I know it's been a bit of an angst slog, but I promise, it's not like that all the way through ^^"

You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

This story also has some spotify playlists for those who want some fun listening while reading!

No Paths Are Bound: The Playlist
Calamity Xie Lian: The Playlist
The Wu Ming Playlist

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The calamity stands at a distance as his lieutenant makes terms with a dealer of spiritual items in a nearby stall, quietly haggling over price.

As a recently murdered soul, full of spite, he's valuable—but Wu Ming doesn't haggle as much as he might have on any other occasion.

There's satisfaction in deeming the spirit cheap.

When he returns, he places a small pouch of gold in the God's outstretched hand.

"...This should be plenty," Xie Lian murmurs, rolling the pouch between his fingers, estimating the weight.

"For what, your highness?"

The calamity doesn't answer him directly, only gives Wu Ming instructions on where to take him, and what to purchase when they arrive.

Before long, a silver chain is being placed in his palm, and the prince —

Underneath the mask, he manages a small smile.

It replaces the leather cord around his neck, holding the smooth, black stone in place.

It's a small payment, in comparison to what Qi Rong took from Hong-er. But this is the most Xie Lian can offer him now.

He stands there for a moment, grasping the stone between his fingers.

Xie Lian wants so badly to stop feeling anything at all. There are moments when he does. When he can look upon the world and feel nothing but a desire to knock it down.

But he can't erase the fondness in his heart, when he remembers the young man. The pain of losing him.

The ache of missing him.

"...Wu Ming." He murmurs, head down turned.

"Yes, dianxia?"

"..." Xie Lian swallows hard at the sound of that title, remembering...remembering...

The prince shakes himself out of it, refusing to react. "Have you ever been in love?"

There's a heavy pause.

"...Yes," he admits, his voice slightly strained.

"Do you miss them?"

The masked youth tilts his head back, glancing up at the sky.

It's deep in the night, now—the moon riding high, stars twinkling down at him.

"Every day, your highness."

Every single moment.

Xie Lian almost asks him why he hasn't moved on, then—but there could be a dozen reasons. He knows as much, now.

More than anything, the reason that Xie Lian is here, whether he wants to be or not. Resentment

"Does it get easier?" He whispers, only to get the answer—

"No."

Wu Ming already promised that he wouldn't lie to him—even if the answer wasn't what he wanted to hear.

Xie Lian is grateful for that. And he's hopeless. And— "Where would you like to go now, dianxia?"

His eyes squeeze shut under the mask.

Dianxia.

'Gege, did you see me—!'

Xie Lian lets go of the stone, dropping his hand to his sides, shaking them off as if he's been burned.

Hong-er belongs to the human parts of him. The parts that feel. That hope. That ache. Xie Lian doesn't want to feel that ache anymore. Doesn't want to feel anything at all.

Before, when Xie Lian wanted to stop thinking about him, he couldn't —because he promised the boy he would never forget him.

Now, Xie Lian—

He avenged him. He mourned him. There will always be a part of him that mourns.

But now, Xie Lian puts that aside.

He leaves the anger behind. It doesn't hurt.

Everything else, he pushes into a small, contained box inside of him. Locked away in a tight, confined space, where it can't leap out and hurt.

"Take me to the King of Yong'an." He eventually replies, wind playing through his hair.

Wu Ming tilts his head, watching him—but before Xie Lian can express his impatience, that hand is on his elbow again.

"Yes, dianxia."

Xie Lian assumes that, somehow, the blood on his robes must be gone —after all, he doesn't hear petrified screaming when people glimpse him.

He doesn't hear anything but the chatter of merchants. The voices of children playing, before being called home by their mothers.

The sun is down, now, they warn. You never know what things might be about. Slowly, Xie Lian smiles.

There's a pause, when they reach the gates.

In the distance, there's guards whispering about whether or not to deal with them— he even hears another say something about them being beggars. That if they ignore the newcomers, they'll leave.

Xie Lian smiles so widely underneath the mask, that it hurts. There's a chuckle.

That was how this whole thing began—when his father closed the city gates on beggars. Refugees.

How quickly self righteousness fades, when it is no longer accompanied by indignation. When it's no longer convenient.

Xie Lian won't have it.

He won't let them get off so easily.

"Wu Ming." He commands flatly, not needing to elaborate before the ghost bows his head in acknowledgement, murmuring;

"Dianxia."

Xie Lian begins the slow walk towards the gates—unaided by a hand on his elbow this time, but with no worry that he'll fall.

He can hear it beginning, around him.

The faint cries of palace guards. The clang of a saber.

Xie Lian never has to change his gait, never has to pause once. If a body falls in his path, it's cleared away before it brushes his feet.

A siege, laid by a single soldier.

When he reaches the gates, they stand open for him. That hand is back on his arm again, guiding him to step over the threshold—and then, lips murmur next to his ear,

"Keep straight, your highness."

Giving him directions. Just like Hong-er used to—

The calamity grits his teeth.

Some part of him that he can't control shivers at the feeling of breath, ice cold, hitting his jaw—but not in an unpleasant way.

Without answering, he continues moving forward.

The sounds of a small battle continue to rage around him, voices cut off, one by one.

Wu Ming returns each time he needs to step through a doorway, or make a turn— touches light, respectful, never changing Xie Lian's pace or momentum, simply guiding.

There’s a rush of air as an arrow hurtles towards the god’s head from behind—but it’s incinerated before it lands.

It’s the first time Xie Lian has walked in the halls of a palace, since his childhood home was burned to the ground.

The floors feel smooth and polished under his feet. He pauses, reaching out to brush his fingertips over the walls.

Gilded, carved with images of battle.

Xie Lian’s fingertips trace over golden chariots, small battalions of pikemen. Archers, flinging tiny little arrows into the sky. When Xie Lian traces the bumps of them towards the sun, he finds a figure there.

A sword in one hand, a flower in the other.

Falling.

“...” Xie Lian’s lips twist into an angry sneer, his fingers jerking back.

They march to war, crying out about poverty, about their conditions, their suffering.

They destroy his home, slaughter his people.

Xie Lian has been living in their world, now—

There’s still poverty.

They didn’t fix the world. They didn’t cure disease, or give back to the people.

Lang Ying fought a war, toppled a dynasty, all because of their ineptitude. The suffering of the common people.

Then took credit for the ending of a drought. But he didn’t end any suffering.

He just carved murals about it. About him.

Xie Lian’s jaw aches.

How many red coral earrings is this one mural worth? How many lives?

BAM !

The battle shatters under his fist, bits of gold foil and marble crumbling and landing at his feet.

What a joke.

What a *lie* .

He turns back, continuing his slow, purposeful march.

He won't have it.

He won't let them get off so easily.

Xie Lian won't let *him* get off so easily.

This palace, like the kingdom it governs, is a cheap imitation. Pretending to be something that it isn't: an improvement.

There are echoes of Xianle everywhere he touches. In the furnishings. The materials. But the craftsmanship is subpar. There's no art to any of it. No joy.

Only the stink of the blood in it's foundations. The price they paid, to sleep in luxury. The hand on his arm is back.

Helping him turn down the hall, and when Xie Lian breathes in, he smells something surprising.

Fortified energy. Talismans. So many, it's almost acidic under his nose in its strength. He turns his head for a moment, almost concerned for Wu Ming, it can't be comfortable, but...

Then, he smells them burning—hundreds, crumbling to ash, scattering before they land.

Finally, there's a heavy creak as the doors to the throne room swing open. Xie Lian pulls his elbow gently, and Wu Ming lets him go without protest.

He walks forward, fingertips trailing against the walls, then the doors—feeling the deep scars in the wood, left behind by the talismans that burned.

There's only one living thing in the throne room, panicked breathing, a shuddering heartbeat.

A slow smile spreads over his face

“Were you worried, your majesty?” He calls out, his tone slightly jeering. He catches one shredded piece of talisman paper, fluttering through the air—holding it delicately between two fingers.

“You were trying very hard to keep out evil,” the crown prince muses, head tilting.

The remains of the talisman ignite between his fingers, going up in a flash of smoke, ash crumbling in front of his boots.

“Has something been haunting you?”

Silence follows, then—then Xie Lian hears that heartbeat slow, like he isn’t quite so frightened anymore.

“...It’s you?”

The idea that realizing it’s the crown prince of Xianle might bring Xie Lian comfort fills his chest with anger.

“It is.” He replies coldly. Somewhere, he hears a child crying.

“...Have you come to kill me?” The king murmurs, devoid of the one thing Xie Lian desires—

Fear.

Before, Xie Lian couldn't touch him. He was shrouded by the aura of a king, heaven's mandate wouldn't allow the fallen god to fight back, only allowed the human hero to cast him down.

Xie Lian doesn't need to attack now, to know that the King of Yong'an is no longer untouchable.

There's no scent of heavenly aura on his body now, just-- Xie Lian pauses, nostrils flaring.

Just the opposite.

This place stinks of illness, rot, and death.

A curse.

The prince walks forward, his voice frigid with anger, "What is this?"

The scent of a curse is here.

With each step that brings him closer, the crying gets louder, and the scent gets stronger. Of—of—

Xie Lian stops in front of him, his hands going limp by his sides.

"...You caught it," he starts, his voice low with disbelief. "...How is that possible?"

Human face disease.

It shouldn't be possible. After all—Lang Ying is as much of a killer as Xie Lian. As any of the soldiers who fought in the war.

And yet—

"No..." Lang Ying shakes his head, voice trembling, and—

It almost sounds like he's at peace.

"I don't have Human Face Disease."

Xie lian's eyebrows knit together as he steps back, shaking his head, looking in Wu Ming's direction frantically, because the thought of touching the man's body to check is too revolting—

"He has the lesions, dianxia," Wu Ming murmurs. "He's lying to you."

"I'm not!"

Lang Ying cries, clutching his arms around his chest, hunching forward. Xie Lian can't see the way he strokes the faces sprouting from his skin—adoring, but he can smell the rot wafting from him. Can hear the agonized cries.

"This is my wife," he explains slowly, "and my son!"

"..." Xie Lian pauses, trying to take that in. "...Who told you that?"

"...He did," Lang Ying mutters—and Xie Lian doesn't have to ask who. The answer is always the same. The same voice, wearing different masks. "It was a gift."

No.

Xie Lian grimaces with disgust.

It was a trick, disguised as a reward.

Bai Wuxiang was probably laughing as the human thanked him, waiting for the king of Yong'an to receive the fruits of his efforts.

"Tell me," Xie Lian questions, standing over him, "how that thing ever convinced you this was a gift."

"...If I give it enough time, they'll come back," Lang Ying replies, his voice trembling—half agonized, half hopeful. "That's what he told me. Where is he? I-I did everything he asked, I..."

His voice trails off, weak, and Xie Lian trembles, realizing the truth.

He...

He's still such a slow learner, isn't he?

Lang Ying is dying. Xie Lian just happened to arrive in time for his final moments. No.

His body trembles.

No, no, *no* .

Wu Ming approaches the god's side, voice gentle, "...Dianxia, y—"

The ghost cuts off sharply, unable to speak.

Oh, Xie Lian realizes faintly, he really wasn't kidding, before. He was serious. The god's fingers curl tightly around his follower's throat, nails digging in. 'He really would let me disperse him without a fight, wouldn't he?'

Such bravery.

His fingers squeeze tighter.

Foolish, but brave.

Once the calamity's nails break skin, he's able to take what he needs—spiritual power.

Xie Lian hasn't felt energy like this pulsing through his veins in years, flooding through him like ice, surprising in its potency.

This ghost was far stronger than the crown prince realized at first glance. After only a moment, he's taken enough.

He allows his fingers to go slack, expecting the creature to flee from him—but it doesn't.

Wu Ming sits calmly in his grip, staring down at his god, unflinching.

"..." Xie Lian drops his hand, flexing his fingers as he looks away, pushing down a rush of shame.

He doesn't have time for that. Not right now.

"...You're a fool," he mutters, turning back to Lang Ying. "That thing was never going to help you."

"He said—"

"HE'S A LIAR!"

Xie Lian's voice roars, making the walls shake from the force of it—and the spiritual power he took from Wu Ming surges forth, lifting the King of Yong'an into the air.

His heart won't stop, now—Xie Lian will keep it beating. He won't—

"LISTEN TO THEM!" He shrieks, wrathful. "LISTEN!"

The room falls silent, and there's only sobbing. Pained cries. Tortured souls, forced to linger on in agony.

"HOW COULD YOU THINK THIS WAS A GIFT?!"

Lang Ying's expression freezes, hands clutching over his chest. He—he was listening, he was—

"The calamity, he—!"

"HE DIDN'T DO THIS!" Xie Lian cries, sleeves billowing as he thrashes before this man, agonized, because—

There's nothing more Xie Lian can do to him. He can't torture him. Can't make him suffer more than this.

"YOU DID THIS!" The crying gets louder, more tortured.

Bai Wuxiang never forces anyone to do anything. Xie Lian has learned that, by now.

He schemes, lies, and tricks. He manipulates, goads, and torments.

But the mistakes you make are your own. The crimes you commit, they lay on your head.

"IS THAT WHY?!" Xie Lian sobs.

He was able to avenge Hong-er. That's his sole comfort, now.

Because Bai Wuxiang robbed the crown prince of Xianle of the chance to avenge himself. His family. His kingdom.

There's nothing left for him to take.

"IS THAT WHAT HE PROMISED YOU, IF YOU DID ALL OF THIS?!"

Did Xie Lian lose everything for a lie? Because one lonely, desperate man was so blinded by grief, he was willing to follow that thing?

Is this what his family lost their home for?

Is this why Xie Lian lost his godhood, his sight? His hon—?

"No," a voice whispers.

Xie Lian stops, trembling.

"...I felt like a ghost," Lang Ying whispers, his voice cracking. "The rest...the rest of the world was so normal, but...my boy..."

Xie Lian's eyes sting.

"...I had to carry him...so far," the king croaks, "and no one...no one would even look." Tears slip down his face, cheeks sunken in, skin sallow. "He...he was so small," the king croaks, a sob ripping from him, "I-I carried him so far, and no one would listen!"

Xie Lian hangs his head, clutching his hands over his chest. "...I know," he whimpers. "I remember."

"I stood in your temples, I watched people toss SO MANY gold pieces into the offering plates, the pools—they wouldn't even let me take a HANDFUL!" Lang Ying shrieks. "WERE THOSE OFFERINGS WORTH MORE THAN MY SON?! WERE THEIR PRAYERS SO IMPORTANT?!"

Xie Lian shakes his head.

He stumbles backwards, lips trembling.

"...No," he admits, his voice quiet, small. "No, they—"

He almost trips over his own feet, but a hand is at his back, steadying him.

"Your son was already dead," Wu Ming's voice rings out. Flat, unmoved by Lang Ying's sorrow.

"That gold wouldn't have saved him."

"But there were others, just like him, there were SO many others, and they—THEY WOULDN'T EVEN LOOK!" Lang Ying shakes his head, limp, graying hair clinging to his face. "HOW COULD THEY BE SO HAPPY?!"

Xie Lian hangs his head.

"HOW COULD THEY BE SO HAPPY," he shrieks, no, he sobs, "IN A WORLD WHERE MY SON WAS DEAD?!"

"...Children are still dying, Lang Ying," Xie Lian mutters, his voice empty, tired. "You just don't have to carry them anymore."

Xie Lian carried a child in his arms once. So...so far. Dead, and for what?

Because Lang Ying wasn't content to grieve by himself? Because a demon called out, offering a death sentence in disguise, and this fool ran to the slaughter?

"How much gold did you use to build this place?" Xie Lian murmurs, lifting his chin. "When the nobles that once bowed before me came to your balls, dined in your hall, did it feel any easier, to be happy in a world without your son?"

He steps closer, footsteps echoing against arched ceilings.

Wu Ming stands to the side, hands clasped behind his back—watching.

"When the gold they used to build my temples built your throne, did he stop screaming?"

They both know that isn't true—he's still screaming now.

Not because of Xie Lian. Not because of his parents. Or Xianle. Or Hong-er. Not even the drought that took him.

Lang Ying.

Lang Ying did this.

It's all so pointless.

All of it. All of the suffering. The pain. The loss. Everything Xie Lian has endured, at the hands of this man's need to share his pain.

He can't see the way Lang Ying smiles, tears pouring from his eyes as he lets out a pained laugh.

"No," he admits, "but it felt so much better than doing nothing."

Xie Lian flinches in anger, opening his mouth to press the king more, to call him a fool, when—

Clink!

Something falls to the ground with a clatter, rolling across the floor, bumping against the god's toe.

Xie Lian pauses, and after a moment, he realizes, dropping to his knees, fingers fumbling out until they find—

A pearl.

A small pearl bead, fitting perfectly between his fingers. Xie Lian doesn't need his eyes to know the color, how it shines.

"...You kept this." The god whispers—remembering.

He helped Lang Ying, once.

Before Hong-er. Before he fell. Before the plague and the war.

Xie Lian tried to help him.

Xie Lian listened to him.

Xie Lian saw the man's little boy, he—

He looked.

And Lang Ying cursed him anyway.

"...I should have thanked you," the king rasps, "for the pearl."

Xie Lian doesn't look up, clutching the earring so tightly between his fingers that they begin to ache.

"If you had...given it to me sooner..." The prince's eyes well up with tears. "...Things would have been different."

Xie Lian clutches the pearl to his chest. How?

He gave the pearl to Lang Ying the day that he met him. The moment he found out about the man's suffering. How could things have been different for Xie Lian?!

"...I hate you," he whispers.

Xie Lian gave both earrings in this set away, in one way or another. Once willingly, to a man who turned around and cursed him.

Once unwillingly, to the boy who followed him faithfully. Then knowingly, allowing it to burn with him on his funeral pyre.

Two pearls in a matching set, given to such different people—following such different paths.

Xie Lian feels the bead bump against Hong-er.

Eventually ending up in the same place.

"I don't hate you, your highness," Lang Ying rasps, his breaths rattling.

The prince freezes.

"After my boy died..." the crying is softer now, weaker, "you were the only one that was kind to me."

Xie Lian lifts his head slowly, staring at the man before him blindly, dumbfounded. "I always...thought of you as a friend."

Silence.

No crying. No screaming.

Just silence.

A friend?

He—?

Xie Lian chokes, shoulders shaking with something between rage, disbelief, and sorrow.

"HOW COULD YOU SAY THAT?!" He shouts, nails cutting into his palms.

"Your highness—"

"AFTER EVERYTHING YOU DID TO ME, HOW COULD YOU SAY THAT?!" The body falls to the floor with a thump, and Xie Lian falls silent.

Behind him, Wu Ming's voice is quiet, cautious, "Your highness—he's already dead."

He—?

Xie Lian shudders, twisting the pearl between his fingers.

He used the spiritual energy up already? He—but he—

Xie Lian had more to say. More to do. How he—how could he be dead?! That—

He feels like a child again, running into his mothers arms, wailing after losing a game to Feng Xin again. He was always bigger than Xie Lian, even when they were small. Stronger. Faster.

'No Fair! '

He would cry as she lifted him into his arms, burying her face in her dress.

'It's not fair!'

She would always comfort him—but his father was much more stern, grabbing him by the shoulders.

'Stop whining! He's just better than you are right now.' The prince shudders.

'If you want to win next time—just work harder!'

Xie Lian can't work harder. He already tried. He—

He tried SO hard, and there was never a point.

It's not until he looks up that he notices the sound of a saber rattling through the air, chopping the body into pieces.

Until it's completely unrecognizable. Not human. Not even an animal. Just a mass of flesh, bone, and torn fabric.

Xie Lian doesn't move from his place on the floor, wrapping his arms around himself, shivering.

"...I didn't tell you to do that," he mutters, almost irritated.

When he's finished, Wu Ming returns to his side, kneeling, his head bowed low. "Dianxia didn't need to dirty his hands with such a creature," the ghost replies.

"..." Underneath his mask, Xie Lian's face contorts.

His palm tingles, where it wrapped around Wu Ming's throat.

"...I'm sorry," he spits the words out, shocked that he could feel apologetic for anything now, but he does. "I shouldn't have done that."

Wu Ming doesn't ask the calamity what he means, his posture unchanging, "It was an honor, to be useful to dianxia."

Xie Lian flinches.

He remembers someone else, who served him once. With such loyalty and dignity.

'I'm sorry...that I couldn't be more useful to you, your highness.'

The memory of those words aches more now, as time passes.

Xie Lian shakes his head, his voice thick with self loathing.

“I still shouldn’t have done it,” he repeats, swallowing hard. “I’ve never taken very good care of the people who follow me.”

The sorrow in his final words is profound. It brings a cold with it, like a rattling wind, chilling Xie Lian to the bone.

After a pause, the black clad youth replies, “...If it would soothe dianxia’s conscience, this servant could make a request.”

“...” The God turns his head in Wu Ming’s direction, “...A request?” He questions slowly.

“A reward,” the ghost confirms with a nod.

Xie Lian is hesitant at first, distrustful—but slowly, he nods. “...There isn’t much I’m capable of giving now,” he sighs, “but if it’s something I can give, name it.”

Wu Ming’s voice is softer now, filled with an emotion Xie Lian can’t fathom; “I would never ask for something beyond dianxia’s power.”

Xie Lian supposes he should feel grateful—or maybe ashamed, that this soldier is giving him so much, and the only thing Xie Lian can give him in return is suffering.

“Name it, Wu Ming.”

There’s soft rustling as the young man moves closer, asking quietly—“Your hand.”

The god’s brow furrows.

“Could dianxia give this servant his hand, for a moment?”

Xie Lian’s confusion only grows—but it’s such a simple request, how could he deny him?

He complies slowly, lifting his palm out in front of him. Quickly, so easily, gloved fingers grasp his wrist, bringing the god’s arm forward. So gently that Xie Lian never feels a moment of worry, but—

He doesn’t realize that Wu Ming took off his mask until he feels his lips.

Cool to the touch, pressing a kiss against the pack of the prince’s knuckles.

The gentlest kiss that Xie Lian has ever been given, barely even a whisper of a touch at first—then firmer, slightly more lingering when he realizes the god isn’t shrinking away with disgust.

In spite of everything, Xie Lian’s heart pounds, rattling against his ribs.

He can’t remember the last time someone touched him, and he wasn’t afraid. He can’t remember the last time someone touched him, and he didn’t pray for it to end.

His fingers squeeze around Wu Ming’s.

"...This is all you wanted?" Xie Lian whispers, his voice trembling. "After all of that?"

Wu Ming presses another kiss against his skin, softer, almost like he didn't mean to do it, like it was something he indulged in.

For just a moment, Xie Lian's chest tenses with anxiety.

He remembers that man in the woods. The things that he wanted. How angry he became, when Xie Lian changed his mind. He remembers those men in the temple. The things they wanted to take from him, when he couldn't fight back.

Is that what Wu Ming wants? And if it is...

...would Xie Lian be willing to give it to him? He thinks—he thinks he —

Wu Ming lifts his head, and the moment those lips leave him, Xie Lian's chest feels a painful tug. Like he doesn't want it to end. Like he wants to feel that kindness—for just a little longer.

"It's the most this servant could ever hope for," Wu Ming answers quietly, slipping his mask back into place. "Thank you, dianxia."

It feels like a small thing. Such a small thing, in comparison to how cruel Xie Lian knows he's being. How ungrateful.

Why would he...?

"U—Uncle?"

Xie Lian doesn't let go of his hand, slowly turning his head, following the sound of the voice. It sounds like a child—low, horrified.

"UNCLE?! WHAT—WHAT HAPPENED?!"

Guards—the ones that have been left alive, start calling out in turn, screaming—

Ghosts. There are ghosts here.

Wu Ming helps Xie Lian to his feet, and the god almost smiles.

He supposes he is a ghost, now. There's no practical difference between him and then.

He has no loved ones. He's forgotten, invisible to most. Causes hatred and fear in those who do know him.

And he can't die.

"...Burn this place," he murmurs, his hand slipping from Wu Ming's as he walks forward, not bothering to raise his guard.

No one will touch him now.

Wu Ming bows his head, clasping one hand over his chest, twisting his fingers around one strand of his ponytail.

Toying with something braided into long, silken pieces of raven hair. A small bead.

"...Yes, sir." He murmurs.

Xie Lian is slow, making his way down the halls.

He knows the way, now. Can hear the screams of battle. The heat from the flames as they begin to grow and hiss.

He walks through the halls. Listens as the golden murals crack and crumble. As people try to stop the flames, to save the structure before it's damaged beyond repair.

Don't they know?

Xie Lian stops for a moment, on the bridge leading to the palace gates, looking back.

Golden palaces always end up falling down, in the end.

That's the point.

It's the natural consequence of building them.

He's so distracted by it, he doesn't hear the sound of someone rushing towards him. So quick, so fast, even Wu Ming doesn't seem to...

Well, actually—that's Xie Lian's fault. He sent the ghost off to burn the place to the ground.

"YOU DAMN MONSTER!" The soldier shouts right in front of Xie Lian's face—the sound so startling, that the god takes a stumbling step back, just as the young man shoves him—hard.

Monster?

Xie Lian whips his head around, listening closely, breathing in. Did Bai Wuxiang come back? Is he here now? Why would he be—? Oh.

Xie Lian doesn't know the edge of the bridge is there until he's tumbling over the side of it, plummeting into the ravine it covers.

That's—

That's just him. He's the monster.

The air whistles past him—and he can't even bring himself to be afraid of the pain he'll feel, upon landing. Only irritated by the time it will take for his body to pull itself back together.

Then, Xie Lian isn't falling anymore.

There's a set of arms around him, cradling the god like something infinitely precious —a treasure made of glass. The front of his armor is hard in places—but Xie Lian's cheek presses against the gap, feeling the soft fabric of the shirt he wears beneath.

Cold, but comforting.

It smells like the forest after it rains. Soft, wild, but clean.

There's a rush of air around them, and when Xie Lian shudders, waiting for them both to be crushed by the landing, those arms hold him closer, and there's a whisper —

"Don't be scared."

Oh.

His throat aches.

Xie Lian isn't afraid. A little relieved, when Wu Ming lands on his feet. Winded, when the ghost jumps, clearing the bridge again in one leap, his god still carefully clutched in his arms.

But he is sad.

So unbearably sad, remembering a time when he wasn't the one falling.

Remembering how frightened Hong-er was back then, trembling as

Xie Lian continued the fight with the boy in his arms.

It seems so silly now, that the prince didn't stop the parade all together, right then and there.

Back then, he was the one saying, *'Don't be scared.'*

The arms around him clutch him a little closer, and Xie Lian squeezes his eyes tight, his breaths unsteady.

He doesn't want to think about Hong-er. Not anymore. It's too connected to every other part of him, all of the things that Xie Lian doesn't want to feel.

It hurts.

After what Bai Wuxiang did, it's the only part of him left that still hurts.

But after this is done—Xie Lian thinks he might be free of it.

He doubts Jun Wu will let him walk free, after he does this. More likely than not, he'll be too dangerous to be allowed to exist.

"...Put me down," he whispers, his voice lacking the strength he desperately wants to project.

Wu Ming doesn't comment—only obeys, carefully setting the god on his feet.

"Where would you like to go next, dianxia?"

"..." Xie Lian sinks to his knees after a moment, thinking.

He already knows the answer—and he also knows that, one way or the other, it will be their final destination.

Oddly enough, after a life as famous and complicated as his, Xie Lian can't think of any other loose ends he wants to tie up. He has no family left.

Mu Qing doesn't want anything to do with him. Feng Xin—he's probably alone and miserable somewhere, blaming himself for Xie Lian's own failings.

Ironically enough, the only person left that knows him well enough to give Xie Lian a meaningful goodbye is the white clothed calamity

And he's sure that one will show up, before Xie Lian faces some final form of punishment.

All of the regrets he has—they can't be undone, either. There's nothing left. Except... Except for one thing, actually.

Something that occurred to him before, in the throne room.

"...Wu Ming," he murmurs, slipping his mask off of his face. The air feels almost like a relief against his skin, like he can finally breathe again, even if it's strained.

"Yes, dianxia?"

"...Come here," the god's voice is quiet—and the black clad youth kneels immediately.

Xie Lian reaches out, feeling with his fingers until they come across the surface of Wu Ming's mask. Hard—perfectly smooth. They trail to the side, finding the ledge, fingers hooking around—and he half expects the ghost to stop him from removing it, but he doesn't.

He waits.

Xie Lian is quiet for a moment, heart beating unsteadily in his chest. "Could you..."

Wu Ming watches the god's expression, the way his mouth trembles, then sets with resolve.

"Could you do that again?"

"..." The youth tilts his head, about to ask—

"Kiss me, again."

Xie Lian can't see the eyes that widen, pupils dilating with shock. Can't see the mouth that parts slightly, then shuts.

He feels fingers grasping at his own, lifting his hand up—and just before those lips brush his knuckles the prince speaks again, voice wobbling;

"Not there."

Xie Lian spent the entire walk back from that temple wondering about the small mercies Bai Wuxiang showed him, and why. He still doesn't understand why the demon changed his clothes, combed his hair. Maybe it was intended to arouse Feng Xin's suspicions, but...

When Xie Lian thinks of the man that started to reach between his thighs, before Bai Wuxiang let the ghost fire take his life—

(Thinking of the ghost fire is so difficult now too, so painful.)

Xie Lian couldn't understand why, out of every other agony he was subjected to...

Why spare him from that? Why show that small amount of mercy?

But he understands why, now.

'Eventually, you'll come to my side.'

Xie Lian is starting to think that meant...more than what he originally understood. It places the moment he wore Feng Xin's face in a new light.

If Feng Xin had actually been Xie Lian's first kiss, his only kiss, the god wouldn't have minded that. It would have felt fitting, in a way.

Part of him wants to count that moment with the ghost fire but...how could he?

And now, it feels like Bai Wuxiang simply relished in the knowledge that he stole that from him. That's what it feels like. As though someone reached deep in and clawed out his insides, leaving him hollowed out and numb, like a lantern without a light.

Xie Lian was slow.

He was a slow learner, back then. But he learned.

And he knows better now, than to think it's over. Than to think that Bai Wuxiang won't try to take more from him in the future. And when he does, he'll relish in the knowledge that Xie Lian didn't want to share it.

That he was the first, and the only.

Xie Lian waits, heart skipping around in his chest, his hand wracked with tremors in Wu Ming's grip. The youth holds him so lightly, not immediately responding or obeying. Not like before.

But he doesn't recoil, or push Xie Lian away.

"…" The god pulls his hand back, and by extension, Wu Ming's with it, bringing his fingers to his lips. "Here," he murmurs, hearing a sharp intake of breath.

"Kiss me here."

It's fine, right?

He touches Xie Lian with the sort of longing that implies desire.

He must want to, right?

Xie Lian waits, shivering, to see what the ghost will do.

Is it not a tempting offer, the way it may have been in the past? Maybe not, after the things the ghost has seen Xie Lian do. Is he not desirable?

Has he finally stopped being beautiful?

Part of him almost hopes that's true. Maybe then, no one will want anything from him anymore. Maybe then, people won't try so hard to take things away. Maybe—

Those fingers slip from his wrist—and the moment Xie Lian feels shame rise in his chest, expecting…him to…

Before, when Xie Lian said those things in front of Qi Rong…Wu Ming…didn't react badly. When he kissed Xie Lian's hand, the prince…he thought—

The Ghost leans forward, and Xie Lian's breaths halt, hands falling down into his lap, struggling to stay still—

He feels lips.

Not where he asked for them, but pressed against his forehead. Soft, so careful.

Xie Lian's lower lip wobbles, and his breathing resumes, this time ragged, unsure if this is a gentle way of saying no, or…

Wu Ming's mouth moves down—slow. Xie Lian's breaths come faster.

It takes the prince a moment to realize that the ghost is intentionally giving him a chance to change his mind, making sure the kiss doesn't come out of nowhere—that Xie Lian—

His eyes are shut, but they sting.

...He doesn't want Xie Lian to be afraid.

'Don't be scared.'

His nose is cold, when it bumps against Xie Lian's—but not in the way one might associate with a ghost. It makes him think of winter mornings, rushing out to look for snow, breath fogging in front of his lips.

Nights spent cupping his hands over his mouth, breathing heat into his palms, missing summer afternoons, staying out too late, his mother calling him back inside, telling him to stop running so fast—to stop chasing butterflies.

His skin is cold, but every brush brings nostalgia.

Their mouths are level, then—those fingers lightly grasping his jaw, tilting him up, and Xie Lian feels Wu Ming stop one more time, giving him one last chance to say no, but—

The prince is the one who leans forward with a soft sound of anxious impatience, closing the gap.

Oh.

Xie Lian knows technically, you're probably supposed to kiss with your eyes closed. Honestly, he can't tell the difference—but it's likely somewhat disturbing for the person on the other end of it.

But for a moment, he's just staring ahead blankly, dazed.

It doesn't hurt.

The press of Wu Ming's mouth is soft, careful—despite Xie Lian's anxious, clumsy way of initiating. Not pressing for more—and the prince can't imagine that the ghost would, he probably has no idea what Xie Lian was thinking when he made the request, but...

Xie Lian closes his eyes, not necessarily deepening the kiss, but melting into it, relaxing completely in the young man's hold, and something about that...draws a reaction.

Subtle, but the grip on his jaw is slightly more firm, and one lip slides between his, drawing a small gasp

Those fingers tighten again, digging into his skin—but not unpleasantly. No—no, Xie Lian, he...

His stomach drops slightly when he feels the ghost starting to pull away, frantically thinking—

No.

The prince presses closer, arms blindly sliding around Wu Ming's neck. Please—

An arm wraps around his back, long fingers spreading there, steadying him as Xie Lian clings around Wu Ming's neck, thinking—

'Just a little longer.'

And finally, he feels the ghost ease into it as well, sinking deeper, holding Xie Lian closer.

'Just a little bit longer.'

The Crown Prince's first kiss wasn't actually much of a kiss at all. It was a trick. In the years, no, centuries that follow—he'll come to understand that it's as a form of assault.

This, however, feels like a choice. One that Xie Lian made on his own. One that doesn't hurt.

It's...

Wu Ming's hair is soft under his fingers, like silk. His mouth is firm against Xie Lian's now, but never trying to take anything, just—

Just enjoying him, without asking for more.

Xie Lian's heart squeezes with uncertain, painful euphoria.

Good—this—

This is *good* .

And there are so many things that he knows he'll never have.

Xie Lian knows that he'll never hold the person he wanted. He'll never marry, or have a family of his own. He'll never be admired and loved the way he once was.

There are so many words Xie Lian will never hear.

So many memories that he'll never have. So many other kinds of touches, experiences, and feelings, but…

He'll have this. This moment—it'll always belong to him, even if…

Slowly, Xie Lian pulls back, arms still loosely wrapped around Wu Ming's neck, and… he bites his lip.

"…I'm sorry," he mutters, his breaths still uneven, cheeks flushed. "I shouldn't have…" The prince swallows thickly, placing one hand on Wu Ming's chest as he pushes himself away, "I shouldn't have done that."

The Ghost lets him retreat, but keeps a hand on his back.

"Dianxia hasn't done anything wrong," Wu Ming assured him quietly—but his voice is different. Slightly breathless and uneven, and it only makes Xie Lian feel—

"This servant was happy to be useful to him."

"…" His lips tremble slightly.

That's just the problem.

Wu Ming isn't here because he had that sort of desire for Xie Lian to begin with. He's here because—

Because he was a soldier of Xianle, and he wants to serve his prince. Because he died for his country, which in turn forgot him, and he wants revenge.

He isn't here for this.

But he did it anyway, because Xie Lian asked it of him. And the prince—he can't help but think—

He keeps remembering what he was thinking, when someone kissed him with Feng Xin's face. How petrified and sad he was—but how he didn't want his friend to leave.

Was that what Wu Ming was feeling, just now? Was that why he was so hesitant, so careful, even when he pulled Xie Lian closer? Is he—

Xie Lian's lips tremble as he looks away, caught between the exhilaration of taking something back for himself, and the guilt of knowing...

He might have taken something away from Wu Ming in the process. He might—

He might have done the same thing as Bai Wuxiang.

He—How could he—?

Slowly, the ghost lifts the mask back over his face—Xie Lian can hear the sounds of it sliding back into place.

"If it would ease his highness's conscience," the ghost murmurs, repeating the same words he said before—but in such a different context now, "this servant could make a request of him."

Xie Lian nods, forcing himself into a state of numbness, lips still tingling. "Name it."

At first, he doubts there's anything he could offer that would make up for the way he's used Wu Ming. Callously, without thought, but—

There's a hand over his, squeezing softly, with a kindness Xie Lian knows that he doesn't deserve.

"Let me be the one to do it."

Xie Lian pauses, his eyebrows knitting together with confusion. "...Do it?" He questions, slightly unsure of what he—

"Release the Human Face Disease."

The lead weight in Xie Lian's gut sinks even deeper.

Oh.

"...You want to do it yourself?" He questions, looking away.

"Yes," the ghost replies, his hand still squeezing Xie Lian's. "The people of Yong'an brought suffering to the person that's precious to me."

Xie Lian's chin dips slightly as the young man speaks.

"It would please me, to be the one who unleashes this upon them."

Xie Lian pulls his hand away, clutching his fingers against his chest.

"...No," he mutters. "it has to be me."

Wu Ming doesn't respond, just watches him from behind a blank, smiling mask.

"You'll have to think of something else."

Even now, there's no protests from the ghost.

"...As dianxia wishes," he replies, slowly rising to his feet, helping his god rise up as he does so.

Xie Lian doesn't pick up the mask again, just stares blankly down at his own hand, wondering what it must look like, holding Wu Ming's.

"Aren't you going to ask?"

Wu Ming tilts his head, replying, "After." Those fingers curl around his one more time, squeezing gently. "This servant will ask dianxia after he finishes his work."

Xie Lian squeezes his eyes shut, nodding.

Good, that's—that's good. Then, he can give Wu Ming whatever he asks.

After a pause, the youth asks, "Where would dianxia like to go now?"

To the end, Xie Lian thinks. To where all of this started.

"...Lang-er bay," he responds, his voice suddenly cold. "Take me to Lang-er bay."

Again, Wu Ming leads him down the path.

"Yes, your highness."

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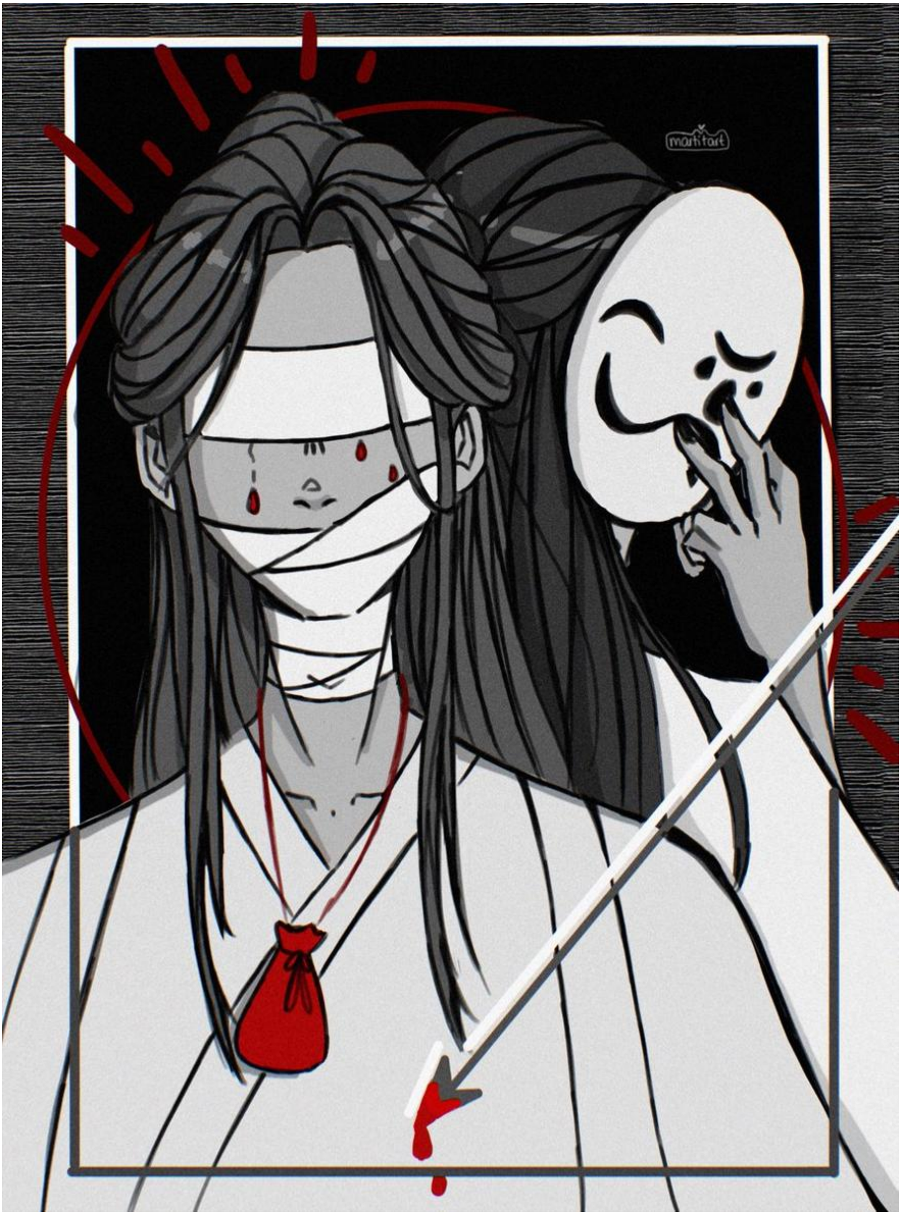

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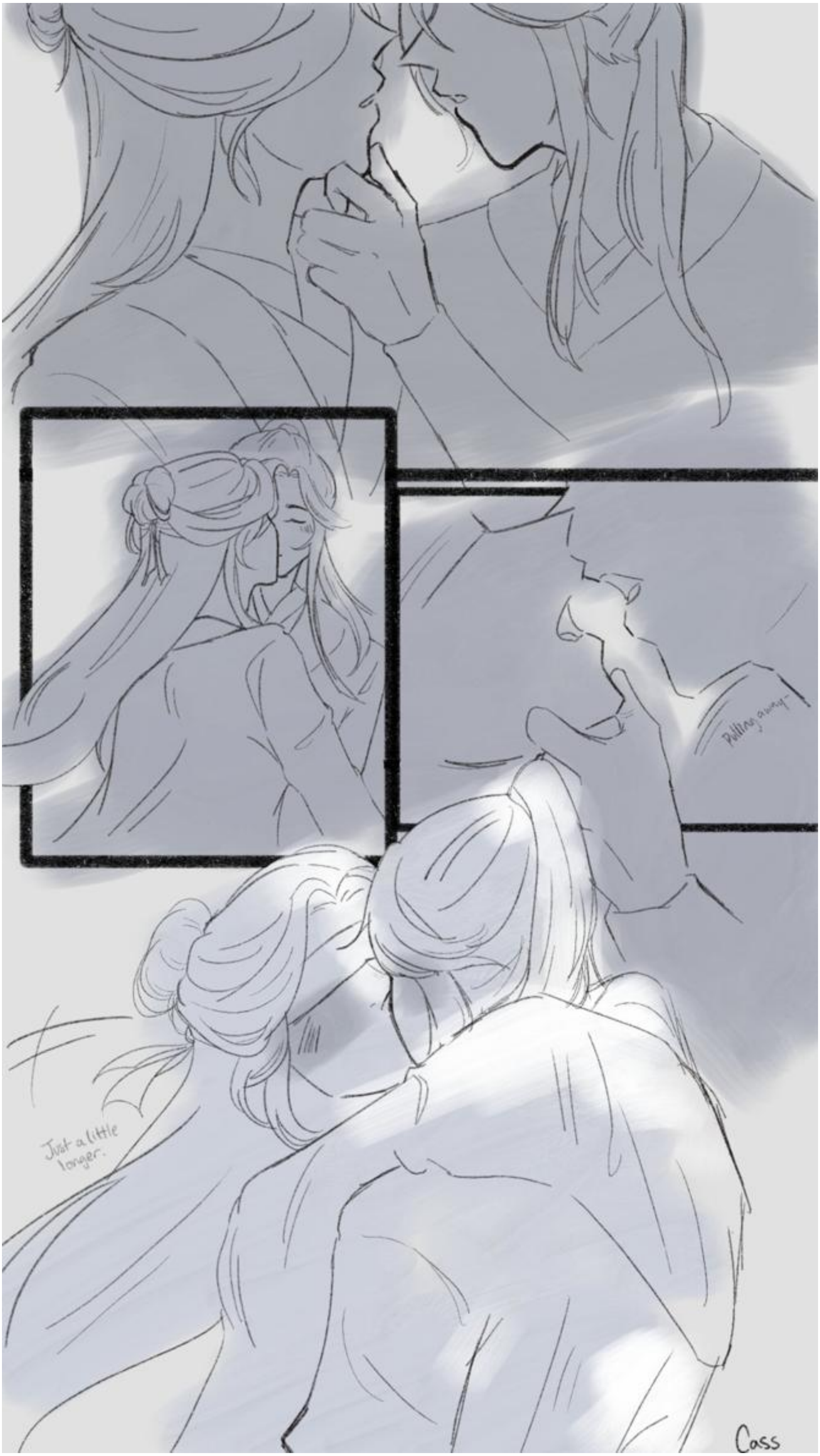
Pulling away~
Just a little longer.
Cass

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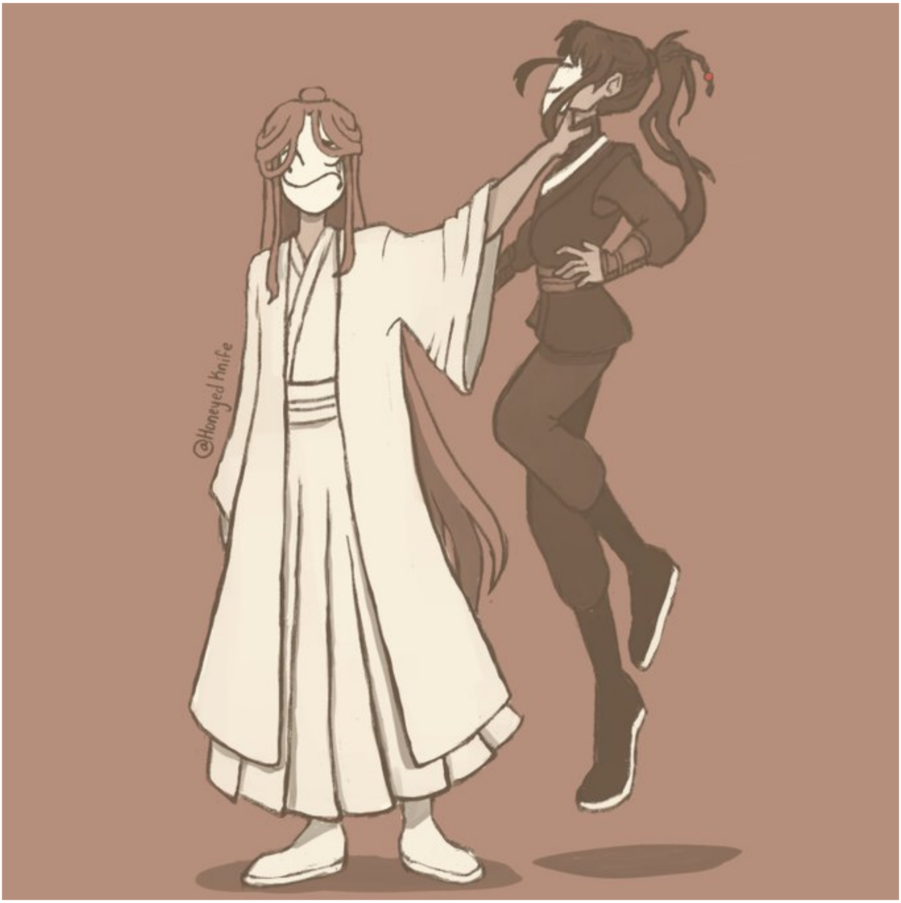
tw// kinda violent? maybe nsfw? 100% funny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Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to all of the artists who have made such beautiful pieces for this story! The response has been incredible, and you all motivate me so much and are so amazing for my creativity! And thank you also to everyone who has been supporting the story on twitter. Ya'll are the reason I can write at the pace I do, and you make it so much fun!

Big thanks to Marta, Ren, Honey, Cass, Lakitsune, and JunkyArtist for allowing their work to be included in this chapter! They are extremely talented, and we're all lucky in the TGCF fandom to have so many amazing artists that are constantly sharing their work with us for free! Please go and support them in any way you can, it's very much deserved! ❤

Thank you all for continuing to read / support this story here and on twitter, your comments and kudos are appreciated, I'm very grateful! 🙇

xoxo, Evie 💋

A Slow Learner

Chapter Summary

The rain stops.

That's what Xie Lian thinks, at first, until he feels the weight on his head—slight, but solid, stopping the rain from soaking him any further.

A bamboo hat.

The prince freezes for a moment, then looks up with a glare, unable to see that the merchant is glaring right back at him. "What are you looking at me like that for?! It's just a little yelling. How is that worth getting so upset over?"

"..." Xie Lian pauses, unable to answer.

"...I didn't realize you were blind," the man admits, scratching the back of his head, his voice clearly a little sheepish. "You should've said something."

Chapter Notes

tw// VIOLENCE, SELF HARM, kind of...? Character death? Depending on how you look at it. HEAVY spoilers for book 4.

You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

This story also has some spotify playlists for those who want some fun listening while reading!

No Paths Are Bound: The Playlist
Calamity Xie Lian: The Playlist
The Wu Ming Playlist

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The journey feels shorter than it probably should, with Wu Ming gently guiding his god by the elbow, Xie Lian contemplating the things that he has done.

He murdered someone.

Xie Lian has killed before, on a battlefield. That was different. An expected aspect of war.

The men he killed—he never knew their names. Never took pleasure in their suffering. There was a level of impersonality to it.

Not with Qi Rong.

Xie Lian enjoyed that. Still feels a satisfied pinch of glee when he thinks about it now.

He would have murdered Lang Ying, given the chance—tormented him.

But he didn't feel any better, shrieking in the king's face. Didn't feel any closer, when he heard Lang Ying's desperate cries of grief.

You can smash a mirror, but you can't change the reflection.

When they arrive in Lang-er bay, the prince feels the sea breeze against his cheek. The scent of rain, only recently ceased.

How much he went through, to give this place rain.

Xie Lian stops walking.

He listens to the sound of the ocean waves, of children laughing and playing.

The sun is warm on his face, his eyes comfortably shielded from the light they cannot see by Ruoye, wrapped around the upper part of his face.

"...Does dianxia need to find a place to—?"

"I know where I'm going to do it," Xie Lian mutters.

Wu Ming falls silent, waiting.

Xie Lian takes in the sounds of this city. The smells. The thousands of lives, all floating around him at once.

And they're all so happy.

How, how could they ever possibly be happy, in a world like this?

It fills the crown prince with frustrated, vengeful sorrow.

And doubt.

"...Dianx—?"

"Three days," Xie Lian mutters, pulling his hand from Wu Ming's hold. "I'll release it in three days."

The ghost tilts his head, watching him—then nods.

"Yes, your highness."

This, the ghost seems reluctant to do—but he has never once disobeyed an order.

“Stay away, until then.”

He doesn’t disobey now, either—even if he dislikes the idea.

The crown prince stands alone, waiting, listening to the sound of Wu Ming’s footsteps fading into the din of the city streets.

It’s easier to think clearly when the ghost isn’t beside him. To be cold, and cruel—the way that he wants to be.

Xie Lian doesn’t view it as an act of mercy, not really—more as a search for justification.

Even as they go about their lives, pray to their gods, and raise their children—they do so on the rubble of what was once his.

When he walks to the side of the road, lifting fangxin from his side, he thinks that they’ll show him exactly who they are.

Hypocrites—people who are no better or worse than those they replaced. That they have no right to scorn him.

This isn’t Xie Lian’s first time doing this.

He’s run himself through with a sword before—but back then, the act left him screaming in agony on the floor of a cave, trembling from the effort it took not to beg the young soldier protecting him to seek out help.

It hurts still, but in a distant way. Like it’s happening to someone else.

He collapses into the ground, the force of the fall creating a small crater underneath him, and he cries out—

“Help!”

A soft voice, weak, but clear, crying out against a cacophony of sound.

Xie Lian hears people pause, knows that they hear

But each time someone approaches, questioning—people start to recognize him.

Xie Lian took off the mask, after all.

His eyes are closed, hiding the shackle—but Ruoye is wrapped around the hilt of fangxin.

‘ *That...is that the crown prince?’*

They even say his name warily.

As though misfortune and suffering is something that could become contagious. That even acknowledging the fallen god could infect them.

They’ll catch something soon, but it won’t be Xie Lian’s bad luck.

‘Is...is no one really going to help him?’

‘Are you kidding?!’ A voice scoffs. *‘Do you think we’re crazy?! He's the god of misfortune! If we touch him, what kind of luck does that bring down on us!’*

A god of misfortune.

Xie Lian stares blankly against the insides of his eyelids.

There’s one thing about that moniker that has never made sense.

Xie Lian wasn’t actually that unlucky until he fell. That came from the shackle. When he was a god, he...

The prince frowns, fingers playing lightly in the dirt beneath him, wishing that it was a grave.

What was he the god of, anyway?

Battle? Surely not.

Wealth, maybe?

That was what people prayed for the most. Wealth, good health—and children.

Given what he's about to do, Xie Lian doesn't know if he has any strong claim to a past as a medicinal god. And while people often prayed for wealth, those weren't the prayers he paid close attention to.

When Xie Lian thinks back, he tasked Mu Qing and Feng Xin with those. He wasn't actually listening to those who prayed to him directly, most of the time.

That's the most depressing thing about becoming a God. You learn just how rarely they're actually listening.

Xie Lian spends his first day thinking on that, listening as a stall merchant tries to bring him something to drink, only to be stopped by his wife each time.

Maybe the disease will come for her face first, the god thinks nastily. She's already hideous on the inside.

When Xie Lian thinks back on it, the prayers he actually granted were… To people like Lang Ying. The people of Yong'an. The…

Bitterness and anger fills him, at the unfairness of it all.

'No fair!' He used to cry, weeping and reaching for his mother. *'It's not fair!'*

But then, he remembers something else.

Even at the height of his power, there were still some shrines in disrepair. One had a divine statue missing the flower traditionally held in his right fist.

A little boy brought him a fresh, perfectly formed blossom. Every single day.

He keeps telling himself that he doesn't want to think of Hong-er. That it hurts too much. Reminds him of a past that has become too painful to bear.

But when they were on the road from the imperial city to Lang-er bay, Xie Lian noticed something—a flower, tucked behind his ear.

He questioned Wu Ming about it then, startled and angry—and the ghost feigned ignorance, repeating that he wasn't sure what Xie Lian meant.

It was hard, then, for the god to fight back tears—because somehow, he just knew that the petals were as white as snow.

And Xie Lian knows that his companion is gone. That the chain around his neck carries all that's left. But in that moment, it felt like the boy was right beside him, trying to tell him—

Trying to tell him not to do this.

The flower is still in Xie Lian's hair, even now.

If gods are what their most devoted believers associate them with, then Xie Lian would be a god of flowers.

The hand that isn't wrapped around fanxgin's hilt reaches up to his ear, stroking over the petals softly.

He almost smiles.

He would be a god of orphans. Of hope. Of campfire stories and meat buns, split in half to share. A god of weaving.

Wu Ming's beloved used to weave too. He admitted that, on their walk to Lang-er Bay, when Xie Lian felt a string tied around one of the ghost's fingers.

He explained that they—man or woman, Xie Lian isn't sure, he never used specific language—would often keep track of which threads were which by tying them around the young man's fingers as they worked.

Xie Lian used to do that with Hong-er, since he could never see the colors.

More often than not, the boy would insist on including red, which would make the god smile, agreeing each time.

Xie Lian can't remember when he stopped weaving, or why.

He knows, upon contemplation, that he isn't a god of misfortune. It might stalk him wherever he goes, but...

That's his curse. Not his godhood.

On the second day, someone does approach—but not to offer assistance.

“...What on earth are you doing?” A voice drawls, half annoyed, half bemused.

Xie Lian glares at the sky, briefly opening his eyes, the shackle pattern within his irises gleaming up at Bai Wuxiang in anger.

“Go away. You’re boring.”

The calamity smirks, crossing his arms over his chest, shifting his weight onto one foot.

He’s wearing the face of a wealthy young lord today, handsome, wearing robes of jade and green, hair pulled away with his face by fine golden ornaments. Girls sigh fondly as they walk by—and merchants grumble that the young man is bothering with the fallen god.

“Childish.”

Xie Lian knows his voice, anyway. It doesn’t matter what face he wears, or what clothes he decides to wrap himself in. Xie Lian can’t be distracted by any of that.

It makes no difference to him, after all.

“That’s right,” Xie Lian drawls, folding his hands behind his head. “I’m a childish good for nothing,” he yawns, stretching his legs, like it doesn’t even hurt when the movement jostles the blade in his chest. “You should probably just give up on me already. It’s getting sad.”

“...” The calamity’s eyebrows slowly raise, lips parting in disbelief. “I’ll never leave you, your highness.”

Pah .

Xie Lian rolls his eyes, crossing his ankles.

What more can he do, than what he’s already done? Kill the distant cousins that Xie Lian doesn’t even remember? Torture him some more?

Fine. It’s all boring now, anyway.

“Weren’t you the one that was always insulting my followers?” Xie

Lian mutters, “Telling me how foolish and stupid they were?”

How stupid Hong-er was.

“What does that make you, then?”

For the first time, Bai Wuxiang doesn’t seem to know how to answer.

The crown prince yawns.

“Whatever,” he sighs, toying with the flower behind his ear. “If you’re going to be a stalker, do it from a distance. You’re blocking my sun.”

Not that he’s getting much of a tan, exactly. Or that the sword impaling his chest implies that was ever his intention to begin with.

To his credit, even when Bai Wuxiang hops directly into the crater with him, standing over him, Xie Lian doesn’t flinch. His breaths stay the same.

He isn’t afraid.

If you’re forced to live with something long enough, nothing can stay frightening forever.

Not even Bai Wuxiang.

“...No one is going to help you, you know.” The calamity muses, his shadow covering Xie Lian’s face. “Why bother with them?”

Xie Lian scoffs, flicking a pebble towards the calamity’s boot with his fingers, even blind, it lands with a dull thud.

“None of your damn business.”

He mutters, flicking his bangs out of his face.

Bai Wuxiang won’t do anything to him. He’ll just manipulate him into some new, even more devastating mistake. Given the fact that the crown prince is currently on the verge of releasing a plague in order to warrant execution...

Well. Xie Lian isn’t exactly worried about that right now. He’ll cross that bridge when he comes to it, or Jun Wu will obliterate him first.

Either way, Bai Wuxiang isn’t very important to the outcome at the moment.

It’s the first encounter they’ve had that doesn’t end with Xie Lian screaming.

Ha.

Xie Lian wiggles his head when the calamity walks away, mimicking a silent, annoyed little cheer.

Consider that growth, after all this time. Good for him. Xie Lian feels it, when the sun sets.

The third day comes, and as the morning hours tick by, Xie Lian listens to the merchant trying again, to bring him a cup of water. Listens again as his wife smacks him upside the head, calling him an old fool.

Xie Lian agrees.

Showing kindness in this world—it makes one a fool.

Finally, he knows the sun must be on the verge of setting—because that voice is back. That shadow is over him—and a hand wraps around the hilt of fangxin, unsheathing the blade from Xie Lian’s chest.

“I don’t know what you expected,” Bai Wuxiang murmurs.

“Has anyone else ever helped you before?”

Xie Lian doesn’t answer him, slowly sitting up.

He never expected anyone to help. That wasn’t the point.

This creature wouldn’t understand that, and Xie Lian doesn’t bother explaining. It’s been raining for hours now, and he’s cold.

He wants to be done with it now.

The god grips the edge of the hole he’s dug himself into, pulling himself up, and just as he crawls back onto the street, blood still streaming from the wound in his chest— someone smacks into him, hard, landing on the ground with a thud.

Xie Lian tips forward, hands catching himself against the cobblestones—and he feels something sharp beneath his fingers. Grains of rice, slowly becoming soaked by the rain.

"…" The trades man on the ground beside him sits up with a groan, "Oh, HELL! Look what you did!"

He scrambles around, trying to stop any more rice from flooding out of the basket he was carrying, his bamboo hat slipping from his head, dangling from the cord around his neck—but it's no use.

"…FUCK!" He curses, sitting back and crossing his arms over his chest. "Wasted!"

He turns to glare at the young man, still sitting on his hands and knees in the middle of the road, throwing his hands up, "Do you have ANY IDEA how hard it is to earn that much rice? In *THIS* ECONOMY?!"

The youth doesn't lift his head, and he doesn't answer. The stranger fumes.

"Oh, so now you're just gonna SIT THERE?! You're not even gonna apologize or PAY ME BACK?!"

Xie Lian's nails scrape onto the cobblestones below teeth clenching. Oh, he'll pay him back, alright.

"WHAT WERE YOU EVEN TRYING TO DO, LAYING IN THE STREET LIKE THAT?!"

The man shouts, gesturing around him angrily, arms flapping like an incensed bird. "Were you waiting for SOMEONE TO RUN OVER YOU OR SOMETHING?!"

"Yes," Xie Lian mutters, his voice flat.

"…" The middle age man stops awkwardly, his arms still aloft, like he hadn't expected that.

"Well," he mutters, trying to get back to what—what he was—ah, right, right—

"IF YOU'RE GONNA KILL YOURSELF, AT LEAST BE CONSIDERATE, YOU LITTLE SHIT!" He howls, picking up his basket, placing it on his hip, "And DON'T MAKE TROUBLE FOR OTHERS!"

Whatever.

Xie Lian glares.

It doesn't matter. No matter how long the man howls and curses at him, trying to get the young man to pay him back, none of it matters.

It'll all be over soon, anyway. Then a bag of rice is nothing.

Eventually the man gives up with an irritated huff, stomping off.

Xie Lian stares down at the ground blankly, taking slow breaths to steady himself, the cold sinking into him, all the way to the bone.

Soaked, in a city that was once plagued by drought.

Xie Lian was cursed for trying to make it rain.

And now, not one human soul will help him.

When he opens his mouth to call Wu Ming, to tell him that the time has come... The rain stops.

That's what Xie Lian thinks, at first, until he feels the weight on his head—slight, but solid, stopping the rain from soaking him any further.

A bamboo hat.

The prince freezes for a moment, then looks up with a glare, unable to see that the merchant is glaring right back at him. "What are you looking at me like that for?! It's just a little yelling. How is that worth getting so upset over?"

"..." Xie Lian pauses, unable to answer.

"...I didn't realize you were blind," the man admits, scratching the back of his head, his voice clearly a little sheepish. "You should've said something."

The young man sits there, dumbfounded, as the man rises to his feet—pulling Xie Lian up with him.

"People don't pay attention," the farmer scolds the prince sternly, adjusting the strap under the prince's head—leaving it nice and snug, not easily jostled. "If you just sit around and get mad about no one noticing you need a hand, you'll be angry the rest of your life."

Xie Lian...he...

"It was my bad today, you don't have to pay me back for the rice," the man sighs, and Xie Lian can't see it, but it sure does sound like that fact still grieves him. “Now, go on. You’re not a child, you’re a grown man—stop glaring and go home, understand?”

He turns Xie Lian around by the shoulders, giving his back a little slap—then turns and heads on his own way without another word, a half empty, slightly dented basket of rice in his arms.

“...” Slowly, the prince reaches up, grasping the edges of the hat. Oh.

His lips wobble.

He used to cry, running to his mothers arms.

‘No fair !’ He would sob, clinging to the front of her dress. *‘It’s no fair!’*

But Xie Lian never really learned that way.

‘Stop whining!’

It’s his father’s voice that he remembers now.

‘You lost because he was better than you!’

Oh.

Xie Lian’s head tips forward, his tears mixing with the drops of rain on his cheek.

‘If you want to win next time—just work harder!’

That’s what it...what it...

His fingers reach up, grasping the stone hanging around his neck, resting on a silver chain.

Xie Lian realizes.

After so long, he realizes what he has done, all this time.

His hands clap over his mouth, eyes wide, tears pouring from them so much faster now than they have in so, so long. In months, since—

Since that night, in the woods.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, shoulders hunching in.

He said that before, falling to his knees in his own shrine, before his own believer, begging for forgiveness.

“H—” It’s been so long since he was able to say his name.

“Hong-er,” he sobs, the word wrenching from him painfully—but a good hurt. It doesn’t break. “I’m sorry!”

‘Everything good about you—it’s in SPITE of me, can’t you see that?!’

Xie Lian hear it so vividly now, clear as a bell—the way Hong-er’s voice sounded, when he replied—

‘How could you say that?’

His grief isn’t pretty. He doesn’t fall to the ground and wail beautifully.

The Crown Prince of Xianle stands in the middle of the street, sobbing like a child, clutching his hands over his face.

‘Allow me to be that meaning.’

‘If you can’t find meaning in life, allow me to be that meaning .’

Xie Lian told that boy to live for him, to find meaning in life through him—and he, Xie Lian, he—

Xie Lian won’t even live for *himself* .

After how hard the boy tried to take care of him. How desperately he tried to make the god happy.

Xie Lian has held Hong-er’s greatest treasure in his own hands this entire time, and he’s treated it with such...carelessness.

“I’m sorry!”

He doesn’t know how long he stands there, trembling underneath the rain. How long he weeps, apologizing to a dead man over and over, until he feels raw from it.

Slowly, his hands drop from his face—finding the stone against his chest once again, gripping it tightly.

“...I won’t do it again,” he whispers, eyes narrowing with determination, squeezing the stone with everything it has. It never cracks, and somehow, even now, it’s warm beneath his fingers.

Xie Lian swallows hard, his voice thick with tears. “I promise—I won’t ever give up again!”

It’s not long after that when he hears another voice through the rain, slowly clearing now. “...What are you doing?”

It’s him, of course.

Xie Lian chokes out a laugh for a moment, covering his mouth again, the tears slowing.

“It’s almost sundown. If you don’t get moving—”

“Fuck you.”

Xie Lian doesn’t lift his head, not yet—and Bai Wuxiang pauses, staring at the god with disbelief.

“...Excuse me?”

He sounds startled, almost dangerous, but now, Xie Lian doesn’t cringe away in fear. Or apathy.

The crown prince lifts his head. “Did I stutter?”

He steps forward, not unsure, not without purpose.

When Xie Lian’s feet land, the ground shakes beneath them.

His hand snatches out, grabbing the calamity by the front of his robes:

“I’ll say it again,” he whispers, glaring blindly into the face of a white mask. “FUCK YOU!”

A kick lands in the center of the calamity’s chest, with such power, it sends him rocketing all the way across the town square. He lands on the side of a building, bricks fracturing and crumbling underneath him.

“Who do you think you are, to even *SPEAK* TO ME?!” He snarls.

He’s learned to cringe from his title, from anyone for recognizing him for who and what he is.

Xie Lian was so desperate, not to be himself back then. Being anyone else would be better

Being no one, even.

Now, he roars, with everything he is—

“I AM THE CROWN PRINCE!”

Slowly, the calamity rises back to his feet, shaking dust and rubble from his face.

“...Have you lost your mind?!” He hisses.

If anything, Xie Lian just managed to find it again.

“Did you forget?!” Bai Wuxiang cries, his voice reverberating in it’s anger as he stalks forward.

“Do you remember how these people treated you?!” He roars. “How they cursed you?!”

Xie Lian tilts his head, “You think I could ever forget?”

“Your parents left you, your people, your followers—and all it took was—was THAT man?! That NOBODY?!”

The crown prince shakes his head.

“I didn’t lose all of my followers,” he murmurs, and even if he doesn’t raise his voice— the calamity hears him clearly. “There was one who never would have left me.”

Not ever. No matter what Xie Lian became, or whether or not he deserved to be worshipped.

“...He’s still gone.” Bai Wuxiang responds coldly. “No one will thank you for this. They won’t build any more temples for you. They won’t send you prayers. This will never make things the way they were before!”

Each phrase is said sharply, hurled at him like a knife—the words that have haunted him.

The Crown Prince of Xianle doesn’t cringe from them, not anymore.

He doesn’t collapse back into a pit of self pity.

Xie Lian smiles. It isn’t bitter, or angry. It’s shaky, tear-filled, but sincere.

More beautiful now, than when he wore robes of silk and masks of gold.

“I don’t need prayers,” he whispers, his smile aching—eyes filled with so much warmth—so much affection, and…

Hope.

“That isn’t why I help people.”

Just like there are some people who pray without expecting an answer.

Somewhere along the way, Xie Lian forgot that.

He was born with wealth and fame. Beauty and power. The world was at his feet before he could take his first steps.

Xie Lian didn’t want to become a god for those things.

It was when he was cradled in the arms of his Guoshi, asked what he would do, if he could grant a prayer.

When the man asked Xie Lian what he would do, if there were two worshippers and one cup of water, and his answer was deemed sacrilegious: make another.

It could have been the wrong response, but Xie Lian is still the same child that said it. Xie Lian forgot that, along the way

He forgot about wanting to make another cup. Forgot about those afternoons, smiling and laughing on the side of Mount Taicang. He forgot about the boy who protected him, fighting beside him, the first one to make his heart race.

He forgot about his first friend.

The one that would poke fun and roll his eyes, clutching a broom against his chest, making sarcastic little comments that Xie Lian felt a little scandalized for laughing out, but when he did, the boy would smile—like they shared a secret.

He forgot about the mother who forced him to start building golden palaces when he didn’t want to stop chasing butterflies. Who wiped his tears when they fell down, and when she reminded him of that, Xie Lian was too lost to even understand what she meant by it.

Golden Palaces will always fall down, no matter what you do. That’s the point. That’s the natural consequence of building them.

Xie Lian took that as an excuse to knock them down on purpose, but that was never what his mother meant to say.

Golden Palaces will always fall down.

But that doesn’t mean they aren’t worth building. Because just like the butterflies he was chasing—they will always fall. They’ll always end.

But they’re still so beautiful—and once you’re done crying, you can pick up the pieces…

And you can build them again.

He forgot about the father who told him to stop whining and feeling sorry for himself when he cried that the world wasn’t fair. Who helped him get stronger, when he had every excuse to be weak.

And when Xie Lian was afraid, his father held him close, kept him safe.

The father who told him that it was alright to be afraid—that the world was a big place, and he would keep the prince shielded from it until he was big enough to deal with it.

And he did. Xie Lian never realized it, but… His father did.

He forgot that, somewhere along the way

He forgot the boy who dropped into his arms from the sky like a falling star. Even when Xie Lian promised himself he wouldn’t, wouldn’t forever.

He forgot the way that boy looked at him, like the entire universe could be encompassed in the space of the prince's eyes.

Xie Lian has spent the time since he fell learning to hate the world. To curse it. To think that it was cruel, selfish, and miserable—and that he didn’t want to save it.

But he didn’t become a god because the world was perfect, or because everyone in it was worth protecting.

Xie Lian became a god because he loved the world, and he loved so many people in it.

Even if there are plenty of Qi Rong's. People who lie. Who judge, steal, and rape. Who will take your gifts and curse you while calling you a friend.

The world is cruel, selfish, and miserable.

Xie Lian knows now that he probably can't save it. He certainly can't save everyone in it.

But this world gave him parents who loved him. This world gave him Feng Xin. It gave him Mu Qing, who, even now, Xie Lian would give anything to start all over again.

This world gave him Guoshi, and every lesson the man ever taught him. This world gave him that soldier who stayed by his side all through the night when he was infected with the land of the tender, even when he received no reward for helping him.

This world gave him Hong-er.

This world gave him a boy that followed him to hell and back, content to live with nothing, just for the chance to stay by his side. Who endured what he did, all in silence, just to keep Xie Lian safe.

A boy who prayed with all of his might, not ever expecting an answer.

And even when the same world took him away—it still gave Xie Lian a group of villagers, willing to search all through the night, all through the cold and the dark, just so a blind man wouldn't be searching alone.

People who were practically strangers to them.

A farmer still gave Hong-er the robes from his own marriage ceremony. His sons still built a pyre, even though it was so late in the night.

When Xie Lian had been lost in sorrow, thinking the world took everything away from him, it gave him that.

It gave him a Ghost Fire.

Even when it couldn't keep him warm, it kept him company. Chased the dangers away when it could. Even when Xie Lian was often cruel or indifferent to it. Even when he constantly ignored the claim it so desperately wanted him to believe—

‘I am forever your most devoted believer.’

And even when the ghost fire was gone, even when his parents had left him, and the world felt so dark, so impossibly lonely…

The world gave him Wu Ming.

Someone who had already given up everything in the name of Xianle. In the name of Xie Lian—but followed him anyway.

Even when the path Xie Lian walked was so lonely and cruel. Even when he treated the young soldier so callously—so selfishly.

The only reward the ghost asked for was to kiss his hand.

Xie Lian clutches that hand to his chest now, and he smiles. Smiles so widely that it hurts.

Smiles honestly. Smiles fiercely.

Because sometimes, smiling in the face of sadness is the bravest thing a person can do.

It was never easy for Xie Lian to be brave before—he had seen too much of what the world could do.

But Xie Lian loves this world.

He tilts his head back. He feels the warmth of the setting sun on his skin. Tastes the salt in the air. Hears the waves crashing on the shore. Children laughing and playing in the distance—and their mothers, calling them home.

Xie Lian loves this world, and he loves so many people in it.

Even when most of them aren’t here anymore, living only in the spaces of his heart, or resting on a silver chain around his neck.

Xie Lian loves this world, and he probably can’t save it—but that doesn’t mean it isn’t worth living in.

That doesn’t mean it isn’t worth protecting

Bai Wuxiang watches him, his expression one of growing disgust.

“…God, you’re such a disappointment,” he mutters, shaking his head. “To think, you would turn back now, after coming so far…”

The prince smiles, eyes closed, still enjoying the sun on his face.

“My real teacher used to get upset with me too,” Xie Lian admits, his hair stirring in the breeze. “He got so frustrated with me, most of the time…”

“Because you never LISTEN!” The calamity barks, and the prince shakes his head.

“No,” His smile softens, and he lowers his chin. “I listen.”

He’s laughing now, and he’s crying—but he isn’t sad, he isn’t breaking, he’s just…

Growing. And sometimes, that hurts.

“I’m just a slow learner, that’s all.”

“…” Bai Wuxiang’s hands ball into fists, trembling with anger. “You can’t stop this, you realize!”

“When that sun goes down, you’ll have to release the curse! And if you don’t, you’ll be cursed for ten thousand lifetimes! You must know that, don’t you?!”

Xie Lian’s smile fades slightly—because he does.

And he isn’t the cocky, overzealous prince that he once was.

He knows now, even if he tries his best, there’s a very good chance that he’ll fail. But that doesn’t mean that he won’t try.

The calamity makes a low, infuriated noise when the god turns away from him entirely, feeling with his toes until he finds fangxin, lifting it up.

“…” He stares at the blade, unable to see it—but still apprehensive—taking a deep breath before he runs into the center of the square.

“LISTEN!” He calls out, shouting with all of his power—until the people who spent three days walking right past him stop and stare.

“SOMETHING IS ABOUT TO HAPPEN!” He cries, desperate that anyone will believe him, half convinced that no one will, but…

Then he hears screaming, people tilting their heads back as they point towards the sky.

“Oh god, what is that?!”

“That—!”

“IT LOOKS LIKE A HUMAN FACE!”

Xie Lian shouts louder, to be heard over the crowd. “It is, it—it’s Human Face Disease, it’s coming back!”

He can’t see how angry the white clothed calamity is, arms crossed, watching him from a distance, guiding the curse to swirl and gather in the air.

“WHAT?!” “No!”

There’s terrified screaming and shrieking, children crying all around, and Xie Lian raises his arm over head, brandishing fangxin.

“THERE’S A CURE!”

All of those voices stop, and Xie Lian—he takes a deep breath, bracing himself for what he knows will come next.

“R-Really?!”

One man whispers, panicking, “Can we trust...can we trust what he says?!”

“Didn’t you hear?” Another replies, grasping his arm tightly, “he’s the crown prince! A god—and everyone said he knew the curse to the disease—”

“Why would he help us now? We’re his enemies!”

“GODS DON’T HAVE ENEMIES!” Xie Lian’s voice rings out now, louder than ever “They don’t have kingdoms, and they don’t protect only one people!”

The crowd, filled with those who watched him suffer for three days and did nothing, watches in silent awe.

He...would really help them?

Xie Lian can’t see how angry Bai Wuxiang is, watching him now.

He also can’t see another pair of eyes, watching from beneath a different mask. Falling in love, all over again.

“I WAS NOT THE GOD OF XIANLE!” He cries, “I WAS A GOD OF THIS WORLD! Listen to me, now!”

And they do.

Each one of them, rapt with attention, as the crown prince speaks louder, “The cure— it’s murder—” there are a few horrified gasps, but Xie Lian hurries to finish, “but you don’t actually have to kill anyone! Here—”

He holds out fangxin, waiting for anyone to take it.

“Just take this and stab me—I definitely won’t die, but you won’t catch the disease if you do!”

Behind him, Bai Wuxiang’s jaw goes slack.

He would...endure that again? This time willingly?

The citizens gathered around him are hesitant, and Xie Lian presses on, shaking fangxin.

“It’s alright, like I said! I won’t die, so just go ahead! There isn’t much time!”

All around him, he hears people fighting with their own hesitations, squirming and unsure—but he knows, they’ll do it, if given the chance to give themselves permission.

There’s debating.

Some want to step forward and take their chance, or even just for their children— while others cringe from the idea, calling it too horrible.

The water merchant speaks the loudest, pointing out how no one helped Xie Lian before, when he was bleeding in the street.

How could they accept his help now, when they wouldn’t even help him then. It’s not decent. It just—it isn’t the right thing to do.

They argue back and forth, and Xie Lian—he knows they don’t have time for any of this, that they—

BOOM!

There’s a crash like thunder.

A flash of light so bright, that people stumble backwards.

The ground shudders beneath their feet.

Xie Lian panics, clutching fangxin tighter, wondering if it's too late, it's already—

CRASH!

The crowd scatters and cries as the crown prince's body is enveloped in light.

...What?

Xie Lian's arms float out in front of him, the sword slipping through his fingers, falling to the ground with a clatter.

His robes billow—his sleeves changing from the billowing cut of mourning robes, to the simple, white garb of a cultivator.

Ruoye slides away from his face, circling around him rapidly, gleaming with spiritual power—and when the crown prince opens his eyes, his irises no longer hold the burning shame of a cursed shackle.

They shine, filled with golden light, like the sun burns inside them.

And Xie Lian—

Xie Lian can see.

After years of darkness, wandering through the world without a single glimpse of light, he can see again.

But the sight that greets him isn't Lang-er bay. It isn't Bai Wuxiang.

It isn't even Wu Ming.

Standing before him, hovering over the crowd before his eyes, is a prince.

Young, so much younger than Xie Lian ever realized. Wearing robes of red, white, and gold silk. Chestnut waves of hair pulled from his face, held with pins of gold and jade.

He's beautiful.

There's a gleaming, white sword in one of his hands—a matching flower in the other.

A crown of pink lotus blossoms sits upon his head, and Xie Lian stares, his lips parted.

He's beautiful—he is so, so beautiful. But so horribly sad.

Hands trembling, eyes filled with tears.

There's no sound from below—Xie Lian knows that there won't be, that this is a moment held in between moments of time, a moment of divinity, one that is for the god alone.

A moment of ascension.

The boy grips his sword tighter, and he whispers—

"I tried."

Xie Lian's heart pounds.

"I tried *so* hard."

Tears well up in those eyes. Those beautiful, golden eyes. The eyes that used to look down from the world on high, truly believing that they could save it.

"...I know," Xie Lian whispers, his gaze filling with tears of his own. "I know you did."

The Crown Prince smiles, as though that brings him some small measure of peace.

"And I'm sorry," Xie Lian murmurs, his voice wobbling, mourning so much more than just a friend, a family, or a future.

He mourns for the boy he used to be.

The one who built golden palaces and chased butterflies. Who thought there was no problem so big that he couldn't solve it.

Xie Lian listened to the world curse him for so long, he began to believe every word of it was true. That he deserved it. And that he—

That he wasn't worthy of love, admiration, or faith. That just like the world, he wasn't worth saving.

“I’m sorry,” Xie Lian repeats, tears slipping down his face, dripping down from his chin, “that I was so unkind to you.”

“...” The Crown Prince lifts his chin, and he smiles. “It’s okay,” he whispers, holding out his hand.

It isn’t holding a flower, not anymore.

It’s holding someone else’s hand.

A small boy, so small, he barely reaches the prince’s knee. Half of his head is wrapped in bandages, but ink black curls poke out wildly, framing his face.

He watches Xie Lian cautiously, half hidden in the Crown Prince’s robes, like he might be frightened—

But the teenager squeezes his hand gently, whispering—

‘Don’t be afraid.’

The tears on Xie Lian’s cheeks won’t stop falling, when he sees that little boy.

“...I miss you,” he whispers hoarsely, grasping the stone sitting around his neck. “And I’m so—I’m *so* sorry.”

The boy doesn’t speak, but Xie Lian can see it, in the dark eye that peers back at him. He misses Xie Lian too. So much, he doesn’t need to say the words.

“...He’s right, though.” The god smiles through the tears, his voice shaking. “You don’t need to be afraid, and I—”

His voice trembles and cracks, knowing this moment is a projection of his own spirit, that it isn’t real, that Hong-er is gone, but—

“I’ll see you again someday.”

The boy nods, believing him. Always believing in him.

He opens his mouth, and Xie Lian, he desperately wishes this was more than just one moment. That they could sit and talk for hours.

That he could hear that voice call, *‘Gege!’*

One more time. But nothing lasts forever.

Nothing good ever stays, but—that doesn't mean that it isn't worth having, even if that means it might end.

Xie Lian blinks, and in the space of that moment, the two boys are gone.

Slowly, his body lowers to the ground, the wind rushing around him, Ruoye slowly returning.

The bystanders whisper in awe and terror—after all, it's rare for anyone to see a god's ascension, much less a second ascension, all in broad daylight.

When Xie Lian turns his head, he sees it now—the angry clouds in the air, filled with human faces.

This wasn't Bai Wuxiang.

The white clothed calamity might have pushed him down this road, but he didn't do this.

Xie Lian did this.

"..." He swears his shoulders, eyes narrowing with resolve, crying out, "COME TO ME!"

And they do, swirling around all at once, coiling together. Xie Lian kneels.

Without looking, his hand reaches for fangxin—where it should be now, after he dropped it to the ground before, but—

It isn't there.

Xie Lian looks around on the ground, confused. Where—?

The spirits rush towards him, and the god fumbles around.

Where is it?!

Why, the moment he can actually SEE what he's looking for, at a moment like this, does he lose it—?

"Your highness."

The god stops, slowly turning his head.

A few meters behind him, stands a young soldier.

Tall, but slender—like a fresh stalk of bamboo. Wearing a white mask.

Not half laughing, half smiling, just—

Just smiling.

“...Wu Ming?” He whispers, eyes locked upon his form.

He’s dressed in all black, scaled armor shining on his arms and chest—familiar, so similar to what the soldiers who fought for him used to wear. A saber hangs by his side.

Long, sharp.

‘Handsome.’

Xie Lian can’t see his face, can’t imagine what the young man looks like—but in his heart, no, in the utter core of his spirit, he knows the person that lays beneath that mask is beautiful.

But he isn’t holding his own sword. No—

He has fangxin.

“...Wu Ming,” he whispers, his voice trembling as the malicious spirits surge closer, “What are you doing?!”

The black clad youth tilts his head, watching the horde as it looms before them. He doesn’t seem to hold an ounce of fear.

Brave.

Xie Lian’s lips tremble.

Foolish, but so brave.

“Stop,” he chokes, staggering to his feet, knowing in an instant, what the young man plans on doing, “You can’t, I—I haven’t even paid you back yet!”

That face stares back at him, the white blankness of the mask hiding any lack of resolve, but...

Somehow, Xie Lian knows—there was never a moment of doubt in the ghost’s heart, anyway.

“Don’t worry, your highness,” even now, his voice sounds completely calm. “You can pay me back next time.”

Xie Lian can see those fingers tighten around the hilt of fangxin, determined. But he already knows—there—there—

“There won’t be a next time!” He cries, desperately trying to reach him. “That—doing this—it’ll destroy you for sure!”

Xie Lian would have been obliterated too, most likely—but for a martial god of his strength, he stood a much better chance.

He knows, even as he moves with all of the speed and grace that he now has—he won’t make it in time.

It’s happening all over again—and there’s nothing—there’s nothing he can do!

In the last moment, just before the end, the ghost whispers something that brings his god to a halt.

Even over the terrified screams of the people of Yong’an, the shrieking of the malicious spirits, Xie Lian hears it so clearly, like the words are being whispered directly in his ear:

“I am forever your most devoted believer.”

The prince staggers, eyes wide, hand outstretched.

“...You?!” He whispers, eyes staring at that mask so intently, wishing they had more time; he—he has so many questions, so many things he never got to say, but—

But then, he did exactly what Xie Lian had planned on doing, moments before. He turns the blade on himself.

In an instant, he’s swallowed by an entire storm of spirits, lifted up into the air—and all the prince can do is watch, head upturned, eyes filled with utter horror.

The scream that fills the air, Xie Lian realizes—

He’s heard it before.

Knows it so well, it feels like his own

The swirling builds, rising until it reaches a fever pitch, and then—

And then there's nothing.

Fangxin falls to the ground in front of him with a clatter, and with it... A small white flower.

The crown prince stares, unmoving. His mind is unable to understand what his eyes see.

Wu Ming...he...

Xie Lian's fingers reach out, brushing over the white flower sitting on the ground— trembling.

Slowly, he reaches for the one in his hair, comparing the two, and... His eyes flood with tears.

"...You said you would never lie to me," he whispers.

They're the same.

How could Wu Ming tell him he didn't know where the flower came from, he—

Xie Lian's fingers tremble as he holds both flowers close to his face, trying to reconcile himself with the truth of what he saw. What he knows now, in his heart.

That ghost fire... It was Wu Ming.

The god shudders, clutching the flowers close to his chest, tears dropping down onto fangxin below.

Xie Lian—

He was so *awful* to him. So—So awful to them both, how could he—

Why, after how much that poor spirit suffered, would it still follow him?

What about...

What about his precious person? The one that he...didn't want to leave behind?

In that context, when Xie Lian thinks back on the kiss—he knows he should feel more remorse, but...he can't bring himself to.

He's glad.

He's glad that Wu Ming was the first man he chose to kiss, even if the Ghost Fire, the savage spirit he became, would have rather shared that moment with someone else.

He was probably thinking about them, when he held Xie Lian so tenderly. But...That's alright.

He's still glad.

Because at that moment, Xie Lian felt so safe. Even in his darkest moment, he found something...so close to happiness.

He takes a long, deep breath, and then...

He hears someone laughing. Low, wild cackling.

Slowly, he turns his head—only to find that Bai Wuxiang is still there.

Hunched over, clutching his stomach—and Xie Lian can't see his laughter from underneath that mask, but can hear it, grating against his ears so offensively.

Though, if he truly knew what the calamity thought was so funny—he would only feel horror.

"...What's so amusing?"

"I'm sure, now—" Bai Wuxiang's head tilts to the side, low giggles piercing through the mask, "You must know who that soul was."

"..." Xie Lian presses his lips together tightly, and the calamity cackles. "Your very last believer! And now, he's gone!"

He...he's...

"...Gone?" Xie Lian echoes slowly, looking down at the sword before him.

'Don't worry your highness—you can pay me back next time!'

How...how could he just be gone?

"His soul," the calamity explains, "it's dispersed!"

Xie Lian, he...he knew the risks. He knew.

When he was going to turn that blade on himself, he knew that even he didn't have a strong chance at surviving, but...Wu Ming...

He sounded so certain, so determined, that even against all odds—Xie Lian believed him.

But there's no ghost fire now. Not a trace of Wu Ming's aura.

He's...even if he wasn't gone, Xie Lian would have no way of trying to summon the spirit.

He didn't have a name, after all. He's just...gone.

Xie Lian hangs his head, clutching the flowers to his chest, heart pounding with pain —and it breaks again.

Just a little bit more.

It's different from before. He knows, now, that he can survive this pain. That no matter how miserable and alone he feels, it won't last forever. And yet, he...

"...What a miserable, pathetic god you are," the calamity sneers, watching his pain with a bemused smile.

"Anyone who would follow a weakling like you must be even more so."

"..." Xie Lian rises to his feet, tucking each flower into his sleeves. "Shut up."

"Really, after everything that little beast must have seen, he still followed a lowlife like you—!"

The Calamity falls silent.

A sword, gleaming white, is buried in his chest, pinning him to the ground. The prince seemed to summon it from thin air, along with several others, slowly swirling overhead, eyes narrowed with heavenly wrath.

"HOW DARE YOU MOCK HIM!" The prince roars, eyes burning gold.

"WHAT DOES A MONSTER LIKE YOU KNOW ABOUT FAITH?!" He stalks forward, more swords appearing, swirling around him like a storm of hornets, eyes shining like two small suns, "WHEN HAVE YOU EVER BELIEVED IN ANYTHING?!"

He can't see the calamity's expression, but he hears something.

His ears are far more sensitive now, than they were before—even by the standards of a god. Whether the calamity actually intended for him to hear—he doesn't know.

"People believed in me, once—long ago."

Before Xie Lian's expression can flicker with hesitation, he cries—

"What is there to say about a failure, following another failure?! Why shouldn't I mock you?!" He rises to his feet, casting the sword aside. "Do you REALLY think you could win against me, as you are now?! You couldn't before!"

Maybe not.

Xie Lian has become more than familiar with the taste of defeat. But that doesn't mean he won't try.

But before either can move towards one another—the rumbling begins once more— just like before, when Xie Lian's godhood returned, but just a little bit stronger.

"Maybe he can't defeat you," a voice calls—rumbling, familiar. "But what about me?"

Xie Lian turns around, just in time to see a young martial god walking forward, wearing armor of gleaming white and gold.

He stares, eyes widening, slightly unsure. "Jun...Wu?"

The heavenly emperor offers him a kind smile, one that the crown prince can't help but return, watching as he launches into battle against the calamity, thinking to himself...

Why now?

There were so many times that he prayed to Jun Wu before, when he was being tortured.

When he desperately wished for death. Relief. Anything. And the god never answered.

Why come here now? Has he finally decided that Xie Lian's prayers were worth answering? That he was worth saving?

Even as he watches his tormentor get shredded to pieces, Xie Lian ponders.

Even when only a bloody, broken mask remains, and the heavenly emperor returns to him with a tired smile.

“Welcome back to the ranks, Xianle.”

Xianle.

Xie Lian forgot that the emperor used to call him that. It’s a painful memory, now.

Slowly, he turns his head.

The sun is beginning to set over the ocean. Burning gold and red across the horizon, making the sea itself gleam like fire, the beginnings of stars beginning to poke through in the sky above.

This city is beautiful.

He lifts his chin, looking all around, taking it in.

But in the end, instead of responding to the emperor, Xie Lian takes a seat on a wall overlooking the sea, and he watches the sunset.

Watches it with an appreciation that no one else in the world could ever understand. With longing—happiness, and so much sadness.

It’s beautiful

But there were so many other things that Xie Lian wanted to see.

Even when he thought he would never get his eyes back. When he had given up on cultivation. When he thought the world would forever remain in darkness.

He has his eyes now, but… Hong-er isn’t here.

Neither are his parents. His friends. Or Wu Ming.

Something slips from his chest, falling to his lap with a slight clatter—and when Xie Lian reaches for the chain there—he realizes—

The stone is gone.

His chest seizes up with anxiety, because—how—? How could it be gone?!

But when he looks down at his lap, to see what fell—

There's a ring there.

Too large for Xie Lian to wear on one of his own fingers—made from what looks like pure diamond, instead of any form of metal—

And a ruby set in its face, gently gleaming up at him. Xie Lian stares.

How...?

His fingertips brush over the ring, cautiously lifting it up in front of his face.

Somehow, it's warm under his fingertips. Pulsing gently, when he squeezes it too tight.

Just like a little heartbeat.

And he couldn't explain why, but...he knows. He knows it's Hong-er.

Xie Lian doesn't know why the ashes keep changing like this. Assumes it must have something to do with him, because the last time this happened, he was exposed to such extreme spiritual power at the hands of Bai Wuxiang, and again, when he ascended once more.

It's almost kind.

He won't ever get to see the man that Hong-er would have grown into. But at least now, in some small way—even if he's never heard of bone ashes doing such a thing before—

Xie Lian's companion is growing with him. Changing, even now. Even though he's gone.

He's careful to place the ring back on his chain, now—and he slips the red coral pearl into place next to it.

There.

Even if the other was lost in the pyre—in a way, they're a matching set again.

Now that the sun has set, and the prince has seen what he wanted to see...

He rises to his feet, turning back to face Jun Wu.

“I’m sorry to trouble you, your highness,” he murmurs, stepping down from the wall, walking towards him. “But could I ask you for something?”

The martial emperor raises an eyebrow, intrigued. “What is it, Xianle?”

“Banish me again,” he murmurs, watching as the emperor stares at him with an expression of abject shock. “And give me another shackle, this time.”

“Another…?” The emperor sputters, his jaw hanging open, “You—you realize you won’t be a god any longer if I do, don’t you?”

Xie Lian smiles, not happily or sadly—it just is. “I know that better than anyone.”

“…They really will start calling you a god of misfortune at that point,” Jun Wu points out, eyebrows raised.

Xie Lian knows as much—and that’s fine. He knows that he isn’t.

He’s a god of flowers. A god of orphans and beggars. A god of tapestries, campfire songs, and meat buns, split to share.

Xie Lian knows those things—and so did the ones who believed in him.

“…You would really give up your sight again?” Jun Wu questions, his tone reluctant.

The crown prince glances up at the sky—the stars, and knows, even if he walks the length of the entire universe, all the way to those lights in the sky and back, he won’t find the face he wants to see.

“…There are worse things,” he murmurs.

Xie Lian understands that now.

Slowly, Jun Wu smiles.

“You’ve really grown up, haven’t you, Xianle?”

Even if it took him too long. Even if he was slow—Xie Lian did.

"…Still," he muses, rubbing his chin, "I can't banish you to the mortal realm without a decent reason."

Xie Lian smiles, grasping Hong-er.

"Oh," the god tilts his chin, eyes burning bright, "that's easy."

The clash between the heavenly emperor and the flower crowned martial god is known throughout the ages—not because of the awe inspiring nature of the battle.

(Though it was quite impressive.)

No—it was known for being the briefest time that a god had ever ascended before being cast back down again. Not even for the length of one incense.

(A record that would be broken sooner than anyone expected.)

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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[image]

CREDIT: MYSTERYSEONG, support the artwork HERE

TW// BLOOD

Go away. You're boring.
xiaoya

CREDIT: Pri, support the artwork HERE

[image]

CREDIT: MYSTERYSEONG, support the artwork HERE

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you again to Pri and Seong for your amazing artwork!! Everyone, please go and give them support, they are so talented and absolutely deserve it!
>
> I will likely be posting another chapter today (within the next twelve hours) that will wrap up this arc. (It is not long at all, so be aware!)
>
> Thank you to everyone for their support of this story, it is deeply appreciated!
>
> xoxo, Evie

Wait for Me

Chapter Summary

CLACK!

There's a sharp rattle, echoing through the hall, the only sound that disturbs the silence.

No natural light. No flow of air. No breathing. No heartbeats.

CLACK! CLACK! CLACK!

"...How many did you get?" A voice drawls, "I'm not letting you roll again."

"Oh, come on!" His companion cries, "No fair, no fair! You gave me an extra roll last time!"

Chapter Notes

You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

This story also has some spotify playlists for those who want some fun listening while reading!

No Paths Are Bound: The Playlist
Calamity Xie Lian: The Playlist
The Wu Ming Playlist

Three weeks later, the former crown prince of Xianle wakes alone.

That isn't so frightening anymore—he's used to it now.

He isn't so slow about making his way about the day as he was before. Isn't so careless about the way he puts on his robes.

Xie Lian takes the time to comb his hair, to pull it back into something presentable.

He remembers how much effort Hong-er put into it, before—and now, he can't bear to leave it a mess.

Nothing like the fancier styles the boy preferred, or Wu Ming used to twist his hair into—but Xie Lian thinks it suits him. Works better with the hat, anyway.

He remembers sometimes, the night when he pressed Hong-er on what kind of woman he might want, or man, it didn't matter, and the boy said he wanted someone with nice hair. Long, soft and shiny.

Not everyone has hair like that, you know. Remembering it now makes the prince smile.

When he walks to the well to fetch some water, his foot trips on the unfamiliar terrain —but he doesn't fall. Not completely, anyway.

A white silk bandage wraps around his arm, and Xie Lian lands on his knees—but not on his face, thankfully.

"...Thank you, Ruoye."

He pats the spiritual tool as it wriggles happily, glad to be of use.

Slowly, he makes his way back into the shrine. It's old—abandoned. There are plenty of those, these days. He doubts he'll stay here for now, but...When he was scrap collecting the day before, he found something

The loom was a bit worn down and dented, but the god was able to work it back into place until it was in working condition.

Now, the former god kneels before it, remembering a different time, in a different shrine, so much like this one.

It's been a long time. So, so long.

He doesn't have anyone to separate the threads for him now—so when he was at the shop, he had the girl behind the counter carve the characters for the colors into the cases. When he feels for them now, he's able to keep track of which threads are which in his mind, laying them out.

It's been such a long time since he tried weaving—and now, it soothes him. The slow, methodical movement of his fingers as he pulls each thread together, building a story, piece by piece.

He remembers the boy that used to sit beside him, always listening to him talk. No matter how long Xie Lian droned on, or how boring it was.

At first, he found this hobby tedious. Thought it was a waste of time for a warrior like him, but...

Time has given Xie Lian a deeper appreciation for tapestries, and the stories they tell. Even if they hurt.

Maybe, one day, if he gets good enough—he can sell them. But not this one. This one is just for him.

It shows a crown prince, elegant and strong, a blade clutched in his hand, gleaming white—covered in silks, jewels, and every other luxury.

And in his other hand, a boy.

Small, so very, very small. But strong.

And so brave.

Having them together here, even if they aren't together now, brings some small form of peace.

Xie Lian strokes his fingers over his work when he's finished, over faces immortalized in threads of red, white, and gold.

"...I miss you," he admits, his voice low.

Part of Xie Lian thinks that he'll always miss him.

But he won't give up again either—he promised him that much already. He'll try. He'll keep on building golden palaces, even if he knows they'll always fall in the end.

That doesn't mean they aren't worth building.

And he knows, in the end—he'll see him again.

(Xie Lian just never realized how long it would take.)

Slowly, he removes the tapestry from the loom, finishing off the edges, rolling it up and tucking it into his rucksack.

He disassembles the loom, bringing it with him—and he begins to wander down the path. Maybe he'll collect junk today, or find work in a farmer's field.

Either way, that’s fine by him.

He twists his finger in the chain around his neck, raising the ring there to his lips.

A soft kiss, his lips warmed by the warmth of the diamond beneath his lips.

“Good morning,” Xie Lian whispers.

He’s done this every morning, since his second banishment began.

And after that, slowly, often rambling, he begins to tell Hong-er about his day.

A red flower blows past him in the wind as he walks down the country road, slowly drifting over the air.

Things can often slip right past you, whether you see them or not. But, sometimes, the world will bring them back to you.

It’s only a matter of time.

CLACK!

There's a sharp rattle, echoing through the hall, the only sound that disturbs the silence.

No natural light. No flow of air. No breathing. No heartbeats.

CLACK! CLACK! CLACK!

"...How many did you get?" A voice drawls, "I'm not letting you roll again."

"Oh, come on!" His companion cries, "No fair, no fair! You gave me an extra roll last time!"

"Yeah," the ghost agrees, lifting a sharpened rib bone from the table at which they sit, using it to pick his teeth, "because we're friends!"

"We're still friends now, right?!"

"...I guess," the other grumbles, seeming a little annoyed now. "I don't like you as much anymore, though."

"Huh? Why not?"

"You never pay up."

"Just let me roll again, alright?! One more time, and if I don't, I—!"

Both spirits fall silent when there's a groan in the corner.

"...Oh," the young man can hear a voice, low and rattling, like the crackle of a fire more than a human tongue, "the little pup is finally waking up."

There's a shrieking giggle from the man at his side. "Which way do you think he's gonna go, Xiang?!"

Which...way...?

Slowly, the youth opens his eyes, sitting up.

The hall he's sitting in—it's like nothing he's ever seen before. Cavernous, with ceilings so high, he can't see the ceiling itself—but no sunlight. The only light comes from an unearthly green glow.

Ghost Fires.

Slowly reappearing, then sparking out, over and over again, flickering throughout the space.

The stones that make up the walls, the floors—and most like the ceiling too, are completely black. Etched in ancient characters, unrecognizable to the young man.

Slowly, he stands up.

His hands rise up to touch his arms, his chest—looking for any signs of damage, after what he just experienced, but—

There's nothing. His body feels intact, completely whole.

His face is different, though.

When his fingers trace over his cheeks—there are no more scars.

The place where he broke his nose before—that's gone now, too.

But when he looks to the left, he finds two men, sitting across from one another at a stone table.

The only other figures in the room—one tall and thin, with sallow, pockmarked skin.

The other is short and round, with a slightly upturned nose, vaguely reminiscent of a swine.

They watch him curiously, and when the young man looks to the table at which they sit--he sees a pair of dice.

Black, with numbers painted in gold.

"...What is this place?"

The two men glance at each other, then back at him.

"...You know that you're dead, right?" The taller one—Xiang, the youth presumes—questions.

The teenager crosses his arms, distinctly unimpressed. "I've been dead before," he drawls. "I didn't end up here."

"...Oh," the shorter one's eyes widen with recognition, looking up towards his friend with newfound caution, "...I think this one must have been a pretty strong ghost, Xiang—"

"Who cares!" Xiang retorts, rolling his eyes. "He still ended up here, with the likes of us."

The likes of them.

His eyes drift down, finally noticing the men's throats.

Slit from ear to ear, though their bodies have long since been drained dry.

"...Two gamblers who couldn't pay up?" He snorts, raising an eyebrow. "Clearly didn't learn your lessons, either."

"Oi!" The taller one glares. "Respect your elders! We have names—I'm Xiang, and this one, he's Fai."

Fai nods eagerly, almost shrinking behind his friend's side, while clearly trying to look confident.

"..." Xiang glares, turning and hissing, "What are you cowering for?!"

"Xiang," his friend whines, "I don't think the kid is normal..."

"Obviously NOT, you little idiot, he's DEAD!"

"Even for a dead one," Fai shakes his head. "Can we just...go back to playing? I'll pay up this time, you don't have to let me roll again—"

"You didn't answer me."

The young man walks forward, his eyes narrowed with annoyance. He doesn't have time for this. "What is this place?"

"..." Xiang lifts his chin haughtily, "I don't talk to strangers. What's your name?" His gaze lingers on the boy's right eye.

Ah. That must be the same, then.

"...Wu Ming," he replies flatly.

"That ain't a real name!" Fai grumbles, falling silent with a squeal when the boy glares at him, and Xiang huffs.

"My friend is right! That ain't an actual name."

"...I don't have one, then." The boy admits with a harsh frown.

"What kinda respectable ghost doesn't even have a name?!" Xiang huffs, puffing his chest out. "Ain't gonna get any kind of respect that way!"

"You have a name," the teenager sneers, "you aren't doing particularly well with getting respect, are you?"

"..." Xiang gawks.

Slowly, he turns his head to the smaller ghost, mumbling under his breath, "...Yeah, I think you're right, the kid isn't normal."

Then, in a smaller voice;

"...He really hurt my feelings!"

The teenager stares, watching the two grown men comfort each other.

"They always have a way of getting to your insecurities," Fai agrees, patting his arm softly.

"...Are either of you going to answer me?!" The teenager glares, rapidly losing any semblance of patience.

"Fine, FINE!" Xiang mumbles, rubbing at his nose irritably. "Look around."

Slowly, the teenager does, seeing most of what he already took in before. Dark walls, ghost fires—impossibly high ceilings—and now, something else.

Doors.

Massive, so large, an entire palace could fit in the doorway of each, situated on opposite sides of the hall.

One black, the other red—each elaborately carved.

"That one," Xiang mutters, pointing towards the black door, "goes to the shit hole."

"The shit hole?" The teenager questions dryly, unimpressed by the...creative naming process.

"You wanna get chased through a maze by your worst memories for all eternity?!" Xiang glares. "It's a shit hole!"

Oh.

The boy frowns, turning to stare at the door. "Why would anyone choose to go through there?"

"No one does," Fai admits, uncomfortable, but trying to contribute

"But most of them don't have a choice." Oh.

The teenager tilts his head, a curtain of dark, blank hair moving with him as he does. Much longer now, than he remembers it.

That's hell. They're talking about hell. "What's the red door?"

"Starting over," Xiang shrugs.

The mention of that makes the youth scowl. He doesn't want that, either.

"And what are you two doing here?" He mutters, crossing his arms. "Why haven't you picked one?"

"Well..." Fai frowns, scratching his head. "We can't go through the red door. Our ashes got scattered."

“...The fuck?” The teenager glances them over. “What did you two do?”

How did two little lowbrow gamblers manage to piss someone off bad enough to do something like that? Scattering ashes is no small thing. It brings bad luck with it— enough to curse a bloodline, if unjustified

“Nothing that bad!” Xiang glares, clearly defensive. “My buddy here, he—he just never really knew how to quit it, even when he was on a bad kind of roll, and those assholes at the gambling den never cut him off! Even when they knew they milked his whole family dry!”

Fai hangs his head, nodding—clearly ashamed. Xiang, however, holds his chin high, arms crossed.

“So, I tried to win the money back for him!” He shrugs. “It was honorable, really! They completely overreacted is all!”

“To what?”

“...I may have loaded my dice,” the ghost admits.

“You were trying to save your friend from a predatory gambling ring,” the teenager questions dryly, “and you loaded your dice.”

“...” Xiang rubs his nose again, glancing away sheepishly. “I said it was honorable, I ain’t saying it was smart, alright?!”

“...Right.”

“Anyways, that asshole—he didn’t like me to begin with. His wife, she was TOTALLY into me, but that wasn’t my fault! I’m not that kind of guy, I just attract attention from the ladies!”

The youth eyes Xiang’s pockmarked skin and hollow cheeks. “...Uh-huh.”

“He does!” Fai crows.

“But that whole family was just rotten,” Xiang glares. “They think they’re better than everyone else in the city because they’ve got money, but they're just as rotten as the rest of us! Acting like merchants, but they run gambling dens, and brothels, and all sorts of shit!"

"...Really?" The kid frowns. "And they killed you...and scattered your ashes...for cheating?"

"They killed me for the debts," Fai sighs, "the rest was all for the loaded dice, yeah."

He's seen some...overreactions in his day, but that's a high bar.

"So now you can't reincarnate?"

Both men shake their heads glumly.

"But we didn't do anything that bad, so..." Fai sighs, staring at the black doors. "We haven't been dragged in there yet, either."

The young man isn't sure if sitting in an empty hall, playing with a set of dice for all eternity is any better.

"...What if you don't want to go through either door?" The young man stares. "What's the other option?"

"..." Xiang scratches his head, looking at Fai. Slowly, both men shrug, and the taller starts to pull out a third chair—

"Yeah," the teenager holds up a hand, "no thanks."

"..." Xiang slams the chair back in, turning around, throwing his arms out, "FINE! Fuck you TOO, I guess!'

"Xiang," Fai pats his back, loose skin (from a decade or so of death induced weight loss) dangling from his forearm, "he didn't mean it personal!"

"No! He's a little brat!" "It's not that—"

"You're always the one saying, 'Xiang, you've gotta be *VULNERABLE* with people! Expand your social circle!'" The ghost wails. "AND *LOOK* WHAT HAPPENS!"

Actually, the young man thinks this might be hell, not the space beyond the black doors.

"There's no way out?"

"...Not really," Fai admits with a frown.

Xiang sniffs, not turning back around until he composes himself, "Aren't ya just gonna go through the red door anyway?" He grumbles.

The teenager glances it over with disdain, "...No."

"Ungrateful," the ghost grumbles. "With the way your form looks right now? Your ashes must be in," he raises his fingertips to his lips, giving them a loud, smacky kiss, dust spurting from his teeth, "PEAK condition! You'd probably be rich! Handsome! Hell, maybe even a prince!"

He shrugs, unimpressed.

"Why be a prince when you could just have one?"

It's not until both ghosts turn to stare at him that the teenager realizes those words came out of his mouth, not remaining in his thoughts.

"...I'm not in the mood to reincarnate," the teenager mutters, crossing his arms again.

"Can't I just go back?"

"I mean..." Xiang and Fai glance at each other, confused. "...Why would you want to?"

"If I reincarnate, I lose all my memories, don't I?"

Both ghosts nod, and the teenager shakes his head, his gaze determined. "Then I'm not doing that."

It's baffling.

He...doesn't exactly seem like a kid with a lot of good memories. If he was, well...

But, he seems determined.

"You realize...you're here because your soul is pretty much dispersed, right?" Fai questions quietly. "And you died heroically, in your second form."

"And?" The kid replies coldly.

Not much of a kid, really—he towers over both of them, clearly close to nineteen years old by now, but there's a boyish air about him.

"...Most savage ghosts don't get the chance to reincarnate, when they disperse," Xiang huffs. "It's a big deal!"

"Great," the teenager shrugs, "but it wouldn't work for me, anyways."

Both men glance at each other, then back at him. "How come?!"

"Do I seem at peace to you?"

"..." Neither of them have an argument there, and they sigh. "Well, there's only one other way out of here."

"Name it," the boy breathes, glad they're finally getting somewhere—Only for his face to fall when Xiang points to the dice, sitting on the table.

"You think we're playing for fun?" Xiang huffs, shaking his head. "We're trying to get back!"

"...Betting against what?"

"The universe? Whoever runs this place?" Xiang shrugs, "The last guys explained it pretty simple—you bet a piece of your soul each round, and if you get two sixes, you get a wish. Now, me and Fai here have been playing the system a little—"

"You two really don't learn, do you," the teenager mutters, shaking his head. "And who were the last guys?"

Xiang squirms a little at the memory, finding the rib bone he was using to pick his teeth from before. "There used to be four of us, but the other two, they..."

The teenager can estimate what happened.

They kept on betting until they didn't have any souls left—and then, they were completely obliterated.

"...We've been betting against the ghost fires, to get a little extra juice," Xiang admits, lowering his voice like he's confessing.

"It helps stretch things out a little, at least."

Kind of unfair and predatory, considering most ghost fires are dumb as rocks—but the young man can't say he wouldn't be willing to resort to such things if necessary.

“…So,” he walks forward, boots clicking on marble.

“If I want out of here, I have to roll two sixes?”

“That’s about right,” Fai agrees.

The teenager comes to a halt in front of the table, picking up the set of dice, staring.

“…Well,” he mutters, rolling them slightly in his hand, listening to the way they rattle and clack.

“Fuck.”

After all—in his entire life, he’s been infamous for one thing: having bad luck.

Both of the other ghosts nod, staring at him sympathetically. They could smell it on him, when he arrived.

“Reincarnation really isn’t that—”

“Can you say how much you wanna bet?”

“…” Xiang scratches the back of his head. “…Yeah,” he agrees cautiously. “Why?”

“And your odds go up, the more you bet—right?”

He wouldn’t know for sure—but it sounds right. He’s never gambled before. Never needed to.

“Right,” Fai agrees, then frowns. “…What are you…?”

“Well,” the teenager tilts his head, cracking his neck, “I’ll bet the whole thing, then.”

That’ll put his odds as high as they’re ever going to get, anyway—and he doesn’t have time to waste, hanging around there. These two look like they’ve already been here for decades.

“…YOUR ENTIRE SOUL?!!” Xiang half screams, lunging forward to stop him. “Don’t be crazy, didn’t you hear what I just said?! YOU COULD BE HANDSOME, A PRINCE, YOU—!”

The teenager throws down the dice with a flick of his wrist.

If he can't get back, he doesn't need a soul.

It's simple, really.

Both ghosts stare, trembling, watching the dice roll across the table. Of the three, the teenager seems the most calm, by far.

"...I thought you didn't like the kid," Fai mumbles, fingers trembling where they cover his mouth.

"Shut up! I hate him!"

Xiang cries, barely peeking out from where his fingers cover his eyes. "Did it...did it...?"

Both stop, when they see the dice come to a halt.

"...You're..." Xiang scrambles forward, staring in shock, jaw dropping so hard, the bone dislocates. "You're fucking kidding me!"

But, joke or not, a set of sixes stares right back up at him.

Thirty years of playing, with no luck. And now...this kid...in *one* throw...

"...Right," the teenager nods, like this—this was just expected. The natural order of things.

Both ghosts stare at each other in abject shock.

"I'm out of here," he mutters, cracking his knuckles. "Good luck to the both of you, though."

"...You realize it's not gonna be that easy, even when you get out?!" Xiang grumbles, sending Fai an annoyed glance.

It's that time, after all.

The dark haired young man turns back.

These two are annoying—and he doesn't find himself in the mood for doing any favors. But they did tell him how to play. And without that, he wouldn't be able to return.

He believes in returning favors, as a general rule.

"Back in the mortal realm," he calls out. "Is there anything the two of you want done?"

Fai and Xiang don't have to look at each other—that one's easy.

"Old man Shi is probably dead and gone by now," Xiang grumbles, "but you make sure his descendants pay for what they did to us!"

"...They're the ones who scattered your ashes?"

Xiang nods, teeth clenched from the memory. "They're a merchant family, most powerful ones in the eastern region of Xuli. And when you get those assholes, you tell them..." He claps a hand over his chest, "Xiang sent you from HELL!"

His friend jumps up and down beside him, pumping his fists in the air, "And FAI!"

"..." The teenager doubts that the merchant's descendants would know either of their names, but he tilts his head in acknowledgement. "Fine, fine..."

There's a low, rattling creak.

When the young man turns his head to find it's source—there's another door in the wall.

Smaller, big enough for just one person—made from what looks to be the purest jade. He makes his way forward, footsteps echoing across the walls.

"Hey, kid?"

He looks back one last time.

Xiang rubs the side of his head, watching the younger ghost with a newfound curiosity. After all—there is something weird about him.

Something almost...regal, in an odd sense of the word. "Did you ever come up with a new name?"

For a moment, the teenager is quiet.

Xiang half expects him to say something about not needing one, or repeating that, "Wu Ming" bullshit again, which is ridiculous. Every ghost needs a proper name, even the ones that are cursed or have their original names stolen—

This time, the young ghost actually answers.

“Hua Cheng.” He murmurs, staring at something in his hand—something that neither of the ghosts standing before him can catch a glimpse of. “You can call me Hua Cheng.”

With that, he turns back around, marching towards the door.

A slow, pleased grin stretches across Xiang’s face. Revealing a wickedly sharp set of teeth, and a forked tongue. “An excellent name indeed, young master,” he murmurs, watching as the door swings open. “Safe travels.”

“Do you think he’ll make it far?” Fai muses from his side.

The door swings shut from behind him—and Xiang’s smile never fades, feeling assured now, that he’ll have his revenge. That even if they cannot manage to return on their own—this youth will bring suffering in their stead.

“Oh, yes,” he nods, picking up the dice. “I’m certain.”

The most deceiving thing about modern myths, in Hua Cheng’s experience, is the idea that there’s some sort of road to hell. If there was, it would be easier to get to.

The path back from hell is a slow, winding staircase. Each step is a little steeper than the last.

It almost tempts one to fall right back down—but his steps never seem to falter. The whole way up, his fingers twist around the stem clutched between his fingers.

The stem of a small white flower—petals perfectly formed, untouched by wilt or death.

Hua Cheng.

Maybe he can’t use his old name, but the roots of who he was remain in his new moniker, after all…

He’s still the boy who brought flowers, in the end.

He sees the flash of light ahead, knowing the destination is close, and…

The young ghost thinks of his beloved.

Screaming for him with tears in his eyes, begging him not to do it.

Hua Cheng doesn't regret protecting him. He never could—it isn't a part of who he is.

But he does regret, above all else, his nasty habit of leaving his love. In tears.

His fingers squeeze the flower tightly.

The light is even closer now—and whatever lies beyond—Hua Cheng will face it.

And once he's finished, he'll find dianxia again.

It's only a matter of time.

He reaches up, finding a small coral bead, braided into his hair—and his soul aches.

"...Wait for me," he whispers.

END OF THE BOOK FOUR ARC , ENTERING: MOUNT TONGLU

FOR THOSE WHO WOULD LIKE TO CONTINUE FROM THIS POINT ON TWITTER, START HERE .

An Eye for a Blade

Chapter Summary

“Ghost King,” he repeats slowly, considering the idea. He’s heard of them before— from dianxia, in a vague sort of way. Knows that, among ghosts—they sit at the top of the heap. “Is one about to be born?”

“...In a way,” each of the ghosts around him nods their heads in agreement. “When it opens—whoever is left will be reborn.”

It.

Hua Cheng turns his head again—and this time, when he narrows his gaze, his eyes quickly adjust, magnifying far more than the average human can see—there’s a mountain in the distance. “...When what opens?”

There’s shrieking laughter, somewhere beyond the hills. Agonized screams, the clang of blades. Hua Cheng reaches for his own saber defensively—only to find his hip bare. Of all of the things not to be carried with him...

“...The kiln,” one of the ghosts replies.

Chapter Notes

TW// VIOLENCE AND GORE

You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

This story also has some spotify playlists for those who want some fun listening while reading!

No Paths Are Bound: The Playlist
Calamity Xie Lian: The Playlist
The Wu Ming Playlist

After what feels like an eternity, his feet find the landing of the stairwell—and when he presses his palm flat against the doorway that awaits, pushing it open—

A road awaits him.

Long, winding, the sky overhead dull and gloomy, storm clouds gathering.

"..." Hua Cheng crosses his arms over his chest, watching as hordes of people flood past on the road, all marching towards some unknown destination with great haste.

And, oddly enough, they're all ghosts.

Slowly, he tilts his head, only tugged from his thoughts when someone knocks into him.

"Oi!" The middle-aged ghost glares, brushing off the front of his tunic. "Why don't you pay attention before you stop and stand in the middle of the street, you...!"

The young man turns to look at him, one bloody red iris gleaming in the dull sunlight, and he falls silent, laughing nervously. "Actually—never mind! I should have been paying more attention to where I was going—a-apologies, young master!"

Hua Cheng arches an eyebrow.

It’s the first time in his life that anyone has ever referred to him by any form of title. He’s gone by many names before.

Monster. Bastard. Abomination.

Hong’er, little spirit, and Wu Ming.

Some cruel, others familiar—but never a name that rang with such respect.

Such fear.

“...Where are all of these people going?” He sighs, looking to the road ahead. There are crowds of ghosts scrambling over one another in their hurry, some getting trampled.

“You don’t know?” The ghost questions, eyes wide, and when the young man’s gaze snaps back to him, he gulps

“...Bai Wuxiang is dead,” he explains quickly, sending his companions a placating gesture when a couple stir impatiently, clearly eager to get back on the march.

"Is he really?" Hua Cheng muses, his lips curving up with pleasure. "How?"

"Struck down by the heavens," The ghost explains, shivering, wrapping its arms around itself with displeasure. After all—if even a calamity like the white no-face could be obliterated, what hope did the rest of them have?

"Was it by the Crown Prince of Xianle?"

The older ghost pauses, his tone incredulous.

"What? That loser? Ha! It—"

There's a low shriek in the air as the spirit's form dissolves in the grip of Hua Cheng's fist, fading into a faint flame—before even those are snuffed out by a twist of his fingers.

The ghost's companion watches with wide, horrified eyes.

"..." The young man shakes his wrist; whatever remains of the man's soul being scattered after he consumed him. Not particularly enticing when it comes to taste, but a much-needed meal. "Who killed the white clothed calamity?"

This question is directed at the ghosts remaining.

"U-Um, the heavenly emperor did," one explains, staring at the empty place where his companion once stood. "The crown prince has b even banished a second time."

Hua Cheng's lip curls with distaste, but he asks nothing more of the heavens.

He isn't interested in such worthless trash, anyway.

"What does his death have to do with the ghosts here?"

"...He was the only ghost king in existence," another spirit answers slowly, trembling the moment the youth's eyes land upon him. "There must be another."

"Ghost King," he repeats slowly, considering the idea. He's heard of them before— from dianxia, in a vague sort of way. Knows that, among ghosts—they sit at the top of the heap. "Is one about to be born?"

"...In a way," each of the ghosts around him nods their heads in agreement. "When it opens—whoever is left will be reborn."

It.

Hua Cheng turns his head again—and this time, when he narrows his gaze, his eyes quickly adjust, magnifying far more than the average human can see—

There's a mountain in the distance. "...When what opens?"

There's shrieking laughter, somewhere beyond the hills. Agonized screams, the clang of blades.

Hua Cheng reaches for his own saber defensively—only to find his hip bare. Of all the things not to be carried with him...

"...The kiln," one of the ghosts replies.

From the way they're all staring—Hua Cheng can glean what the 'Kiln' must be. A volcano, already spewing smoke and ash into the sky, the ground rumbling as more ghosts rapidly begin their approach.

That explains the weather, then.

"..." The youth crosses his arms, thinking.

"Being a Ghost King," he questions, his head slowly tilting to the side. "Are there any benefits?"

One of the spirits standing back snorts, like that must be some sort of ghost, but, well —

It takes one sharp look to shut him up.

"...Besides being the strongest, you mean?"

The ghost standing closest to him mumbles, "Isn't that the biggest benefit there is?" Slowly, the young man smiles—a set of newly formed fangs flashing between his lips. "It's plenty."

He listens closer, hears the screams getting louder.

"Is there fighting going on?"

"The more ghosts you kill, the better your chances are," one of the spirits standing around explains, then, when he sees the ghosts around him tense with worry, he falls silent.

After all, their plan was to stick together until they reached the mountainside. But now…

None of them expected to encounter a savage level ghost so early on—even if he clearly is in a weakened state, he…

“Thank you, for your help.” The dark-haired figure murmurs, beginning to stride forward. “I’ll give you a reward in exchange.”

He’s a reasonable man, after all.

The ghosts pause, glancing between each other with confusion, wondering what this young man could offer them, but—

Hua Cheng glances back over his shoulder, one eye burning like a cursed star, lips curled back into a snarl.

“Turn back, now—and I won’t swallow you whole.”

There isn’t debate, or any false attempts at bravado before they turn tail and run, desperately attempting to make their way back down the road they were once charging down with such determination.

Hua Cheng’s eyes return to the path ahead.

To the kiln.

Without a weapon, this is going to be inconvenient.

But he can feel the weakness in his limbs now—still strong, when compared to the average ghost, but not as strong as he was.

Not strong enough to be of use to his god. To protect him. Hua Cheng can’t afford to stay this way.

So, he’ll just have to change the circumstances.

It’s as simple as that.

Besides…

His fingers curve in, long, gleaming talons forming in the place of fingernails, fangs extending.

You always have a weapon, if you’re creative enough. It’s just a matter of imagination.

The road is long. Impossibly so.

He couldn’t tell you how many hours it is, charging forward—crushing spirits beneath his feet, between his jaws, shredding them with his claws.

It must have been days.

And still, there were more.

Even as his limbs begin to feel stronger.

As the rest of his senses begin to return, expanding out over the land.

There are millions of ghosts—a near inconceivable number, even to him. Each with the same destination in mind. Most are worthless little weaklings, foolish little creatures that came all this way to be food.

But, from what he can tell—there are five creatures of savage rank, like him, that might present a challenge.

One smells mildly familiar—but is so far in the distance, Hua Cheng can’t place him. He surveys the battlefield from the top of a craggy rock formation, gaze narrowed.

Each enemy is an evaluation, weighed against the potential risk of delaying his approach to the kiln. Of the five savage ghosts present, two are still stronger than him. Tackling that—

"You're an odd one, aren't you?" a voice drawls from behind him. The young man goes still.

When he glances back over his shoulder, there's a woman standing there. Tall, slender—long hair, falling loose around her shoulders.

Hua Cheng has never been one to care for things like beautiful women—but, objectively speaking, she is rather lovely.

Delicate lips and sharp cheekbones, wearing robes of red and black, with gold embellishments along the sleeves.

If not for the dried blood in a tear of her gown, directly over her heart, the younger ghost might have mistaken her for a bride.

And eyes the color of blood.

"You've been to the other side, haven't you?" She muses, narrowed gaze slowly looking the youth over. "I can smell it on you."

Hua Cheng elects not to answer, evaluating her with his own gaze—and sumptuous lips turn up into a sly grin.

"Considering devouring me, young master?"

Clearly, he is—he can smell the spiritual power rolling from her. And it's a battle of the fittest, after all. If he doesn't attack, she will.

The woman doesn't seem particularly interested in that, however. "It's rare for a soul to come back after dispersion."

She walks forward, black heeled boots clicking against the stone beneath her feet, leaning close, breathing him in. "And that curse, my, my—"

The moment she leans in to get a better look, the youth lunges, fangs bared—

Only to be stopped by a delicate, impossibly strong hand.

Perfectly manicured fingernails dig into the skin of his throat as she bares fangs of her own, hissing in his face, "Don't INTERRUPT me while I'm speaking, whelp!"

He's twice her size, easily—but thrown to the ground with all the effort it would take to throw a ragdoll.

It doesn't damage him, not particularly—but his body does sink three feet into the earth, deeply fracturing volcanic rock in its wake.

She drops down beside him, landing lightly on her feet.

"What's your name?" The ghost questions, her voice cold with impatience.

When the young man doesn't answer, her foot drops down on his chest, the sharp heel of it digging in until he clenches his teeth in discomfort.

"First lesson in being a ghost, boy—" She hisses, pupils narrowing, "You WANT people to know your name!"

"...Hua Cheng." He growls.

And just like that, the foot lifts from his chest, and her tone becomes far more pleasant.

"Was that so difficult?" She muses, taking a step back.

"..." The youth rises to his feet slowly, glaring, and her smile returns. "You may call me Zhao Beitong."

He brushes his hand against his chest, wary. After all, he thought there were only five ghosts of savage rank in the vicinity, but he never sensed her, not until she was right behind him.

Even now, he struggles to sense her spiritual power—but clearly, her strength is immense.

"...If people knowing a ghost's name is so important," he grumbles, eyes flashing with annoyance, "how come I've never heard of you?"

Clearly that brushes some sort of sore note—he can tell from the way her eyes flash with annoyance, but her smile only widens.

"The weaker ones need the name recognition," she muses, slowly stalking around him in a slow circle. "Why have you come here?"

"The same reason as you, I'm sure." He mutters, still tense understanding now that, if it comes into a fight, it won't end well for him.

Her laugh is cold, like the wind that cuts past them, flowing through her hair. "This is my home," she responds coldly. "And I have lived alone for a very, very long time."

"..." Hua Cheng glances around, and slowly—he recognizes what they're standing in for what it is.

Not a craggy rock formation, like what he originally mistook it for—but a city. Buried in long cooled flows of lava and volcanic ash.

When he turns back to her, she isn't smiling anymore—lips pressed into a tight frown, waist length hair blowing in the wind.

"...What is this place?" He questions, eyes struggling to take in the sight before his eyes.

Dianxia told him many stories in their time together—many of them historical, featuring natural disasters...

But never anything on this scale. Zhao Beitong's hands ball up into fists.

"I will tell you, if you answer my question," She lifts her chin. "Why have you come here?"

"..." Hua Cheng crosses his arms over his chest, irritated by the delay, but understanding that he isn't dealing with someone who can be forced into speaking. "To enter the kiln."

Zhao Beitong waves that off, almost bored by that situation—and Hua Cheng supposes, if this truly is her home, this must be somewhat of a regular occurrence for her. "Why have you returned to this world?" She questions again, her gaze intent.

The young man hesitates.

It's the easiest question in the world to answer—and yet, for the first time, he feels the urge to deny it. His instincts telling him the answer will bring danger, but...

Ghosts have a penchant for detecting lies.

"...I still have someone precious in this world," he replies.

A powerful form of love. Incredibly rare. In fact—

In all of Zhao Beitong's years—and even among ghosts, she is ancient—she has never heard of a dispersed soul coming back for something so simple.

"If that's true, why haven't you returned to them?" Hua Cheng's jaw clenches.

"...I could not effectively protect him, as I am now."

She hardly even reacts to the revelation of the gender of Hua Cheng's beloved, simply arches one perfectly shaped eyebrow, "It shouldn't be difficult for a savage ghost like yourself to protect a single human."

"...He's a prince," Hua Cheng replies flatly, not worrying about that identifying marker—after all, this world has many princes walking its surface. "With many enemies."

Zhao Beitong's eyes widen sharply, then narrow once more, her arms crossing over her chest.

He's unsure of what to expect, but—

"I loved a prince, once," she mutters, eyes filled with emotions that the young man, in his broad experience of suffering, can't manage to fathom.

"It was the end of me."

Slowly, she turns around. "Can you read?"

Again, he hesitates.

"I said," she repeats, her voice sharp with annoyance, "can you read?"

"...Somewhat," he answers flatly.

Dianxia taught him some, but, given his condition...the process was slow, and by the end of his life, Hua Cheng had only picked up the most basic characters.

Zhao Beitong lifts one hand, pointing to the east. When Hua Cheng follows the gesture with his eyes, he finds a sign there. No, more like what might have once been an entrance plaque—either to a government building, or a temple.

"Those characters—they spell Wuyong."

She explains, lowering her arm. "That is the name of this place. If you're clever enough to make it to your destination, I'm sure you'll learn the rest for yourself."

Spite drips from her like acid rain, a level of vengefulness Hua Cheng can only admire, and he asks—

"What about you?"

At first, she does not answer—her back still turned, posture tense. And eventually, she replies—

"What about me?"

"Why do you linger on in this world?" The young man questions. It seems an odd place to haunt—and she seems lacking in purpose.

Her shoulders seem to hunch even higher, but before Hua Cheng question the reaction, she responds—her voice low, bubbling with resentment.

"Because I also have someone precious in this world." And yet, her voice doesn't sound loving.

It sounds utterly hateful.

Before Hua Cheng can say more, in the blink of an eye... She's gone.

In her place is simply...a butterfly.

Emitting a silvery, unnatural light—lazily drifting past him as it glides through the air. He tries to reach out, to snatch it between his fingers, but...

It's gone.

Hua Cheng spends the next hour wandering the place, slowly piecing apart the characters she pointed out to him, assigning them to sounds.

He never had teachers, growing up. Pain was his teacher, and the humiliation that came with it.

But he’s always been quick to learn.

The language itself isn’t so different from that of Xianle, just older. If he had a stronger foundation of reading level, he could have decoded more of it, but...

What he does manage to learn is that this place was once called the kingdom of Wuyong, just as Zhan Beitong said.

And, just like Xianle—

They worshipped a crown prince, born under a cursed star.

He stops before what was once a temple, his head tilted, slightly contemplative, considering the idea of going inside, but...

There’s a faint rumble in the distance, and his eyes flash with resolve

His questions can be answered later—for now—

The ghost has work to do.

Several mountains roam the region—crushing hordes of ghosts under their foundations, nearly overtaking him twice, when he isn’t paying attention.

But never the mountain in the center.

Mount Tonglu.

And the closer the ghost grows to the kiln, the thicker the heat of battle becomes.

With each victory, he can feel himself gaining strength, but there are limitations.

He's forced to feed on smaller, weaker ghosts, unable to use anything but fangs and claws.

Any lower-level weapons he tries to take hold of have the nasty tendency of shattering under his hands, worse than useless—and the other savage ghosts, particularly the more challenging ones, require more than just raw physical strength to deal with.

Hua Cheng is nearly at the foot of the mountain, contemplating an option, ways to gain a tool that would help him acquire the upper hand, when he notices something.

Something that distinctly doesn't belong.

Slowly, he breaths in, his lip curling with distaste—

Humans.

"..." He turns his head sharply, nostrils flaring, pupils dilating.

What on earth are humans doing here?

It also explains why so many lower-level ghosts have been flocking to the area so quickly, often only throwing themselves into his jaws.

They smell live bait.

"You could be smarter than the rest of them, you know," an all too familiar voice drawls.

Hua Cheng rolls his eyes, not looking up—but a pale ankle dangles in front of his face, connected to a delicately shaped calf.

Zhao Beitong stretches out on the rock outcropping overhead.

She's bored, watching so many ghosts battle for victory in a game that she clearly doesn't deem worth playing, taking slow, lazy bites from an apple, the juices dripping down her chin.

“You know, I really LOVE it when people make annoying, vague comments,” Hua Cheng sneers.

“It’s incredibly helpful. Keep up the good work.”

The ghost smiles, not annoyed by his cheek this time. “You know what you’ll need for the kiln, don’t you?”

Hua Cheng huffs, starting to walk past her, but that foot stops him, the ball of her shoe pressing into his forehead.

“A spiritual tool,” She carries on, using her toe to shove him back a foot, taking another bite from her apple. “And currently, you aren’t equipped to do much more than please a woman.”

He levels an unimpressed stare in her direction, and she amends—

“Or a prince, if you like.”

He clearly would, but that’s beside the point.

“I’ll be sure to pick one up on my next stop to the market,” he replies, his tone withering.

“You know, if you stop being such a cocky little brat for a moment, I’ll teach you something,” the elder ghost hums.

He falls silent.

She tosses her apple core into the air, watching with mild boredom as a horde of bats descend upon it, ripping the scrap—and each other—into pieces in the air.

“A spiritual tool is always forged through blood sacrifice,” Zhao Beitong murmurs, her gaze far, far away.

“If you’re clever…” Her eyes flicker towards the cave, where the human scent lingers. “You’ll have quite the forge for yourself.”

The youth pauses, staring up at her. “…I thought spiritual tools were formed through noble acts. Martyrdom. Enduring suffering. Things like that.”

Zhao Beitong’s lips twist up into a sly smirk, and she shakes her head. “Who tells people that, the gods?”

Hua Cheng falls silent. His knowledge on that subject—and most subjects of higher learning—came exclusively from dianxia. Who was well learned, yes, but...

The older he grows, he begins to learn that his god, in all his talents, strengths, and knowledge, doesn't know everything. And often, he's only ever been shown life through one perspective.

That isn't dianxia's own failing—Hua Cheng would never blame him for it.

But he was raised to trust the heavens blindly, to take every teaching from the lips of the heavenly emperor as gospel.

Hua Cheng, by contrast, has lived a life that causes him to view those who look down from on high with a far more jaded perspective.

"Listen to me well,"

Zhao Beitong drawls, spinning something between her fingers, the object flashing far too quickly for Hua Cheng to pick out what it is. "Magic does not care how kind you are, how good, or how evil. It only cares for how much you pay. It is a transaction, not a moral exercise."

It makes sense, Hua Cheng supposes. After all, if spiritual tools were only formed by incredible acts of kindness and sacrifice, gods would be the only ones to possess them.

Upon thinking of it—Hua Cheng suspects that's why the heavens would push such a lie about magic.

Not out of some desire to stop humans from committing acts of evil to form spiritual tools, no—but to ensure that their side would be the only one to have any.

"...And how do you know so much about these things?" He questions, lifting his chin. Her smile fades slightly.

Not out of sadness, no—Hua Cheng can detect a note of pride in her gaze, mixed with...many other emotions, most of them beyond his understanding.

"I forged many spiritual tools in my human lifetime," Zhao Beitong murmurs, looking back up at the sky, her tone growing...

Somewhat bitter.

Her prince needed so many, after all—and such a fondness for his swords.

And in the end, what did she forge, if nor the finest blade of them all?

“If you want the strength to protect the one you love, you’ll be forced to make such choices.”

Just as she did.

“...” The young man takes one, taloned finger, using it to delicately nudge her ankle out of his face, continuing towards the cave. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

The moment Hua Cheng fades from her sight, the cocksure smirk on her face fades, because she knows what will come.

After all, she’s been playing this game for many, many years—and while many have impressed her, none have risen to the levels of becoming...

Zhao Beitong closes her eyes with a sigh, dropping back down on the rock outcropping—and she waits for the young man to meet his doom.

They always do.

Most people need to go through a long, horrific journey to learn to hate their own kind. To fall from grace, to experience some horrible form of betrayal.

For Hua Cheng, that was never necessary.

He’s always disliked humans—after all, they never gave him a reason to think otherwise.

The first clear memory he has of his human life is of his mother—and it’s also one of the last he has of her. Not because, like Xie Lian’s Guoshi predicted, she would have abandoned him, no...

Humans took her away from him. All while laughing, sneering, and calling her son a little monster.

That is among one of Hua Cheng’s earliest memories of the world, and it is not one that he is willing to delve into. Even now, after everything he has lived through.

That memory stays in a box, carefully locked away.

So, no—he has little love for his own species, dead or alive. And when he approaches the cave entrance—he hasn't completely ruled out Zhao Beitong's suggestion.

After all, whatever brought these humans here, he can't imagine their reasons were *sympathetic,* but...

But when Hua Cheng enters the mouth of the cave, he finds something he wasn't expecting.

A detail that is often lost or forgotten in the stories that follow.

"...Gege?"

The ghost freezes at the sound of a soft, frightened voice—clearly that of a child.

And the further he walks into the cave, he realizes—nearly all the humans present are children. Under the age of fourteen at the least, some of them are so young, they can barely speak at all.

The only adult he can set his eyes on is a young woman, huddled in the corner with two of the smallest children, barely more than infants, cradled in her arms. And when he speaks—his voice is cold in its confusion,

"...What is it?"

The young girl glances up—and she yelps.

It takes a moment for Hua Cheng to realize—she must have done so upon seeing his face, leaving her to cringe against the wall, petrified, clutching both children even closer.

"...Why are you here?" The ghost questions again, retracting his claws and fangs.

"I...W-We..."

She stammers, staring at him, lips pale and trembling, "We were...t-traveling, there... there wasn't enough room in the orphanages in the city anymore, and....a-a merchant said he was establishing another facility in the next town over, so..."

Hua Cheng arches an eyebrow.

"Well..." He glances around, taking in the bats, spiders, and blood splattered walls. Slowly, his form becomes less intimidating as he steps into the light, “It’s an interesting place to pick for an orphanage, I’ll give him that.”

One of the older children lets out a startled laugh, and the young woman glares, suddenly defensive. “It wasn’t supposed to be here!” She cries. “He said there were too many demons on the road, so he hired a cultivator to help escort us on the journey! But...” She trials off.

“The further we traveled, there were just...there were so many ghosts, and...he said the best thing we could do was hide,” she whispers, eyes wide—and clearly traumatized. “There were twice as many of us, before.”

When Hua Cheng glances around—he counts nearly thirty present.

Which means thirty children have already died, for what seems to be utter idiocy at first glance. “Where is the cultivator who was escorting you before?”

“He went to go get help hours ago,” the girl explains, her eyes misted over with tears, “but...he never came back.”

Slowly, the ghost lifts his head—eyeing the cafe ceiling.

There’s an array there, likely put in place before Mount Tonglu opened— drawn in human blood.

All the sudden, he knows exactly what this is.

An overfilled orphanage, desperate to solve a crowding problem.

A cultivator—likely of the demonic breed—looking to capitalize on the resentment that would be released by the opening of Mount Tonglu.

And what better sacrifice, than so many innocent souls?

Half as effective now given that he failed to keep so many of them alive, but still.

These children weren’t being moved—they were sold like cattle.

Hua Cheng’s lip curls with disgust as he shakes his head.

A typically selfish, callous, human act.

“...Gege?” A voice calls again, and when Hua Cheng looks down, there’s a little boy standing beside his leg.

Small, horribly thin—with a mop of messy brown hair, staring up at the young man with wide, slightly hopeful eyes. “Did you come to save us?”

The youth pauses, his lips slightly parted, and the boy shivers a little, tugging on his sleeve, whispering—

“There are ghosts outside!”

The dark-haired youth stares down at him for a moment, his expression unreadable.

Outside, neither savage nor calamity, another ghost stares at the sky, waiting for his downfall.

They always do, after all. No matter which path they choose. When Hua Cheng was very small, he used to play a game.

Whenever he was being beaten or screamed at. Whenever he was hungry, tired, and alone, he would pretend that he was someone else.

At first, that vision wasn’t particularly concrete.

He just imagined himself as someone with a bed. Or dinner. Sometimes, he’d imagine a world where he had a father, and his mother didn’t have to do the things that she did.

When she was gone, he would pretend that he was someone who had a mother at all.

Not the woman they forced him to live with after. Someone gentle, who smiled whenever she saw him, who didn’t cringe with disgust when she saw his face.

Then, as he got older, he imagined himself—but the future. He pretended that he would get out of that place.

That he would come back later, a wealthy, powerful man—with a beautiful wife, chests of gold, a gilded carriage, fine blades—and he would rub that wealth in their faces. Make them beg for his forgiveness, just to beg for his scraps.

Then, his imagination turned vengeful.

He imagined himself becoming a warrior, stronger than everyone else, so strong, that no one could beat him anymore—

And then, he would start hurting them, in turn.

He would kill everyone who ever laid a hand on him. On everyone who watched it happen. Then everyone else, too.

Just for good measure. Just for the crime of being happy in a world that had treated him so cruelly.

He was playing that very game, during the God Pleasing Parade. Leaning against the very end of the city wall, imagining how spiteful it would be, to throw himself from the edge.

And then, for just a moment—it wasn't a game anymore.

That was the day when everything changed. When the whole world changed, because...

That was the day that Hua Cheng learned that at least one person in the world could be kind, only for the sake of it.

That somewhere in the world—not in the confines of a game, or a fantasy of his head —there was a place where he could feel safe. Even if he was never good enough to be allowed to stay.

Even if his luck was truly so rotten, he couldn't be allowed to stand in the prince's presence.

The thought of it made him weep, back then. Made him want to cry and scream, until someone told him that it wasn't true. Clinging to the front of dianxia's robes as the Guoshi told him his fortune, crying that it wasn't true, that he wasn't cursed, that he wasn't bad luck—

And the crown prince held him so tightly, whispering,

'I know.'

'I know you're not.'

From that moment on, the game was still there—but it changed.

Instead of imagining that he was someone else, or a future version of himself— whenever Hua Cheng was suffering, he would just...

Imagine what dianxia would do, if he was there.

Not that he imagined the god would save him, no—even in his most desperate moments, the little boy never wanted to trouble Xie Lian in such a way.

But he would imagine the crown prince being brave, and just. Stronger than his enemies, casting them aside like they were nothing.

And honestly—Hua Cheng never quite managed the ‘just’ part. His temper never allowed for it.

But he tried to emulate the rest of it.

Now—he isn’t a child anymore. Now, he knows so much more about the world.

So much more now, about the god he worshipped—and later, as he learned what it meant, fell in love with.

Hua Cheng could never be exactly like the Crown Prince. No matter how hard he tried —they would always be different people, and he would only ever fall short of his goal.

And that’s alright—that’s—that’s just fine.

Because even if Xie Lian only ever saw him as a child, a lost little duckling following him around in the world, he still accepted him—cared for him enough to mourn him.

Still, old habits die hard—and Hua Cheng is good at this game. If Xie Lian was here, Hua Cheng knows what the god would do.

Even without any spiritual tools, he would still try and find a way to protect these children. Even if it was hopeless. Even if he knew that he would probably fail.

But what would—will—Hua Cheng do? He couldn’t tell you why.

When he looks into that child’s face, Hua Cheng can’t find some beautiful philosophy about the world. It never gave him a chance, and the ghost never returned the favor. He can’t use his god as justification, because this...is a serious risk.

Risking the very thing he bet his own soul for—returning to dianxia’s side.

But when he looks into those eyes—small, hopeful eyes, trusting him so easily...

The ghost knows he's capable of doing the cruel thing. Of turning around and leaving them to die—or, even worse…

Using them. That's likely exactly what Zhao Beitong meant for him to do, when she told him how to build a spiritual tool.

He can only imagine that the lives of so many children would create a tool of incredible evil—so powerful, he could go to the kiln right now.

There's no reason that he couldn't, or that he isn't capable of it.

But in this moment, the reason is as simple and as common as anything—

Hua Cheng doesn't want to.

Slowly, his hand lands on top of the boy's head, ruffling his hair, and he murmurs—

"I'll try."

It's most lowlifes coming after them anyway. And the more Hua Cheng kills—the stronger he'll get, he—

The logic is weak, of course—but he tries to tell himself that there's a chance. That, when the time comes, he won't have to choose the worst option.

"…Thank you," the oldest—the teenager whispers, her voice trembling. The same girl that cringed in disgust, upon first seeing his face.

"…" Hua Cheng doesn't respond, just turns around, walking back to the mouth of the cave without another word.

"Careful, gege!"

His steps halt for just a moment—and somehow, just barely, he manages a smile.

It feels so odd, hearing someone call him that name. Nostalgic, in a strange way.

When he returns to the mouth of the cave, Zhao Beitong hasn't moved, watching him curiously.

"What are you doing?"

The young ghost stands at the mouth of the cave, overlooking the valley below with a mildly grim expression.

“Something fucking stupid,” he admits, sounding almost annoyed by the whole thing. Annoyed by his own better angels, as it were.

“Well,” slowly, she smiles. “At least you know.”

He’s one of those reluctantly heroic types, isn’t he? She leans her hand on her chin, long, red tinted nails tapping against her chin as she watches the young man face the onslaught.

Probably has no idea that he is, too—all the better.

Still—success or failure, Zhao Beitong knows what will happen in either outcome. And either way, she will be disappointed.

You believe in things only to be disappointed enough times, and you develop a stubborn sense of nihilism—even in the afterlife.

Still, she watches him try.

For three days, she watches him try.

Slaughtering countless hordes of ghosts and goblins—to the point where the bodies begin to pile in mounds along the mountain path.

Until he’s soaked in blood up to the elbow, looking more like a beast than a hero protecting the helpless.

Until his claws are too slick with blood to get a proper grip, and he’s left with nothing but his teeth.

On the third day, in between waves of hordes—he forces himself to stumble back inside, attempting to wipe the sweat from his face—but ending up streaked in blood instead.

There’s a small pool near the back of the cavern—flowing from the aqueducts beneath the fallen cities of Wuyong. Most of it corpse water, he’s had to waste spiritual power purifying it enough for them to drink several times already.

And now, shaking with exhaustion, he attempts to clean the blood away, scrubbing at his arms, his face, cupping his hands and pouring it over his hair—

Then, there’s light pressure against his cheek, and he turns his head, snapping with a hiss.

“I-I’m sorry!”

It’s—

It’s the teenage girl. The one who unwittingly led an orphanage-worth of children to a hideous fate. The one who cringed from him with terror and disgust, the first time she saw him.

She’s scrambling away now, a rag clutched between trembling fingers. “I’m sorry, s-sir!”

“...” Hua Cheng’s eyes level on her face, pale and drawn. She’s shrunk back against the cave wall, trembling like a leaf, knees pulled up against her chest. All the other children seem used to him—or, at the very least, understand he’s a friend.

But she’s still petrified.

“What are you doing?” He questions flatly.

“U-um...” The rag is still clutched to her chest—and by his estimations, she’s probably on the verge of hyperventilation at any moment now, but she swallows it down. “Y- You still have blood on your face,” she mumbles, her voice small.

If he were a gentleman, he’d probably say something about how it was an honor, getting bloody in the defense of a young lady. If he was interested in girls—or anyone at all, for that matter, he’d probably smirk and tease her for wanting an excuse to touch his face.

But Hua Cheng isn’t a gentleman, and he isn’t interested in girls, or anyone else. And even if he was—she’s already expressed how repulsed she was by him already.

“What’s that got to do with you?” He replies, his voice cold. The young woman pauses, wringing the rag anxiously.

“...You’re...” She swallows dryly, forcing herself to push away from the cave wall, creeping forward once again—cautiously this time, like she half expects the ghost to lash out at her again.

He doesn’t—just watches her with narrowed, distrustful eyes. “Your arms...are shaking.”

She explains carefully, slowly—and ironically enough, with shaking limbs of her own —bringing the rag back to the ghost's cheek. "S-So… let me," she mumbles, gently patting the blood, grime, and dirt from the young man's skin.

Hua Cheng watches, his expression…complicated.

She's careful, gentle—and even if she is trembling with terror, it's still the gentlest touch the ghost has received since, well…

And even then, in his entire life, the Crown Prince was the only one who had ever touched Hua Cheng gently.

"I'm…um…I'm sorry, r-really," She mumbles, dropping the rag down in the pool beside them, squeezing it until the blood rinses out, before bringing it up to the ghost's hands.

Her lips tremble, when she sees the talons—and she looks a little faint—but she lifts his wrist up anyway, cleaning them attentively.

"I-I shouldn't have screamed the way I did," the teenager mumbles, her eyes downcast with…

Genuine shame.

"I've always been afraid of ghosts," she admits, her voice slightly lowered so the children won't hear, "ever since I was a little kid, but…"

She bites her lip.

"…I didn't realize there were nice ones," She admits, staring at the ground sheepishly, like it's such an embarrassing thing to say.

Hua Cheng can't stop staring. Baffled that, by anyone's assertion, he could ever be viewed as a 'nice' ghost.

His silence is pointed—not aided by his glare—and eventually, it's awkward enough that she tries to break it.

"W… were you getting married?" She questions, cupping in the water in her palms so she can use it to rinse the blood from his hair—and Hua Cheng pauses.

"…What?"

"Your robes," she mumbles, looking them over. They're stained an even more vivid shade of red now, but…Hua Cheng remembers, now.

He forgot that, years ago, when they were building his funeral pyre, a farmer dressed him in the robes of a bride groom.

"...No," he mutters.

"I was just laid to rest in these."

"Oh," she pauses, her eyebrows knitting together. "Isn't that...bad luck?"

The ghost lets out a low snort. He was born with the worst possible luck that a human being could have—the clothes he was buried in would hardly make a difference.

But he doesn't explain that—instead, he just says—

"There was someone." His eyes stare at the darkness of the cave walls, unreadable. "But I never got the chance to ask."

Like he ever would have had the nerve, anyway—or would have been accepted, if he did.

"...I'm sorry," The teenager murmurs, frowning with sympathy. "W... Was she beautiful?"

Hua Cheng doesn't feel the need to correct the gender at this point—doesn't feel at ease enough to offer up too many details. "...Yes," he sighs. "More than anything else in the world."

She seems pleased by the thought. It must sound so romantic when you didn't actually live through it. When you don't know...the circumstance. "Did she love you too?"

There was a time when he would have instinctively replied no, never. That it wasn't possible.

Now...

"Yes."

'Because I loved you too much.'

It's hard not to believe that, particularly when the person doesn't even realize that you're around to hear it.

If it was ever possible for Hua Cheng to Rest in Peace, those words ended that chance then and there.

How could he ever leave?

When he watched his beloved hold his body, weeping, whispering those words—how could he ever move on?

Even if it isn't the same type of love as the one that Hua Cheng feels—it's the only love that he's ever been given.

And he can't—he *can't* let that go, not ever.

"...When you died..." She questions softly, gently wringing what's left of the water out of the ends of his hair, "Did you hurt your eye?"

"..." He lifts his fingertips to his face, slowly brushing over his right eyelid, and he shakes his head. "I was born that way."

"...Oh."

She frowns, her voice awkward, sympathetic, and...

It's that sympathetic tone that makes him stiffen again, pulling out of her grasp.

"There are more coming," he mutters, rising to his feet. Maybe he should tell her to stay back, or something like that, but...

That's something a gentleman would do. Or maybe someone heroic. The main character in a fairytale. A prince. A god. Any of those things—but not him.

Hua Cheng has never had the opportunity to doubt who or what he is. The world has spent his entire life reminding him.

A monster. An abomination. A freak. Even then, when she was thanking him, that girl —

She was disgusted by him, all the same. Even then. Pitying him, when he admitted he lived his entire life with such a face.

Even if she hadn't, there will always be the words from that night.

'A disgusting little monster,'

His teeth pull back into a snarl again, as he launches himself into another battle, over and over again. As though somehow, if he pushes enough of the anger, turmoil, and anguish in his chest out through the violence he unleashes, it'll hurt less.

‘Desperately in love with a princess.’

Hua Cheng isn’t the hero in any fairy tale. Even now, even after—

‘But he can never say his name,’

His teeth gnash together.

Even after what was taken from him. Making his story more ‘interesting,’ in the words of the calamity.

At best, he’s a sympathetic villain. At worst, a forgettable side character that doesn’t even make it to the end.

Which seems more and more likely now, as the smaller hordes of ghosts and demons begin to thin out, and he sees what’s coming behind them.

A powerful, savage ghost.

Zhao Beitong sits up now, watching with greater interest.

It’s half man, half beast—nearly unrecognizable from what it must have been, in its previous life, standing over three meters tall.

Scales instead of skin, wielding a scalding black whip, blood dripping from its handle

“...What are you doing?” She whispers, watching with rapt interest as the creature charges forward, smoke pouring from its jaws—

But the young man she’s been watching—watching for days now, unable to draw her gaze away, doesn’t cower. Doesn’t even flinch.

He surveys the creature as it closes in with the same look of frustration that she saw before. Annoyed with himself. With—

With his own better angels.

His shoulders hunch as he drops into a crouch, one eye burning like fire as the other blends into the dark, fangs bared.

“Something...” He exhales sharply through his nose, finishing the last words with a snarl, “Fucking *stupid!*”

It’s hopeless, she thinks, watching the ghost as it battles the creature—fighting with a terrifying level of determination, yes, but unable to completely even the odds.

Even as he's able to wound it, using the strength from thousands of slaughtered ghosts as he leaps onto the beast's shoulders, using his claws to gauge at its eyes until it wails, he—

He can't contend with the whip.

A powerful spiritual tool.

One that rips his entire back open in one strike—and still, the pain doesn't seem to slow him down. If anything, it seems to wake him up, ignite a bloodlust that makes her want to cry out in frustration.

How, how could he not know that it's hopeless?!

"You have to stop!" She cries, hands balled up with frustration. Because—it's foolish, a waste! "You can't take another hit from that thing!"

His soul is trembling. Strong—stupidly strong, with such determination, she's almost scalded by the heat of it—but on the edge of shattering from the strain

"If you die, they'll die anyway!" Zhao Beitong snarls, slowly rising to her feet, "What's the point in that?!"

There isn't—and she *knows* that the child must know, from the way his teeth gnash together in frustration.

This is how it always ends, one way or another.

Mount Tonglu is a graveyard for good men, and a breeding ground of evil. To become corrupt is to survive. And to overcome that is to accept your fate.

There is no third path. She has watched this bloody metamorphosis since the dawn of the modern age, and she knows it's ways.

"SHUT UP!" He snarls, falling on the back foot, barely missing another strike from the whip, spitting blood as the creature before him roars. "DON'T YOU THINK I KNOW THAT, HAG?!"

She gawks, eyes widening in offense, "WHO ARE YOU CALLING A HAG, YOU STUPID BRAT?!"

There's only one way, and they both know what it is—and what he must do.

“STOP BEING A COWARD AND DO IT ALREADY!”

In one powerful leap, Hua Cheng leaps thirty meters back, landing on top of the rock formation above the mouth of the cave, breathing raggedly.

She isn’t wrong.

When he looks down the hillside, he sees another one coming—this time, an earth spirit, making the ground rumble and shatter as it rolls toward them. It won’t attack Hua Cheng’s enemy first, now—

They’ll fight to beat the other to finish him off first.

Whichever one does will get the gain in strength that comes with his kill—no small advantage.

It’s hopeless.

The ghost’s hands ball into fists, his breathing ragged. It’s hopeless, and he knew that from the very beginning.

And now—he finds himself looking to the mouth of the cave below.

Knowing that he gave himself the chance to do the right thing. That he tried, and he failed—but that failure is not an option.

That even if those below don’t deserve to die—Hua Cheng isn’t willing to die for them. That isn’t who he is. And even if it was—he has promises to keep.

He doesn’t have to kill them all. That’s the first whisper of temptation, creeping through his mind.

In the end, one soul can be enough.

His thoughts drift to the girl. The cowardly little fool.

The one who stupidly listened to that cultivator, leading so many helpless children to this place, cowering from him when he so much as looked in her direction. Pitying him, for being born with such a face.

For being born with the eye that the world has always cursed him for.

Hua Cheng could kill her. Use her body to create a tool, add more souls to it later, if it's not enough.

It was her stupidity that helped bring those children to this point in the first place. It seems like a fair exchange, in the end. Maybe not fair, but...

There's a bitter taste in his mouth.

When has life ever been fair? To him, or anyone else?

And if the world is such a way, why should he be any better? It's never shown the same courtesy to him.

Slowly, he drops down—landing before the cave entrance, walking back inside.

The children are cowering in the corner—and the girl, the same girl who spoke to him of her fears and his first loves just the span of hours before, is kneeling among them— trying to keep them from crying too loudly.

By his side, his fingers hook into claws. It's an ugly thing.

A horrible, hideous thing to do. Befitting a place such as this. A man such as him.

Another page in his story—one that was never intended to have a sympathetic story. No heroes. No happy endings.

"...Gege?"

The ghost comes to a halt, feeling a small hand tugging at his sleeve.

Slowly, he turns his head—his face covered in grime, sweat, and blood. Fangs and claws still extended, eyes swollen and red from the soot.

But the child staring up at him now—he doesn't seem afraid. Not of him. "...Did the ghosts hurt you?"

He—

"Gege!" Another voice cries.

This time, a little girl—running to his side, grabbing his hand. Not caring for the blood, or the talons. "Don't go back out there!" She cries, shaking her head. “We can sneak away, okay?”

“Yeah!” Another voice calls out, then another.

“Maybe there’s another way out!”

There isn’t.

“Maybe if we’re REALLY quiet, and we run fast, they won’t see us!” It won’t matter.

And maybe the little ones are too small to know that—but not all of them. Many of them know, he can see that.

He had eyes like that once, too. Young, understanding far too much.

And when the ghost’s eyes drift over to the girl—the same girl he had justified slaughtering just a moment before—

She’s smiling at him.

Trembling, as she holds as many children as she can carry, holding them close.

Terrified of what’s coming, but smiling at him.

Gratefully.

She doesn’t say the words out loud, doesn’t want to frighten the children who are still too young to understand the truth—that this is the end.

That there are creatures in this world that don’t care about small, weak, helpless little thing. That don’t have mercy on children.

But she mouths them to the ghost, tears slipping down her cheeks—

‘Thank you.’

From the mouth of the cave, the ghost can hear the monster’s roar.

Ever since Hua Cheng was small, he’s been playing a game with himself. Pretending to be someone else. A future version of himself.

When that didn’t work, he imagined what his god would do. Tried to emulate something that he knew he couldn’t be.

If this was dianxia, he would have died already. Outside, fighting those creatures to the end.

Because Xie Lian loves the world, and he'll always try to save it.

Even when Hua Cheng would argue a thousand times over—the world doesn't deserve his god, and it doesn't deserve saving, either.

But they will always be different people. And as deeply as he loves and admires his god, Hua Cheng could never be the same.

They don't need to be.

"...Gege?" The boy holding his sleeve frowns when the ghost tugs out of his grip, turning back around. "Gege, what are you doing?! Don't go back there, you'll—!"

He falls silent when a taloned hand, scorched with soot, stained with blood, lands on top of his head.

From above, a low voice rumbles—

"Don't be afraid."

His walk back to the front of the cave is slow, measured—each step purposeful.

Hua Cheng doesn't love the world, it's never given him a reason to.

And he isn't doing this out of some well thought out moral philosophy. Not because a god told him to, or because of some fear of higher retribution.

If you need a god to tell you what to do—or the fear of going to hell to stop you from being a monster...

...Then all you are is worthless trash.

He stops in front of the mouth of the cave once more, watching the two savage spirits close in with a vague sense of calm.

This isn't salvation, or confirmation that he wasn't the monster that the world thought he was.

When the moment came, Hua Cheng was capable of being everything the world scorned him as. A monster. An abomination. A hideous beast.

That’s the story that’s been written out for him, line by line, every thread of his plot carefully woven into place.

He lifts his hand.

His fingertips trace over his eyelid, contemplative.

Hua Cheng is all of those things.

But he’s also a soldier of Xianle.

He’s been loved by a god.

He took on a curse of ten thousand lifetimes without flinching. Hua Cheng is the man who looked death in the face, and said no.

Whatever story was laid out for him, whatever role he was meant to play—he wants no part of it.

Even if he has to tear the tapestry to pieces. Even if he has to rip out every single page.

It’s not that he couldn’t be a monster, or a villain. He just doesn’t want to be.

Zhao Beitong watches—in the last moments before the collision between the young ghost and his foes, wondering if this is some form of suicide, calling out, her voice aching with frustration—

“What are you doing?!”

It’s only when she sees Hua Cheng’s smile, that she understands.

Blood drips from the corners of his mouth, fangs bared as he clenches his teeth with a snarl. “Something…” His fingers curve in, pressing down against his own eye socket.

Misfortune, that was what they told him, when he was born with this eye. A curse. An abomination.

But bad luck, in Hua Cheng’s experience, is only what you make of it. And now—he’ll make his curse his own salvation.

“…Fucking *STUPID!”*

It’s no small thing, gauging out one’s own eye.

Even if you're accustomed to pain. Even if you've learned to embrace it.

The roar that rips from him is so loud, so violent, the savage ghosts that were bearing down on him only moments before coming to a stumbling halt, stopping to look at one another with startled confusion.

The agony is searing, shooting all the way to his core, shrieking—

And through it all, the ghost smiles. A bloody, savage grin, even as he howls from the agony.

Because it's enough, he knows. In a system where magic is a transactional process, not a moral exorcise—

This was a very high price to pay.

Zhao Beitong is frozen, jaw hanging open.

How—could he—?

"AAAAAIIIIIIEEEEEEEEEEEE!"

The shriek that pierces the air is blood curdling, so sharp, it makes every creature for miles stop and clutch their ears.

CLANG!

The young man is on his hands and knees, blood pouring down his chin, dripping onto the ground below.

When he lifts his chin—for the first time, he looks upon the world with just one eye. No longer the black eye he was born with, or the red eye that left him cursed.

This eye shines like a falling star, dipped in amber and gold.

On his lips is a fierce smile.

"Come to me."

He lifts his hand, and in a flash of silver light—something lands in his palm, fingers curling easily around the handle.

Zhao Beitong watches with bated breath, unable to move, unable to breathe. The scimitar in the young ghost's hand is long, curved—so wickedly sharp.

“I don’t know if you’re the bravest man I’ve ever met,” the elder mutters under her breath, “or the biggest fool I’ve ever seen.”

E-Ming vibrates underneath it’s master’s fingertips, waiting for orders. Hua Cheng rises to his feet, slowly spinning the saber between his fingers.

He’s always been brave. That isn’t very hard.

It’s easy to be brave when you’ve seen the worst of what the world can do.

A cruel, miserable, selfish world. One that Hua Cheng doesn’t particularly care for saving.

But this world still has someone precious to him. And that makes it worth living in.

Makes it worth choosing not to be the monster, at times—even when the world gives you every single reason to be.

She half expects him to say something poetic—something that ends up in the history books.

After all, it has to live up to the likes of, *‘Body in the abyss, soul in paradise.’* But the ghost says no such thing.

Instead, his smile widens—all blood, sweat, and sharp teeth, hissing —

“Why don’t you fuck around and find out, then?”

And then, he’s killing.

Not fighting, no.

This isn’t a fight.

The first time the cursed scimitar E-Ming leaves it’s sheathe, it’s to slaughter.

Shrieking through the air like a calamity itself, slicing its enemies from every angle without a moment’s pause, in perfect time with its master.

And in the space of less one incense time—no, not even half an intense time—

Two of the most powerful ghosts on the fields of Mount Tonglu are left as nothing but charred, bleeding remains—a young ghost standing over them, head tilted back.

Somehow, it has started to rain.

Zhao Beitong doesn't know how, she didn't see a single cloud in the sky, but... Here they are.

She extends one hand out, catching a few drops in her palm—and that's when she realizes, eyebrows shooting out with shock—

Is it...

...Raining blood?

The Ghost stops, tilting his head back—the rain pouring down over his face, his cheeks, dripping down the sides of his neck in a bloody baptism.

And that's exactly what it is—because the moment he does, there's a flash of golden light, so sudden, so fierce, it lights the horizon like a sunrise on a land that has not known daylight in centuries.

BOOM!

Hua Cheng's eyes snap open wide, just as Zhao Beitong's narrow.

"...Always playing both sides," She mutters under her breath, leaning her chin against her hand, staring at a singularity, an event that will never be repeated, all throughout human history, with a scowl.

A ghost, ascending from the foot of Mount Tonglu. "What a cheat."

When Hua Cheng opens his eye again, there's no darkness. No shrieking. No rivers of blood or clouds of ash.

The pain that wracked his body only moments ago is gone, and aside from the darkness in his right eye, he feels intact again.

Slowly, he turns his head. The sky is blue.

Not a single cloud in sight.

The streets are pristine, laid with bricks of gold and white jade.

Everywhere he turns his head, there’s a palace—one after the other, as far as the eye can see.

And when his gaze comes back down to earth, well—

He realizes exactly where he is.

That this isn’t earth at all.

Before him stands a handsome young man, wearing gleaming armor, white, trimmed with gold.

Jun Wu, the empower of the heavens, extends his hand to the ghost—no, not anymore.

The god.

And he smiles.

“Welcome, my friend.”

Hua Cheng doesn’t take the hand extended before him—only stares at it, his eye slightly narrowed, contemplative.

After a slow beat of silence, a voice echoes from Jun Wu’s side—

“Yes, yes, we all understand, it’s a very awe-inspiring moment, but there are logistics to handle!”

Hua Cheng’s gaze is drawn from the heavenly emperor himself, to a tall, thin, slightly haggard man—a neatly kept beard, steel gray hair, but deep bags beneath his eyes. He keeps his arms folded neatly in the sleeves of his robes—but the hunch of his posture reveals his impatience

“Now,” he lifts one arm from his sleeve, revealing a scroll, ready to be filled out, “Is he going to be classified as a martial god, or civil? He did ascend during battle, but the nature of his ascension was far more similar to that of Yushi Huang...”

Jun Wu tilts his head.

“I thought having a deputy to help you these days would help ease your impatience, Jing Wen.”

Ah—Hua Cheng has heard of him. The civil god overseeing the logistics of the heavens. The prince mentioned him once or twice, never seeming to have much of an impression.

The ghost can see why. He's stern—but forgettable.

"With how many gods have been in and out lately, can you blame me?!" The expression on the young warrior's face suddenly sours, and the civil god continues, "Of course, we ARE short a martial god at the moment—"

"I was thinking we needed a new fire master, actually." Jun Wu muses, rubbing his chin. "The role has sat empty for quite a while now, don't you think?"

"We could make that work—"

"There's no need," the ghost interrupts them both, his voice calm—but utterly disinterested.

The two gods stop, staring at him—Jing Wen with a look of baffled annoyance, and Jun Wu's expression unreadable.

"There is absolutely a need, young man! That's how this—!"

"I'm not staying," Hua Cheng replies flatly. "As a civil god, a martial god, or your fire master."

Jun Wu's gaze never leaves his face. "...And you think that decision is yours to make?"

The ghost glances around. There are other heavenly officials about—though at a distance. All laughing and smiling amiably, enjoying the fruits of their ascensions.

But Hua Cheng knows better.

He knows that they all live within a narrowly defined set of rules—rules that don't particularly make sense for anyone. Not the gods, or the humans they serve.

And if they deviate from those rules, they fall.

Hua Cheng knows too well what happens when they do.

They might have their sight, their powers, their worshippers—but every single one of them still wears a shackle. Gilded chains that come with a life in luxury. They're just too arrogant and blinded by their own egos to see it.

"All of my decisions are mine to make," he replies. "And even if they weren't," he turns on his heel, walking towards the gates of heaven, "they wouldn't be yours."

Once his back is turned—the heavenly emperor's expression darkens, if only a fraction, and Jing Wen crows like a cat doused with water.

"Who do you think you are?!" He cries, shaking his scroll over his head, "You are speaking in the presence of the heavenly emperor himself!"

But instead of sounding ashamed—or at the very least reminded of his own insignificance, the young man just sounds amused.

Cocky, even.

"I've never prayed to him."

The silence lays heavy between the three men.

"Heavenly Emperor or common farmer," the ghost shrugs, "it doesn't make a difference to me."

Hua Cheng has always had a healthy taste of his own freedom, never willing to give in or compromise when he didn't have to. Unwilling to accept the chains that society placed upon him.

He has only ever prayed to one god. Kneeled before one man. There's only one shackle in this life that he would be willing to accept.

And it wouldn't come from the likes of Jun Wu.

"What will you do now, then?"

The ghost stops at heaven's gate, glancing back over his shoulder.

And he smiles.

"You killed the last Ghost King, your highness," he answers, hands clasped lightly behind his back, saber gleaming at his side.

"There must be another."

With that, heaven's gates swing open before him, and for the first time since their construction…

A newly born god willfully casts himself down.

From below, a lone ghost sits above the battlefield. Watching as large swaths of ghostly armies clash, raging like the waves of the sea.

Tonglu has called a tidal wave of resentment this time around. More than she ever has before.

The ghost watches the surrounding mountains close in, sealing the area for what's to come. The final step, before the inevitable natural selection of who will enter the kiln.

Of the two savage ghosts remaining, she finds only one of them promising—the other, rather boring.

And in the end, for the battle at hand, they both seem rather lacking.

However, once the mountains close in—the battlefield will be sealed. And there will be no more contenders.

Her lips turn down into a slight frown. It's disappointing, but…

Men always are.

BOOM!

The battlefield is overtaken then, with a flash of light.

The same flash of light as the one that she saw before—but brighter this time, flashing gold.

Then red.

Then, finally, black.

With bated breath, she watches a ball of golden light plunge back down to earth.

Like a bloody falling star.

When it lands, the earth shakes and tears—thousands of spirits are dissolved in the space of an instant, in one, rattling scream.

Zhao Beitong rises to her feet slowly, watching as a new sun rises. She has watched the world for countless centuries.

Seen kingdoms rise and fall. Dynasties crumble. The heavens burn with corruption, only to be built anew.

And in all that time, she has watched men struggle at the fork in the road. Always going one way or the other. Always disappointing.

Today, a third path is forged.

Today, for the first time in over a millennium—nearly twice that, now—

Zhao Beitong has a student.

No One Mourns Like a Ghost

Chapter Summary

“You are dead, Hua Cheng.” Zhao Beitong murmurs, her voice low, but firm. “Wu Ming is dead. The boy you were before—he’s dead as well.”

Slowly, the crimson ghost arches an eyebrow—almost amused. “I’m very much aware of my own deaths, Zhao Beitong. I was the one who endured them.”

Her next words, however, make him stop.

“But you are still mourning them.” She stares up at him, hands clasped behind her back, almost mimicking Hua Cheng’s posture. “And you must let it go.”

That’s the hardest part about the afterlife, though it’s never spoken about. The living mourn, yes. But they also build new experiences. Forge new relationships. Make new memories. It takes time, but they move on. The act of haunting in itself means that you cannot move on.

And no one mourns more than a ghost.

Chapter Notes

TW// GRAPHIC VIOLENCE

You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

This story also has some spotify playlists for those who want some fun listening while reading!

No Paths Are Bound: The Playlist
Calamity Xie Lian: The Playlist
The Wu Ming Playlist

Battles in the mortal realm are relatively quick affairs. Two sides crashing together until one breaks. A matter of days—weeks, at most, months.

Not on the fields of Mount Tonglu. It's been years.

Three years, just to thin the endless sea of souls down to a number of contestants that still number in the thousands. By the fourth, the possible victors have already been picked out.

Three savage ghosts. The rest are fodder to be picked off, fighting to survive.

A blade spirit, dangerous in battle, but not particularly clever, by the name of Xiaosheng.

A wrathful spirit covered in bandages, bringing spirits to their knees for miles around with his screams, known by no name at all.

And the crimson ghost, wielder of the scimitar E'Ming. The savage spirit—Hua Cheng.

Each spirit takes their hold within the depths of the mountain. The blade spirit stands from its summit, confidently screeching to attract any of the ghosts that will hear.

The bandaged wraith hides on the slopes, picking them off, one by one.

It's the crimson ghost that is rarely seen, lurking in the depths, deep in the caverns beneath the surface.

The occasional ghost battalion wanders down into his keep, sent to test the waters of his strength.

None return alive, and the curiosity grows. “They mock you.”

Zhao Beitong sits in the corner, delicately sharpening a dagger between her fingertips. “They've begun to call you mad.”

The young man doesn't turn his gaze in her direction. It's too plainly fixed on the sight in front of him.

In the beginning, his attempts were horrific.

Barely recognizable to their subject matter—but not from a lack of vision, no. Hua Cheng can still see him in his mind every single moment, always lurking behind his eyelids, feeding the yearning in his heart, the solemn plea—

‘Wait for me.’

This is his nine hundredth version.

The face that stares back at him is delicate, with fine, attractive features. A serene smile, tranquil eyes—many layers of silky, perfectly laid hair.

Still—he finds none of the features do his memories justice.

“Do you think I’ve gone mad as well?” He questions, eyes unmoving.

The older ghost doesn’t answer at first, her gaze fixed on his back.

He’s grown larger, since he arrived. His body slowly reaching the peak physical form it would have achieved, had he lived a full mortal life.

Tall, broad shouldered, a heavy curtain of black hair.

Deathly pale skin—slightly pointed ears. There’s something almost feline about him— like a panther, or a jaguar, something that lurks in the branches above, waiting to snap you between its jaws.

“Yes,” She murmurs, “but not in the way that they do.”

Love is madness, after all.

The other ghosts who dwell in the fields of Mount Tonglu—they say the crimson ghost has lost his mind. That it must take a madman to claw out his own eye, only to cast himself down from the heavens when he ascends in reward.

It must take a madman to not pursue the battle.

To watch as the other potential calamities get stronger with every passing year, choosing instead to hide in the depths of the mountain, playing among the stones.

But Zhao Beitong knows that this is not child’s play, nor is it an expression of madness.

“You must let it go.”

The crimson ghost doesn’t respond, standing still, hands clasped behind his back as he looks upon his work—and the elder repeats herself.

“You must let it go, Hua Cheng.”

It’s been half a decade since he chose the name for himself.

He’s rarely heard it spoken aloud.

Few have the nerve to address him directly, aside from his…acquaintance.

“…You know better than to ask me that,” he murmurs, voice low.

There is one thing about the young man, regardless of how brutally the waves beat against his shores, that cannot be washed away.

Zhao Beitong cannot look upon his devotion to the flower crowned martial god with anything but building dread.

All too familiar with the madness that comes from loving a fallen god. The damage that blind devotion can cause.

“Not of him,” she murmurs.

Rarely has she ever shown gentleness to the young man, but she does so now, slowly rising from her seat, the heels of her boots clicking against stone, echoing throughout the cavern as she walks to his side, head tilted back.

She observes the crown prince with a keen eye.

“Is this an accurate likeness?”

“…Yes,” he admits, slowly tilting his head. “Not perfect, but close.”

Slowly, a set of delicate, perfectly manicured fingernails stroke over a marble cheek— and the crimson ghost allows it, watching her closely.

Zhao Beitong almost smiles.

“You don’t need to let him go,” she sighs, slowly dropping her hand from the statue’s face. “I know it’s necessary.”

After all—this love, this unending, borderline psychotic adoration—is what has kept the young man so strong. So determined.

“Then what do you mean?”

Slowly, she turns to face him.

In the beginning, Hua Cheng was aware of her beauty in a vague sort of way. After so many years spent in close quarters, he's come to know her visage better than most.

A heart shaped face, sharp eyebrows, high cheekbones.

Dimples at the corners of her mouth when she sneers or smiles—a crease that forms between her eyes when she frowns.

Her eyes are only the color of blood when she uses magic. Normally, they burn like two amethysts, perfectly clear.

Those eyes stare up at him now, evaluating.

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That's the hardest part about the afterlife, though it's never spoken about.

The living mourn, yes. But they also build new experiences. Forge new relationships. Make new memories. It takes time, but they move on.

The act of haunting in itself means that you cannot move on.

And no one mourns more than a ghost.

Hua Cheng didn't have much of a life worth mourning, not until the very end of it. And there were certain things he wanted, even then, that he knows he never would have been able to have.

People have dreams, they look at treasures kept behind glass—but they don't get to touch.

'*... Could you do that again?*'

He reaches up to his lips, contemplative, remembering.

What he mourns the most, in the end, isn't the future that was taken from him. Not the first time, or the second. He knows he'll come back; he always does.

'Kiss me again?'

'Kiss me here?'

"I'm not mourning them," he mutters, shaking his head.

"What else is there to miss?" The older woman questions, shifting her weight to the other foot, a dark curtain of hair spilling over her shoulder. "Your beloved cannot die, you know that."

After a pause—

"My name."

Hua Cheng.

A city of flowers.

There's a message in it, yes—but it's not the name that his beloved would now. Not the name that he heard him call out so many times when he was lonely.

'Hong'er!'

When his dianxia needed him.

'Hong'er, is that you?'

'Please—just answer me!'

His fingertips drift up from his lips, to the vacant spot that once housed an eye.

When he was young, Hong'er thought he understood what it meant, to be cursed. Thought such hatred from the world around him was real suffering.

He was wrong.

He knows something far worse, now.

The greatest kind of suffering there is—the greatest kind of suffering any one person can experience—is to watch the person that you love suffer, and be unable to do anything about it.

It's hell.

From his first death, and every day since, Hua Cheng has been in hell.

"...Someone took my name," he whispers.

Zhao Beitong is quiet, her expression unreadable—and when she does speak, she does so bitterly, half under her breath.

"Who hasn't lost a name?"

Hua Cheng turns his head sharply, but instead of explaining, the ghost holds her head high.

"You will never be strong enough to leave this place if you don't let it go," she murmurs, turning on her heel. "Do you know why the names of ghosts hold such power, young one?"

Slowly, the crimson host shakes his head.

"They stop humans from forgetting us."

She calls back to him, making her way from the chamber. "The world did not know you to begin with. They will only know you for the name that you chose. Make them remember it well."

"What about the one who does remember me?" Hua Cheng calls after her softly. "What then?"

Zhao Beitong stops in the cavern's entryway, hair hanging around her face. "Humans do not love names," she reminds him, "they love the men who carry them."

It sounds so simple. And maybe, if his love could know him through some other way, a name wouldn't be such a powerful thing.

But his dianxia cannot know him by his face. Or his voice. After Bai Wuxiang's torment, Hua Cheng doubts the god would believe it, if he tried to use his old appearance as a mask now.

He would see it as torture.

The ghost wonders now if that was an intended consequence.

But he also knows that Zhao Beitong is right.

That, if he remains in this cave for as long as he feels sorrow in his heart for what's been lost, Hua Cheng will never leave this place.

And that is not an option for him.

He takes a slow, weary breath—and he follows her.

When he does, there's a flicker of silver beside his ear, flashing past him as it follows its master.

His fingers snatch out, trying to catch it by the wings—but, as always, the wraith butterfly always escapes.

"Are they spirits?" He questions, watching the silver creatures.

Her lips quirk up into a wry smile, hands still clasped behind her back as she walks, shoulders thrown back. There's something almost regal about it—and Hua Cheng finds himself mimicking it, hair swaying behind him as he walks by her side.

"What do your senses tell you?"

He frowns, eyebrows knitting with concentration as he closes his eyes, breathing in. There's spiritual power all around them, two powerful presences—but just that, only two. Her, and his own.

"...That they're coming from you," he mutters, frowning. "But I don't understand how."

Her smile widens, a dimple cutting into the corner of her mouth. "Think harder, little one."

She often calls him such things, little one, young one—as though he isn't a grown man —one that stands well over a head taller than her.

"...Are they pure spiritual power?"

"Close,"

She muses, pushing her hair over her shoulder, "but not quite on the mark."

Hua Cheng things, watching the small flock of butterflies—the way they always seem to stick closer to her, but when she desires, flutter away.

"...Are they a spiritual device?" Now, she seems satisfied.

“So, you *can* be observant when you put in the effort, can’t you?” She snorts when she sees the young man roll his eyes in response, “They are.”

Hua Cheng watches them with a quiet sort of fascination. He’s always been fond of beautiful things—but these creatures feel…

Important, somehow. Calling to him. “How did you forge them?”

That is one of the only questions that she ever seems to refuse to answer, no matter how many times he enquires. Everything else, she’ll hint—show him how to figure it out on his own.

Not that.

But for now, there’s other work to be done.

For the first time in years, he feels the wind on his face. The faint hint of the sun, through all the clouds and soot.

It’s never warm out here. The only heat comes from the kiln itself. At his waist, E’Ming rattles.

Hua Cheng’s fingers stroke over the saber’s handle, contemplative. “Bored?” He muses, feeling it shiver in response. “…Hungry?”

The eye set into the pommel spins with excitement, and Zhao Beitong stops, leaning against the trunk of a tree.

“You haven’t fed the poor thing in years,” She muses, twisting a lock of hair between her fingers. “Such a cruel master you are.”

Hua Cheng rolls his eyes. The blade was forced from a part of him that he was only too willing to cast aside. He holds no lingering affection for it.

“It’ll live.”

“Spiritual tools are like any other,” Zhao Beitong’s tone turns slightly scolding, “if you don’t use them, they dull. And for a scimitar forged through blood—it must be fed, or it will not serve you properly.”

He sighs, flicking the blade with annoyance.

It trembles—almost apologetically—in response.

How troublesome.

“Coincidentally,” she muses, her eyes drifting towards the top of the mountain, “you have an excellent option for a proper meal.”

Hua Cheng follows her gaze to the summit—where Xiaosheng sits, howling and cackling

A cocky creature. All bluster, shouting for all of the ghosts on the fields below—telling them to come challenge him. How strong he is. How terrified they should all be for standing in his presence.

Hua Cheng rolls his eyes.

It reminds him of another ghost he knows.

If Qi Rong still exists at this point—who knows what that merchant used him for. But, when Hua Cheng escapes from this place, he intends to find out.

“Xiaosheng,” he calls—not even needing to raise his voice before the blade spirit’s gaze snaps to him, gaze wild.

A laugh overtakes the air, rattling against the horizon, like the sky itself speaks.

“AH, THE CRIMSON GHOST!” It snarls, eyes blazing with an unnatural red glow, “FINALLY CRAWLED OUT OF IT’S CAVE, LIKE THE LITTLE RAT HE IS!”

It’s ironic, given that Xiaosheng is much shorter.

“If I’m a rat,” the ghost muses, slowly walking up the hillside—using that same proud, regal posture from before. Shoulders back, hands clasped behind his back. “What does that make you?”

The blade spirit beams, crossing its arms, puffing out his chest, “I’m —!”

Hua Cheng interrupts, rolling his eyes, “I hope you weren’t planning on saying something embarrassing—like a lion.”

Xiaosheng falls silent, closing his mouth. He often projects the demeanor of a grown man—and he certainly is large enough—but his personality is childlike.

“You, a lion?” The crimson ghost lets out a low laugh. “That’s almost funny to imagine. You’re more like...” He smirks, “An angry little monkey, howling and screaming and throwing things, because you want attention.”

As he listens, the spirit begins to tremble, flushed with anger

“Who DO YOU THINK YOU ARE to talk to ME?!” Xiaosheng shrieks, dropping down from his mountain peak, the ground trembling and cracking under his feet.

“Dinner,” Hua Cheng sighs, drumming his fingers against the hilt of E’Ming. “Though it’s taking longer than expected.”

He watches with faint amusement as the blade spirit charges down the slope, calling out, “Oh, could you run faster than that? I’m still stretching my legs—or are yours too short? See, it’s been so long since I had a proper meal—”

“BASTARD!” The blade spirit shrieks.

“STUPID, UGLY LITTLE COCKROACH!!” It drops down into a crouch, running on all fours—like more of an animal than a man, “WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?! YOU CAN’T SPEAK TO ME LIKE THAT, I’M THE GHOST KIN—”

It stops in mid run, the breath choked out of it, dangling in the air, flailing

“What was that?” Hua Cheng muses, watching the angry little creature howl and twitch under his grasp, lip curling with amusement. “What did you call yourself, just now?”

Xiaosheng flushes purple from temple to chin, hands shifting into blades—but before he can attack, he’s gone.

With a flick of the crimson ghost’s wrist, he hurls the blade spirit down the mountainside, sending it somersaulting, head over heels, taking down trees, rock formations, and other ghosts in its wake—eventually slamming to the foot of the mountain with a—

CRASH!

“Apologies, your *majesty,*” Hua Cheng sneers, slowly making his way down the slope as the smaller spirit crawls up and out of the hole created by its landing, shrieking with offense. “I wasn’t intending to throw you so far—I thought that big mouth of yours might weigh more.”

Throwing him around is one thing. It might humiliate the blade spirit—and amuse the crimson ghost to no end—but it won't damage him.

For that, they'll have to fight in close quarters. And in that, Xiaosheng, a blade given consciousness, will always have the upper hand.

That being said, E'Ming, like his master, enjoys a proper challenge.

CLANG!

CRASH!

SCREECH!

Each part of the blade spirit's body can shift and contort into a new form of weapon, swirling and attacking from every direction, clashing with the scimitar over and over again.

Each time they do, the sky flashes like a lightning strike, rumbling all around them.

It might as well be a clash of titans—but to Zhao Beitong, from her perch atop a nearby tree, it might as well be simple theatre.

"You look clumsy out there," she muses.

"E'Ming is better off when you just let him fight on his own," the ghost cores and slices the apple in her hand with her talons, tossing a piece into the air before catching it between her teeth. "Didn't you say someone told you that your style was suited to sabers?"

Hua Cheng isn't particularly amused by the commentary. He doesn't like being condescended to, not when he's clearly in the middle of trying to condescend to someone else. "What of it?"

"Did you ever ask the person who told you WHY you would be suited to such a weapon?"

In all honesty? He had been so delighted back then, a young man, complimented in sword mastery not only by his idol, his god—but also his first love, that he had been too overwhelmed to ask.

Zhao Beitong clicks her tongue, eating another slice. "Lovesick little fool."

Xiaosheng shrieks with laughter, his arms turning into two separate broadswords, spinning like a deadly top as he runs towards him, "HA!

The crimson ghost doesn't even know how to use his own tool?! Stupid, STUPID! You—YOU'RE the monkey!" He howls, earning an annoyed stare.

"Yes," Zhao Beitong agrees, her voice coy, saccharine as she addresses the little ghost. "But you know how to use a scimitar quite well, don't you?"

Like anyone, Xiaosheng flushes upon a compliment from such a beautiful woman, preening, pressing bladed palms to his cheeks.

"I know how to use every blade there is!" He crows, wiggling from the praise. "I'm the best! The strongest, the mighty, all powerful, XIAOSHENG—!"

"Why don't you show us, then?" Zhao Beitong cuts him off flatly, still chewing on her apple.

The blade spirit can hardly deny her.

He even tries to look a little more elegant about it, shifting one arm to the shape of a scimitar, similar in size and shape to E'Ming—and, to Hua Cheng's amusement, he makes himself a little taller.

(So naturally, the crimson ghost grows proportionally in response.)

His companion lets out a low, amused snort.

"So childish."

But now—the battle goes from a blind, thoughtless free-for-all, and becomes something different—

Instructive.

"Do you see what he's doing now?" She explains, one foot dangling from the branch she's perched upon.

"He's not using stabbing motions—the curve of a scimitar isn't designed for you to fight with the point—"

Xiaosheng, of course, takes all of this as praise, like she's mocking Hua Cheng—not realizing that, at best, he's being used as a classroom tool.

"It's designed for melee."

Hua Cheng watches the way the blade spirit moves, the changes in his fighting form— and slowly, he begins to understand.

Standard swords are common infantry weapons—and what he trained with, during his time as a soldier in Xianle.

The two most basic skills of any swordsman are to thrust and parry. Often seen as aggressive, clumsier motions—though any master swordsman, like the Crown Prince, can turn such motions into a dance, allowing the weapon to become an extension of the arm.

Sabers are not the same.

As Zhao Beitong—and Xiaosheng, the unwitting beast—explain, they're a raider's weapon, often calling for a wilder, less structured style of attack.

Heavily emphasizing on footwork, moving around the enemy, attacking in quick slices of the blade—dodging rather than blocking.

E'Ming adopts such a style on its own, perfectly capable of attacking without the ghost wielding it manually—

But as Hua Cheng does listen, adapting, taking the blade into his hand, slowly mimicking the fighting forms and structures—the attacks that land gain power.

All the while—oblivious to the hand he has in his own doom, Xiaosheng crows, mocks, and jeers. "Clumsy little monster! Doesn't even know how to fight without Madame Beitong teaching you like a little schoolboy! Shameful! Embarrassing! And you call yourself a—!"

CRAAACK!

The scimitar he was using on his right arm cracks in two, dripping to the ground in several pieces—leaving him to stare down at it in shock. "You...YOU BROKE MY ARM!" Xiaosheng shrieks, looking up at Hua Cheng in offended shock, like a child who thought this was all a silly game.

"HOW DARE YOU!! MY PERFECTLY FORGED ARM!" He wails, face screwing up in anger as his other arm shifts into a blade, and he attacks once more.

But now, it's slowly becoming a losing battle—and the hordes of ghosts watching from the hills seem to know it, hissing in anticipation.

Soon, the crimson ghost takes one of his legs—and then his other arm, E'Ming slicing faster than the naked eye can track it, attacking with a bloodlust not unlike a shark after it detects blood in the water.

Finally, the blade spirit drops onto one knee, trembling. "NO FAIR!"

He whips his head around, silvery waves of hair bouncing around his shoulders as he glares at Zhao Beitong, shrieking, "SHE TRICKED ME!! EVIL WITCH! I'LL RIP YOU TO BITS!"

The elder spirit smiles, slowly baring her fangs, pupils turning into slits, "You think Tonglu is fair?"

Before the creature can answer, Hua Cheng's hand locks around his throat again, forcing the blade spirit to look back up at him, squeezing until its eyes bulge out of its skull, "YOU...YOU CAN'T!" It shrieks.

"I GOT—THIS ANCESTOR GOT SO FAR! THIS ANCESTOR...IS A GHOST KING!"

"Is that so?" Hua Cheng muses coldly, hands tightening until the blade spirit starts to tremble, it's body slowly beginning to shudder and crack, "Then congratulations, my lord—it's time for your coronation!"

But instead of receiving a crown—Xiaosheng loses his head, instead.

Ripped clean from the blade spirit's body, blood pouring down, steaming and hissing as it lands upon the grass.

Hua Cheng holds it up in front of him, staring into that expression, permanently fixed into a look of outraged horror, howling with indignation.

His lips twitch.

Just like an angry little monkey.

"E'Ming," the crimson ghost rumbles, eyes widening as he feels the rush of power flowing into his body, all at once—

"Dinner."

Eye glinting with hunger, the scimitar disappears in a flash—delightedly hacking the blade spirit's body into bits.

As it feasts—Hua Cheng inhales through his nose, slowly taking in the sensation, the newfound power.

Xiaosheng killed more spirits on this mountain than almost any other, and unlike his previous kills, the crimson ghost is absorbing an incredible amount of power in one swallow.

There's something quite deceiving about the term "Savage rank" when it comes to ghosts. It simply includes any particularly strong ghost that has not been through the trial of the kiln—leading to an incredibly broad range of strength among that rank of the dead.

Any one of them can slaughter a city, yes—but some of them can be handled by human cultivators without heavenly assistance.

Some, like Xiaosheng, have slaughtered heavenly officials before—without ever obtaining the rank of supreme.

Three martial gods, to be exact.

Hua Cheng can feel the strength from those kills pouring into his body now as well— and compared to the rush of power he gained from his ascension, this—

It feels almost earth shattering in comparison.

The ghost smiles, casting his enemy's head aside.

What a joke.

It's only then that he sees it—sitting on the ground.

A small, fine hilt of black leather. Likely the original handle for the blade spirit, back when it was a simple human tool.

"..." Hua Cheng kneels, picking the item up—and he can feel it, pulsing under the surface.

Spiritual power.

It amuses Zhao Beitong to no end that the young warrior forges the remains of his enemy into an eyepatch.

Insulting a man's appearance to the very end, only to spend an eternity sitting upon his face.

It's petty—but rather clever. "How does it feel?"

The crimson ghost tilts his head back, one eye staring ahead—and now, with the spiritual tool on his face (one that, for many centuries, the entire world will assume is a simple accessory), his right plane of vision is no longer dark.

After all, Hua Cheng didn't destroy his eye.

He transmuted it into something far more useful. But now, with this tool—he's able to see through the iris embedded into the pommel of E'Ming itself.

It takes adjusting, learning to separate two very different visual inputs without allowing it to impact his depth perception.

But once he does—it turns the blade into far more than just a simple saber. "...Heavy," the youth finally answers, rolling his shoulders. "But less exposed."

Zhao Beitong nods, watching as he fastens the ties around the back of his head—and now, Hua Cheng has his own question:

"Why are you helping me?"

After all—before, he could simply qualify her actions as amused interest. Following him from place to place, goading him, sometimes, for his own stupidity—but in general, she often remained an observer.

Today, it felt more like...an intentional lesson.

And it's yet another question that the ghost of the fields of Tonglu refuses to answer, simply shrugging it off—making some sort of excuse about having no desire to see a pathetic excuse of a ghost king rise to power.

But why should she care? She will never leave this place.

The victor of this battle doesn't impact her in the slightest.

Hua Cheng asks her—repeatedly—and still, she never answers.

The death of Xiaosheng is felt throughout the former kingdom of Wuyong, sending ripples through the remaining demon armies that remain.

And it leaves behind only two possibilities for the one that will rise as the next Ghost King from the kiln.

Hua Cheng, the crimson ghost, wielder of the scimitar E'Ming—

And the bandaged ghost, who hides within the forests that cover the slopes of Mount Tonglu.

Five years turns into six, then seven.

The armies of Ghosts that once remained on the fields of Mount Tonglu are picked to shreds. In the beginning, they numbered in the tens of millions—then, only the tens of thousands.

Now, there are only a few hundred of them left.

Slowly being picked away—devoured in broad daylight by the likes of Hua Cheng, leaping down from the sky with a wicked flash of his saber, or swept away in the night by the bandaged ghost, never heard from, never to be seen again.

"...You know," Zhao Beitong's tone is...delicate. "I am not one to question artistic vision, but..." She tilts her head to the side, slowly examining the statue standing before her. "Is it just me, or...are your specimens becoming...slightly more scantily dressed?" She muses, examining a pectoral muscle, giving it a light poke.

A dark glare flashes in her direction, and she holds up both hands in a neutral gesture, "If you're so sensitive about such a simple question, that speaks more to a guilty conscience—"

"He should have come by now," Hua Cheng grouses, not in the mood for her teasing. Of course—she doesn't have to question the young man to know what he means.

The bandaged spirit is the final legitimate competitor to the title of ghost king after all —but each time the crimson god has entered the kiln, waiting for his opponent to arrive—he never comes.

And the kiln has yet to close, sealing in the final competitors.

"You shifted the scales of power, devouring Xiaosheng the way you did," Zhao Beitong muses, slowly lifting her hands from a (very carefully sculpted) marble torso. "He probably wants to even them before battle."

But with so few ghosts left, that seems unlikely to happen. And with the kiln refusing to close, it implies more to the prolonged length of battle than what meets the eye.

"Does it normally take this long, when Mount Tonglu opens?" He questions, his teeth clenched with annoyance

Zhao Beitong doesn't immediately answer, but when she does, her tone is…difficult to discern. "It usually takes much longer," she murmurs. "I've seen it take fifty years before enough ghosts are cleared out for the final competitors to enter the kiln."

Hua Cheng tenses.

He doesn't have fifty years.

Since the fields of Tonglu sealed themselves seven years ago—there's been no way of contacting the outside world. No way of knowing the condition of things.

Or finding the crown prince.

He must be safe—if he wasn't, Hua Cheng would know that much.

Regardless of anything else that's going on, he knows that dianxia would defend his ashes to the death. And if the crown prince was no more—Hua Cheng's remains likely would have been caught in the crossfire.

Meaning wherever he is, he's alive. But for dianxia…

Alive…could still mean immense suffering. Or loneliness. Or any other manner of unhappiness. And for as long as the crimson ghost is trapped here…

He can't look after him, not even from afar.

No—no. He doesn't have fifty years.

"But there's only two of us left," he mutters.

In total, there are a little over three hundred ghosts remaining—but only two real contenders.

The kiln should have begun to close by now, forcing him and the bandaged ghost to race inside.

And yet, the volcano hasn't moved since the fields were sealed—only rumbled at times.

"…The Kiln will close when the proper conditions have been met," Zhao Beitong murmurs. "But you should not mistake it for a simple facet of nature."

Hua Cheng turns his head, raising an eyebrow, and she reminds him of something he had known, but nearly forgotten in time.

"Before the fields were sealed—remember how the mountains moved about this place?" She sits back, stretching her legs out upon a stone bench he carved for one of his more recent pieces. Likely something degenerate, if he wants the statue lying down—

After a moment, the crimson ghost nods.

"They are ancient spirits," she explains, her eyes suddenly...filled with a certain kind of sadness, one that Hua Cheng cannot understand. "Tonglu is no different."

The young man glances at the cavern around them. "This place is...alive?"

Zhao Beitong nods, chin tilting down, watching the way her feet slowly drag across the floor. "According to the legends, they were four friends, once," she whispers—and yet he hears her perfectly clearly. "All in service of a higher purpose."

"...Creating Ghost Kings?"

Hua Cheng questions dryly, and she rolls her eyes.

"In service of the same *god,* you childish imp." She mutters, looking away. "There were no ghost kings in that time."

The young man grows quiet, watching her. Remembering two things that he had lost, somehow, in recent years.

First: that the Kingdom of Wuyong was Zhao Beitong's home, in her mortal life. And when she speaks of these mountain spirits—

There's a very good chance that she knew them when they were men.

And second: that the only god he found that was worshipped in this place, was...

"...You mean they served the Crown Prince of Wuyong?" He questions —not missing the way that, even with no blood left in her body, Zhao Beitong manages to become slightly paler.

"Yes," she replies, rising to her feet. "Until the very end."

No matter how many more questions Hua Cheng asks on the subject—the woman provides no answer.

The Burial Mounds

Chapter Summary

The wailing seems even louder now. Hua Cheng steps closer.

As he does so, the snow crunches beneath the soles of his boots—and the white bandaged figure seems to finally become aware of him, half hunched over the hole it's been digging.

"...Have you come to kill me?" It murmurs, voice slightly crackling. A familiar voice.

Hua Cheng crosses his arms over his chest, struggling to place it as he replies, his voice cold—

"You're already dead."

Chapter Notes

TW// GRAPHIC VIOLENCE, HORROR ELEMENTS

You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

In the months that follow, he hunts for the bandaged ghost.

There's a limited number of places that he can be—and each night, the crimson ghost sends E'Ming scanning through the skies.

The red eye in its pommel gleaming like a cursed star as it flies through the night— but never once does it find its target.

No, Hua Cheng is forced to hunt him like a beast. Following his scent. Laying traps. He must have a lair, after all—it's just a matter of finding it.

The forests of Mount Tonglu are dense, constantly shifting—which makes more sense to Hua Cheng now, knowing that the mountain itself is a powerful spirit.

And as the seasons change—the weather never turns friendly. Shifting from howling blizzards to raging storms.

The best conditions one can hope for are dense fogs—the sort that make it impossible to see more than one foot ahead.

And with each passing day, Hua Cheng kills more ghosts. Bringing the numbers from three hundred to two, then less than seventy.

Still, the Kiln does not close.

He asks Zhao Beitong more questions about the Mountain—about Wuyong. And while the ghost is perfectly happy to tell him of magic, combat, and the forging of spiritual weapons—her helpfulness turns to silence when he asks about her home.

Hua Cheng doesn't have time for this.

He stands on the hillside of Tonglu one night, staring into the fog, a recently fallen drift of snow crunching beneath his feet—and he glares.

It's been eight years since he cast himself back down from the heavens. Eight long, miserable years—constantly left wondering.

Where his beloved is. If he's safe, or if he's frightened and alone. If someone is looking after him. Catching him when he falls. Waking him in the night, when the dreams come.

Every moment, those thoughts are there. Gnawing at him, slowly eating away, along with...fear.

What if...not quickly, but eventually, with the relentless passage of time, Hua Cheng's god...forgets him?

Forgets him so completely, that without his name...Hua Cheng can't make him remember?

It was hard enough, when he was a ghost fire, unable to do more than whisper and float.

And as Wu Ming—Hua Cheng thinks, if Xie Lian had not been so distracted by his own suffering and grief, the god might have realized the truth.

All of that was while their time together was still so fresh in his memory. But what if it does take fifty years? Or longer?

What if, in the worst-case scenario, he doesn't find the prince for over a century? What then?

He's lost in those thoughts, staring into the cold, misty dark, thinking that name over and over again.

Dianxia, dianxia, dianxia. How is he supposed to—? Hua Cheng pauses.

There were many things his god taught them, over their time together. History, poetry—he attempted with calligraphy, but had no way of knowing if the child learned or not—

(He didn't.)

Archery, sword play. Countless skills, each invaluable—but there was also something else.

Sight isn't everything. In reality—it's a very small part of how people perceive the world.

Hua Cheng stares into the fog laden darkness ahead, and instead of narrowing his eyes—he closes them, breathing in through his nose, slow and deep.

And *ah.*

There it is.

Spiritual power.

There aren't enough ghosts left to mask the deeper, more malicious scent of a savage spirit. It's there, carried on the wind.

The crimson ghost's lips curl back into a snarl.

"Found you," he mutters.

But as he creeps through the mountainside, he wonders.

Most of the powerful ghosts in this place don't run and hide, even if it benefits them. With how few ghosts there are now, the bandaged spirit doesn't have much of a chance to change the odds of the playing field.

So why?

What on earth is he trying to do?

The closer Hua Cheng comes to the ghost's lair—he's left with more questions than answers.

He's vaguely aware of all of the ghosts left in the fields of Mount Tonglu, knowing that now, they number in sixty-six. A dozen had disappeared recently, slinking off into the night.

When they did, the savage ghost had assumed that must have been the bandaged ghost's doing—snatching up what prey remained, before the final confrontation.

He was right—but now, Hua Cheng is realizing that he was also wrong.

Very wrong.

The bandaged ghost was responsible.

That much quickly becomes clear—but the ghosts who disappeared weren't destroyed, or consumed.

Hua Cheng sees them now, hanging from the trees—like demented little lanterns. Bound in bleeding white gauze, hands and feet bound. Unable to move, unable to speak—weakly crying out.

Their voices are muffled, left unable to speak—but Hua Cheng can tell from the tone —they're begging for release. Even if the cost would be their very souls.

He pauses, staring up at them.

For obvious reasons, Hua Cheng isn't particularly fond of the sight of them hanging there.

It almost reminds him of his own death. Of the man that inflicted it. But this isn't the same.

These ghosts aren't being tortured, or mocked, or used for decoration. They aren't even being used as food.

They're being…

Starved. Slowly, but surely.

But…why?

What would the spirit have to gain in weakening them before consuming them? Isn't that the very definition of self-destructive?

He creeps closer now, the scent growing stronger—and still, vaguely familiar.

There’s crying. Not muffled whimpering—not from the ghosts, no.

This crying is almost human. That of…a child.

Finally, the scent becomes so strong, it tickles under his nose—and when the ghost enters the forest clearly, suddenly, the fog clears.

Revealing a man standing there, bandages wrapped around the entirety of his face. Digging.

A ghost lays beside him on the ground—wrapped in the same bleeding white bandages, meaning weakly, so starved of spiritual power, it’s clearly on the verge of death, and Hua Cheng realizes…

It’s trying to…bury them.

The wailing seems even louder now. Hua Cheng steps closer.

As he does so, the snow crunches beneath the soles of his boots—and the white bandaged figure seems to finally become aware of him, half hunched over the hole it’s been digging.

“…Have you come to kill me?” It murmurs, voice slightly crackling. A familiar voice.

Hua Cheng crosses his arms over his chest, struggling to place it as he replies, his voice cold—

“You’re already dead.”

The bandaged ghost doesn’t address that statement, still staring down into the shallow grave.

The white gauze covers every inch of his skin—stained by blood.

“…I thought it might be you,” the ghost mutters, shovel dangling loosely between his fingers. The wailing gets even louder now, so loud, Hua Cheng covers one ear with a wince.

“Who else is left?” He grumbles, initially thinking about the fact that they’re practically the last.

But then, he realizes that wasn’t what the ghost meant. ‘I thought it might be you.’

Hua Cheng's eyes narrow as he steps closer, wondering just who this spirit is, what he's doing, and how they must know each other, asking —

"Who are you?"

Slowly, the other ghost straightens.

Shovel still clutched in its hand; it turns its head. Its face is still nearly completely obscured, just like the rest of it, but...

Those eyes are familiar. The screaming of the child. The one tracked determination on something so odd, so fruitless—and then, it all seems clear

The bandaged ghost of the fields of Mount Tonglu, the spirit that has avoided Hua Cheng for the last eight years, hiding in the mountainside for seemingly no reason—is none other than the first king of the Kingdom of Yong'an.

Lang Ying.

It's so startling, that after a moment—Hua Cheng takes one stumbling step back, muttering, "I thought..."

The spirit stares back at him, it's gaze somewhat blank.

"I thought you were at peace?!"

After all—the fool got what he wanted, didn't he? The destruction of Xianle?

Instead of answering him, Lang Ying asks a question of his own.

"...Where is he?" He murmurs, fingers trembling slightly, where they grip the shovel. "The white clothed calamity, where is he?!"

"Not here," Hua Cheng replies coldly. "He's dead."

"No..." Lang Ying shakes his head.

Slowly, he turns back to the hole that he's been digging—all this time. "That can't be right."

Hua Cheng stares, finally noticing now.

All around them, as far as the clearing goes, are small little mounds of earth.

...How many spirits has he buried in this place? And why?

He hasn't even consumed any of the energy from them—Hua Cheng can still feel it, trembling in the air. Far heavier now, than it was before.

This much resentment, it's almost reminiscent of...

"He promised me," Lang Ying mumbles, and Hua Cheng realizes, now, what child is crying.

"...And he lied to you, remember?" The younger ghost replies coldly. After all, dianxia explained that fact quite clearly the night that Lang Ying died. "I don't know how this is news to you: but ancient malicious spirits aren't known for their honesty."

"You're mocking me."

"Ah, so there are things that don't slip over your head," Hua Cheng replies dryly, looking him over. "...What's with the bandages?"

Lang Ying tilts his head to the side, lifting one hand in front of his face, marking, "You should know that just as well as me."

His fingers keep on trembling, loosening over the grip of the shovel, only to tighten around it again. "You were the one that destroyed my body, remember?"

He takes a step away from his makeshift grave. "You were the one who burned my palace when you were finished, remember?"

The King of Yong'an take another step forward, ambling, as though his legs don't quite remember how to obey his body yet, catching himself with one palm against a tree, "It...it took a long time," he muses, eyes staring at Hua Cheng through the gaps in the bandages.

"...to pull myself...back together."

Of course—he doesn't mean that emotionally. He means it literally.

"...Why would you do that?" The young man questions, his eyebrows knitting together. He isn't afraid of Lang Ying—no, not in the way that most men would be.

But he's confused.

In his case—why he's returned is obvious enough. But in the case of Lang Ying...

There's nothing else on earth to keep him here. No family. No unfinished business. He destroyed his enemies. There's nothing left to haunt.

"He..." Lang Ying turns back to his grave. "He promised."

One hand reaches down, dragging the ghost he's left on the ground into the hole that he's made, head hung low. "Can you do me a favor, Wu Ming?"

The ghost stiffens, crossing his arms over his chest, and Lang Ying amends— "I'm sorry, it's Hua Cheng now."

The youth doesn't reply

"...Could you stop killing the other ghosts?" He murmurs, shoving the spirit into the grave, kneeling with it. His hands paw at the dirt—almost like a small animal, struggling to cover food it wants to store for winter. "I need them."

The younger man stares.

"...You've gone insane." He mutters, shaking his head.

Maybe Lang Ying was always insane, in the end. In Hua Cheng's experience, humans rarely follow reasonable men in such droves.

No stable mind has ever felled a great Dynasty of the like of Xianle. "No," Lang Ying frowns.

"This is what he told me to do. It's not insane," he shakes his head. His voice sounds perfectly even now, calm—even as the ghost beneath him whimpers with horror, tortured by the prospect of being buried until its spirit gives out. "This is how you do it."

"...Do what?"

"Bring them back," Lang Ying whispers. "I just have to bring it back, first."

"...Human Face Disease?" Hua Cheng questions, his expression tense. "That's what you think you're doing?!"

"He told me," Lang Ying repeats, patting the earth down, frantically burying the little ghost.

“I just need more,” he mutters, pale, bandage shrouded fingers, stained by blood and dirt, moving frantically. “I just need a little more resentment. So, if you just leave the rest of them alone—!”

“It took an entire battlefield of souls for the Crown Prince to summon it,”

Hua Cheng shakes his head, “and you think these miserable little spirits can—?”

Then, he realizes.

How small the ghost Lang Ying just buried was. How small many of the burial mounds around him are. Not all of them, but...

Surely, at least thirty of them.

‘There used to be half of us...but now...’

It was eight years ago, but he still remembers. Still often thought about the thirty orphans who lost their lives in that cave on Mount Tonglu before he was able to save the rest.

Children.

Lang Ying has been burying children.

“...What have you done?” Hua Cheng repeats—his voice softer this time, almost with disbelief.

It’s rare to nearly render the crimson ghost speechless.

Lang Ying lifts his head, blood streaming down the bandages on his cheeks, eyes wide.

“He told me!” The ghost cries.

“HE TOLD ME!”

“HE TRICKED YOU!” Hua Cheng roars in response, only to make the ghost before him pause with a start, clearly remembering Xie Lian’s words from the day that he died. “HOW MANY HAVE SUFFERED, BECAUSE OF YOUR FOOLISHNESS?”

The wailing is louder now than before.

When Hua Cheng glances up—there's another spirit in the trees. Small, emaciated. That of a little boy, hardly more than an infant. Clutching his head, rocking back and forth.

"...Lang Ying," The crimson ghost pauses—

"Your son is already here."

"No, no," the ghost frowns.

"Not like that," he straightens, picking up his shovel. "He can't stay like that."

He always will, no matter what Lang Ying does. The spirit of his child clearly would have moved on by now—reincarnated, not lingering in this world.

His father has kept him here without consent.

The boy will never grow, the way Hua Cheng did after his own demise. He will never stop crying and wailing. Because for a spirit to be kept beyond its means, beyond the natural expiration date of its will—

It's cruel. A selfish, monstrous thing to do.

"I'll put him back in my body again," the former king whispers, starting the process of digging another hole. A bigger one, this time. "It'll be better than last time, it—"

"You don't have a body anymore, Lang Ying." Hua Cheng points out softly.

The ghost pauses momentarily.

"...Where is your wife's spirit?" Hua Cheng questions, looking around. He sees no sign of her. Just the wailing child, and the captured ghosts, waiting to die in vain. "Did you let her move on?"

Lang Ying shakes his head, muttering to himself. "I didn't have enough..."

"What?"

The ghost lifts his head, "I didn't have enough," he explains, "you killed to many—so I had to bury her, too."

Silence falls as the younger man processes what Lang Ying has done. The gravity of it. The utter monstrosity.

“She would understand,” Lang Ying mutters. “It’s for our boy. She understands.”

He begins to dig more frantically, and the wailing—god, Hua Cheng just wishes that it would stop.

“...You need to let him go, Lang Ying.” He mutters, taking a step forward. “He’s suffering.”

The king’s face contorts. “THAT ISN’T MY FAULT!”

He shrieks, straightening. “I TRIED! I DID WHAT I WAS SUPPOSED TO DO, AND HE—THOSE ROTTEN ASSHOLES IN XIANLE, THEY WOULDN’T LISTEN!”

“They—”

“THIS IS THEIR FAULT!” Lang Ying cries. “THEY DID THIS!”

“The king and queen of Xianle didn’t kill your son,” Hua Cheng corrects him.

“A drought did.”

“But they wouldn’t...” Tears of blood roll down the ghost’s cheek as he digs even faster, arms trembling, “They wouldn’t even look at him. They wouldn’t even help—”

“He was already dead by then,” Hua Cheng shakes his head. “What could they have done?”

Lang Ying’s hands tremble, then they stop—and in a moment of clarity, Hua Cheng hears the ghost speak clearly:

“That doesn’t matter.”

He lifts his head, looking Hua Cheng in the eye.

“It doesn’t matter if they couldn’t have brought him back. That wasn’t the point.”

The tears leave red trails on his cheeks—but Lang Ying makes no move to wipe them away. “My child was dead. So many children were dead. And maybe they couldn’t have fixed it, but...”

Lang Ying's lip curls with resentment, with a hint of the self-righteous anger he once carried.

"They still should have looked."

Even now, despite everything—of how much suffering this man has caused for the love of the ghost's life, for the kingdom that he destroyed—

Hua Cheng agrees, his voice tired—but fair.

He's many things, but usually fair.

"Yes, Lang Ying,"

The ghost murmurs in acknowledgement. "They should have looked."

Because there is nothing more painful to be suffering—truly, from the bottom of your heart, suffering—and to know that the world isn't listening.

"But you still have to let him go," Hua Cheng presses quietly.

"..." The ghost turns away, clutching his shovel. "You never had any children, did you? You died too young for that."

And, the one he desired being a man—Hua Cheng never had any plans to have them if he could have, when he reached adulthood.

"Did you know your father?"

For a long time, the crimson ghost doesn't answer. "...No." He mutters, his tone slightly sour.

He has some memories of his mother. Faint, most of them painful—the last, truly horrific—but none of his father. He was never there, and Hong'er's mother rarely spoke of him at all.

There was something about him being a soldier—or some sort of fighter, Hua Cheng can remember that. And she mentioned something about the fact that her son resembled him.

But rather than being specific, she usually just offered vague platitudes. Saying he was brave, strong, the like.

When Hong'er was particularly small, he believed that. He thought his mother was telling him the truth—that his father was some brave soldier, fighting in a far-off land. That he was handsome, strong—and he would come back, soon.

Now, he knows better than to believe it anymore.

Mothers will constantly make up reasons to explain why your father isn't there. Anything that will hurt less than the truth.

Hong'er's father must have been dead—or simply abandoned them. And she wanted to give him a pretty little story, something that was easier to listen to.

"Then you would never understand," Lang Ying mutters, throwing himself back into grave digging, his expression strained. "I can't let him go!"

"Parents lose their children every day," the ghost sighs, watching him work, "they don't do this."

"THEN THEY DON'T LOVE THEIR SONS THE WAY I LOVED MINE!" Lang Ying cries—and in his stress, the shovel between his fingers shatters at the handle. He stops for a moment, staring—then he seems to realize.

"...you were the one who killed most of the other ghosts, right?"

Slowly, he turns to look at him. "All of that power...it went to you, didn't it?"

Hua Cheng can see what the king is thinking—and that the grave he's been digging while they've been speaking—

It's much bigger than the others.

Big enough for him, even.

"...Yes," he agrees.

Part of him finds the creature's rationale absolutely infuriating, while the other is relieved that he's finally decided he wants to fight.

"Let's go, then." He mutters, turning to walk back. "What do you mean?"

The crimson ghost tosses him an annoyed stare. "The Kiln."

"...Oh," Lang Ying frowns, shaking his head, "I'm not going there."

Hua Cheng freezes after taking three steps away, his boots crunching in the snow. "What do you mean?"

"I don't want to be a Ghost King," the bandaged ghost explains, rubbing at his chin. "I never did."

"..." The youth turns his head back, staring down the former royal with narrowed eyes. "Then why did you come here?"

"There weren't enough ghosts anywhere else." Lang Ying explains, glancing around at his arrangement of burial mounds. The closer Hua Cheng looks...

He realizes that it stretches far beyond this one clearing. That it's the entire valley, in the shadow of Mount Tonglu. Countless souls, utterly wasted and obliterated, their resentment buried into the earth.

All for one man's madness. His refusal to let go.

"Besides," Lang Ying murmurs taking a slow, ambling step towards him, head tilting to the side sharply, like he can't completely control the movements of his neck—

"I can't bury you there."

The crimson's ghost lips pull back into a snarl, his scimitar rattling at his side.

"No one will ever bury *me*," Hua Cheng snarls, one eye flashing brightly in the dark, E'Ming's scorching in its pommel. "But you can destroy yourself trying."

The ghost moves towards him still, and Hua Cheng lifts his blade. "That's what you always do, isn't it, Lang Ying?"

Slowly ripping himself apart, in the name of his goals—never realizing, not until nothing else remains.

CLANG!

There's a crash when E'Ming slams into Lang Ying's arm, severing it in one blow. It rolls through the snow limply—and at first, Hua Cheng thinks this will be quick.

But then, he watches the arm wiggle and twist, slowly dragging itself back towards its master—watches as Lang Ying lifts it up from the ground, bandages stretching out like roots from a tree, slowly binding the arm back into place,

"I told you," Land Yang whispers.

"It took me a long time," he starts moving faster, ambling towards Hua Cheng like a deranged animal, "BUT I PUT MYSELF BACK TOGETHER!"

His eyes burn a harsh shade of gold in the night, glowing like two small candles, flickering in the wind.

CLANG!

This time, it's steel on steel, sparks flying between two swords, lighting up the dark of the night.

It's grueling.

No matter how many pieces Hua Cheng slices away, no matter how quick he is—those bandages continuously pull the broken pieces back in, binding him together.

They fight all through the night—but the sun never rises. Hasn't risen on the fields of Mount Tonglu in several months now, the region entering an eternal stage of darkness.

Zhao Beitong says the sun won't rise again now, not until another ghost king walks the earth.

The moon shines down on them now, illuminating both ghosts in a savage silver light, flashing through the darkness, lighting up the night with sparks each time their blades crash together.

CLANG!

CLANG!

"You..." Lang Ying laughs, flipping back onto his feet.

"Truly are impressive!" He throws his head back, breathing in the cold, crisp air, watching as his breath—his cold, undead gasps—frosting in the air. "IT'S NO WONDER XIANLE WAS SO DIFFICULT TO DEFEAT!"

Hua Cheng doesn't smile from the compliment, boots crunching in the snow.

He was just a foot soldier during the war. Hardly one that could make or break the difference in a battle. After all—he was only thirteen, by the end of it.

But that isn't what Lang Ying means, of course—and the crimson ghost knows it.

Devotion. Determination.

Hua Cheng was—and still is—by far the most devoted soldier in the army of Xianle. But even still—the loyalty of the Xianle army to their prince was a thing of legend. To the point where many who hadn't seen it didn't believe it.

That so many men believed the Crown Prince was worth dying for.

"There's a difference," the youth replies, "between fighting for something because you believe in it, and fighting for something because you're hungry."

He's done both, after all.

Hunger doesn't last forever.

Faith, however—at least in Hua Cheng's experience—can outlast anything.

It doesn't disappear when you're tired, or angry. Doesn't fade into the night when you're sad, or insecure. There might be moments when you forget, or when you get lost—

But that faith is always there.

And when he sees the look in Lang Ying's eyes now, the young ghost realizes—

The former King of Yong'an is envious of him.

Blood splatters into the otherwise pristine snow as E’Ming takes another slice, this time severing several of the bandaged ghost's fingers.

Lang Ying smiles, several bandages peeling from his arms, reaching down into the snow. "We both know this is a waste of time," he murmurs, still taking those slow, uneven steps toward him. "No matter how many times you cut me with that blade of yours—I won't disappear."

Yes.

Unfortunately, with building frustration, Hua Cheng is beginning to understand that E’Ming cannot hack every single enemy he encounters to bits.

Well, in this case it CAN, but disassembling Lang Ying isn't a guarantee to victory.

"E’Ming," he snaps, his brow furrowing with irritation. The scimitar flies into his hand, trembling with apologies—but the ghost doesn't have time for that right now. "Cut the others down."

It's more useful with that task, at least. Quick as a flash, it rushes off.

Swirling through the trees, quickly cutting through the bandages hoisting the ghosts into the trees—a few of them adults, but, to Hua Cheng's dismay, most of them are still young children.

They stumble around in the snow, weakly crying out into the night. "Papa!"

"It hurts!"

All of them were already dead, yes—

But Lang Ying's actions prolonged their suffering. Made it far worse than it needed to be.

In the back of his mind, part of him wonders where Zhao Beitong has gone. Normally, this would be when she would appear during a fight.

Scolding him.

Telling him that he was being lazy, or uncreative. That he should out—think his enemies, not outmuscle them.

(Hua Cheng has always preferred the latter option. For the benefit of saving time, and his ego.)

But that doesn't seem possible now—and her absence is inexplicable.

In any case, he doesn't have time to linger. Without E’Ming, he's still doing the same amount of damage—which is to say none—while having given up his main tool for guarding himself from Lang Ying's attacks.

And his current method—ripping the bandages from his body—is slow.

He takes a long leap, rising thirty meters in the air, landing some distance away on the hillside, and he still hears more crying.

"W—Where are you?"

"I can't see anything!"

"Is the bandage man gonna c—come back?!"

The fog is back now, thick, heavy, drowning even starlight.

When he lands again, feet sinking slightly in the snow, one of the ghost children is right beside him——thick, terrified tears freezing on his cheeks as he trembles, reaching for the crimson ghost's hand.

"G—Gege, I'm—I'm lost!"

Hua Cheng opens his mouth to answer, but—

"Shuo?!" Another voice calls out through the trees and the fog, and the little boy holding onto Hua Cheng's fingers sobs, trembling like a leaf.

"BAO!" He sobs, whipping his head around. "It's me! W—Where are you?!"

"I can't s—see you!"

Hua Cheng squeezes the boy's fingers.

The action seems to remind the little ghost that he's there, looking up at Hua Cheng with frightened eyes, "I—I'm sorry, mister! I—I'm just lost!"

The crimson clad youth slowly tilts his head—and he realizes, this boy... He doesn't seem to realize that he's dead. Not yet.

"Is that your gege calling for you?" Hua Cheng questions, his tone isn't as warm as he'd like for it to be—he's never had the same skill as dianxia when it comes to projecting softness with children—but it isn't cruel, or unkind.

The boy bobs his head, rubbing at his nose.

"..." The crimson ghost hoists the boy up in one arm, hitching him on his hip—half expecting the child to scream or cry out with fear—but he doesn't, immediately clinging both arms around Hua Cheng's neck, sniffling.

Like he knows that he's safe, now. "Hold on tight, got it?"

The child whimpers out some form of acknowledgement, and the ghost launches himself into the air——leaping through the treetops, breathing in—until he detects a similar scent to the boy in his arms.

Sweet, with a little hint of cinnamon to it—like candies from winter festivals

When he drops down, the boy—from the looks of it, somewhere close to nine years old—yelps, nearly running away in his fear—but his little brother calls out, reaching for him.

"BAO! Bao, it's me!!" He cries, and the elder brother stops. "S—Shuo?!"

The siblings run into each other's arms, holding on tight, with the older brother—Bao, scolding Shuo through his tears, "I told you to hold onto my hand!" He cries. "We have to get out of here, before the bandage man comes back!"

"I did!" Shuo sobs. "I didn't let go!"

He clings his arms around Bao's neck, "I don't know what happened! O—One minute you were there, and the next I—I couldn't see you anymore!"

Having done that one small kindness, the crimson ghost starts to turn back, knowing that Lang Ying is searching for him in the trees, now—

"Wait!" Both boys cry, the older one grabbing onto Hua Cheng's hand. "You can't l— leave us here! What if the bandage man comes back?!"

"What if Shuo lets go of my hand again?!"

"I DIDN'T! Believe me!"

"I won't be able to find him, I don't—I don't wanna be alone again!"

Something about that last sentence makes Hua Cheng pause.

'I don't wanna be alone again!'

After all...He used to know someone that was afraid of being alone, too.

'Please...don't go!'

The crimson ghost pauses, turning to face the boys. "You don't want to be separated again?"

Both boys shake their heads, clearly petrified, and...

Hua Cheng sighs, dropping down so he can kneel before them, one knee sinking into the snow. "Give me your hand," he murmurs, looking to the older one—Bao.

He sniffles, but obeys—offering it out to him.

Hong'er was a selfish child, who grew into a selfish teenager—and now, Hua Cheng is a selfish man. He's never had many belongings to call his own. And most of what he does have—all came from the person most precious to him. Small trinkets——junk to some, treasures to him.

He's never once in his life given something away. Not unless it was to dianxia, and in that sense—it never felt like he was losing something.

But now, removing the small red thread that sits on his third finger, carefully winding it around Bao's—it's almost agonizing.

To the naked eye, it's completely worthless. To Hua Cheng, it's from the last day he spent with his love, while he was alive, sitting by his side, holding different threads for the god as he worked on his weaving. Before the argument—the last argument they ever had.

"This is very special to me," he murmurs, tying the knot until it's secure, gesturing for Shuo to give him his own hand, "Make sure you take care of it until I come back, understand?"

Both boys nod, sniffling, looking at one another with uncertainty. "I—It's...special?"

The ghost smiles—a rare, soft smile, his eye sparking up at them, a sole point of warmth in the cold, endless darkness. "It's magic."

Both boys stare down at him with wide, awe inspired gazes.

"Go down the hill. Keep the string, and you won't lose each other. Understand?"

Of course, the string wasn't magic *before,* but Hua Cheng has learned how to control and manipulate his own spiritual power over the years, and he pours a significant dose into the thread now, rising to his feet. "Go on, now."

Both boys bob their heads, holding hands tightly.

"Yes, sir!"

"Thank you, gege!"

They turn, hand in hand, running off into the fog.

Slowly, the ghost turns—surveying the endless fog, the cold wind cutting all the way through him. And when he breathes in, he knows.

Lang Ying is close.

His one advantage in the fight from then on is the fact that, while Lang Ying can't see through the fog—Hua Cheng knows how to find him by scent, dropping down to ambush him from the treetops. Occasionally ripping at his bandages, or tearing a piece of him away with his teeth.

It seems endless—like the only choice Hua Cheng has is to use only physical attacks, slowly wearing down his opponent until Lang Ying's spiritual power runs out.

The amount of time that would take is almost daunting to consider—but he struggles, trying to think of another way.

Meanwhile, down the hillside, through the slopes of the forest—Mount Tonglu is experiencing a first.

Hua Cheng's small act of kindness was a rarity for a place so soaked in bad karma— one that likely never would have been repeated, except...

Children mirror what they see.

As they stumble down the mountainside, occasionally tripping on the snow, or fallen branches—struggling to make their way through the wilderness in the dark, but following the downward slope...

The string never breaks, staying steady between them. "H—Hello?"

Another voice calls out—this time, a little girl. Just as small and frightened as them. "C—Can anybody help me? I—I can't find my mama!"

Both brothers stop, looking at each other, and when Bao tries to drag his brother along, Shuo stops, dragging his feet in the snow.

"Wait!"

The little boy protests, looking back. "She's lost!"

"Yeah?" His older brother grumbles, shaking his head. "So are we, come on!" "...But what if the bandage man gets her, too?"

"Not my problem!"

Shuo's lower lip juts out, and he tugs back on the string, glaring.

"If that's what crimson gege thought, I never would have found you!"

The brothers glare at one another, one determined, the other frustrated, but...

They stumble towards the sound, holding onto the string tightly, until they find a little girl—kneeling in the snow, sobbing.

Her hair was tied up into little buns on either side of her head, once—now, they're half falling down, and the small stuffed rabbit she's clinging to is missing one ear.

"Mama!" She weeps, looking around, alone in the dark. "W—where are you?! I—I'm scared! I wanna go home!"

She jumps away in fear when she hears footsteps, so sure that it's going to be the bandage man again, that she's going to be hanging from a tree once more, listening to the horrible, rotten sound of the old man digging——

"Hi," a voice whispers. A child, just like her. "What's your name?"

Her lower lip wobbles. "Yanlin!" She cries, sniffling—holding her stuffed rabbit close to her chest, trying very hard to sound frightening, "A—And I'm very big! So—You should stay away, or I'll step on you!"

"We're not gonna hurt you, swear!"

When they approach, they can see she's lying, and that she wasn't very big at all—but neither of the boys seem angry about it.

They look small and frightened, just like her.

"My name's Shuo," the younger one whispers, "and this is my big brother, Bao."

"...I don't like it here," Yanlin whispers, eyes wide, filled with tears. "I want to go home!"

"Me too," Shuo admits, stumbling closer, "But it'll be okay, promise!"

She sobs, shaking her head, "W—what about when the bandage man comes back?!" Shuo takes her hand.

"We'll just run away, before he does!"

Yanlin shakes her head, clutching her rabbit even tighter. There's no use, she's tried. "I keep getting lost," she moans, "It won't work!"

"Sure, it will," the older boy—Bao—speaks up, his tone betraying a little bit of annoyance. "Here,"

He snatches up her hand from Shuo's grip—

And that's when she sees the red string, sitting there on his finger. "See this?"

"..." Yanlin nods, pressing her nose against the head of her stuffed rabbit, sniffling.

Bao pulls on one end of the string—and somehow, it stretches.

He wraps it around Yanlin's finger, tying the bow tight. "It's magic."

The little girl frowns, her eyebrows knitting together sulkily. "No, you're lying! It's just a normal string!"

"Is not!" Shuo huffs, crossing his arms, "My gege ain't a liar—a god gave this to us!"

"..." Yanlin looks back and forth between both boys, her eyes frightened and cautious. "...A god? I didn't think they had those here."

She's been praying to the Heavenly Emperor every single night, since the bandage man put her in that tree. No one has ever answered.

Even Bao looks doubtful, but Shuo crosses his arms over his chest, nodding very seriously. "Oh, he for sure is! I was all alone, just like you, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't find my brother—so I prayed, I prayed as hard as I could!" He beams, "And he came!"

"He found my gege for me, he gave us this string—and he told us it's magic! So, if you stay with us, you won't get lost—and we'll definitely get out of here, okay?" Shuo offers the little girl his hand again, helping her up. "Or do you wanna stay here by yourself?"

"...No," Yanlin admits, shaking her head.

"Then come on!" Shuo tugs her along, his shoes crunching lightly in the snow. "All we gotta do is go down the hill!"

"..." The little girl sniffles one more time, hugging her rabbit close. She's tired, and she wants to go home.

But if there really is a god here, and he's on their side, well... It makes it seem a little easier, to be brave.

She stumbles along with them, holding onto the red string as tight as she can—and in her mind, she prays. To a god she doesn't know, and has never seen.

'Don't let it get me,' she whispers, following her new friends through the night, jumping at every sound. *'Please—I'll be very good when I get home. I'll be nice to my little brother. I'll do all my chores without Mama asking! Just—please, don't let it get me!'*

Yanlin isn't the only child they find on the slopes, making their way down. One by one, they find more and more. Crying, alone, and scared.

Bao insists they don't have time, but Shuo always makes them stop.

And somehow, the red string the crimson ghost gave them never runs out.

It keeps getting longer and longer, connecting them as they make their way down the mountain, single file——and by the time they reach the bottom, there's at least a few dozen of them, staring at one another when the fog clears.

"See?" Shuo beams, squeezing Yanlin's hand.

"I told you, we'd definitely make it!"

"Who gave you that string, anyway?"

"Mmm..." Shuo rubs his chin, thinking about it. "He was HUGE! With only one eye, and wearing red! Anyone know a god like that?"

All the children stop, thinking—a couple of them rubbing their heads. None of them can think of one.

But just as they're contemplating the matter—there's a red flash of light, sending them screaming and scattering when they see a scimitar flickering through the air.

Then, when Shuo sees the figure that's landed on the snow, he beams. "Gege!"

Several of the other children pause, lifting their hands from their heads when they see Shuo running forward, grabbing the crimson ghost by the sleeve, "We made it down! I think everyone else did, too!"

Hua Cheng pauses, turning his head to look over the group of children.

There must be almost seventy of them—more ghosts than he realized were even left on the fields of Mount Tonglu to begin with. Nearly all of them are slightly emaciated, or pale...

Most killed from disease, or hunger—and none of them seem to know it. A little girl runs to his side.

“Mister God!” She cries, holding a stuffed rabbit against her side, “What’s your name? I got a gold piece for my birthday last year, I’m gonna put it in one of your temples!”

Hua Cheng stares down at her, slowly tilting his head to the side. “...I don’t have any temples.”

“...” Yanlin frowns, her brow knitting with worry. She hadn’t thought of that.

Shuo huffs, crossing his arms, “I’ll build you some, then! As soon as I’m big! Our dad builds stuff too, you know—he can help!”

“What’s your name?” Yanlin repeats, tugging at his sleeve again.

“I don’t know how to build stuff, but there’s an apple orchard behind our village! I’ll make a shrine in my room, and I’ll bring you some every day!”

That almost makes the ghost smile, and he murmurs—

“I’m not a god, little one.”

None of the children believe him on that front. Finally, he replies—

“Hua Cheng. That’s my name.”

Yanlin smiles up at the ghost shyly, holding her rabbit to her chest with both arms, “Thank you, Hua Chengzhu!”

The title is a little odd—after all, he isn’t exactly the ruler of this place, but... From their perspective, he might as well be.

“Thank you, Hua Chengzhu!” Other children cry, each running over to give the ghost cries of appreciation.

Eventually, he turns to Bao, holding out his hand, “Did you take good care of it for me?”

The boy nods seriously.

He reaches down, untying the red string from his finger, each of the other children doing the same, carefully handing it back to the ghost, or, well—

If you asked any of them, their god.

“Stay where you are,” he murmurs, wrapping the string back around his finger once more.

“Don’t go and get lost again.”

“We won’t!” Several of them crow, while Shuo trails after him with worry.

“Hua Chengzhu—where are you going?”

A hand lands in the little boy’s hair—ruffling it, and silently ordering him to stay back.

Hua Cheng continues up the slope, replying.

“To kill a ghost.”

That, none of the children have any qualms with. They know which one.

And they all hate him. A resentment that runs deep in their bones. So much hate for children to feel. Young, too young.

But the world taught them to hate, anyway. E'Ming is frustrated.

Hua Cheng knows as much from the way the saber restlessly rattles by his side, infuriated by how useless it is in this situation. The ghost can almost empathize. After all—Lang Ying is an infuriating opponent. In the time it would take Hua Cheng to wear him down...

Lang Ying could be doing the same thing to him.

And even if Hua Cheng does believe that he could win—he doesn't like the uncertainty of it, and...

He doesn't have time for this.

When they clash again, the bandaged ghost is even more infuriated than he was before.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!" He roars, their swords clashing together so violently, even E'Ming is trembling with the effort it takes to beat the other ghost back. "DO YOU REALIZE HOW LONG IT TOOK ME TO CATCH THEM?!"

Hua Cheng grits his teeth, planting one foot in Lang Ying's chest.

Kicking him so hard, the ghost flies back at least forty meters, slamming into a large, ancient oak—so violently, the trunk snaps in two.

"They are CHILDREN!" The crimson ghost shouts back, "JUST LIKE YOUR SON!"

"THEY'RE DEAD!" Lang Ying wails "WHO CARES WHAT I DO TO THEM NOW?!"

"So IS HE!" E'Ming slices off a good portion of the ghost's bandages now, but not nearly enough, "SO AM I, AND SO ARE YOU!" He shouts, "So, if none of it matters, if no one should care, why DON'T YOU JUST GO AND DISAPPEAR ALREADY?!"

Somehow, they end up back where they started.

Standing in the middle of the burial mounds, two ghosts, in a graveyard. An empty grave standing open—waiting for one of them to lay down and rest.

"I can't," Lang Ying moans, clutching at one side of his face, sword hanging limply in his grip. "...DON'T YOU SEE THAT I CAN'T?!"

In their next clash, Hua Cheng cuts off the king's arm again, watching it roll to the ground, twitching and flailing, getting ready to make its way back.

Then, it occurs to him—that maybe, just maybe—Lang Ying is telling the truth.

That even if he wanted to, his soul is too cursed to allow him to rest in peace.

And then, staring at the string in his hand—the crimson ghost gets an idea.

Brains over brawn—something that Zhao Beitong would like. She's always preferred cleverness, after all.

"...Did you mean it?"

Lang Ying is hobbling towards his arm, movements robotic and jerking, when he asks that question. "...What?"

"The night you died," Hua Cheng explains quietly. "When you called the crown prince your friend. Did you mean that?"

"..." The king turns around, leveling Hua Cheng with a cold—but clear-headed stare, a moment of clarity between bouts of madness. "I did."

The curse that Bai Wuxiang placed upon him in his human life ate through whatever honor Lang Ying may have had. His sanity.

Took his natural blessings, the luck he was born with, and burned them to ash.

"I see," Hua Cheng replies—and in a flash, before the other ghost can even react, the taller man is in front of Lang Ying, holding his severed arm in hand, gripping it by the elbow. "Well, then—"

CRACK!

Lang Ying's head whips to the side, his spine cracking, making it spin all the way around on his shoulders after he—

After Hua Cheng slapped the King of Yong'an in the face with his own arm, twirling it between his fingers like one might with a baton.

Slowly, he smiles.

Not a kind smile. Not a friendly smile. The smile you see pressed against your window at night, when you can't seem to wake from a nightmare. The smile of a beast, on the verge of devouring you. The smile the devil makes, each time he steals a soul.

Wide, sharp—full of teeth.

"Any friend of Taizi Dianxia is a friend of mine," He purrs.

Lang Ying has a very particular—cruel, destructive—form of friendship.

Hua Cheng thinks it would be a shame if no one gave him a taste of it.

The red string unspools by his hand, hanging by his side like a whip.

It's tied around the elbow of Lang Ying's severed arm—snatching it up and binding it to a trunk of a nearby tree.

The spirit's bandages try to retrieve it, but hard as they may—they can't wrench the arm free.

The red string won't break.

Hua Cheng takes his other arm, next.

Binding it to a nearby tree.

Then one foot. then the calf, up to the knee.

It's a slow process, one that requires him to get under the former king's guard, to dodge around the slowly building web of string forming around them, burning hot to the touch.

Lang Ying doesn't seem to notice—not at first. His bandages act as new limbs, dragging his torso around, helping him skittle through the snow like a demented little spider, trying to tear at Hua Cheng with his teeth.

But he's in someone else's web now. And there is no escape.

He's hoisted up from the ground, no limbs left to speak of, a red string wrapped around his throat—surrounded by pieces of his own body, hanging around him in the trees.

Just like the ghosts he used. Pieced apart, just like the humans who suffered under the plague he unleashed.

Hua Cheng was also watching, as the white clothed calamity tormented his beloved. He was also learning: and he took away an important lesson.

Bai Wuxiang doesn't force anyone to do anything if he can help it. He tricks, lies, and steals. Rarely however, does he wield the blade

He doesn't believe that it was no face who unleashed the plague on Xianle for the first time. Or that if he did—he wasn't acting alone.

Lang Ying was the one responsible.

Hua Cheng doesn't know how. Has no proof of the matter, but he knows.

In his bones, he knows.

Finally, it's there again—now, in this final moment, another flash of clarity.

"..." Lang Ying lifts his chin, almost uncaring of the fact that his limbs are gone, glancing around the clearing. "...Who is that crying?" He whispers.

The pained, terrified wailing has never stopped.

"Wu Ming, who is that? Who's crying?!"

The crimson ghost looks up at the creature, strung up like meat in a slaughterhouse— and he almost pities him, the way he knows his love did, towards the end.

Dianxia is like that. Always has been. He has room for hate, yes—but tempered.

He is also capable of forgiveness. Of offering mercy at times—when he thinks it's deserved.

But they are not the same people.

Hua Cheng is not a forgiving man, and he does not show mercy.

Nor does he feel pity for a man whose choices were all his own.

“That’s your son,” he replies softly. “He’s suffering.”

Lang Ying looks around, twisting his neck frantically, trying to find him. “...Where? You’ve got to let me go; I need to—”

The red string tightens around his neck, so much so that he can no longer speak.

Hua Cheng approaches, stopping underneath him. “Your son was lucky.”

Lang Ying’s expression freezes, pupils widening.

“He was lucky,” Hua Cheng continues, reaching out to wrap his fingers around a nearby thread, “to have died young, rather than be raised by a man like you.”

The mere suggestion makes Lang Ying’s face contort with rage, thrashing, “My family WAS CURSED—!”

Then, he stops—realizing how weak he’s become. That, all this time, while the strings were holding his limbs—

They were also consuming his spiritual power—slowly, but surely.

“Their only curse was you,” Hua Cheng replies, staring up at him with cold, unforgiving eyes. And then—there’s that smile again. The sort of grin that, even now, makes the bandaged ghost tense up with fear.

He hasn’t felt fear in so, so long. “But don’t worry, your highness,”

Hua Cheng tugs on that thread a little harder, until it starts to vibrate and rattle, burning with heat. “I’ll take good care of your son.”

Somehow, Lang Ying pales.

“...What are you going to do?”

The crimson ghost’s smile never fades. “Whatever I please.”

“WU MING!” He cries.

“HUA CHENG—YOU CAN’T! IF YOU DO—I’LL COME BACK! I’LL CURSE YOU! YOU—”

Hua Cheng learned something in the last hour.

He doesn't know if it's because of his ascension years ago, or because of his strength as a ghost—

But he can feel it now. Prayers, being sent up to him.

Filling him up with even more power than before. With that, and all the energy he's absorbed from Lang Ying, his entire form is shuddering with it, forming energy like the core of a far-off star.

And he wonders, now—about what Jun Wu said. The Fire Master.

The title was obviously never his—Hua Cheng never agreed to take it. But now, he's curious to see. What it would feel like, if he was.

His fingers squeeze that thread tighter, until it slices his skin, his own blood dripping down, staining the snow.

And he whispers—

"Burn."

Every inch of string, in that moment, sets itself aflame, flaring so violently that a hundred-meter-high pillar of flames shoots up into the sky, a swirling inferno that almost wants to shatter the horizon itself.

The flames do not touch their master, however. They don't dare.

Hua Cheng watches, hands clasped behind his back, as the former King of Yong'an's form is reduced to ash—even those becoming incinerated as the flames rage on.

Not scattered. Not thrown into the sea or left to rot. He is simply no more.

The flames roar, and the crying stops.

It's a taste of what he could have been, had he not turned his back upon heaven itself —but this, this feels more powerful than any show of force that the ghost has seen from a heavenly official before.

The flames dim, leaving his face cast in an amber glow, eye smoldering. Then, he remembers—

They all wear their shackles. Dance to the same song, holding their hands out for coins to be thrown down from on high.

Puppets. Glorified little pets of the heavenly emperor.

Hua Cheng kneels before no one. Prays to only one god.

And he wears no chains.

The burial mounds moan beneath his feet—seeming to know, now, that their murderer has been slain.

Even by the standards of Mount Tonglu—this is a tainted place now. Cursed. Filled till it's bursting with howling resentful energy.

For a savage ghost, it's a feast that never ends.

Hua Cheng, however, turns his back on it.

Slowly making his way to the edge of the clearing—he stops, holding out a hand. "Come."

There's hesitation—sniffling, but...

Slowly, a hand—that of a toddler, barely more than an infant—grasps his own. It doesn't hurt anymore.

They make their way down the mountainside—and Hua Cheng leaves the burial mounds, and the one, empty grave left by Lang Ying, behind.

Let them fester and rot—Hua Cheng doesn't care.

He won't feast on the souls of children, stolen from their graves by a madman to fuel a curse.

When he returns to the base of the mountain, his little flock of believers are waiting. Jumping up and down still, cheering—because each and every one of them knows—

The bandage man is gone.

"Hua Chengzhu! You did it, Hua Chengzhu!" They cry out, clapping in the night.

He sets Lang Ying's son down with one of the older ghosts, knowing what he'll do with him later—but leaving him, for now.

"What are we supposed to do now?" One of the children mumbles, scratching the back of his head.

“Yeah, how are we supposed to get home?” Bao frowns. “We don’t even know where we are.”

Hua Cheng almost answers—knowing that the truth will be horrible, yes, but that it’s better than a lie.

“You’re—”

CREEAAAAAAAK!

Everyone in the valley goes still, turning their heads. The fog is gone, now.

Mount Tonglu scorches.

The ground rattles, jumping up and down beneath their feet—so violently, it knocks nearly all of them to the ground, leaving Hua Cheng as the only ghost left standing, staring.

“...Hua Chengzhu?”

His eyes dilate, pupils narrowing into slits.

It’s time.

“What’s going on?”

Hua Cheng’s enemies are gone. Other than this small, weak crowd of children—no other spirits remain in the fields of Mount Tonglu.

There were once tens of millions of them, flowing through the valley like molten metal.

Now, the crimson ghost is the only one left standing. And the mountain must know it.

Because now, the Kiln is closing.

A ghost king is about to be born.

Before the children can ask anything more, the crimson ghost disappears in a flash— shooting towards the mouth of the volcano like a fiery arrow, crashing inside.

It’s time.

He crashes through the entrance just as it seals just, rocketing down to the floor with a slam.

It’s done.

He’s trembling slightly—from the adrenaline, and the exhaustion that came with fighting Lang Ying, and creating a new spiritual tool.

But he did it. He made it.

Out of tens of millions of spirits. Plenty stronger, more ancient and powerful than him—and he, an orphan without wealth, family, or even a name, made it here.

E’Ming buzzes at his hip, and Hua Cheng’s fingers wrap around the handle of the blade, stroking it slowly.

It’s done.

No more battles to fight. No more evils to witness. The Kiln itself won’t remain closed for long with only one ghost inside of it. Whatever reasons Hua Cheng had to wait this long for it to close—they don’t matter now. It’ll be a matter of months, at most.

Then, he’ll find him.

His other hand reaches up into his hair, to the red pearl braided into dark tresses, squeezing it tightly.

(Wait for me.)

(Just a little longer.)

The ghost clenches his teeth from the exhaustion, rising to his feet.

(I’m coming home.)

But when Hua Cheng looks up—he stops.

It’s a rare thing for the crimson ghost to be wrong about anything—particularly bad things. He’s always been cynical. Punishment, for the crime of being born unlucky.

It’s rare for him to be so surprised.

But he was wrong.

The battle is not over—and Hua Cheng is not alone.

There’s a slow clap, rattling off the massive cavern walls, echoing throughout.

“Well done, little one.”

Full, red lips curve up into a smile.

“You’ve grown strong.”

Standing in the center of the cavern, head held high, arms clasped behind her back…

…Is Zhao Beitong.

The Goddess of the Kiln

Chapter Summary

“What are you doing here?” Hua Cheng growls, and at first—he thinks this must be a trick.

That she was a competitor, hiding in plain sight all this time. That she was lying to him, building him into this false sense of security—all so she could learn his movements, make it easier for her to take him apart in the end.

But her smile doesn’t change.

“This is my home.”

Chapter Notes

TW// this chapter contains references to sexism, abuse of power imbalances, and the deaths of children.

You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

This story also has some spotify playlists for those who want some fun listening while reading!

No Paths Are Bound: The Playlist
Zhao Beitong's Playlist
The Wu Ming Playlist

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Her student stands by the closed doors to the kiln, taking in the space all around them. It’s not what he thought it would be. Not what the stories said.

He imagined this small, tight, oven like space—something like the name implied. Not this.

The cavern is dauntingly vast.

Much like the cavern between realms, where he met the two gamblers, betting souls— but instead of black walls, every surface of this place is pure white marble, standing in contrast to the dark, ashen exterior, everything that's left of the Kingdom of Wuyong.

"...What is this?"

He questions, his voice low—and the ghost in the center of the room smiles at him, slowly tilting her head to the side.

"What do you mean?"

"What are you doing here?" Hua Cheng growls, and at first—he thinks this must be a trick.

That she was a competitor, hiding in plain sight all this time. That she was lying to him, building him into this false sense of security—all so she could learn his movements, make it easier for her to take him apart in the end.

But her smile doesn't change.

"This is my home."

He doesn't answer—just stares, his gaze hateful, distrusting.

How quickly it changed, the moment he suspected her betrayal.

"You know, Tonglu opens more often than anyone thinks," her heels click against stone, echoing against the endless space around them. "Do you know why?"

Hua Cheng doesn't answer, doesn't move. Just stands there—arms clasped behind his back, just like hers—and he waits.

Waits, and listens.

Just like she taught him.

Zhao Beitong's smile softens—only to grow sharp once more. "My father was a builder, in my human life."

She explains softly, lifting her head, staring at the expanse over their heads. "More of an engineer really, even though he never had the proper education."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"You saw the aqueducts, didn't you?" Zhao Beitong doesn't turn her gaze from the ceiling.

“My father built them.” She whispers.

And the palaces. The streets. And the temples.

A man born the son of a servant, not even taught how to read before he came of age— and he raised one of the greatest imperial cities the world had known at that time.

It would only be rivaled again by another kingdom, beloved by the heavens—fond of the arts, the sciences, and beauty.

The Kingdom of Xianle.

She would stand from the top of this mountain, some days—let her eyes peer as far as they could against the horizon—and she would watch.

Watch golden palaces and shining temples rise from a virgin landscape, and ache. Ache for the life she once had. The father who built the world around her, knowing— knowing that the boy would come back.

That he would bring it all crashing down, just as he had before.

“They use forces like gravity to carry the water from one place to the next,” Zhao Beitong explains. “But pushing it uphill—that requires pressure, using sharp angles and pumps to push all of that water where it needs to go.”

“If I ever want to be a plumber, that’ll be useful.” Hua Cheng grumbles, impatient and unimpressed. His companion smiles, never lowering her head. Foolish child. Bratty, and stubborn—

But oh, how she had desperately hoped that it would never come to this. “The pressure puts strain on the entire structure,” she continues.

“For that, there’s release valves—letting offshoots of water pour out into the sewer system. That’s where the majority of it goes, you know —most of the time, only half of the water moving through the lines actually makes it to the destination.” She stops next to the Kiln’s wall.

Presses her palm there, flat against the stone. “That’s what this place is.”

“A sewer?” Hua Cheng questions, still tense and unhappy, never pleased when he feels as though he's been tricked.

"A pressure release valve." Zhao Beitong clicks her tongue, lightly scolding.

"What do you think happens, when so much spiritual power is produced by cultivators? When so much of the energy in the universe is pushed upwards, towards the heavens?" She murmurs, pointing one finger up to the kiln's ceiling.

Slowly, he begins to understand.

"...Pressure."

"Resentment," she murmurs—which is essentially the same thing.

In truth—it isn't cultivators. Isn't the gods. It's one god. One cultivator, who has never respected the balance of things. Who has only seen the resources before him as natural rewards for his talents.

There will always be certain men who feel entitled to power. Who see a shining future as a birthright, not something that must be earned, or shared.

"When the resentment builds to a breaking point, Tonglu will send out it's call," she murmurs. "And the underworld will answer."

It always does.

"But this does not always result in the birth of a ghost king," she explains, turning to face him again. Her hair falls loose around her shoulders—and he notices that her dress is different, now.

Finer, more layers—trimmed in gold, rubies braided into her hair.

"If a ghost of the proper caliber does not survive, the result will be half formed. A grotesque monster," she admits, the look in her eyes...complex. A mix between disgust and affection. "But not a Ghost King."

"Does that mean Bai Wuxiang was the only success?" Hua Cheng questions.

Zhao Beitong lets out a soft laugh, shaking her head. "He was the first true success, but he wasn't born here. No—there have been two successes, within this kiln. Two Ghost Kings, since the birth of Bai Wuxiang."

That gives the young ghost pause, his eyes flashing with confusion

“...If that was the case, why has no one ever heard of them?”

Zhao Beitong’s eyes bear down on him, burning like alchemical flames, violet light cast down over her cheekbones—and when she smiles, it’s feral. Powerful.

Sorrowful.

“Because I devoured them,” she whispers.

Hua Cheng’s heart can no longer beat. His breaths can no longer stutter.

But if it could, it would be racing now, shivers sinking into his bones—realizing now, why he could never sense Zhao Beitong’s spiritual power.

Why he could never catch her scent. Why they’re both here.

Her spiritual energy exists in the ground below. In the air around them. It’s the very atmosphere that forms the clouds above the former kingdom of Wuyong.

Her scent is the soot in the air, the fire below.

“I didn’t want to close the doors,” she explains, her voice aching.

“Because I grew fond of you.”

Hua Cheng stops.

His anger stops. His distrust. His belligerent form of cynicism.

Because when he looks into Zhao Beitong’s eyes, he knows that she means it. That, for the first time in so very long, there’s more than one person who... Cares.

Eight years is a long time for anyone—but he’s still young. It’s more time than he’s spent with any creature in his brief existence. And aside from one other—she’s been the first nurturing influence in his life.

Even if he didn’t always recognize it as that. Not until now.

When it’s already been too late.

“…When you ascended—for just a moment, I was relieved,” She admits.

Disappointed, but relieved. Because that man was getting his way again, yes— cheating, always loading the board in his favor.

“But when you came back down…”

The mountain rumbles around them, and Hua Cheng can feel it—the heat, burning from the outer walls.

“I knew that you and I would end up here.”

There’s a low rustling noise, following the rumbling—and that’s when Hua Cheng starts to see them.

Silvery little points of light. Wraith butterflies.

They followed her throughout the years, always in smaller groups—but now, there are so many, it looks like a tidal wave, slowly floating down from above.

“…I don’t take credit for the other creations,” Zhao Beitong murmurs, her voice slightly fragile.

“I’ve never been happy with a half made product. They always disgusted me, but…the Ghost Kings, they…” She smiles.

Not a happy smile, no—something so deeply mournful, that even in all of the grief and suffering Hua Cheng has experienced, he struggles to fathom it.

But it’s also ferociously proud, like—

“They’re my children.” Zhao Beitong’s lips quiver.

Like a mother.

“And you—” She steps forward, just as the wraith butterflies begin to crest overheat, “—will be my third son.”

Her fingers reach for his face, trembling. “…My San Lang.”

Her finest creation. Her favorite child.

She clutches his face in her hands, staring up into his gaze.

That brave, handsome face.

God, how she hated him. Resented him, hoped he would die.

And god, how she adored him. Wanted to lift him up, to keep him close—keep him safe.

But her fingernails slowly begin to dig into his skin—hands trembling, heart breaking, as she whispers—

“I have made many weapons. All my life.”

In many ways, that’s truly all she has ever known how to do.

“...But there will never be another Ghost King,” Zhao Beitong murmurs. “I won’t allow it.”

There are many types of mothers in life. There are those who love you fiercely, want to keep you safe and warm—to protect you from the world, while also making you strong enough to face it.

And then, there are mothers who resent the act of creation itself.

They are the ones that devour their young.

Zhao Beitong, in the end, is both.

Life has given her no choice to be any other way. The world has taught her nothing different.

It is now, staring back down at her, that Hua Cheng understands what the elder spirit means to do.

That she means to open her jaws, and swallow him whole.

And of course—it’s never that easy. Not with him—nor with her.

They part, with her clutching her stomach in the place where the young man kicked her—and Hua Cheng landing a hundred meters away, clutching E-Ming.

“...” Zhao Beitong stumbles to the side, slightly—one hand on her ribs as she looks up, and as her gaze intensifies—so does the heat from the kiln. “...Is that what you call a blow?” She calls, her voice distinctly unimpressed.

She charges, then—with millions of butterflies crash in her wake, light as air before, but now, in such mass, they make the floor rattle and shake as they come towards him, roaring like the sea in a maelstrom—

“I EXPECT *BETTER* , BOY!” She roars.

And so, it begins.

Each time they clash, the mountain roars in response.

There’s fluttering everywhere, making it impossible to see anything around him as the butterflies warm—wings cutting into his skin, tiny little mouths latching in, sucking at his spiritual energy like little parasites.

The only way to counter them is to swallow them—to absorb them into his own core—and when they come in such vast numbers, it’s almost impossible to do.

“I DON’T—” Hua Cheng cries out once, when they clash—his E-Ming against her own blades, “I DON’T WANT TO DO THIS!”

He surprises himself when he says it. He’s never been one to shy away from a battle, from what needs to be done—no matter the cost. There was only one person he ever placed above betrayal, harm, or reproach. One person he could never raise a hand to, no matter the circumstances.

But he doesn’t—

Hua Cheng realizes now, with slowly building regret—

He doesn’t want to hurt her.

He will, he knows. Knows that there’s very little that he isn’t capable of. That as much as he’s come to…care.

He’s come to care for Zhao Beitong in these past eight years.

But as much as he’s come to care, he was a selfish child. A selfish teenager. And now, he’s a selfish man.

His affection for her isn’t more important than his reasons for being here. It just makes the climb to the top far more painful than he expected.

“YOU WILL!”

She cries, eyes mad—mad with grief, torment, and curses.

So many curses, ten thousand—ten MILLION lifetimes of curses, resentment, and hatred. Built up in one place, placed under heat and pressure until there was no space left.

And now, it must be released.

But this was never Zhao Beitong's choice. She doesn't want this. She never did.

Hua Cheng learns something else, now. About the Kiln, her, himself—about the very nature of magic.

The lines between two people can slowly begin to blur, the better they know one another.

The more they care for one another.

That if you put them in a situation like this, under enough heat and pressure, it—

It can lead to things bleeding over between the two.

Somewhere in the melee, her hand reaches him—clutching over his forehead—and for a moment, it's all dark.

Then—he isn't in the kiln anymore.

No burning heat. No stinging pain. No butterfly wings, fear, or death.

He's small, and when he opens his eyes, blinking blearily against the sun, he's on a narrow country road.

Lined by red maples, as far as the eye can see—and it's autumn.

He sits up, slowly rubbing the side of his head—soft, ink black curls beneath his fingertips.

There's humming ahead.

When he lifts his cheek—he sees a woman there, just a few paces down the road. Tall, slender—long, jet black hair, bouncing against her shoulders.

There's a cheerfulness to her gait, a natural energy about her—and when she calls, the boy can't help but smile, "Where's my little Hong

Hong-er? Did a ghost steal him away?”

A soft giggle tears from the boy's lips as he rolls to his feet. “I’m here!” He calls. “I’m coming!”

He always runs just a little too fast, never realizing quite how quick his legs can take him—and when he slams into the back of her legs, his mother lets out a soft *‘Oof* !’ Nearly dropping the basket in her arms.

But she doesn’t scold Hong-er, smiling when he hugs her knees.

“There you are!” She smiles, reaching down to pat his head. “What were you doing, getting so far away from me?”

“...” The little boy doesn’t speak at first, hugging her so, so tight—pressing his face into her skirt. Eventually, he replies, “You were going too fast!”

His mother frowns, reaching down to pet his head.

“I tried really hard to keep up,” he mumbles, “But you were walking so fast, I got tired!”

“...I’m sorry, little love,” she shakes her head, setting the basket on one hip, wrapping an arm around him so she can hoist him up.

“I don’t ever want you getting too far away from me, alright?” She hitches him on her hip, letting the little boy cuddle against her side as she continues down the road. “You just let me know if you get too tired, and I’ll carry you.”

Hong-er hums in response, cuddling closer.

In truth—he wasn’t very tired at all. His legs might be short, but they’re strong, and he’s always been quick.

He just likes being picked up and carried around—that’s all. And now that he’s all warm and comfortable, he grumbles. “How much further is it?” He whines.

“We’ve been waking FOREVER!” His face drops against her chest, legs kicking out irritably, “I’m gonna die!”

“It’s only been a few hours,” the young woman snorts good naturedly, bumping her cheek against his head. “You won’t die!”

"I will!" Hong-er cries out, stubborn.

"I'll die, and then I'll turn into a ghost and tell you that you're the one walking slow!"

Any other parent would probably find that horribly disturbing, or at the very least disrespectful—but his mother throws her head back and laughs, hugging him close, "Oh really?"

"Uh-huh!"

"Hmmm..." She thinks about it, rubbing his back with her hands, "Well, I think you'd be a very cute ghost! You better haunt me forever, alright?"

Her son beams up at her, eyes sparkling with amusement. "I will!" She can't blame him for being grouchy after all—it isn't his fault.

They've been traveling on foot for weeks now—and it would exhaust anyone, but especially a little boy his age. He should be running and playing with other children— not walking so much that he wears out two pairs of shoes in as many weeks.

"You didn't answer, Mama," he huffs.

"Hmm?" She glances up—and the little boy repeats himself.

"How much further?"

"Oh..." She glances down the road, thinking, holding him a little closer. "Maybe... another couple of days?"

Hong-er scowls—because that's exactly what she said when he asked the day before.

And...she sighs. "Look—I think you'll like it there. It'll be good for us!" She encourages the boy, hugging him a little closer. "A nice change of pace!"

"But why did we have to leave?" He mumbles, eyes slightly narrowed. "...Money wasn't good back home," his mother shrugs.

"And I've got a hungry little ghost to feed!" She gives the boy on her hip a playful little bounce, trying to lighten his mood.

Of course—he was too small then, to understand the economic downturn in the kingdom of Xuli. And for someone like his mother...

You go where the work is. Simple as that.

“Besides—Xianle is a nice place, I promise,” the young woman reassures him. “Everyone there is rich, and kind—the king and queen are good and just, and they even have the most beautiful crown prince in the world!”

Hong-er really doesn’t see what that has to do with him. They never see people like that outside of stories, anyways. “I still won’t have any friends,” he mumbles—and his mother’s gaze saddens.

“...Maybe this time will be different,” she shakes her head, “give it a chance.” There’s no point, and they both know it.

He pushes his hair in front of his face irritably—hiding his right eye. “They’ll be scared of me.”

“...” His mother frowns, batting his hand away as she pushes his hair behind his ear. “Don’t say that, Hong-er.”

“Why not? I’m ugly.”

He tries to say it bravely, like it doesn’t bother him—but the words just come out small, distinctly...sad, and his mother squeezes him closer.

“Don’t ever say that,” she repeats, leaning down to kiss his right eyebrow—even as he shrinks away. “My little Hong-er is handsome!”

He doesn’t believe her—he never does, even if she tells him that each and every time.

“Even if I wasn’t ugly, they’d make fun of me anyway,” he grumbles. He’s in a mood this afternoon, she can tell—probably from being tired, and well...

She gave him her own portion of dinner last night, but she doesn’t doubt that the poor thing still must be hungry.

“Why?”

“‘Cause I don’t have a name,” the little boy replies, staring up at her pointedly, making her frown.

“Yes, you do!” She huffs. “I picked it out myself!”

His gaze is unrelenting, but she’s just as stubborn as he is, “It’s Hong!

it's a good name!"

Hong Hong-er, cute enough for now, when he's still a sweet little boy—but Hong is a perfectly fine name for a grown man, too! It's a good name, really—!

"But I only have one name!"

Hong-er frowns. "Everyone else has two!"

"That's just given names and family names," his mother waves him off. "Hong is your given name—"

"And what's my family name?" He presses. He's still so small, still such a child at times—

But he's also *relentless* .

"...Your father's name," she hedges.

"What's his name?"

"We'll talk about it when you're taller." She never says older—because then she would just end up being forced to set a date and time for the conversation.

Instead, she told him they could discuss it when he was two meters tall—which he didn't realize until very recently meant it would be a *very* long time, maybe not *ever* .

But before the boy can say much more, his mother is distracted by an orange grove on the side of the road.

"Look at that?" She muses, setting him down on his feet. "What do you say I get us a snack before we keep on?"

He tries to cling, to tell her to never mind, but she pats the top of his head. "Stay where you are, your Mama will be right back!"

With that, she slips into the tree line—and Hong-er is left staring after her, standing alone on the side of the road.

"...She was so young." A familiar voice echoes in the young man's ear. "That's surprising."

Hong-er's hands ball into fists. "Get out." This is *his* memory.

“How old must she have been when she had you?” Zhao Beitong muses, rubbing her chin. “Barely more than a child herself, I imagine.”

“How should I know?!” Hong-er hisses.

This memory is an old one—he was so young back then, the ghost had completely forgotten it until now.

“She never did tell you about your father, did she?” The older woman watches as his face contorts with anger, and her voice softens. “...You assumed the very worst, didn’t you?”

“He was dead, or a bastard.”

“But your mother never said that,” she points out.

“Why would she?!”

Hong-er snaps, “What kind of mother wants a little boy to know that?!”

“Or maybe it just wasn’t true.” She murmurs, watching as he shakes his head vehemently.

“He left—if he wasn’t dead, then he was just worthless trash,” the little boy snarls, fists shaking.

“...He loved her.”

“Shut up!” Hong-er cries. “You have no way of knowing that!”

“You think I haven’t read your fortune, in all of our time together?” Zhao Beitong muses, crossing her arms, the wind playing through her hair. “Do you know what it means, being born under the star of solitude?”

The little boy turns away from her, glaring into the tree line of the orange grove, waiting for his mother. “That I’m cursed, alright, I KNOW!”

“Not necessarily,” she murmurs, making her companion freeze. “That’s only one possible outcome.”

His entire life—he’s only ever been told the opposite.

“Your life could always go one way or the other. You could be the most cursed soul to walk the earth—or among the most blessed. It will always veer between the two extremes, influenced by your own will."

"...What's that got to do with my father?" Hong-er grumbles, peering into the trees.

"For a child to be born with such a fate—it is always created by the love of two parents who love each other deeply," Zhao Beitong explains. "So, regardless of whether or not he was dead..."

His father loved his mother.

Must have loved her deeply, for that to be true.

Hong-er stares into the orange grove, heart beating wildly in his chest, and he knows —she comes back in the next three minutes.

They eat their oranges, she sings songs and tells stories.

All he has to do is sit here and wait, and she'll come back. Sit here and wait, and he can live in a memory that doesn't hurt.

"...Hong-er."

It's the first time in so many years that he's heard that name. Not in a memory, or in a dream—but spoken clearly.

"The name that he stole from you," Zhao Beitong repeats, her eyes never leaving him. "It was Hong-er."

"..."

Oh, how many years he has ached to be known by that name. For his beloved to hear his voice, and to know that it was him. To no longer be a permanent stranger.

Now, hearing it—the one thing he's wanted to hear for so fucking long—fills him with nothing but endless frustration.

Because it's not him.

Because this is his memory, and he doesn't want to share it. Because he doesn't want to do this, he—

"GET OUT!" He snarls.

He whips around, lunging his hands thrown out—and the moment that they wrap around Zhao Beitong's throat, her eyes widening—

everything goes dark.

They aren't in the Kiln anymore.

They aren't on a narrow country road, lined with maple trees.

For a moment, the world is dark.

CLANG!

Sparks fly as the hammer strikes across hot metal, slowly molding the edge of the blade into shape.

CLANG!

Sweat beads across her forehead, pouring down the slim, toned muscles of her arms and shoulders, soft, elbow length leather gloves shielding her from the heat.

It's been six hour straight, working on this particular rapier. It needs to be thin, delicate—but strong enough not to shatter under extreme force.

The water hisses and steams as she dunks the searing metal into the trough to cool, letting out a tired sigh—but satisfied.

There are voices in the street outside—to be expected, after all, it'll be busy now, right up to the lantern festival.

But not all of the words that filter down through the workshop as they pass by are pleasant.

"...Isn't that Old Man Tonglu's daughter?" "That's their name?"

There's some laughter from the young women as they pass by, and the young woman's face contorts with annoyance as she pulls her gloves off with slightly more force than necessary, tossing them down onto the counter.

"I guess it's fitting—but how hideous!"

Tonglu. Molten Copper. A kiln. A furnace. No matter which way you look at it, it's a fitting name for an armorer, the daughter of a bricklayer, who rose to the rank of Royal Architect.

New money, new political power—it doesn't immediately bring any respect, only scorn.

She sets her tongs aside with a heavy clatter, rolling the muscles in her shoulders, feeling the joints ache and crack from so many hours at work.

The wealthier citizens of the imperial city have never been friendly to her family. She's used to it, by now.

"I hate it when you scowl."

The sound of that voice makes her pause, shoulders stiffening slightly. She's quick to reach for her outer robe, pulling it around her shoulders—which were bare and exposed before, the sleeves ripped from her under robe to make forging easier.

"Is this when you tell me I should smile more?" She grouses, pushing her hair up into a loose bun, sweaty, soot covered locks pulled out of her face.

The man walks closer, leaning back against her work bench. God, he's so handsome.

A little too old for her—but always so kind.

"No," he murmurs, reaching over to push one lock of hair that remained stubbornly between her eyes, pushing it behind the young woman's ear. "I just don't like seeing you unhappy."

"..." She ducks her head away, turning around, her cheeks slightly flushed—but not from the kilns.

"You don't have an order waiting," the weapon's master mutters, "and I don't have any lessons today."

"...No," he agrees, "both of those things are true."

She was lucky to be accepted into the Royal Court as a cultivator—the first common born citizen to do so.

Not to mention the first woman. She can't decide which of those things make people hate her more—and in the end, she doesn't think it matters.

"Then why are you here?"

"...Because I have a surprise for you," the man replies, a lightly teasing edge to his voice.

She tilts her head, peeking at him over her shoulder—and when he sees the slight flush on her cheeks, his smile only widens. “Are you going to sulk, or are you going to come and see?”

“...A surprise for me?” She questions softly. Her friend—her oldest, dearest friend, smiles. “For you, yes.”

Finally, she turns around—reaching out and taking the arm that’s being offered. It’s rare for any young gentleman to come and escort her anywhere—to let her feel like a beautiful young woman, for once.

“It isn’t my birthday,” she mumbles. “No,” he agrees.

“Then what’s the occasion?” He doesn’t answer, and her eyebrows knit together irritably, her voice turning into a whine as she tugs at his arm, “Mei Nianqing!” She huffs, tugging at the fine silks of his sleeve, “You’re being such a tease!”

The Guoshi demurs. “No such thing!”

She was surprised when she was accepted into the group of cultivators in the court of Wuyong—to find a Guoshi so young, not even in his twenty-third year.

For her, a girl of just sixteen when they met—he was so easy to idolize. And now, as a woman of nineteen, sometimes, she...

“You’ve been very tired recently,” Mei Nianqing comments, gripping her elbow gently as he leads her away from the city streets. “Have you thought about taking any time for yourself?”

She bows her head. “The order is from the crown prince himself, I would be stupid to delay.”

Even at such a young age—the daughter of the Architect Tonglu has gained a reputation as one of the finest blade smiths in Wuyong, already considered a master in her craft.

And with her cultivation, her potential to create weapons of the caliber to become spiritual devices is...

Too great for even the royal family to ignore.

The Guoshi smiles, patting her arm. “The prince is actually a rather patient and gentle young man,” he explains as they walk away from the hustle of the city, taking the path leading towards the valleys and hillsides below.

“If he learns that you’re straining yourself too hard—he won’t mind waiting a little longer for you to give yourself a rest.”

Maybe so, but she highly doubts that everyone would see it that way. “...” Mei Nianqing watches her expression with a frown, sighing. “You must be kinder to yourself, Hudie. I worry.”

Instead of answering his premise—or even directly addressing the subject at all, the young woman glances around them, raising an eyebrow. “Aren’t these lands part of the palace grounds?”

“They are.”

“Am I allowed to be here?”

“You really do speak like you’re still a commoner,” the Guoshi laughs softly, shaking his head. “Why wouldn’t you be allowed here?”

Hudie doesn’t answer, hugging his sleeve a little tighter—pressing all the closer. It’s hard to feel like she belongs in places like this.

After so many years of her childhood spent with nothing. No mother, barely a roof over her head—or food on the table at night. Her father worked hard, so hard, so that they could be where they are now, but...

She often forgets that her world has changed.

“Where is my surprise?”

“Patience, child, patience.”

Her expression sours slightly—stomach twisting with frustration each and every time the Guoshi calls her a child.

“I’m a woman now, you know.” Hudie grumbles. “Old enough to marry and have children.”

Mei Nianqing looks away, hiding his expression.

She can’t see the way his cheeks have suddenly gotten a little pink—and when he scratches his chin—she assumes it’s teasing, rather than sheepish.

“I know that,” he mutters. “Obviously.”

Hudie’s lips twitch as she reaches over, plucking one lock of the Guoshi’s hair playfully.

“Just because you LOOK like an old man, doesn’t mean you need to act like one.” She teases.

Mei Nianqing is the greatest cultivator of their time—and likely of any time before it— and no one could say why, but the moment he came of age, while he was meditating at sunrise...

His hair turned completely white. The rest of his body did not change. His face was still young, youthful—his eyes the same clear shade of blue as they had always been.

But his hair was, and still is now—white as the fresh driven snow. “Don’t make me regret spoiling you,”

The Guoshi grumbles. “Now, close your eyes.”

Smiling even wider now, her chest bubbling with excitement, Hudie agrees—allowing Mei Nianqing to carefully lead her down the path, one hand on her elbow, the other on the small of her back.

“Just three steps more, and...here we are.”

Tonglu Hudie opens her eyes, looking around—and her breath halts in her chest.

The fields in the valleys of the overlooking mountains have always been left, in large part, untouched. They’re spiritual lands—rich with energy, used for cultivation, and the occasional hunt.

But this—

This is a garden.

Not strictly speaking. Not as neat and manicured as those within the palace walls— but the entire clearing has been filled with bushes and flowers, of all different colors, but...

They favor purples and blues, similar to the shades of Hudie’s eyes.

“...This...is for me?” Hudie questions softly, looking around—her mouth hanging open in quiet awe.

She’s always been a beauty—slim, with delicate features. But the nature of her work tends to make people forget. Men don’t give her jewels, or bring her flowers.

But this…

“Yes,” Mei Nianqing replies softly, watching her face. “Do you like it?”

His student nods, slowly revolving in place—trying to take it all in. “Did you do all of this yourself?”

“I did.”

“It’s—I’ve never seen a garden like this before, what is it—?”

Then, she sees them.

Fluttering between the flowers—wings of every color, beautiful and delicate.

Butterflies.

The smile that spreads across the young cultivator’s face is a picture of happiness itself.

Butterflies—like her name.

“Certain plant species attract more of them,” the Guoshi explains.

“You always complained about how they never came this far into the mountains, so —!”

He’s cut off when the young woman throws herself into his arms, hugging the Guoshi tightly.

Hudie can’t see the softness in his eyes—or the warmth in his smile—when he wraps his arms around her.

“Thank you,” she whispers, practically thrumming with happiness. “Why would you do such a thing for me?”

“…” Mei Nianqing takes a deep breath, steadying himself. “You see, I—” “Guoshi?” A voice calls through the trees. “Is that you?”

The two step apart quickly.

The ivory haired man clears his throat, adjusting his sleeves as he turns around, dropping into a low bow. “Your grace,” he replies. “I thought you would still be busy with your studies. I gave you quite a bit of reading to do this morning."

"I finished it already,"

The voice replies—and then, a young man steps into the clearing.

Hudie's breath, heart, and thoughts all seem to cease in the same moment.

He's likely a boy of sixteen—not much younger than her. Tall, broad, with strong limbs. And...

So beautiful, it's almost blinding.

Standing before her in robes of white and gold, long, jet black waves of hair, pulled high on his head with golden hair pieces, the one holding his ponytail carved into the shape of a dragon.

Eyes like the sun, smoldering down at her, a youthful, cocky grin on his face.

"Well," he speaks with the voice of a man beyond his years, deep, confident nearly to the point of arrogance, "aren't you going to introduce me to your lovely companion, Guoshi?"

There's a beat of hesitance, but Mei Nianqing smiles stiffly. "Of course, your highness."

He sweeps one hand before the young woman, who immediately falls into a deep bow of respect, staring at the ground, "May I present Tonglu Hudie, daughter of the Architect Tonglu—the cultivator I spoke to you about before."

"And the one making my new blades," the youth murmurs.

"Yes," Mei Nianqing agrees, "Hudie—this is his royal highness, the Crown Prince of Wuyong. Slayer of a thousand dragons, weirder of ten thousand blades—"

"That's enough, Guoshi." The young man cuts him off from listing his titles, amused. "There's no need to be so formal."

"After all—we'll be working together, from now on."

Hudie pauses, lifting her head, freezing with shock when she sees...

The Crown Prince is bowing his head to *her* , hands clasped in front of him respectfully.

“I look forward to learning from you, Guoshi Tonglu.”

Her breath catches as she whips her head around to look at her own teacher, who rubs the back of his head, “We hadn’t discussed it, yet...”

“...Discussed what?” She asks breathlessly, her mind struggling to catch up—because —

She is a student—not a Guoshi. Much less to a prince.

No woman has ever been given such a title, regardless of their status of birth. And at her age, how could she expect—?

“I have learned much from my teachers,” the prince explains, stepping closer. “But with regards to matters such as the creation and use of spiritual devices...”

His voice is just behind her now, “I have been told that you are far superior to anyone else in the field—and I always want to learn from the best.”

“...From me,” she mutters, unsure.

Mei Nianqing finds her hand, squeezing gently.

“You *are* the best,” he reminds her.

“...Was this why you built this place?” She questions slowly, looking around in wonder. “...As a way of...?”

Of convincing her to take the position on? Or rewarding her, for such a sudden and drastic promotion?

The Guoshi stares down at her, his expression unreadable.

The boy speaks over them both—reaching to take the young woman’s elbow in his grip. “Guoshi Nianqing is always generous like that. Have you seen the rest of the palace grounds yet? I’ll show you.”

Mei Nianqing watches Jun Wu sweep away with the newly appointed Guoshi on his arm.

Beside him—but unseen, stands another young man—taller, with long, dark hair, and an eyepatch covering his right eye.

Slowly, he tilts his head to the side, watching the young prince, taking Zhao Beitong by the arm.

He cannot place it—but something about him is vaguely familiar

He watches as she teaches the young prince.

To anyone else, the scene unfolding before him might look like a fairy tale.

A beautiful young girl—common by birth, catching the eye of a wealthy, prestigious crown prince.

It only begins as lingering glances.

Sheepishly looking away when he's caught. Smiling at her so brightly whenever the Guoshi spares him a compliment. Her praise, it seems, pleases the crown prince more than anything else.

Guoshi Tonglu seems endeared by it, in the beginning. Flattered, but not taking it seriously.

"You ought to be careful," Mei Nianqing warns her once, not looking up from his scrolls. "When that boy sets his heart on something, it can become rather difficult."

"His heart?" Tonglu shakes her head, laughing with disbelief. "He's a teenage boy, his interests will change."

It is flattering to be a young woman with the attention of a prince—but Tonglu Hudie knows better than that.

She's a novelty. He's never met a woman like her, not in the sheltered environment of the royal court.

She's fascinating, for now. But his interest will pass.

"I was a teenager myself not so long ago," Mei Nianqing mutters, gripping his scroll a little tighter. "My interests have never been fleeting."

Her smile softens, one hand coming to rest on his shoulder, "You were never a normal teenage boy, you silly man."

The Guoshi goes still from where he's seated behind his desk, slowly lifting his chin to stare up at her.

She had never understood it, the way her former teacher looks at her. With eyes so full, but so guarded.

Hua Cheng knows that look very well. It's like looking in a mirror.

"...I wish I had known you then," Mei Nianqing admits, his voice stirring with an undercurrent of longing. "When I was a young man."

Cautiously, Hudie rests her palm against his cheek, gently reminding him—

"You still *are* a young man, Mei Nianqing."

He so often forgets.

After a moment of watching one another, the woman questions—gently, so careful— "Is there something you want to tell me?"

The Guoshi stiffens.

"It just...seems like there's more than what you're saying."

'Tell her,' Hua Cheng thinks to himself. He silently tries to whisper the words through time. *'You stubborn fool, just tell her.'*

Slowly, he pulls his face back—until Hudie's hand falls back to her side.

"No," he mutters, looking away. "It doesn't matter anymore."

Hua Cheng watches as Guoshi Tonglu's face falls.

"...Just be careful," Mei Nianqing finally mutters. "He isn't a normal young man either."

His fellow Guoshi doesn't respond, lips pressed together tightly, leaving them pale. Then, she sweeps out of the room with a flick of her sleeve.

Mei Nianqing wasn't wrong.

Hua Cheng watches the months pass—and the young man's interest never fades. Slowly, it grows.

There's nothing superficial or untoward about it. He listens to her every word with such attention—such respect.

Sometimes, he spends an afternoon thinking of ways to make her laugh.

When he wins a tournament among cultivators from around the continent, he's met with a shower of flowers from the audience—and everyone watches with bated breath as he catches a single flower—a red dahlia—passing over every woman in the crowd... Giving it to Guoshi Tonglu, instead.

That is when the whispering begins. When people begin to wonder how the first female Guoshi of Wuyong truly earned her place. Some hiss behind their hands that she's a witch, sent to distract the prince from his cultivation.

The first time he kisses her, Guoshi Tonglu is firm.

She tells the young prince that she is honored—she apologizes for encouraging his advances.

(She says all of this, knowing that she did no such thing.) But Hudie knows her place—and it is not with him.

Jun Wu's reply steals her breath.

"Your place is wherever you wish to be."

The second time he kisses Hudie, it's more difficult to reject him. The third time—she kisses back.

Heated touches that only lengthen and grow, stirring things within her that she never knew before.

She still feels moments of wariness. When she knows she should stop it.

One day, he comes to her office with something clutched behind his back—smiling cheekily, saying that he's brought her a surprise—

A gift, just for her.

"..." Guoshi Tonglu smiles, tilting her head. "There's no occasion."

"A prince never needs an occasion to give a gift."

"...I suppose not," She agrees, watching as he sets the box on the desk before her. He stares eagerly as the Guoshi begins to remove the parchment paper, fingers freezing when she sees what lurks beneath.

The prince watches, eyes alight. “Do you like it?”

It takes her a moment to respond.

The box is made from heavy, polished wood, inlaid with gold leaf on the sides—and the front is sheer, covered by only a pane of glass.

Beneath, lays a butterfly—artfully pinned down, forever immortalized In mid-flight, silver wings aloft.

One of the very same that roams her garden on the palace grounds—the silver butterflies that only come at night, when the moonflowers bloom, filling the clearing with a silvery glow.

It doesn’t shine now.

“...Did you do this yourself?” She questions, her voice quiet.

The prince nods, clearly quite pleased with himself. “You’re always saying you wish you could visit them more, so...I thought you might want to keep one.”

‘Not like this,’ she thinks to herself, looking down at the poor thing.

“...Did you have to kill it, or...was it already—?”

“They don’t live very long,” he reminds her. “It didn’t suffer.”

That, at least, seems to soothe her—but the prince’s expression slowly shifts to a frown, sensing his lover’s unease.

“...Do you not like it?”

“I do,” Guoshi Tonglu mutters, looking away. “It’s beautiful.”

She tells him that it’s beautiful, even as her chest twists with anxiety—looking at that beautiful little thing, pinned down forever.

“...But beautiful things aren’t meant to last forever,” Hudie adds, half under her breath.

Jun Wu reaches over, pushing her hair behind her ear.

“Wait until I’m a god,” he whispers, that boyish smile on his face, “and tell me that again.”

Her lips turn up at the corners, but there’s still worry in her eyes.

“...What about your cultivation method?” The Guoshi questions. “Won’t this disrupt —?”

She’s silenced with a kiss.

“Let me worry about my cultivation method,” the prince replies, his fingers stroking over her cheek. “It’ll all work out in the end.”

She can see why he believes that. For him, they always do.

But those stolen moments became more and more public, as time went on.

The whispers got louder—and she couldn’t—

She couldn’t look her former teacher in the eye without feeling some amount of shame.

And frustration, because Tonglu Hudie knew she had done nothing wrong. But when Mei Nianqing’s eyes were on there, she felt...

Treacherous, somehow.

Hua Cheng watches as the memories shift forward in the years, showing, to anyone else’s eyes, a love story.

A young woman slowly falling in love with a prince. Cautious, distrustful, but gradually beginning to believe his promises. His sweet words and gentle touches.

The gifts he constantly showered upon her.

His affection for the young woman wasn’t fake. Even now, through the lenses of time —Hua Cheng can see that.

If it wasn’t for his knowing what Tonglu would become, he would look upon this as a happy story.

But even back then, one person knew.

Hua Cheng watches as two men stand off to the side of the royal throne room, speaking in hushed voices.

“I have stood aside,” Mei Nianqing murmurs, hands clasped firmly behind his back, “I have let this go on for too long—”

“...Master,” The prince sputters, his expression a mask of shock, “do not think that I hold any less respect for you as I once did—but you forget your place."

The Guoshi stops, clearly taken aback. "...My PLACE?"

"You 'allowed' this to go on? No." Jun Wu shakes his head.

"If you could have stopped it, you would have—and I will not insult your pride by delving into it further than that."

Mei Nianqing's face pales, his eyes widening—and the crown prince carries on; "You speak of what we're doing as if it's something unusual, but how so?"

The prince raises an eyebrow. "I'm a young man, she's a young woman, what's so odd about it?"

"You..." Mei Nianqing has always held affection for his students—Jun Wu more than nearly any other.

But this—this is madness.

"You speak as though you have no intention of ascending!"

Jun Wu crosses his arms, leaning back against a marble pillar, "What does she have to do with my ascension?"

"You have to give up ALL of your mortal attachments when you rise to the heavens." Mei Nianqing reminds him. "What will happen to her, when you do?"

"Plenty of gods have wives," Jun Wu frowns, straightening his shoulders. "Why shouldn't I? I could appoint her to the middle court after I—"

"WIVES?!" Mei Nianqing sputters, his eyes nearly bulging out of his head. "You forget—she's a cultivator in her own right!"

"She might want to ascend on her own merits—!"

"On her own merits?" The prince pauses, raising an eyebrow. "I don't deny that Guoshi Tonglu is a talented, formidable woman—but she's not a scholar, she couldn't become a civil god."

"That isn't the—"

"And I don't intend on allowing her to fall into a situation where she would need to make any extreme or noble acts of sacrifice, so she won't ascend that way, either."

"You won't be ascending through scholarship or acts of faith either, your highness." The Guoshi reminds him.

Finally, Jun Wu seems to understand.

"...Do you mean to say that you think she could be a martial god?" The idea seems almost insane to him, difficult to contemplate. "Is that the future you think I might be stealing away from her?"

Mei Nianqing falls into stormy silence.

There has never been a female martial god—not one originally born that way, anyway, shifting forms aside—and the heavens aren't exactly known for straying from tradition. There have been truly astonishing female warriors over the centuries, yes—

But none have ever ascended.

"...I am saying that it is foolish for you to pursue leaving your mortal life while forming such serious attachments," The Guoshi mutters, his voice firm. "It will be your undoing."

Hua Cheng can sense now, watching the scene— Mei Nianqing isn't wrong. He's prophetic, in a way.

The crimson ghost watches as the Crown Prince of Wuyong announces his engagement, along with his new method of cultivation.

Watches the young woman that would become the fierce ghost of Mount Tonglu, Zhao Beitong, slowly ease into falling in love with the young man.

He watches the look on Mei Nianqing's face, during the wedding. Seeing Hudie descend the palace steps in her red wedding robes.

Hua Cheng's heart has belonged to another for nearly all of his life—but even he can admit that she's the most beautiful woman he has ever seen.

'Tell her,' Hua Cheng thinks to himself, watching with agonized frustration, as a living man, a breathing man, watches his own life pass him by.

'You stubborn fool, just tell her.'

And when the time comes to crown the new princess of Wuyong—that duty falls to the Guoshi himself

When she kneels before him in the royal pavilion, her husband looking on—they look at one another. Teacher and student—each imagining different futures. Some happy, some sad.

Each of them knows this is a fairy tale. That she's the princess, plucked from obscurity by a prince.

That he is a guide, and nothing more.

But Hua Cheng knows, watching this scene—beautiful golden palaces, flower petals raining down from on high—that fairytales are only this beautiful on the surface.

That this shining veneer of beauty is nothing more than just that.

Because fairytales aren't love stories. They aren't meant to be painless, beautiful things.

They're fables. Painful, throned beasts—meant to teach lessons. Thorough, monstrous lessons.

Quickly, the Princess of Wuyong once again finds herself a student. This time of grief.

Hua Cheng didn't speak in all this time—watching her memories float by, because he didn't want to wake her from it. To alert her to this presence.

This memory, however—of all of the intimate moments that he has seen—feels like something he shouldn't be intruding upon.

The sobs and screams—he's never heard anything like them, alive or dead. It isn't like when he died, and dianxia screamed against the night. Both were howls of pain, but this grief is something more profane—completely unnatural.

The shrieks of a grieving mother, pierce the night

Her husband tries to hold her, but she can't seem to let him close—cringing away from everyone, anyone who tries to pull her from her son's side.

"I don't..." Her face shines with tears, fingers trembling where they grip the bars of his crib, "I...I don't understand!"

“It happens, your grace…” One of the maids tries to comfort her, rubbing her back, “Sometimes, when they’re still small like this…”

“I was here AN HOUR AGO!” She screams, her voice rattling through the room, “He was—” Hudie hunches in on herself, “—he was p-perfect!”

So beautiful—golden eyes, like his father. Soft curls, smiling up at her, giggling sleepily as she rocked him to sleep.

Her perfect, precious boy. The most beautiful thing Tonglu Hudie ever created. And now, he…he’s…

“HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?!” She screams, clutching her head.

The door opens, and when she sees who it is—she scrambles to the Guoshi frantically.

The princess hasn’t let a soul touch her, since she found her son like his—not even his father. But now, she throws herself into her friend’s arms, “Help me!” She sobs. “MEI NIANQING, HELP ME!”

The Guoshi holds her, one hand steadying her back as the princess weeps against his shoulder, each cry ripping from her so violently, it feels as though her body might rattle apart.

His reaction, looking upon the scene, is exactly the same. “…What is this?” He whispers.

The little prince could be sleeping—not a single sign of injury upon his body. When the Guoshi examines him, there’s no sign of sickness. No hint of any abnormality.

His soul is just…gone. As simple as that.

Tonglu clings to him, pleads with him to fix it, to save him.

But there’s nothing to be done. Not even a summoning, for the spirit of a child so young, without any resentment or foul play, it…

Would simply move on, immediately entering it’s next life.

Hudie knows this, every moment she begs and pleads, she knows that there is nothing Mei Nianqing can do. Nothing that anyone can do.

But still, she begs. She rages, smashing anything she can get within her reach. The blocks for his little golden palaces. Priceless jewels.

Boxes of pinned silver butterflies. She rips them apart with an uncontrollable wrath, screaming with grief, with confusion—with uncontainable rage at the universe, for how hungry and stupid and cruel death can be.

From the corner, Hua Cheng watches.

Watches the Crown Prince.

He weeps with his wife, yes—shows moments of sorrow. But never surprise.

The Crown Prince of Wuyong screams with his own grief, when his son is cremated. Stands before his funeral marker and howls.

But never once does he seem shocked or bewildered by what has happened.

Tragedy befalls again, one after the other.

The King and Queen of Wuyong perish in a bout of plague, slipping away peacefully in the night between rounds of fever, holding one another in their arms.

The Crown Prince weeps in his wife's arms—

But he does not look surprised.

Then, there is war.

Between Wuyong and their enemies to the west—the middle plains. When her husband rides to battle, he places a golden butterfly pin in his princess's hair.

Tonglu Hudie stares at the pin, each night, sitting beside an empty crib... And she weeps.

Becomes a shell of her former self, the woman who once spent her days striking metal into shape, stoking the irons of her kiln.

A shadow—a wraith, limply wandering the halls of her palace, alone. The occasional butterfly trailing behind her, weakly trying to catch her attention.

There's no spark in her. No life. Not until one day, when her husband returns—not the boy she once knew, but now a man. A hardened warrior.

He kneels before his wife's chair, grasping her hand, pale and limp—resting his cheek against her knee.

"I know who did it," he whispers.

She doesn't react, not until he says the words: "I know who took our boy." Slowly, Hua Cheng sees life in those eyes.

Maybe not happiness, curiosity, or love.

But there's a flicker there, a hint of the wrath that lays beneath.

"...Who?" Guoshi Tonglu whispers, voice shaking.

Hua Cheng watches the crown prince explain a plot from their enemies to the west. Weakening the royal dynasty. Sending an evil spirit to swallow their son's soul in the night. Bringing the plague that took the King and Queen's lives.

Hudie listens, her eyes sparking brighter.

"...I can make them pay," Jun Wu whispers, squeezing both of her hands between his, stroking his finger over the golden band he gave her on their wedding day. "But I need your help, my love."

Slowly, for the first time in months, the Crown Princess of Wuyong lifts her head. "Name it," she snarls.

For the first time, Hua Cheng sees a glimmer of the ghost that will come to haunt the remains of this land.

The shadow of Zhao Beitong, lurking behind the rage in the young mother's eyes. "A blade," her husband replies. "I need you to forge one for me."

For the first time since her coronation, the kilns of Tonglu Hudie spark to life once more, burning brightly.

She discards her silks and jewels for a blacksmith's apron and leather gloves, flames casting shadows of hatred across her face as she slams her hammer again and again.

CLANG!

Pouring every ounce of grief, wrath, and hatred within her body into the near molten metal.

CLANG!

Muscles in her arms and shoulders aching from a year without use—slowly forming again.

CLANG!

She folds the layers of metal in, over and over again, unrelenting.

CLANG!

It's the longest she's ever spent on a single plate, hammering down so many layers she almost loses track of them. Creating a sword so sharp, so solid, it dwarfs any weapon that came before it.

CLANG!

And with every ounce of hatred she pours in, the steel slowly turns black, forming into a blade that Hua Cheng knows all too well.

It is the blade that pierced his beloved over a hundred times as the crimson ghost wailed and screamed, becoming the savage spirit Wu Ming.

It is the blade that the Crown Prince of Xianle would turn against his own family, using it to slay the disgraced noble Qi Rong.

The blade he would use to direct the souls of ten thousand wrathful spirits, looking to unleash human face disease a second time.

The blade that Wu Ming would then turn on himself, to save his love from a curse of ten thousand lifetimes.

It is also the blade that killed the boy Hong-er. A slow, horrifying death. One that he remembers all too well.

Burning in the cold of the night, hovering over the forest path—watching his own body, swinging from the branches, blood dripping from the toes of his boots.

All while dianxia screamed his name, over and over again.

'Hong-er?!'

'HONG-ER!'

'Please, just answer me—I'm scared!'

When Guoshi Tonglu presents the blade to her husband, the Crown Prince of Wuyong names it Zhu Xin.

She etches the characters into the steel, using the characters for ‘punish,’ and ‘heart,’ inlaying a streak of silver—

Reminiscent of the glow of wraith butterflies.

The blade is called Zhu Xin—but in his heart, Hua Cheng knows that it is Fang Xin.

Each time the sword passes before his eyes, he can remember the places where it pierced him, his teeth breaking as he held back his screams.

Every single one, until it pierced his heart.

In that moment—even though he’s never known the Crown Prince’s name—

(Each and every memory he passes through has every mention of it blurred or muted away, erased from time.)

—he knows what the Crown Prince of Wuyong will become. The White Clothed Calamity—Bai Wuxiang.

He takes the sword from his wife’s hands, carrying it into battle.

Zhu Xin becomes a mythical blade—cutting through the enemies of Wuyong like the wrath of hell itself, leaving dozens of cuts in one blow.

One for each layer of hatred that Guoshi Tonglu hammered into its steel.

All one hundred of them.

One battle is so monstrous, so ruinous—bringing the entire nation of the middle plains to it’s knees in one night, that the Crown Prince of Wuyong does what he always intended to do.

What Mei Nianqing always warned would happen, in the end.

When the Crown Princess of Wuyong learns that her husband has ascended to the heavens, she is the last remaining member of the Royal House of Wu.

She orders the kingdom to feast in his honor, but she does not smile. Fireworks crash overhead—and she doesn't even look at them.

There is another coronation now, this time, for the last true ruler of the Kingdom of Wuyong.

It's final monarch, and it's first queen.

She kneels in the Royal Pavilion once again, among the wealthy citizens of the capital who once scorned her—looking down in distaste.

Now, her former teacher places a new crown upon her head—one of amethyst and white jade. But this time, she discarded the traditional golds of the House of Wu.

This time, when she commissioned the new royal headpiece, she asked for silver. Carved into the shape of butterflies.

Even as a new martial god—arguably the most powerful—the former Prince of Wuyong still comes to visit his wife, defying the normal traditions of the Heavens.

The judgement in people's eyes is never directed towards him, no. Not their beautiful, illustrious crown prince.

They blame her.

Even as she rules their kingdom, bringing peace and wealth. Even as her father designs their roads, builds her husband's temples, and the water lines that run through their homes.

'Witch ,' some of them whisper. *'Pretender* .'

Seducing their god. Distracting him.

Mei Nianqing finds her one evening—alone in her garden, the one that he built for her, years ago.

Her hair loose, streaming softly in the breeze, surrounded by the silver butterflies that come when the night is still, and the moonflowers begin to bloom.

Just as beautiful now, as she was then.

But it hurts so much more to look at her than it used to.

“...I was wondering where you were,” the Guoshi murmurs, slowly moving to kneel by her side.

The Queen doesn’t look up, fingertips slowly playing through the blades of grass.

“...The other two Guoshi barely speak to me these days,you know.” Hudie whispers, watching the butterflies float around her. They’ve become so accustomed to her presence now, many will land directly on her head or shoulders, easily flying into her outstretched fingertips.

Mei Nianqing’s eyebrows knit together, his head slowly tilting to the side. “Do you have any idea why?”

“...They think I’m going to bring some sort of curse down upon the land,” the queen snorts, shaking her head. “For using my salacious ways upon their precious crown prince.”

Of course—they both know that it’s just the opposite.

Jun Wu returns to his wife often, yes—but since the death of their son, the queen has barely been able to stomach his touch, grief turning their marriage distant and cold.

And she feels such shame over it, every moment.

“...I’ll speak to them,” Mei Nianqing mutters, shaking his head. “It’s unacceptable.”

Hudie shakes her head, a faint smile on her lips as she reaches back, gently squeezing the Guoshi’s hand. “It’s alright, let them think what they want.”

When she turns her head, Mei Nianqing can see the violets of her eyes, illuminated by the silvery lights of the butterflies around them, and—

The beauty of them is unfathomable. Haunting. Fills him up until he can’t speak. “I always wanted to bring my children here,” she admits

Her hand is still in his, squeezing firmly. “It’s the most beautiful place in the world to me,” Hudie continues, lips quivering. “I wanted them to see it.”

And now, her son is gone. With her marriage as it is, husband a god...

Who knows if she’ll ever have more.

Mei Nianqing squeezes her fingers in return, his heart filled with an impossible, resounding ache. "...That was what I wanted, when I made this place for you," he admits.

"...To bring my children here?" She questions slowly. He answers without meaning to, without thinking; "Our children."

And as soon as he says it, he regrets it, watching as the Queen's eyes widen with shock, her lips parting—knowing that this isn't the time, and whatever they could have been, in another life, it certainly is no longer his place.

"...Mei Nianqing..." She whispers.

He looks away, instantly filled with regret—sure that she'll curse him, or be angry with him. Call him a selfish, cowardly fool—all of the things that he knows he already is, but...

A hand lands on his shoulder, squeezing gently. "...Is there something that you want to tell me?"

The Guoshi can't look at her, his face pale, heart pounding—Hua Cheng can hear it, pounding against the man's ribs.

'Tell her,' he thinks—with even more fervor now. *'Tell her, you stubborn fool—just tell her!'*

Slowly, he turns his head to look back at Tonglu Hudie, his student. His dearest friend. His...

And finally—oh god, finally—

Mei Nianqing tells her.

"You're haunting me," he whispers, gripping her hand tighter.

For a moment, the Queen pauses, brow creasing, but he presses on—

"Because I feel as though I am in love with a ghost."

The words come out of him slowly—not out of contemplation—he's spent a decade thinking of them now. But because each syllable coming out of his lips now feels like a betrayal. Of his prince—of his country—of his path of cultivation.

"When I first brought you to this place..."

The Guoshi shakes his head, “It wasn’t as a reward, or a form of thanks, it...” He sighs, barely able to look her in the eye. “I was willing to give up my cultivation,” he explains.

“But...” Hudie trails off, struggling to take it in. “Your immortality, you—you’ve come so far—?”

“I wanted to marry you,” Mei Nianqing shakes his head. “I knew I could still serve the crown prince as his teacher, and...I wanted to be your husband. To have children with you.”

Her eyes sting with tears, butterflies landing in her hair.

“...And I made this place,” he explains.

“So we could bring them here.”

She doesn’t speak, just stares down at their joined hands, lost in what could have been. If he had said more—and if she hadn’t been...

So tempted, by the love and validation of a man with the world at his feet. So wary of rejecting his affections.

“...And I live under no false impressions,” Mei Nianqing reaches out, gently pushing her hair away from her face, tucking it behind her ears. The butterflies don’t shy away from him, either—and the queen realizes—

How often the Guoshi must come here, for them to be so calm.

“I know that you are not mine,” he admits, his thumb lingering over his cheek for as long as he dares before he pulls his hand back, letting out a shaking breath, “but I have always been yours.”

Amethyst eyes never leave him, watching carefully, listening to every word he says.

“And you haunt me, now.” Mei Nianqing’s lips quiver, his eyes strained with concern. “Because I don’t know how to help you,” her hands tremor slightly in his hold, “but I can see how much that you’ve been suffering.”

Every day, each moment without her son—it’s been agony.

It hurts. It hurts. Oh god, does it hurt.

But the hand in hers now—it doesn’t hurt.

When she leans forward on an act of impulse, like grabbing onto a rope when she's drowning, or stealing a breath when she's starving for air—

Hudie kisses him, clings to him. It doesn't hurt.

It might be a sin. A betrayal that she should be ashamed of, their mouths pressing together over and over again as they sink down into the grasses, the silver light of the butterflies he summoned for her fluttering all around.

But each touch, while aching—burning— Never hurts.

It's in the weeks that follow, when the crown prince of Wuyong is visiting his Queen, that his wife allows him to kiss her again.

To make love to her again.

Most cannot remember a story of a sitting god fathering a child—and many cannot decide if it's a blessing, or a curse.

But when Tonglu Hudie looks down on her second son, cradling the child in her arms —she no longer feels like a ghost, wasting her way through life.

When she smiles at Mei Nianqing over her husband's shoulder, it no longer haunts him the way it once did.

Even if the truth does.

"...Don't you think it's bad luck?" Jun Wu murmurs, watching the boy's face with quiet wonder, his thumb brushing under the baby's chin.

"What?" Hudie replies, eyes never leaving the little boy's face.

"Being born under the Star of Solitude," the god frowns, wondering.

"I was always under the impression that meant bad luck."

"No," Hudie croons, pushing the boy's hair out of his face. He has so much of it— dark, just like hers.

His eyes are blue—but the Queen explains to her husband that her own eyes were like that, when she was born.

They'll darken over time, she assures him.

"It can be good luck, or bad." She explains, leaning down to kiss her son's forehead, breathing him in. "It's all up to the choices that he makes."

And, it means his parents loved each other. Deeply.

Throughout the Kingdom of Wuyong, they celebrate the birth of a new Crown Prince, Jun Bolin.

A perfect name, for a second son. And for a time, there was peace.

The Queen of Wuyong was competent and fair, always with the keen advice of her Guoshi.

Her husband, their god, was powerful and generous. The harvests were bountiful, and the seasons were calm.

The Kingdom's power grew and grew—until people forgot any mention of curses and doom.

Tonglu Hudie watches her son grow into a beautiful, brilliant child, and her heart begins to heal.

Mei Nianqing has a new student to teach, and he does so diligently, taking the boy under his wing day in and day out.

In the evenings, he joins the queen and her son in the forest

They sit in a clearing of wild flowers, watching silver butterflies dance around in the twilight.

Bolin giggles and runs all around them, trying to catch them—always running back to his mother when he scrapes his knees.

He listens to her sing—to his Guoshi telling stories.

These memories, passing before Hua Cheng's eyes—are the happiest of Zhao Beitong's that he has seen. And he knows, eventually, that they must end.

War returns to the Kingdom of Wuyong. A new clan has risen to power in the central plains, looking to avenge their forebears.

And, inexplicably—the kingdom of Wuyong. The proud, powerful kingdom of the strongest martial god—

It's losing.

Again and again, battle after battle.

Each time, when the Queen calls her husband, prays to him for help, the reply is always the same.

That he cannot.

He wasn't a god before, when war came to their kingdom. And now that he is, he cannot interfere.

That's never stopped him before, and she doesn't understand, but—

But the battles become more and more costly, the loss of life too great. They even begin losing territory, and...

When the Kingdom of Wuyong tries to engage with them to begin peace talks, there is only one condition that the central plains clans are willing to accept.

Prince Bolin.

Their Clan leader's wife can no longer have children, and they have had no sons. Have no heir to carry on.

Normally, adopting the child of their enemies might feel like a disgrace, but... The son of a god? Well, that would be an honor for any family to accept.

Of course, the Queen rejects it out of hand. Refuses any iteration of the offer, her Guoshi steadfastly agrees with her.

There must be a solution, some other way—and even if there wasn't, war must turn at some point, surely? How could it not, with how far superior their strength is? How—?

How are they still losing?

And still, Hudie pleads with her husband. Kneels in his temples and begs.

"They're trying to take our son, don't you understand?!" The queen weeps, breathing through her tears and burning incense. "It's either our son, or our kingdom, and I—I WON'T LOSE HIM!"

Finally, in the depth of her terror, Hudie's husband gives her an answer. "You must."

The Queen of Wuyong freezes, slowly lifting her head from where it's pressed against marble floors, her eyes widening. "...What?" She whispers, her voice trembling.

"If you don't give him to them," her husband's voice echoes throughout the hall, remorseful—but sincere.

"He will die."

A petrified sob rips from Tonglu Hudie's chest, her eyes glancing around wildly, before settling on Jun Wu's divine statue. "What do you mean?!"

"I've seen it," the prince answers. "In my dreams." And, unfortunately...

Jun Wu's dreams tend to come true.

"...How?" She croaks, trembling fingers pressed against her lips.

"In flames," her husband's voice explains softly, but the gentleness of his tone brings no comfort when she is faced with the savagery of his words. "I saw him burn."

Hua Cheng listens to that sound again, now.

Screaming.

Horrified, mournful screaming.

The wails of a mother, realizing that her only hope of saving her son is to never see him again.

He's so sweet, when she kisses him goodbye. So confused, about why his mother looks so sad.

He still doesn't understand.

She kisses him, over and over. Tells him how dearly that he is loved. That no matter where he goes, or what he does, somewhere, out there—there is a mother that loves him endlessly.

Then, they take him, and the moment he can no longer hear her—
The Queen of Wuyong wails.

Jun Bolin of the Royal House of Wuyong is no more—hailed as a hero, giving up his title and his home to save his kingdom.

Now, he is heir to the Clan of Xie—so young, a boy of just five years old, she… Hudie doubts he'll remember where he came from, by the time he's a man.

Her husband tries to comfort her, to remind her that they can have another. The Queen can barely look at him when he says it, shrinking off to her son's room.

Years ago, she spent endless nights in her first son's nursery, weeping beside an empty crib.

Now, she sits in Bolin's room, holding the stuffed fox he used to sleep with, slowly stroking it's ears, staring at the butterflies she painted on the walls, when he was still so small…

And her tears never seem to end, pouring from an endless well inside of her.

Finally, the man watching her speaks, watching from his place in the corner.

"…Do you think he knew?" Hua Cheng questions. His tone isn't cruel, or judgmental —only curious. And when the Queen of Wuyong lifts her head, looking back at him…

She finally seems to remember that this is a memory, and that she isn't watching it alone. "…No," she croaks, her voice raw. "He would have killed Bolin, if he knew."

Which, in the end—makes her grateful that she let him go. Even if it was agonizing.

Because in the end—banishment saved the child's life.

He was able to grow into a man, inherit the leadership of his clan—strengthening it into the center of political power in the central plains. Turning a loose collection of clans into a true city state.

One that would later rise as a powerful kingdom in his own right—as wealthy and beautiful as the country of Bolin's parents.

The Kingdom of Xianle.

"…Your first," Hua Cheng questions, tilting his head. "Did he…?" Zhao Beitong hugs the stuffed fox tighter, shaking her head.

"I don't think that he did." She answers quietly.

Jun Wu knew more than he was willing to say. Maybe even knew that their first born was in danger, and failed to say a word—probably arrogantly thinking that he could stop it alone.

But even now, knowing everything she does...

She knows that her husband wasn't a monster in those years. Selfish and arrogant at times, yes. Entitled, often childish. Those were always his shortcomings, and she was never blind to that.

But it was what came later that would make Jun Wu cruel. That would split him in two.

"...Did he take your name too?"

The Queen of Wuyong stiffens, listening to the young man speak. "Tonglue Hudie,"

Her eyes widen, then well up with tears—this time, of a very different kind. Mourning something far different than the loss of her children.

"When did he take that name from you?"

"...Get out," She whispers, her shoulders trembling.

This is her memory—and she doesn't want to share it.

After a moment, when the young man doesn't reply—she turns her head with a snarl, reaching for the blocks to a golden palace.

"GET OUT!" She rages, hurling them at him, rising to her feet, charging in a blind fury. "I SAID GET OUT!"

Her hands grip his face—and everything goes black. Swirling, pitch black.

Not the Kiln.

Not a narrow country road.

Not the Palace of Wuyong. There's only cheers, now.

The roars of a crowd. The beating of the drums. Flower petals pouring from the sky, the clear blue sky, directly over his face.

All screaming the same word, the same title, over and over again.

"DIANXIA! DIANXIA! DIANXIA!"

The wind whips through Hong-er's hair, rushing past.

He's falling.

Plummeting so fast, his hands outstretched toward the sky, pink and white petals all around him.

But the sky is beautiful.

He never stopped to look at it—not before.

Now, the little boy thinks—one dark, tear filled eye staring up at the clouds—

He should have.

'Where's my little Hong Hong-er? Did a ghost steal him away?'

'No,' Hong-er thinks to himself as he rapidly approaches the earth, soon to shatter into a million pieces—a bloody, forgotten stain. What everyone always saw him as, to begin with.

'The ghosts took you away instead.'

He just...

"DIANXIA! DIANXIA! DIANXIA!"

Hong-er just wishes he could have looked at the sky a little longer. Seen that face a little more. Maybe even gotten to talk to him someday.

But that's okay. He's used to it, really.

Hong-er is unlucky, and he always has been.

Until the moment that he isn't.

Until, for the first time in the boy's life, one of his wishes comes true.

Not to be saved, that never crossed his mind, but...

Suddenly, there are arms around him. Strong—surprisingly soft, through the many layers of silk.

His eye widens.

The face above him isn't the same as the one he was entranced by before—not the mask of white jade and gold that burned in the sun, meant to emulate a god.

The eyes that look down on him now are human.

And Hong-er, he—

He sees the entire world inside of them, all in a moment.

All the clouds he never bothered to look up and see. Every happy memory that he never got to experience. Fireworks that were always too far away for him to catch sight of at night. The mother that he can no longer hold onto. The father that he never met.

It's all there, somehow.

His heart doesn't quicken often. Rarely affected by anxiety or fear. But now, it pounds. Thrums in his chest like he must have swallowed a hummingbird, tiny wings trying to beat out of his ribs.

That mouth smiles, and those arms hug him closer, keeping— Keeping him safe.

Reliving this memory now, it's been over twenty years, and Hua Cheng has lived an entire life and two deaths since then.

He has seen Kingdoms fall, and gods come crashing down with them. Has cursed the world for his love, then borne it's wrath in his stead.

He has stood between the two doors that stand in the land beyond life and death, and refused to take either. He has risen as a god, then cast himself back down.

And this moment—in the space of this memory—

Hua Cheng is as close to heaven here, as Hong-er, as he has ever been.

And every moment of pain that led him here—every blow to his body, every cruelty he was forced to witness and endure—even if he doesn't make it out of this place, and the Goddess of the Kiln swallows him whole—

It was worth it, to live inside this memory one more time.

'Don't be afraid,' that voice whispers to him, holding him tighter.

Xie Lian must have thought, then, that Hong-er was trembling out of fear.

But the only thing the little boy feared, in that moment, was that the crown prince would let him go.

Zhao Beitong stands to the side, watching the world pass by.

When she first met the crimson ghost, Hua Cheng—and then his childhood counterpart, little Hong Hong-er, she had presumed that the young man had few happy memories to speak of.

In the beginning, she was right.

She watches as the child is constantly beaten. Shoved from one home to the next. Forced to work day in and day out—do and see things that no child that age should have to.

She watches, horrified, as he's lured with the promise of work for a meal, then thrown into a sack.

Dragged behind a carriage until his little body is half bloody and broken.

And then, she watches someone save him. Someone hold him close and send for doctors to tend to his injuries. Watches the Crown Prince watch after him, carrying him up the mountainside.

Even as she watches the fire that followed—scowls scoldingly as the man she loves tells the crown prince that the boy is cursed, making him scream with indignation—

"I'm not! I'm not!"

Even as her heart aches for the boy, thinking that the world will show him no kindness...

A pair of arms hug him close again, whispering to him, "I know."

Hong-er's eyes fill with tears as he clings to the crown prince's sleeves—and he begins to weep.

"I know you're not."

It isn't until she hears Mei Nianqing call the prince Xie Lian that Zhao Beitong goes still.

Xie…

Her eyes slowly begin to well up with tears, one hand clapped over her mouth.

…Xie Lian.

He…he was…

Now, she isn't just passively watching the boy's memories—she's charging through them, hungrily devouring every inch of the young man's face that she can find.

The story that unfolds before her eyes—not Hong-er's, but the god he loved, it's… Painfully familiar.

Watching a prince, so dearly beloved by all—rise so far. And the moment he did, the moment Zhao Beitong saw the god taking the prince's hand, lifting him up to the heavens—

She knew, in that moment, that same hand would cast him back down. And the memories that follow, logically—they shouldn't be happy.

But the two young men, living their lives in a small, broken down shrine… There's nothing to call the look in their eyes but happiness. And…

She watches, as Hong-er shrinks back against the wall of the shrine, face flushed, heart pounding as Xie Lian's fingertips trace over his cheeks.

Watches, as the prince smiles, whispering—

"Handsome."

'Tell him,' Zhao Beitong thinks, watching Hong-er's face. ' *You silly, foolish boy—why won't you tell him?'*

And then, he couldn't tell him at all.

She watches, heart aching, as the little ghost fire trails behind it's god, being batted away and shouted at for weeks on end. Unable to do anything to help the prince in his grief.

Zhao Beitong walks the path behind him, an invisible shadow in the fire's path, as it does everything it can to shield it's love from harm.

Even as it fails, over and over again.

And she sees what Hong-er could not. What, in many ways, he still cannot see.

Xie Lian was not mourning a child. His sorrow didn't come from a place of guilt over not being able to protect the boy—or the sheer responsibility that came from his own failure to make Hong-er leave, no—

Zhao Beitong watches the Crown Prince of Xianle mourn his first love.

And then, she watches the path of destruction that is, in many ways—even over a millennia later, largely of her own making.

Watches the blade she forged, so many years ago, to bring revenge to the clan that murdered her child...

Bring so much harm and suffering to children.

She watches the fragmented remains of a man she once loved, the White Clothed Calamity—bring suffering, torment, and death.

When she watches the maze of scars that he leaves behind on Xie Lian's body—Zhao Beitong knows exactly what he's doing.

He's trying to recreate his own.

She watches, hand clutched over her chest—as the sword she once folded a hundred times over, pressing her own grief and anger into every layer, is plunged into the chest of an innocent just as many times.

Even now, it reminds her of why she'll never forge another weapon again. Zhao Beitong watches the death of the Ghost Fire, and the birth of Wu Ming.

Watches the black clad youth follow his own white clothed calamity, falling into the same path of her own.

Wu Ming, in his desire for revenge, to be useful—stopped being human, instead...

He willingly sacrifices that humanity, making the choice to become Xie Lian's sword. His most powerful weapon, even in the dark.

And when she watches them sitting in the bottom of a ravine, caught up in each other's arms, mouths pressed together, the words are in her mind again.

"Why didn't you tell him?" She whispers, utterly confused. "Why didn't you just tell him?"

It's then, that Hua Cheng pauses, slowly turning his head to look back at her, and he remembers—

This is a memory—his memory—and he doesn't want to share it.

"...Get out," he retorts.

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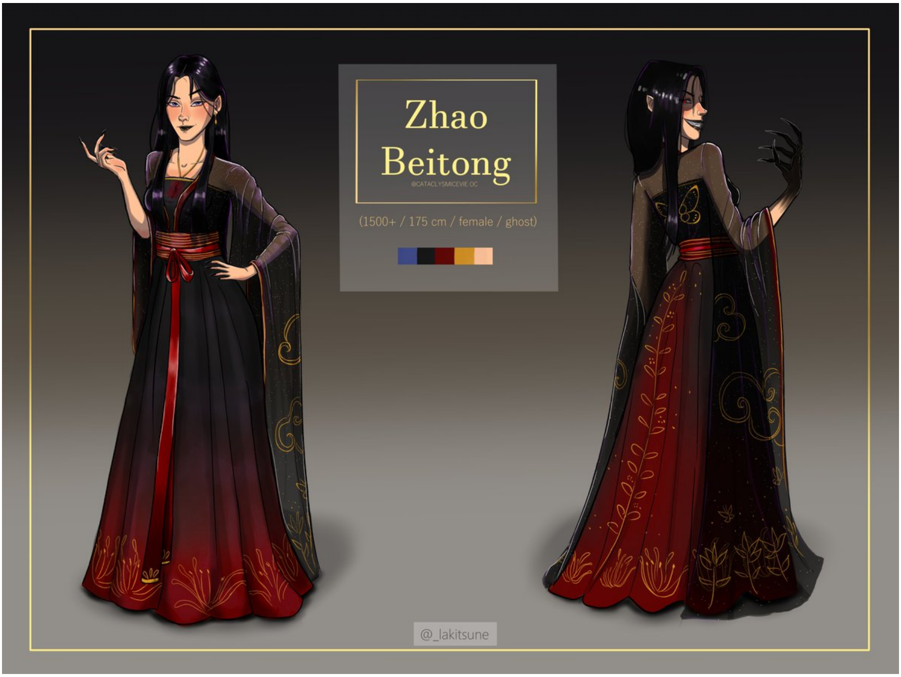
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Chapter End Notes

> Thank you so much to LAKITSUNE and Cas for their beautiful artwork, and allowing me to include it! Please give them your support, it's very much deserved!
>
> xoxo, Evie

The Favorite Son

Chapter Summary

“No one is going to devour me,” he retorts, his voice raw.

“You can try as hard as you want, but I’ll never make it easy for you.”

“You choose suffering, then.” Zhao Beitong appears before him in the tunnel, eyes narrowed with frustration.

“No,” the crimson shakes his head, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “No, I choose living.”

“YOU’RE ALREADY DEAD!” Zhao Beitong snarls, the ground rattling beneath her as she follows him down the tunnel, hands hooked into claws at her sides. “WE’RE BOTH DEAD!”

But dead isn’t gone. Dead isn’t giving up.

Hua Cheng smiles wryly.

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

Chapter Notes

TW// this chapter contains references to sexism, abuse of power imbalances, and the deaths of children. There is also graphic violence, minor character death, and kind of / sort of cannibalism, if you squint.

You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

This story also has some spotify playlists for those who want some fun listening while reading!

No Paths Are Bound: The Playlist
Zhao Beitong's Playlist
The Wu Ming Playlist

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The two clash again, all teeth and claws, fighting for separation, tearing at one another.

All over again, the world goes pitch black.

No narrow country roads. No hills of Wuyong. No heavenly parades.

BAM!

When he opens his eyes, there's blazing white all around.

The walls of the Kiln.

And above, endless swirling clouds of wraith butterflies.

"...You have a strong mind," his opponent admits. Her hair is slightly askew from the battle, eyes wild with bloodlust, the overwhelming resentful energy pulsing through her spirit.

"I didn't expect that."

The crimson ghost rises to his feet, clutching E-Ming in hand. "Bai Wuxiang was your husband." He states slowly. "And he had some sort of plan for the creation of the Ghost Kings."

Zhao Beitong doesn't reply, holding her ribs as she prepares to attack.

"That's why you won't make anymore." Hua Cheng tilts his head. "But you must know —Bai Wuxiang is dead!"

"..." Zhao Beitong throws back her head, letting out a cackling laugh. "God, he hasn't changed!"

"You—!"

"You called Lang Ying a fool," she replies coldly. "Then SO ARE YOU!"

The next blow is so violent, he feels E-Ming wail under the pressure, barely able to withstand parrying her blades.

"YOU REALLY BELIEVE THAT?" She cries as they clash again, and again, and again. "YOU THINK IT WOULD BE SO EASY?!"

"FOR THE HEAVENLY EMPEROR?! YES, I DO!"

Zhao Beitong stumbles to a halt, every single wraith butterfly freezing in midair—like one giant, breathing sculpture with hundreds of separate parts.

It would be beautiful, if it wasn't so lethal.

"...The Heavenly Emperor killed Bai Wuxiang?" She repeats softly.

"Is that what everyone thinks?"

"...Yes," Hua Cheng mutters, bracing himself with E-Ming, blood dripping down his cheek from one of their prior clashes. "That's what happened."

Zhao Beitong stares, eyes wide, mouth hanging open.

And then, she laughs.

A roaring, shrieking laugh

"HE—HE REALLY ONLY HAS ONE TRICK, DOESN'T HE?" Zhao Beitong screams, clutching the sides of her head.

"What—?"

"HOW MANY MASKS DID THAT MAN WEAR?!" She cries, "HOW MANY OF THEM COULD YOU ACTUALLY SEE?!"

The last sentence gives Hua Cheng pause, because... Zhao Beitong is right.

In his human life, then as a ghost fire, and again as Wu Ming—he saw Bai Wuxiang use countless faces. Dianxia's, Feng Xin's, even Hong-er's.

Ironically, the white clothed calamity only wore his mask when he wanted to reveal himself.

But every single face he wore was a disguise.

And if that was the case, why bother with the mask at all? No one would ever know which face was his true one to begin with. Even the face in Zhao Beitong's memories is vaguely familiar, but not exactly the same as any other face he's seen.

But it was Bai Wuxiang's *true* face.

"...Just EXPLAIN IT, then!" He shouts back at her. "TELL ME!"

“THERE’S NO POINT!”

Frustration, when built to it’s breaking point, shatters into madness.

Zhao Beitong is in pieces, clutching her head as she staggers from side to side. Laughing—and sobbing.

“YOU’LL NEVER MAKE IT OUT OF HERE! I WOULDN’T LET YOU!”

She won’t make another calamity for him to unleash on the world. Won’t create any more spiritual weapons or devices to prop up his endless ego.

Hua Cheng barely dodges the next attack, E-Ming creating a shower of sparks.

“IF YOU DO—!” Hua Cheng pants, not normally needing his breath, but now he does, gulping it down, trying to manage his own pulsing spiritual power, threatening to rip out of control “You can’t leave this place, can you? Tell me, and let me go, I’LL KILL HIM FOR YOU IF YOU JUST—!”

A piercing shriek rattles through the Kiln, louder than any that came before it. A millennia of heartbreak, rage, and grief.

“DON’T YOU THINK I’VE TRIED THAT BEFORE?!” Zhao Beitong howls, and now, the butterflies start moving at a fever pitch. “HOW MANY TIMES DO YOU THINK?!”

In the beginning, she told every single creature she released from the Kiln the truth behind it’s maker. Every single bit of it, desperately hoping that they would cast him back down again.

“WHEN YOU LEAVE THIS PLACE—EVERY MEMORY OF HIS IDENTITY—IT’LL DISAPPEAR!” She roars.

That’s how it ends.

She tells them the truth, and they leave. They’ll remember Zhao Beitong. Her tragic life and death, and the man who ruined her.

But they’ll never remember what he became.

“HOW?!”

“HE DIDN’T JUST STEAL MY NAME!” The Kiln walls rattle and groan.

He stole his own name. His own past, and her ability to reveal it.

It's only here, within the bounds of Mount Tonglu, where she can tell the truth, and have it remembered—because his power cannot touch this place.

It can only seal her in, nothing more. But when things leave…

Her laughing, her crying—it turns to screaming.

Miserable, horrific screaming. So loud, Hua Cheng's eardrums feel like they could burst at any moment.

The screams of a trapped, tortured animal that cannot die. That cannot have a moment of relief.

There is absolutely no escape.

The screams of a mother who, when faced with the prospect of birthing a child that could destroy the world, would rather snuff it out instead.

A horrible, impossible choice. One that she has made over and over again. When the screaming stops—she's alone in the cavern.

The Kiln itself—it isn't only one chamber. There are tracks and tunnels that run all throughout, and surely—surely, he's gone there. Hiding. Thinking. Planning.

Just like she taught him to do.

Zhao Beitong sinks down to her knees, clutching her head.

She knows what comes next.

They'll fight and retreat, over and over again. He'll learn, try to out-think it—but only one other being on this earth can match her in power—and it isn't him.

They'll see each other's memories in full. He'll learn the truth, every single bit of it. Then, she'll devour him.

Like everything else in the fields of Mount Tonglu, nothing within the Kiln itself moves quickly.

Hua Cheng spends months like that—lurking in the dark, moving deeper and deeper into the tunnels.

Sometimes, she sleeps. For days—weeks at a time. When she does, he...thinks.

His work has gotten better over the years—there's no denying it. And while the kiln sleeps, he carves.

She asked him years ago, if it was a perfect likeness—and he told her no. Close, but no.

The faces staring back at him now...

Hua Cheng holds one between his hands, barely illuminated by the silver light of the few scatterings of butterflies around him. They never bother him when she's sleeping, no.

They're used to him now.

Now, the likeness is utterly perfect. Just like Hua Cheng remembered it.

His thumbs stroke over cheeks as smooth and pale as marble, remembering the only time he ever dared to touch his god's face. Grasping Xie Lian's chin, feeling every delicate breath and gasp against his lips, but...

He's been reliving his own memories, over and over again.

Sometimes through the eyes of his Guoshi. Other times, in the brief moments when he manages to catch a moment of sleep. Ghosts don't need it—not normally, but he's been thoroughly worn down.

He's painted those memories on the walls in daunting murals of color.

Carved them into stone. Even the ones that aren't real. The ones he only dreams.

And now, he holds a dream between his hands. One made of stone, carved to perfection, and he wishes—for just a moment—that he truly was a god.

The most powerful among them all, powerful enough to...

His lips hover so close to that of another, frozen in rock.

Powerful enough to wish life into stone.

"...Hong-er?"

He goes still, that stone face still cradled in his hand—but his eye blown wide, because he—

He knows that voice.

“Hong-er, are you there?”

He—

“Please!”

When Hua Cheng lifts his head—he sees him there.

Not in a memory. Not a dream. There. Right there, just a few meters away, stumbling through the dark.

“If you’re there—” he stumbles slightly on a dip in the floor, lurching forward, “P- Please answer me!”

Dianxia.

It’s—

“Dianxia.”

The word falls out in response before he can stop it, and—

He sees Xie Lian’s head whip to the side, searching through the dark, lips trembling. “Hong-er?!”

There were so many times when the prince called that name, and Hua Cheng could never answer.

But now—

“Dianxia.” He whispers again, watching with wonder as Xie Lian stumbles towards him, following his voice through the ark.

Now, he can answer.

“Hong-er!” He cries, stumbling over another dip in the floor, starting to fall, but…

Hua Cheng catches him in his arms.

…And it’s all real.

It all feels so warm, solid, and real. The heartbeat pounding in front of him. The short, panicked breaths.

He didn't realize how slight the crown prince could feel. Xie Lian never felt small before, no—but—

Hong-er was small back then, too.

Slowly—he realizes that the crown prince isn't actually small at all, he just—

Hong-er got bigger. But he never noticed it before, not when every time he was with him, it was always...

In a memory. But this...

Hands grip the front of his robes, trembling.

"...Is it you?"

This feels real.

"...Yes," he whispers, his arms wrapped tightly around the crown prince's back, holding him steady, "It's me."

A choked, relieved sound comes from Xie Lian, hands fumbling blindly for Hua Cheng's shoulders. "I-I looked everywhere for you, but you didn't answer!"

And when Xie Lian's hands are on him—it still feels like he could have the entire world in his grasp. Still feels like the only place in the world that he wants to be.

"I'm sorry, I—" his voice trembles and cracks as he hangs his head, arms tightening, "—I r-really tried, I—!"

Then, those hands are pressed against his cheeks again, thumbs stroking under his eyes, over his lips, the bridge of his nose, his jaw.

When Hua Cheng looks up, he can't make eye contact with the prince, he's staring off into the middle distance, the curse pattern of the shackles in his irises gleaming in the dark—

But Xie Lian smiles, holding the ghost's face in his hands.

"...Handsome," he whispers.

Hua Cheng lets out a choked sound, arms tightening as his head sinks forward, until their foreheads are pressed together, and the prince's toes are dangling off the floor.

"I'm sorry," he whispers. "I'm so, so sorry—"

"No," Xie Lian's hands slide up from his cheeks, "Don't be."

His arms wind around Hua Cheng's neck, holding him close, even as the ghost's knees buckle, he goes down with him, never letting go.

Hua Cheng takes shuddering gasps, trying to catch his breath, to grasp what's going on, but..

"I missed you," the prince whispers, " *so* much."

The ghost trembles in response, leaning against the tunnel wall, holding the god so tight, he half expects Xie Lian to shatter.

But he doesn't.,

He stays there, like that. Cradled in Hua Cheng's lap, their foreheads pressed together, noses bumping.

"...But you never left,"

Xie Lian whispers, and Hua Cheng—

Their mouths aren't touching, but he can feel the smile on Xie Lian's face. Trembling and full of tears.

"You never left me."

Hua Cheng's eyes fill with tears of his own, hands tightening against his back. "I knew you would never leave me."

"Never," he whispers, remembering what he was thinking, over and over again, watching Mei Nianqing in the Queen of Wuyong's memories, how frustrated he had been—

'Tell her.'

'You stubborn fool, why won't you just tell her?'

One of his hands slips into Xie Lian's hair.

Slowly, so cautiously—knowing that he shouldn't dare. That he has absolutely no right to touch him at all, but—

The strands are so soft between his fingers, like silk—and just the feeling of it against his skin makes Hua Cheng tremble.

And his god doesn't push him away.

The ghost's fingers gently cradle his skull, his other arm wrapped around Xie Lian's back. "D...Dianxia, I..." He swallows dryly—and he can't blame his hesitation on a pounding heartbeat or unsteady breaths, but his tongue feels like lead anyway, words trembling, "Gege, I..."

"I know," the prince whispers, fingers stroking the back of Hua Cheng's neck, their noses still bumping together when he speaks. "I know that you love me, Hong-er."

A small, terrified—but god, so *longing* —sound rips from the ghost's throat.

And then, Xie Lian presses forward.

At first, when he feels those lips on him—Hua Cheng can't react. The same way that a person can't immediately react when they see any miracle for the first time, because—

Because how?

How on earth could it be real?

But this mouth is warm, and soft—and kissing him so sweetly.

"My Hong-er," that voice whispers, hands tangling in Hua Cheng's hair, kissing his chin, each corner of his mouth, the tip of his nose, then his lips again—emphasizing each word with an accompanying touch.

"My handsome, brave Hong-er." Everything feels thick with warmth.

Like a sweetness, filling his head with incense, his stomach with butterflies—and it's swelling inside of the young man like a balloon, filling him up until there's nothing else. No other conscious thought, just—

I love you.

I miss you.

I am so sorry.

God, I love you *so* much—

But it's the lack of thought that makes him worry. That makes him hesitate. Because it's too good. Any time he has exactly what he wants, he knows that it's a trick. That the rug is about to be yanked out from under him.

He knows that Xie Lian would never kiss him like this. Not without some intervening reason. He—

It feels like moving mountains, just finding the motivation to pull his lips back, to gently—but insistently—push his god away, and when he opens his eyes—

Xie Lian is looking right back up at him. Seeing him, his eyes clear.

Hua Cheng hasn't seen those eyes in years. Not without the bandage that covered them, or the shackle that bound them.

Not since he was a little boy, falling from the sky. Being pulled, broken and bleeding, from a sack.

They're incomparable, and Hua Cheng is haunted by them.

Most people have eyes that remain almost dull, static. Or—like Hong-er, they're cursed with eyes of two different colors, the sharp, often grotesque contrast horrifying anyone that looks.

But the Crown Prince of Xianle can hold the entire world in his eyes. Every single color.

Depending on the lighting, or the emotion inside of them. Now, under the silvery light of the butterflies around them, they look almost violet—similar to that of his ancestors, sparkling up at him in the dark, leaving the fierce crimson ghost, wielder of the scimitar E-Ming...

He's spellbound.

Completely, utterly spellbound. Like a dangerous, venomous serpent, completely defanged by the flute of a charmer.

Xie Lian smiles, slowly, widely, hugging Hua Cheng tighter around his neck. "I wasn't lying," he murmurs, staring up at Hua Cheng.

"You—?"

"You're beautiful, Hong-er." The prince murmurs, one hand coming down to caress his cheek again—and Hua Cheng can't help but lean into it, his eyelashes fluttering, lips trembling from the kiss. "Why didn't you believe me?"

"I..." He tries to answer, his voice dry and unsteady.

"I..."

His eyes flicker up, over Xie Lian's shoulder—and then he goes still. Perfectly, absolutely still.

The prince frowns, patting Hua Cheng's cheek, his eyebrows knitting together. "What's wrong? I—" Then, he glances back over his shoulder, following the ghost's gaze.

"Oh."

His voice is a little flat, almost unappreciative of the interruption.

Across the tunnel from them is...also Xie Lian. But a very different version of him. Younger. Happier. Dressed in fine silks and jewels, hair pulled into an elegant style. In someone else's arms.

The kiss he's sharing with Feng Xin is fierce, his guard's hands on his hips, keeping him grounded against the wall—all while delicate hands, clad with golden rings, claw at Feng Xin's back, clinging, pulling him closer.

He moans, gasps—whispers his name—not Hua Cheng's name.

When they break apart, only for the appointed martial god to bury his face in the crown prince's neck, kissing and biting—the other Xie Lian stares at him from across the tunnel, flushed, panting with want.

And Hua Cheng feels it in that moment, what he felt that day.

Watching Bai Wuxiang do what he did, wearing another man's face.

Tricking Xie Lian into kissing the man that he actually wanted. That he always wanted—not Hua Cheng, Wu Ming, or Hong-er.

It hurts, but it also burns.

With this smoldering, completely unjustified jealousy.

Desperate to possess what he knows he can't have.

But Hong-er was a selfish boy, and Wu Ming was a selfish teenager. Now, Hua Cheng is a selfish man.

A horribly selfish man, who would rip the arms holding his love to shreds now, if not for the weight in his own arms already.

“…That’s you,” the Xie Lian in his arms murmurs, squeezing Hua Cheng’s cheeks, turning his head to get his attention. “That’s not me.”

Hua Cheng stares down at the god in his arms—wrangling down a tangled knot of emotions, trying to figure out exactly what he—

“It’s not him.”

Finally, the ghost gives Xie Lian his full attention, eyes locked on his face. “The person I want,” the god repeats, shaking his head. “It isn’t him.”

Somehow, Hua Cheng’s long silent heart manages to pound—like a phantom limb, rattling in his chest.

‘It can’t be me.’

Hua Cheng thinks to himself, desperate to avoid getting his hopes up, terrified of reaching his hands too high, knowing that he has no right.

‘It can’t be—’

“I would have loved you like this too, you know.”

Now, when Hua Cheng’s eyes focus in again, the god’s appearance is…

He isn’t wearing white cultivator robes, the way he always did before. He’s in the heavy silks and finery he wore the first time Hong-er saw him. Whites and golds and reds, jewels in his hair, coral pears dangling from his ears.

White flowers crowning his head.

Oh.

Oh, he…

Hua Cheng has never found him more or less beautiful, no matter what he’s wearing, no matter Xie Lian’s wealth, power, or status, but —

He doesn't miss the meaning behind the prince's words.

"You think I would have wanted him because he knew me when I was like this?"

Xie Lian shakes his head, and even the smallest details—like the way his jewelry clinks together when he moves, or the smell of the blossoms in his hair—makes Hua Cheng's heart ache with a love that has no bounds, no set paths to follow. It's simply all encompassing.

"It doesn't matter where or who I was when we met," Xie Lian murmurs, cupping Hua Cheng's cheek in his hand. "I always would have been yours."

The ghost goes completely still, his pupils dilating, lips slightly parted.

'Yours.'

'I always would have been yours.'

"Hong—?"

Mine.

Mine.

Mine .

Hua Cheng doesn't realize that he snarled the word out loud until it rattles against his own eardrums, and he hears Xie Lian's soft gasp in response, and—

He can't think anymore. He doesn't want to.

The hand in Xie Lian's robes, holding his back—it drags him in, the other gripping his jaw, tilting his head the way the ghost wants, and—

He doesn't sit there and accept Xie Lian's affection, too terrified to respond, like he did just now.

He doesn't touch Xie Lian like a treasure hidden behind glass, like something he doesn't have the right to possess.

He kisses his beloved the way he wants to. The way that he's always wanted to. With such passion, that it leaves the god trembling in his arms, gasping for—for—

Hua Cheng kisses him with his teeth, scraping over the prince's bottom lip, sucking until it's throbbing and swollen—until their tongues are moving together in this slow, indulgent slide that makes the god whimper, and Hua Cheng—

He's never been so eager to be a sinner.

Those hands cling to his cheeks, pulling Hua Cheng closer, and all the ghost can remember is the sight of another man's hands, holding him down.

There's a small gasp when he flips them around, pinning his love against a cavern wall, wrists held above his head in a loving grip.

Xie Lian could stop him. In an instant, by saying no. By showing fear. By pushing him away. A single word, and Hua Cheng would let him go. Would claw out his other eye, break his own hands rather than offend his god with his touch again.

But the prince just moans, arching.

There's heat, warm, thick sweetness. Flooding his head and his thoughts, making the young man lose himself to the desire. To the one thing he's ever wanted. The only thing a man with nothing has ever wanted so badly.

The thing he would lie, steal, beg, and cheat to obtain.

And on some level, it's possible for a person to be willingly tricked. To indulge in a fantasy, because it's just too beautiful to ignore.

Because Xie Lian's body pressed under his, trembling with want, is too sweet of a delusion to ignore.

Satisfying the hungriest curiosity.

The entire thing is so complete, so flawless—

Is this really what he tastes like? What his moans might sound like? Would Hua Cheng really be able to feel his pulse through his wrists, just like this? Feel the goosebumps rising across the god's skin?

Is this close to reality?

And in the beginning, he truly thinks it's a delusion created by his own mind. That so many years of pain, loss, and isolation have finally made his consciousness begin to fracture, but…

That isn't what this is.

Hua Cheng has a vast imagination, but he's never thought of this.

Never conceived a possibility in which Xie Lian would say those things to him. Not even in his admittedly shameful fantasies in the night, relieving his—

No. He never imagined that.

And it's not a cruel delusion either. It isn't intended to cause him any pain or fear.

The illusions that Bai Wuxiang spun for Xie Lian would start as something enticing, but always ended up inflicting some sort of psychological damage.

This—this illusion witnessed the projection of Hua Cheng's own insecurities—the sight of Xie Lian and Feng Xin—and reassured him.

This isn't an illusion cast with cruel intentions, no—it's meant to soothe him. To distract him.

And then, somewhere, through the haze of pleasure and desire, Hua Cheng remembers something.

Slaughter.

There's a certain way to slaughter an animal properly. Without fear tainting the meat.

Butchers will often distract a prized lamb by tinkling a small bell in it's ear, making it look in the other direction. Giving them small pieces of fruit, soaked in honey— distracting them from the approaching blade.

This delusion is showing Hua Cheng his greatest regret. The one thing he always wanted to experience in his life, but never could.

Giving him his greatest treasure, and allowing him to indulge in it. A mercy. A kindness.

All while he's being slowly devoured.

He pulls back sharply, breathing hard, and when he opens his eyes...

Xie Lian is smiling up at him. Eyes loving, cheeks flushed, lips slightly swollen. As they open wider, Hua Cheng sees a mouth full of long, razor sharp teeth, glinting up at him.

That's when he lunges.

Hua Cheng barely avoids it, moving back so quickly, he slams into the opposite side of the tunnel, walls rattling around him as the Xie Lian he was holding in his arms dissolves into a horde of butterflies.

"You could have just enjoyed it, you foolish child." She hisses.

It was a kindness. More mercy than anyone has ever tried to show Hua Cheng before, he'll admit it.

Certainly would have been less painful than any of his other deaths—and for a moment, he truly did enjoy it.

"No one is going to devour me," he retorts, his voice raw.

"You can try as hard as you want, but I'll never make it easy for you."

"You choose suffering, then." Zhao Beitong appears before him in the tunnel, eyes narrowed with frustration.

"No," the crimson shakes his head, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"No, I choose living."

"YOU'RE ALREADY DEAD!" Zhao Beitong snarls, the ground rattling beneath her as she follows him down the tunnel, hands hooked into claws at her sides. "WE'RE BOTH DEAD!"

But dead isn't gone.

Dead isn't giving up.

Hua Cheng smiles wryly.

"What's that got to do with anything?"

And then, finally, the pieces finally seem to slide together.

He glances around them, at the wraith butterflies that cover the walls, the ceiling, making the tunnel look like a gateway to another world.

"...Guoshi Tonglu?" She tenses.

The boy standing before her is now a man. Tall, broad, with strong limbs. Arms clasped behind him, shoulders thrown back—standing so tall, with his head held high.

His gaze holds no fear, only flashes with cleverness, the love of a good fight. And Zhao Beitong is proud.

Deep, from her gut, she is proud. So proud, that it steals the breath from her chest, makes it impossible to speak.

She resents him, and she loves him. Wants to watch him grow, and wants to rip his newly formed roots from the earth.

And oh, how desperately she wishes that things were different. That they weren't both victims of such cursed circumstances.

But this world is rotten, cruel, and hungry. It devours happiness, dreams, and hope.

It gives you children, then forces you to watch as death swallows them whole.

This world is not worth saving, and Zhao Beitong will not miss it when it dies. But she will not unleash this child upon it either.

Not again. Never again.

"How do you forge wraith butterflies?"

She doesn't answer him then—only charges.

But that's alright.

He knows what he has to do now.

The Crimson Ghost turns on his heels, charging back down the length of the tunnel— and for the first time in over a year, the re-enter the main chamber of the Kiln itself.

Blinding walls of white all around them, impossibly scorching watches of heat, bearing down from all directions.

"JUST STOP!" Zhao Beitong shouts, waves of agony piercing her skull, it's so much pressure, so much spiritual power, and she, she can't—

It's too much pressure. Hua Cheng knows now.

Every system has it’s flaws. Even the valves meant to relieve pressure—when put under too much strain—will eventually break.

He can see the agony that her mind is in, after bearing that weight for over a millennia.

“JUST—!”

She stops when they collide.

Then, the world goes dark.

And they aren’t in the kiln anymore.

No screaming, no pain, no hordes of wraith butterflies swarming overhead. When Zhao Beitong opens her eyes, she’s back home.

“Mama!”

And her heart squeezes as she turns around, opening her arms.

The little boy running towards her is no more than six or seven years old, with long, ink black hair, hanging over his shoulder in a simple braid. Amber eyes, just like his father’s, always glinting with mischief.

“My San Lang,” she smiles, catching her son in her embrace. Her third child, her final child.

It took two years for her to reconcile enough with her husband to conceive another— still so pained from the loss of Bolin, and her first son, Zhang Wei.

But there was this aching gap inside of her.

One that no gold or jewels in the world could fill. Not even Mei Nianqing’s love, which she treasured so privately, holding him close to her heart.

Her husband has so many selfish indulgences, and resent him as she might—Hudie does love him. Can’t not love him, in the end.

But he has prioritized himself, over and over again. At the cost of everything else in their lives. And Mei Nianqing...

His arms are a safe harbor, but they can’t fill the pain left behind by the chilling knowledge that...

Hudie wasn't a mother anymore. Her children were taken.

But when San Lang was born…that ache finally began to ease. Never disappeared, it never, ever goes away. But there was something new in her heart now. Something beautiful. Something that didn't hurt.

"Is Papa coming home this week?" He hums, clinging to her side.

It's been hard, of course—for the boy to grow up with a father who lives and works in the heavens, only coming down to the mortal realm when he can spare the time.

Once again, Mei Nianqing has largely stepped into the role as a teacher and a mentor, but…It isn't quite the same.

"Soon," she reassures him, pushing his hair out of his face, pressing kisses against the side of his head. "Soon, my love—and then we'll all be together again."

Not a conventional family. Not always a happy one. But San Lang is the greatest joy of Hudie's life.

He learns sword play from his mother, teaching him the traditional battle forms of their people, running through the palace halls with his wooden sabers.

His Guoshi teaches him arts, sciences, and cultivation—but the Queen of Wuyong wants his eyes firmly planted on the ground.

"If you spend your entire life chasing the gods," she tells him each night, "you will forget the things that make you human."

He's fiercely clever, playful, and loyal. Always by his mother's side, playfully mimicking her posture when he isn't clinging to her skirts.

Another young man will come, in the millennia that follow. One that will remind her of him so much, she almost wonders if his soul has been reincarnated into a new form.

But for now, he is small, clever, and safe. Always safe, within her palace walls, behind her blades.

Each night, she sings him to sleep in a garden of wraith butterflies, telling him stories of his two older brothers. But instead of making it a sad story, she weaves something new.

Tells San Lang his two elder brothers were dragons, kings of the sky—

and they simply flew away.

“Maybe I’ll be a dragon too, then.” San Lang hums, rolling around in the grass.

Mei Nianqing smiles from his seat against the trunk of a nearby tree, a scroll open across his lap. The boy is not his blood—but that has never stopped him from loving San Lang like a son.

“A fierce little dragon you would be—but then you’d fly away from your mother too, wouldn’t you?”

“No!” The little boy cries, rolling up onto his knees, blades of grass sticking out of his hair. “I’d take her with me! Or I’d stay here, and protect her! I’d protect everyone!”

“Protect everyone?” Hudie smiles, reaching over to ruffle his hair. “That’s quite a task.”

“I can do it,” the little boy grins, one sharp canine poking out between his lips. “Because my dad’s a god, and my mom’s a blade master!” He jumps to his feet. “Bet I can breathe fire!”

He throws his head back, playfully roaring at the sky before he falls backwards, laughing, rolling in the grass again until he bumps against his mother’s leg, smiling up at her playfully.

Oh, and what an easy thing it is to be happy, when San Lang smiles. “I’m just kidding!”

He sits up beside his mother, moving into her lap so she can pick the blades of grass out of his hair, fixing his braid. “I don’t wanna be a dragon, they die.”

After all, his father has slain a thousand of them.

Hudie’s hands become still in his hair.

“...Everything dies, my love.”

The Queen of Wuyong whispers, her voice suddenly mournful. “Even the gods, eventually.”

San Lang hums, snuggling more comfortably into her arms—looking up at her with big, bright eyes—the kind that burn with such intensity, like he’s swallowed the sun inside them.

"Why?"

It's such a simple thing, to a child. Broken things can always be fixed. Golden palaces can always be rebuilt. But death—death cannot be undone.

She finishes fixing his hair, stroking his bangs away from his forehead with the gentleness only a mother can have.

"There is no banquet in this world that doesn't come to an end," Hudie murmurs, watching that sweet little face, always looking upon the world as though it will one day bow before him. "That is the way of things."

San Lang presses his lips together, thinking rather seriously. "...Then I'll be a butterfly," he declares, crossing his arms.

"A butterfly?" Mei Nianqing looks up with a surprised laugh. "They die even quicker than their scaled, fire breathing cousins."

"Yeah, but—butterflies come back!" The little boy cries. "And I'll always come back."

He looks up at his mother, beaming from ear to ear.

"Always!"

And he said the words with such passion, such sincerity—it was almost difficult not to believe him, however impossible the sentiments seemed.

Time carried on, he continued to grow— And so did the world around him.

By the time he was eight, the earthquakes started. Infrequently at first—quiet, gentle rumbling.

But slowly repeating, over and over again—with increasing strength.

Gradually, the Queen of Wuyong began to look at the volcano their city sat in the shadow of with growing concern.

Volcanic eruptions weren't unheard of, of course—but they were also somewhat survivable. Wuyong was a vast kingdom, with wide resources. If they monitored the mountain, they could begin the slow process of evacuation—and assess the damage after the disaster had passed.

In the beginning, that was the plan.

Until, on one of her husband's visits from the heavens, he told her that he'd had a dream.

A horrible, apocalyptic dream.

And, unfortunately...

Jun Wu's dreams had a habit of coming true. The argument was like none they'd had before.

"HAVE YOU GONE MAD?!" One of the Guoshi cries, staring at Jun Wu, the prince he's always followed so steadfastly, like he doesn't even recognize the man standing before him.

"Do you have a better suggestion?" The god questions coldly, arching an eyebrow.

"...My love," Hudie tries to talk him down—gentle, her tone non-judgmental. "Even if we knew such a thing could work—"

"It would work," the god interrupts her, his voice determined, but...He seems soothed, when her hands brush his shoulders.

Mei Nianqing stares at the table's surface, silent.

"We have other options." She shakes her head. "There are neighboring kingdoms, it —the central plains, don't you remember how they attacked us again and again, unprovoked? We could take back the territory we lost in the last war. We could take our son back—"

"No."

Jun Wu shakes his head firmly. "We made an agreement with the Xie family. It would be dishonorable for us to turn back on it now. Besides, the boy has lived there for ten years now—he'll hardly remember who we are at all."

The Queen flinches as if she's been slapped.

"You think it's more dishonorable than sacrificing live humans to a volcano?" One of the other Guoshi questions—the youngest, who was brought in to take Hudie's place after her coronation as queen. "That's an interesting set of priorities."

"Criminals." Jun Wu's frown deepens.

“Who are slated for execution as it is. It hardly makes any difference at all—!”

“No,” Guoshi Nianqing shakes his head. “You just want to execute them in the most horrific way possible, rather than a simple hanging.”

Jun Wu grits his teeth as he looks upon his former teacher. “Even you?” He frowns. “Even you are against me?”

“He isn’t against you,” Hudie frowns. “Have you considered what kind of karma making that kind of sacrifice could bring down upon us? Our family? We have our child to think about—”

“San Lang is EXACTLY why I’m doing this!”

Jun Wu slams his hand on the table, making their scrolls and maps rattle, his expression tense with worry. “Have you ever considered his future? Would you have him be a prince of the ashes?! Of a nation of homeless refugees?!”

“There are worse things to be,” Hudie mutters.

“This is his home!” Jun Wu shakes his head. “Our home—and I won’t allow it to burn!”

“...It might not be up to you, your highness,” Mei Nianqing points out softly.

The martial god pauses, halfway through his rant—lips frozen in mid-sentence. “... What is that supposed to mean?”

The head Guoshi sits back in his seat, rubbing one hand against his temple. He hasn’t aged a day since Hudie met him, while she’s now a woman in her thirties—with the beginnings of age starting to etch itself across her face.

However, at this moment—his eyes seem ancient.

“How many times did I warn you?” He mutters. “Keeping so many attachments in the mortal realm will do you no good.”

“If this is only a lecture, spare me.” Jun Wu glares. “Or explain what you mean.” Mei Nianqing looks up, his gaze unwavering.

“You will always have my respect as a god,” he murmurs. “And as our former prince— but you gave up the authority of your titles when you ascended, Jun Wu.”

The Crown Prince glares, his eyebrows knitting together. “This is—”

“Wuyong has a Queen,” Mei Nianqing’s voice is firm. “And this decision ought to be left to her.”

Tonglu Hudie has always had a healthy respect for the nature of karma. To some extent, she always thought losing Bolin was her punishment for straying from her marriage. For forging the demon blade Zhu Xin, and how many lives it took.

In the beginning, she debates. The pressure from her husband is enormous, but...

Bad karma will travel directly through the bloodline. And in her case, she only has one thing left to lose: her son.

She spends hours meditating in the imperial temple, fortune telling day and night

Visions do come to her, showing that her husband was telling the truth. Images of her home, the country that raised her, pulled her up—made her one of the most powerful women in history—devoured by a sea of flames.

She sees Mei Nianqing, screaming for her, eyes filled with tears

She even sees Jun Wu himself, staring up at the sky with horror, Zhu Xin sticking out of his chest, blood dripping from the corners of his mouth.

Visions that horrify her. That terrify her.

And they aren’t always what she seeks—some unrelated to her, or too far in the future.

She sees a boy, falling from the sky like a falling star. A mask, half laughing half crying. A green lantern, touring through the night. Crimson rain, falling from the sky. She sees ships sinking under black water, and a boy with a wine chalice, smiling and dancing in the wind.

She sees thousands of lanterns, floating as far as the eye can see—and a man, among them, his head crowned with flowers.

She sees the garden Mei Nianqing built for her turning to ash, then forest again. Then, snow, with dozens of little burial mounds, built all around.

Then, they turn to ash again, but, eventually, so far ahead that she cannot recognize the landscape any longer, lotus blossoms grow.

She sees arrows piercing the sun, and when the doors of hell open, she hears the sounds of a flute.

The Queen of Wuyong does not know which of these visions are real, and which are dreams. Some might be possibilities of a future that never come to pass. Others might simply be delusions that come from looking too closely into the eye of destiny.

But one thing chills her.

In none of those futures, real or imagined, can she see San Lang's.

That's when the fear begins to grip her, finding its way into the core of her like a weed, worming it's way in until cracks begin to form.

She never gives the order, but she certainly looks the other way.

When the captain of the guard tells her that their prisoners on death row have con missing, she's slow to investigate the matter—and when her husband returns again from the heavens, she does not ask questions.

She holds San Lang tight, and desperately, she tries to look forward.

But when she tries to see his future, there is only darkness.

Pitch black darkness. Fire and smoke.

When the other three Guoshi disappear without returning, and he gives the explanation that his suggestion horrified them to the point of leaving—

Hudie looks the other way.

She knows that it doesn't sound true. That the answer, if she peels it back, is probably hideous.

"..Mei Nianqing," she whispers one night, when they're tucked away in a lonely corridor, pressed against a pillar. "Promise me something."

The Guoshi doesn't lift his face from her neck, holding one arm around her waist, simply breathing her in. "Name it, your highness, and I will give it."

"..." Her fingers stroke his hair, eyes upturned, watching the stars through an open window. "If the worst comes to pass..."

It's the only thing she has ever asked of her lover that he has wanted to refuse. "Leave me," She whispers. "Protect my son, and leave me."

Hudie misses him desperately—but the central plains are far removed from this danger, and she knows the Xie's have treated Bolin well.

It's San Lang that consumes her thoughts. Fears for his future, that haunt her dreams every night.

"I think you underestimate the fact that your son would bite anyone that tried to take him away from you," the Guoshi answers dryly, earning a soft laugh. "I'll protect you both."

Her smile is faint. "I know you'll try," she assures him. "But if you have to choose— choose him."

Slowly—he nods, making his promise to her.

And part of her hopes, when the eruption doesn't come—that the crisis has been averted. Even if her son's future is still black, she...

Hudie tells herself that she made the right choice, not asking Jun Wu any questions. That if there was any horrible karma to be had by whatever he had done—it wouldn't be hers, because she'd had no part in it.

But San Lang's 13th birthday comes—and with it, the first eruption.

The royal court survives—but half of the farmland is raised to ash in a single night. And with it, any hopes of making it through the winter without famine.

Still, the volcano continues to rumble—and when Hudie tries to read the future again —

All she sees is fire and ash.

Desperately, she begins to plan an invasion, knowing it's their only practical means of survival. And maybe it's selfish—but they are the traditional enemies of Wuyong. What other choice is there? She—She —

One evening she's standing in the doorway to San Lang's room, silent.

Part of her just wants to forget the rest of the world. To sweep him up in her arms right now, and run away. To a place where the world doesn't know them. Where her son can just be a child, peaceful and happy.

A pair of arms wrap around her from behind, holding her close.

"He's so beautiful, isn't he?" Jun Wu whispers, resting his chin against her shoulder.

"...Yes," his wife agrees, resting her hands over his, leaning back against his armor. The same armor she forged for him, before he ascended. "He's absolutely perfect."

"We can save him."

He feels his queen stiffen, her attention piqued. "...if you mean to sacrifice anyone else to the volcano, that didn't work the first time—"

"No," Jun Wu reassures her. "That could never work was a permanent solution, only a temporary delay."

Slowly, Hudie nods.

"Do you remember what I said, when Mei Nianqing told me not to marry you?"

She shifts with discomfort, given how much the context of that moment has changed with time—but she nods. "That you had every right to take a wife."

"And," Jun Wu continues, "I could bring you with me."

The Queen of Wuyong pauses, starting to pull away, shaking her head. "I have too many responsibilities here, and San Lang—"

"Him too," Jun Wu reassures her. "I'm going to bring everyone."

That's the first time that he tells her about the bridge. A ludicrous idea. Impossible.

But he knows exactly who he's talking to. The daughter of one of the greatest architects in the modern era. A master in forging and engineering spiritual devices.

If anyone could confirm the possibility of such a thing, it would be Guoshi Tonglu.

“Can it be done?”

She’s hesitant.

A life in the heavens—it means many things. No hunger, no war, no danger, but also...

Less privacy—and certainly less freedom. She couldn’t go on as she has for the last fifteen years if she was...

Her own indiscretions aside, there’s also San Lang.

A child—who deserves to live and be happy in the human world. To grow among his own kind, and make his own choices.

Not to be plucked to the heavens when he’s barely even a teenager.

And still—with his future so black, she...

Hudie forces herself to consider the matter.

Slowly, she admits that—in theory—it is possible. But that the spiritual power required would be immense, even for him.

She emphasizes it, over and over again—that he must, absolutely, get the heavens to support him in the effort. That he *cannot* do it without assistance.

Hua Cheng watches the man agree, nodding as he listens to her—but somehow, when he sees the odd light in the martial god’s eye, he—

He doesn’t believe him.

Even as he watches the god go in seclusion to store spiritual power, assuring his wife that he’s enlisted the other gods...

All he sees, when he looks into the earnestness of those eyes, is a lie. Something that he distrusts.

In the meantime, the Queen tries to make evacuation plans with the Guoshi by her side. To make ready for what they’ll do if the bridge fails, but...

No one listens.

Every single time she tries, she's told that she doesn't need to worry. That the illustrious Crown Prince of Wuyong is going to save them all. That her fears are stemming from paranoia, and that she's nothing more than a frantic woman.

But Hudie knows Jun Wu's best kept secret.

That he is human. That, beneath all of the glory, gold, and fame—he is just a man.

Men make mistakes. They fail—and they fall.

Hua Cheng watches the Queen of Wuyong spend her final days with her son, now a cocky young teenager, and desperately wishes that she would flee.

Even she, watching her own memories, wishes she had one the same thing. But in the end—she was no different from anyone else.

She had a vein of distrust in her husband—that was true. But not enough so to go against him. Not enough so to believe in her own competence over his.

But when that last day came, and she saw the volcano falling into it's final rattle before entering a final state of eruption—something inside of Tonglu Hudie broke.

"...Mom?" San Lang questions, being tugged along by his wrist. "What are you doing?"

"Father is already getting people onto the bridge, we—"

"We're not going," the queen mutters, shaking her head, looking through the palace armory. Where is it, where is it, where is it?!

"...What are you talking about?" San Lang frowns, his eyebrows knitting together.

"That's been the plan this entire time—?"

"We're going to the central plains," she cuts him off, passing through every shelf, her eyes frantic. "Your brother is there."

"But what about everyone else?!"

"I can't carry them," the Queen mumbles faintly, shaking her head.

"But father said—!"

"YOUR FATHER CANNOT SAVE EVERYONE!" She snaps, her hands trembling, but —

But then she lets out a trembling sigh. "I-I'm sorry, just..." Her hands come up, pressing against her temples. "Go to the palace gates, I'll catch up with you."

"Mother—"

"Hurry!"

He listens to her, as he usually does—and Hudie searches every nook and cranny, trying desperately to find a sword strong enough to carry them both, until—

"Zhu Xin," she whispers, snatching the steel blade from its sheath, dark metal glinting up at her in the candlelight.

They've had to use torches throughout the day for the last week—smoke blocking out nearly all of the sunlight, plunging the kingdom of Wuyong into near constant darkness.

But now, she feels a glint of hope.

She can fix this. She can save him. She—

BOOM!

The explosion is so sudden, so violent, that it knocks her to the ground, her head smacking against a nearby doorframe, blood dripping down from her temple.

No...

The world is spinning and unsteady as she staggers to her feet, Zhu Xin clutched between her fingers.

She has to...

...The gates.

Hudie's heart clutches with fear as she flees through the palace corridors, shoes smacking against marble floors.

She sent her boy to the palace gates.

If she can just get there fast enough, they can go. They can start over. They can find Bolin, and then they—

The moment she bursts through the palace doors, she calls for him. “SAN LANG!”

The Queen of Wuyong whips her head around, screaming.

“SAN LANG!”

“Mom!” She whips around, head pounding with pure terror, and—

She lifts her head towards the sky, Zhu Xin trembling in her hand.

The bridge.

A shining bridge, made from golden spiritual power, carrying the people of Wuyong straight up into the sky.

And as she peers through the crowds of people walking through it—she sees San Lang.

Her San Lang, waving to her excitedly.

“HE DID IT!” The prince cries. “HE REALLY DID IT!”

And even as the volcano explodes in the background, turning the sky and fields around them into a sea of flames, Hudie feels a lurch of hope—and shame.

For not believing in her husband. For not having faith in her god. She takes one trembling step forward.

Ready to follow her son to the heavens, if that’s what she has to do. As long as they’re together, none of the rest of it matters.

As long as Hudie has her son, she can endure anything. So long as she — There are some things in the world that a mother should never have to see.

Hudie sees it, when the golden light forming the bridge begins to flicker. Sees it, when it’s foundations begin to crack.

Even sees the look in her son’s eyes, when he first realizes what’s about to happen. Then, there’s screaming—as everyone begins to fall. Horrible screaming.

The kind that comes from a place so deep inside, you can't find a way to stop it. Screaming that strikes the Queen to her core, makes her wish it would just end, but—

Oh.

That's just her.

She's screaming.

"...SAN LANG!" She shrieks, throwing the sword under her feet.

It surges into the air, carrying the queen with it as she tries, with every bit of strength she has, to be quick enough. Not to be too late, to get to him in time. That's all that matters. If she can just get to him, nothing else—

But she has to watch. And so does Hua Cheng.

Watch, as her son reaches back for her, crying out, in his final moments, for his mother.

And Hua Cheng can see it in the young man's eyes—

He didn't think he was going to die. Not for a moment. He truly believed that Hudie was going to catch him. The way she always had before.

Hudie has to watch, as San Lang slips past her outstretched fingers, unable to reach him by only a few meters. Has to watch, as he plunges past her, through the smoke, into...

Darkness.

Nothing but endless black, raging darkness.

"...NO!"

Her howling out screams the volcano.

"ZHU XIN!" She flails, hair falling from it's fine combs and elegant styles, falling around her, "ZHU XIN, SAVE HIM! LEAVE ME, SAVE HIM!"

But the blade will not leave it's master. Will not destroy itself by plunging into the smoke below.

Where only inferno and death awaits.

Slowly, then rather quickly—the blade begins to retreat. Even when she tries to leap from it, to plunge herself into the flames down below, following her son—her feet are locked against the pommel.

It won't let her go.

"SAN LANG!" She screams, fingers trembling, reaching.

But they find nothing. Nothing but smoke and ash—so scorching, it burns her fingertips down to the bone.

Zhu Xin pulls her from the inferno, spirits it's master away, all the way to the border of Wuyong, depositing her onto the grass as she watches the lava flows in the distance

Hudie doesn't know how long she screams. Long enough, that she feels parts of her throat break and tear. So long, that she begins spitting up blood.

It's all gone.

Her home. Her kingdom. Every single member of her family. Probably Mei Nianqing, too.

All of it—just gone.

The former Queen of Wuyong listens, as the world begins to curse her husband. Watches, as they tear down his temples. As they begin to pray to other gods in his stead.

She has no time for that. No energy or heart left for hating the man.

There's only one thing left, now.

It's a long way to the central plains, and Tonglu Hudie makes every step of it on foot. Until her shoes split, and the soles of her feet begin to bleed. Her legs threaten to give out so many times, but...

Eventually, she finds herself standing in a small city. The newly founded city, ruled by the clan of Xie. The city of Xianle.

People mistake her for a beggar. Shove her to the ground and ignore her when she tries to ask, her voice rasping and difficult to understand, where the young lord might be.

Hudie begs, and no one listens.

People recognize a refugee from the kingdom of Wuyong when they see one. Cursed, bringing bad luck and disaster wherever they go—just like the god they once worshipped.

But eventually, after a week of begging in the streets—she sees him. The first prince of Xianle, Xie Bolin.

A young man now, recently come of age. Tall, strong—with long dark hair, and piercing blue eyes, a blade at his side.

Hudie watches the way the people of the city adore him, obeying his every word. Sees how thoughtful and fair he is—how decent and caring.

Just like his father.

He was the one who found her, in the end. Offering her a drink of water, some bread. “Are you alright, miss?” The young man murmurs, not unkindly, helping Hudie drink from his flask. “What brings you here?” Then, he notices the sword strapped to her back. “...Are you a Taoist?”

“...I’m looking for my son,” Hudie admits, her voice roughened and hoarse, face nearly permanently stained with soot and ash, along with the occasional burn scar. “I lost him—a very long time ago.”

Bolin frowns, helping her drink. “...Perhaps I can help? I know everyone here.” Life offers Hudie one last kindness—but it’s one that she cannot accept.

She already sees the way that the people on the street watch the prince. With admiration and respect, yes, but...

They seem frustrated by the fact that he’s even speaking to someone from Wuyong.

The only thing Hudie could do, by telling him now—would be to cause Bolin pain and suffering.

“...No,” she whispers, offering the prince a shaky smile, taking one last drink of water. “You’re kind, but he...isn’t here.”

Seeing him, her only child that grew into a man, is enough.

Knowing that he is safe, that he is loved, and he is happy...that is enough.

It has to be.

If Hudie stayed with him, now—it might bring her brief happiness, she knows it would. But it would only bring tragedy to Bolin.

And she loves her son so much more than she loves herself.

She leaves Xianle the very same day, Zhu Xin strapped to her back. And she goes to the only place that she can. The only place in the world that is left for her.

Slowly, Tonglu Hudie returns to the smoldering remains of Wuyong. Only ash now, far as the eye can see.

All she wanted, when she returned, was to find her son's bone ashes. But now, in this environment—that seems nearly impossible.

Hua Cheng watches the fallen queen search the ruins of her kingdom—constantly fighting hordes of demons, goblins, and the like.

She's relentless.

Hua Cheng cannot count how many demons are felled by the blade Zhu Xin. How many days she spends wandering the barren landscape, surviving only on roots and berries. Watches as she kneels in the remains of her garden, finding the only living thing that remains.

A lily seed.

Slowly, she tucks it back into the earth, burying it beneath the ashes—giving the plant a small drink of her water to help it establish. Using the last of what she has left to help it grow.

And then, ironically enough, a student fulfills her teacher's expectations.

BOOM!

When she opens her eyes again, it's before a shower of golden light and applause.

Kneeling in the middle of the heavens, watching as people cheer and clap for her.

Her, Tonglu Hudie, the fallen Queen of Wuyong, now ascended as a goddess.

The first and only Martial Goddess.

But when she looks around, taking in the sights around her—she knows.

Any one of these people could have saved her son. Could have protected her boy.

They simply chose not to.

Hua Cheng realizes, watching the scene—

This isn’t the same heavenly capital that he saw before.

Tonglu Hudie doesn’t take exactly the same path as her future student. She doesn’t take one look at the heavenly capital, then cast herself back down, no.

Before the blessing of Immortality can take hold of her, she unsheathes Zhu Xin.

The Queen of Wuyong doesn’t slit her own throat, or shatter her own sword with grief, no.

She plunges the blade into her own heart, with all of the heavens watching.

Tonglu Hudie always practiced as a cultivator—but she never wanted to be a goddess. Never desired to ascend.

All she wanted, in the end, was a peaceful, human life. One spent in the company of those that she loved.

When she wakes again, Zhu Xin is laying on the ground by her side, resting in the ashes. And it takes a moment for Tonglu to realize that she did not survive after all.

Her body is no more—but her soul has returned, taking the form of a savage ghost.

“…” Hudie looks up into the ash-covered sky, tears slipping down her cheeks.

Let me die.

Let me see my sons, let me die.

It's only then, that she realizes that someone is holding her.

The fallen Crown Prince of Wuyong. The prince born under a cursed star. Her husband, the exiled god, Jun Wu.

And before she can even recoil from him, he holds her tighter, whispering— "I found him."

Hudie freezes, eyes welling up with tears.

"I found San Lang, my love."

The ghost stumbles through the ashes, all while her husband—who, clearly, from Hua Cheng's vantage point, is deep in mourning for her —leads the way.

It wasn't until now, that the crimson ghost saw how deep and genuine the Crown Prince's love for his wife was. And now...

Watching Tonglu Hudie become this broken, shadow of a thing—watching her haunt the earth, unable to find peace—for the first time, Hua Cheng sees something else in Bai Wuxiang's eyes.

The occasional flash of madness. Of anger, hatred, and cruelty. "Here," the god whispers.

Hudie sinks to her knees, shoulders slumping as she stares at the object before her, gleaming as it pokes through the asses.

A small, silver hair pin.

'Everything dies, my love.'

She reaches with trembling fingers, pulling it out of the ashes.

Shaped like—like—

'Then I'll just become a butterfly!'

Her fingertips trace over the delicately shaped wings, tears pouring down her cheeks.

'They always come back.'

This world is cruel. It's hungry and stupid, and it takes without

reason.

'And I'll always come back, too!'

Her eyes close.

This world is cruel, and it's hungry and it's stupid. It takes without reason. Devours beautiful, innocent things—simply because it can. Because it's too oblivious to know better.

It's a world of men. Selfish, stupid men.

This grief is different, almost frantic.

Help me.

Hudie doesn't feel like a mourning mother. She knows that pain well. it's all consuming, never ending weight. This—this feels different.

This feels like being haunted. Like being tortured. Like she's a small creature, being toyed with by a monstrous beast that won't let go.

She doesn't know who she's screaming to—what she's begging for. Maybe her son's return. Maybe to Rest In Peace, or just—oblivion.

Help me.

Help me, help me, help me.

Help me, help me, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help me!!!!

She tears at her hair, screams and wails at the sky, and her pain reduces her into this inhuman thing. This unthinking, unspeaking mass of screams and tears, pounding her fists into the ground, desperate for it to end, for it to stop.

It's so much, she can't—she can't— It hurts

It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts...it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS!!!!

Now, it doesn't matter how long she screams, or how much she begs for relief. None will come. She's already dead. Her son is already gone. Everything—

Everything is gone, now. Only ashes remain.

Hua Cheng watches the look in Bai Wuxiang's eyes.

Slowly building hatred.

Watches as he stops viewing his wife, the mother of his children, as a forger of blades, but rather...

Hudie shudders, unable to breathe, unable to think coherently—when Jun Wu's hand lands on her shoulder.

"I know how it happened," the god murmurs— And the ghost freezes.

Slowly, her tears stopped, she turns her head to look up at Jun Wu, eyes wide, almost numb in their need to feel something other than pain. Anything, no matter how monstrous it's replacement might be.

"What?"

"The bridge," Jun Wu explains. "I know how it fell. I know why."

Hua Cheng watches the god tell her, watches as he spins a story of jealous, petty gods. Creatures that wanted more prayers and wealth for themselves.

Tells Hudie how they lied. How they told him they would give their spiritual power to the bridge when the time came.

But they lied, and they never did.

They lied, and Hudie's boy, her joy, the last good thing in this world—

Her San Lang died.

She clutches the butterfly hairpin in her hands, and she curses them. Bitterly, from the very depths of her heart, Hudie curses them.

"...We can make them pay," her husband offers. "For what they've done. But I..."

His hands land on her shoulders, squeezing gently.

"I need your help, my love."

Her body shakes with grief, breaths ragged—but still there's steel in them when she replies—

“Name it.”

Jun Wu no longer sees his wife as one that forges blades—but rather, he begins to see her as a weapon herself.

Tells her that they can bring the heavens itself to it’s knees—but that to do it, he’ll need the proper blades.

One by one, the former Queen of Wuyong forges them.

In the volcano that burned her kingdom to ash, she turns the mantle itself into a kiln, and with every swing of her hammer, she brings new creations to life.

But now, she isn’t only creating blades. Cursed tools and weapons of the like, no. Now, she forges monsters and demons.

Takes the rabid souls from the air around her, beating them down into something new. Something useful.

Bai Wuxiang may have burned the heavenly capital to ash, yes—but Tonglu became known as the executioner of the gods.

Clipping their wings, tearing their golden palaces down.

They whispered in fear of her kiln, the monsters that would burst free from it and tear at the world.

The Kingdom of Wuyong was slowly forgotten—and the only thing that was left behind, in the end, was the volcano that laid waste to it.

The Kiln of Monsters. Mount Tonglu.

The Queen of Wuyong died in the streets of the heavenly city, many years ago. She watched, later, when her husband abandoned her body at the foot of the kiln—

Mei Nianqing came for her.

She watched from the shadows as her lover mourned. Not like Bai Wuxiang had, before.

Mei Nianqing cradled her in his arms as he wept—but he made no promises of revenge. Made no efforts to explain how Hudie’s children had been taken, or why.

He only created a grave for her, keeping a portion of her ashes—

burying the rest. And he made a promise.

That he would protect their son, Bolin. Even if the boy could never know the truth. Hudie stood in the shadows, and she ached to go to him, to thank him.

Oh, in that moment—she could have rested in peace.

But Bai Wuxiang's words were already so deeply ingrained in her heart.

That the heavens were liars, thieves, and monsters. That their jealousy and hatred of her husband's success had led them to tear him down.

And with them, her boy.

Her beautiful, perfect boy.

Her San Lang.

Mei Nianqing called her name, and she could not answer.

Tonglu Hudie was dead. She died in the fields of Wuyong. Burned with her son, even if the streets of heaven would be stained by her blood a year later.

Now, all that remained was the savage ghost, the armorer of hell, Goddess of Mount Tonglu—

Zhao Beitong.

Named for the heavenly dynasty she toppled. For the city streets she stained red with her own blood, then the blood of the gods themselves.

She took her revenge, and used that anger. Tried to cram it into the aching gap that was left inside of her.

The part of her that was still a mother, desperately mourning her children. But nothing could ever seem to fill it.

There were moments of kindness that were offered to her, over and over again. Moments that Hua Cheng knows, watching the story unfold, would have saved Xie Lian.

He followed such a similar path, for a time—as a tool for the same demon. But all he needed was one person to show kindness. One person to prove that the world was capable of goodness.

But there was not enough kindness in the world to save Zhao Beitong.

And then, she learned the truth.

In the final days of the heavens, from the mouth of the final heavenly official.

Zhu Xin drags across the ground from one of her hands—and her hammer from the other. Eyes glowing red in the dark, nails like talons.

The former wind master cries.

“I-I’m sorry!” He weeps, scrambling backwards on the ground, his face streaked with blood. “We—We tried to brig you into the ranks, why are you—?!”

He howls with pain when her hammer slams into his torso, crushing several of his ribs, her face streaked with his blood.

“You think that makes a difference to me?” She questions, her voice cold—nearly unrecognizable from the way it was before “My children were already dead.” She raises the hammer again, “WHAT GOOD DOES YOUR ACCEPTANCE DO ME NOW?!”

“We—we should have helped! I-I know that now!”

The Wind Master sobs.

Maybe she’ll turn him into twin blades, the spinning sort. Or a fan, even. She might like that.

As she brings down the hammer again, he screams—

“WE SHOULD HAVE AGREED TO HELP, I’M SORRY!”

The rest of his ribs collapse with a sick crunch—but she stops.

“...You did agree,” she corrects him flatly. “You all agreed, and then you turned your backs on us.”

The Wind Master shakes his head vehemently, blood streaming down his chin. “No!” He croaks, his breaths coming in shattering wheezes, bloody foam spewing from his lips.

“H-How could we have answered so many prayers, if we were all helping him?! We— Wuyong was just one kingdom in the world, how could we abandon the rest of it to save them? We—we told him no!”

He coughs raggedly, broken bones grating together. “But—But we were WRONG, please—I—!”

Zhao Beitong’s fingers tremble as she stares down at him, trying to—Trying to understand.

She knows, logically, that the Wind Master cannot recover from his injuries. That a dying man has no reason to lie.

She remembers how insistent she was, when he asked about the bridge. That he could not do such a thing alone. That even to try was madness.

She remembers the doubt she felt, when he secluded himself. The same doubt that made her try to flee that day, with San Lang in tow.

And Zhao Beitong knows something else. Something in her soul.

San Lang would not have disobeyed her, in a moment like that. He would have waited for her at the gate, just as his mother asked. Not because he didn’t want to help—but because he wouldn’t risk being separated from her.

Now, she thinks back on that moment. That last day.

Seeing him on the bridge, with a palace guard holding his arm. Likely leading him over. She gave no such orders for anyone to take her son to the bridge—and there would be only one other being with the power to give such a command.

And oh, she can imagine what he was thinking.

That people would trust the bridge, if they saw the prince crossing it. Wouldn’t doubt it, if Jun Wu was willing to risk his own son.

Because what kind of father would risk his child’s life on ego alone? What kind of man would allow his own arrogance to blind him to the risk?

He probably did blame the heavenly officials. Probably meant every word, when he told his wife that it was their fault. That they did this.

But Jun Wu was the one who lied. He was the one who put their son on the bridge that day.

Her hammer falls to the ground with a clatter.

She sits, watching as the Wind Master takes his last breaths. The last heavenly official. The last creature that remains of this place—and she waits.

Waits, until he comes, surveying the destruction that they have wrought with—

With satisfaction.

“San Lang would have been—”

He falls silent, looking down at the blade sprouting from his chest. Shining black steel. Forged to avenge his own child.

The blade Zhu Xin.

When he looks up at his wife, his expression is one of utter shock. “You...You—!” The blade is yanked from his chest without mercy.

Only to be returned once again, with an even more vicious blow.

“You don’t get to say his name.” She whispers, hacking her head, pulling the blade from his chest again, watching as Bai Wuxiang drops to his knees, gasping from the pain. “Not to me. Not ever again.”

Her husband—her first student, the sweet, cocky young man she fell in love with, all those years ago, stares up at her, his lips parted with shock. “You...” he whispers, eyes narrowing. “Even you?”

Zhu Xin trembles in her hold, but Zhao Beitong doesn’t falter. “Even me.”

“Even when everyone else burned my temples, and prayed to others, you...” Bai Wuxiang parries her third attack, but is too wounded to deflect her fourth.

She knows every gap in his armor, after all. She was the one who forged it. “...You never turned against me. And now—!”

“It wasn’t that I prayed to someone else, Jun Wu.” His wife whispers, yanking the blade out for the third time, his blood spattering across the ground. “I stopped praying to anyone, long ago.”

She stopped praying when she realized no one would answer. That no one could.

“And now, there’s only one god left that’s responsible for the death of my son,” She continues, hitting him again, and again, and again. “You’ll be patient with me, won’t you? You said I could avenge him, didn’t you?!”

She pierces him over and over again.

Once for every layer of hatred that she forged into the blade.

Once, twice, three times. A dozen times.

A hundred times.

Zhao Beitong forged countless blades and spiritual devices over the course of her existence. So many demons, she eventually lost count.

Bai Wuxiang, the White Clothed Calamity, was the first monster that she ever created without purpose. Without intending to.

When she’s finished, she stops, breathing hard—her cheeks streaked with blood and smoke as she stares down at the man beneath her.

The prince who offered her the entire world. And in many ways—he gave it to her.

And now, he’s just a mass of blood on the ground, bleeding and broken—just like anything else.

Zhao Beitong kneels before him, whispering by his ear—

“You aren’t better than anyone.”

Even through the pain, his eyes widen slightly.

“I want you to know that.” Zhao Beitong continues, her eyes narrowed. “You are selfish, and arrogant, and greedy. And now—look at you.”

Look at his broken, trembling body.

“You are just as broken, and frightened as anyone else.”

Slowly, she rises to her feet—hair swaying in the breeze, wearing silk, bloodstained robes. “Everyone has left you, and you blame the world.

Scream and cry about how unfair it is.”

She leaves the sword Zhu Xin buried in his chest, stabbing deep into the earth beneath him.

“They left you because you weren’t worth following any longer.” She turns her back on him. “Everything you have done—you did it to yourself.”

And the same could be said for her—but she’s already living her own punishment. Desperate for it to end.

That’s where she leaves him.

Bleeding to death in the streets of the former heavenly capital as it burns. The last god, bleeding and burning with the heavens he was so desperate to reach.

She returns to the ashes of the home she once knew—and when she arrives, Zhao Beitong sees—

The lily seed…

The one she planted just before she ascended… It’s bloomed into a small field of white flowers.

She kneels among them, holding the pin in her hair. Mourning her old life. Her children. The man she loved.

And eventually, she finds herself surrounded by a pale, ethereal glow. Butterflies.

Not the same species as the sort that once bred in these lands, no. Those are long dead.

These butterflies flutter around her—landing on her head, her shoulders, her hands.

Made from pure spiritual power itself.

There are many different ways to forge a weapon.

Through blood, sacrifice, and death. Acts of great selflessness—or powerful, ancient curses.

How do you forge wraith butterflies?

How, you ask?

To manipulate pure spiritual power—you must understand it for what it is.

Cultivators don't. Gods never did, and nor do ghosts.

Spiritual Power isn't any different from any other form of energy that passes through the natural cycles of life and death.

Heat forms in the hearts of stars like their sun, shining down upon them—feeding the plants, which pass onto animals, then to humans—who all, in turn, decay and rot into plants once again.

Spiritual power is forged in the golden core of one's soul, cultivator or not.

It can be passed on through prayers or cultivation—or even resentment. Building up in the world around them. It sends gods to the heavens above, who take that energy and shine it back down with blessings and miracles for those who pray to them.

It can be carried in resentment when those humans become ghosts, still pouring that energy back into the cycle through curses and destruction.

Good or bad, it's all the same cycle. Different streams, all flowing in the same circular current.

And, eventually, those souls pass.

They enter the cycle once more—exploding across the universe in countless little supernovas, reincarnating into new stars. New golden cores, creating spiritual energy once more.

It took her a long time to understand that. Such a long time, to understand that dead isn't gone.

That somewhere out there, in the depths of the universe, is still her San Lang. Just a different star, now. She doesn't know where, or when—wouldn't now his face or voice, if she ever saw him again.

But somewhere, in this great, unforgiving void—he's there. You want know how to forge wraith butterflies?

You learn that ghosts are just spirit fires given shape. That the flames one bursts into upon death are simply the exposed edges of a soul.

And once you understand the shape of your soul, you can mold it. Forge it into new forms.

But to her, a soul is a wish. A hope. A constantly changing, living thing—being reshaped over and over again, in a never ending cycle of change.

A soul is a butterfly.

She sits among those butterflies now, the ever growing number, more and more forming as her core burns on.

Hua Cheng watches her, the Queen of the Ashes, her kiln slowly cooling and going dark, waiting for her soul to spark out. To explode into supernova, to reform.

Watches as Zhao Beitong desperately prays to Rest In Peace. But she goes on, and on, and on.

Across the world, an ill experienced smith tries to reforge himself. To break himself apart, and become something new.

But all he can do is split himself in two.

Hua Cheng watches, his eyes widening, as a bleeding, abandoned god takes on two forms.

A crying, white clothed heavenly calamity. Wearing his white robes, donning a new mask—the white, twisted visage that has long haunted Hua Cheng's nightmares.

And a smiling, handsome young prince.

Hua Cheng watches, and he understands. Watches the ascension of a new emperor.

The strongest martial god of their time, Jun Wu.

Unable to resign himself to the hideous, broken layers of himself that his wife peeled back with her final words to him. When he couldn't resolve the two, he simply...shed that half of himself. Denied it. Refused to look at it.

And then, people were worshipping him again. Praising him again. Once again, the world was exactly as it was supposed to be.

Except this time, the Heavenly Emperor was not a young prince with nothing to hide, nothing to fear.

Now, he had secrets.

Secrets to hide and keep.

And there’s a price, of course, when you split your soul in two.

Rising tension. Pressure that needs to be released, over and over again. If he was simply going to outpour that resentment onto the world, well. He’d be found out.

Instead, he makes good use of it.

Of all of the things Jun Wu took credit for over the years—all of her accomplishments, there is one that he lays at her feet, allows his wife to take all of the rewards for.

Zhao Beitong is blamed for the downfall of the last heavenly dynasty. A new generation of gods hunt her.

Curse her.

Call her the world’s first calamity.

Jun Wu takes the countless tools she forged for him through the years. His wars. His ascension. His downfall. His revenge.

And he uses them to arm his new soldiers, turning them against her. But none of them can kill her.

Zhao Beitong already killed her mortal body with a blade of her own creation. Her own weapons can’t hurt her now. Not anymore.

No matter how badly she wants them to. No matter how desperate she is for her suffering to end—it never does.

Her soul, for some reason, won’t let go.

She sits in the memory, on the edge of the kiln, watching the approaching army of heaven from the distance, and she whispers something—to herself, but Hua Cheng hears it anyway.

“I was also born under the star of solitude, you know.” Her luck could have been good, or bad.

Heavily sensitive to different sources of influence, varying between extremes. But in the end, it was always down to her own choices.

When Tonglu Hudie was a young girl, and the world was so wide, so open—two very different paths opened before her.

Each offered by two very different young men.

One built her a garden of butterflies. A place where they could bring their children.

God, in every day that has passed since then, Zhao Beitong has ached with regret. Wished she could have chosen that life. To go back.

No paths are set in stone in this life. Not when you're young. But as you grow older, you bind yourself to the choices you make. You are forced to live with your own mistakes.

Now, Zhao Beitong has become a butterfly, pinned inside a glass box. Watching, as Jun Wu seals her in.

She isn't the warrior she once was. Isn't the savage ghost that tore the heavens to pieces out of revenge.

It's been centuries—and she's old. She's tired. She wants to go. Wants —

She wants to Rest In Peace.

When her husband comes for her, she hopes he means to give her that.

Instead, with a smiling voice that tells her this is mercy, he's giving her new life, new purpose—

The man she gave her life to curses her.

Her, the Guoshi who taught him how to fight.

Her, the smith that forged the blades he used to ascend. Her, the wife who led his country.

Her, the mother of his children.

Her, the weapon used to enact his revenge.

He curses her. Binds her to the fields and hills of the mountain that she once called home. Strips her of the name she was born with, rather than the titles that he gave her.

When they were young, she often felt as though she couldn't speak against him. There were these invisible rules of society. Things that you could and could not do, and all of them bound her to silence.

Now, the curse forbids her from revealing to the world what he truly is.

In the same way that women like her are always punished for the secrets of the men that pin them down. Always forced to keep them.

She watches the the world, from the small bounds of her cage. She rages. She aches. She births many half formed monsters, sending them out.

Hoping that they'll tell the world the truth. That at the very least, if no one will bring Jun Wu down—someone will come to free her, to slay her. But...

They leave, and any memories of her husband blur. The truth always disappears. One, however, shines above the rest.

Not a mindless beast, no. A beautiful young ghost, with eyes like fire and hair like snow.

A calamity. One that could grow into a being just as powerful as her, one day. One that could set her free. One that could destroy the man that trapped her here.

But she knows...

When he leaves, he'll forget. He'll unleash himself upon the world, just like every other creation she's made for that man before now. He'll level cities. Murder children. Bring so much suffering.

And Zhao Beitong—she won't. She refuses.

She names him Zhang Wei.

After her first born.

He was the bastard son of a king who became a tyrant, executed to spare his family from the wrath of the people once their dynasty was toppled.

Now, she cradles him in her arms, like the mother he can no longer remember. Sings him stolen lullabies.

His eyes are dazed by the beauty of the wraith butterflies surrounding him, and he is at peace.

He is safe. He is loved.

That's when she clips the newborn dragon's wings, and swallows him whole.

She weeps after. Mourns him all over again. Until the valleys flood with her tears

Three centuries later, it happens again.

Another perfectly formed spirit—this one with eyes like the leaves on the trees at the very end of spring, and hair that curls and tangles in every direction.

Another calamity, capable of saving the world—or bringing it to ruin.

He was born in the kingdoms of the north to a quiet, loving home. Then, when the young boy showed potential as a cultivator, he was stolen away. Placed in chains, forced to fight in a far of kingdom, for people he did not know—until eventually, the young man died.

Cast aside and left to rot, like a hound that could no longer hunt. She names him Bolin, after her second born.

Watches him run and laugh, relishing in his newborn freedom—and she promises him, he will never have to fight someone else's wars again.

Zhao Beitong sees to that.

Time passes. It fades and wanes. Eventually, she begins to wonder if the age of calamities has passed. If now, her soul will slowly begin to fade away—and finally, she can re-enter that cycle once more.

But the gates of Tonglu rattle open once more, stronger than ever before.

And when she sees a young, crimson ghost—falling back down from heaven like a cursed falling star, she knows.

That the cycle she is trapped in is not one that can be broken. It will repeat—over and over again.

She knows, the moment Hua Cheng stands before her, how it will end.

When she opens her eyes, now at the end of her chain of memories, she expects to find herself standing in the center of the kiln—and for a new ghost king to stand before her, ready for the slaughter.

But she isn't.

Zhao Beitong slowly turns her head, glancing around.

She isn't trapped in, surrounded by walls of white marble.

There's no surrounding, all encompassing heat.

No, there's just...

Her heart beats unsteadily in her chest for the first time in a thousand years. A garden.

With flowers of every color—but so many blues and purples.

What...?

Slowly, she kneels down, reaching out with trembling fingers, taking in the sight of the blooms beneath her fingers. How soft and warm the petals feel beneath her fingertips.

Not a dream. Not a memory. This is something different, it's...

There were so many things she forgot over the years. So gradually, she never even realized it.

Hudie couldn't remember the way the wind felt on her cheeks anymore. How the air tasted, immediately after the rain.

Forgot the fresh smells of the forest. Slightly wild—but clean.

Hudie forgot how moonlight is something you can feel against your skin, shining down on you through the night.

She tilts her head back with a smile, her face young—unlined by years of torment and grief.

And above—she realizes—

Hudie forgot what real butterflies looked like.

How many different colors they could be. Some with broken, fractured wings—and yet, every single one of them is perfect.

It’s…this is…

She breathes in the air, feels the wind on her face, heart pounding, trying so very hard to remember more, to feel more—

“Mama!”

Her entire body freezes, eyes widening—and for the first time in so, so long, she feels —feels—

At first, she chokes the name out under her breath, but when she tries again, it’s clear —desperation in every syllable.

“S-San Lang?!”

She whips her head around, and— There he is.

Small and gangly, a braid of messy dark hair tucked over his shoulder in a loose braid. Amber eyes sparkling up at her with mischief, a slightly sharpened canine poking through the right corner of his mouth.

He takes a step forward, arms clasped behind him, shoulders thrown back

Even now, playfully mimicking his mother’s posture, but—when he smiles, it aches with affection.

Love—and so much sadness.

“I came home,” he murmurs, staring up at her. “Like I said I would.”

After so long of feeling nothing but pain and rage—

Hudie’s eyes flood with tears.

“S-San Lang—” She sobs, stumbling forward, sweeping the little boy up into her arms, shoulders shaking as she clutches him to her, kissing his head, his hair, his nose, every part of him that she can reach. “Oh, San Lang, I—I love you, I’m—I’m so sorry, I —!”

The little boy wraps his arms around her neck in return, hugging her tight. “I love you too,” he whispers as his mother weeps against his hair. His voice is soft—lacking the exuberance she remembers. The mischievous playfulness. And, after a moment—

“…I’m sorry.”

Hudie shakes her head, arms trembling as she holds him close, hands rubbing his back, pressing her cheek against his hair. “N-No, what should you—what should you ever be sorry for, my love?”

“...I wasn’t a good son,” he whispers, his tone unreadable. “I always made trouble.”

His mother lets out a choked laugh, shaking her head. “Y-you were perfect,” she reassures him, cradling the boy close in her arms. “It—It was the best trouble of my life, I promise.”

He doesn’t speak again, pressing his cheek against her chest—and she holds him tighter, weeping.

Around her, the clearing is full. Mei Nianqing stands behind her, helping little Bolin stretch up on his toes, trying his very hardest to catch butterflies.

There’s a young man with dark hair, leaning against a tree, playing a small hand flute, watching his family happily.

Hudie doesn’t know how, but she knows—it’s the youth Zhang Wei would have grown into, had his soul not been stolen away.

Her family is here.

She closes her eyes, letting out shaky breaths, clutching San Lang against her.

Her family is here.

Her children—they’re here.

“I’m sorry,” San Lang repeats again, hugging her tighter, his eyes squeezing shut— and again, Hudie reassures him that there’s nothing to forgive.

“I’m sorry,” he won’t stop saying it, trembling in her arms, tears pouring down his cheeks.

“Mom—I’m sorry!”

Her mind is clouded.

Confused.

Because why? What on earth should he ever be sorry for?

Just as she's about to pull back and ask him, reassure him, tell him that everything's alright, that she's hear now, and there's no need between them to ever say sorry—

There's pain. Stabbing, sharp pain.

In the side of her neck, like she's being ripped apart, blood gushing down over her shoulder, down the side of her robes.

Around her, her family doesn't react. There's still happy giggling—the gentle notes of a flute, playing the sweetest song she's ever heard.

And more pain.

When Hudie looks down, her chest heaving with sharp, agonized gasps—

San Lang stares up at her, blood dripping from his jaws, eyes burning like twin cursed stars.

And he whispers again, "I'm sorry." Oh.

Hudie clutches the side of her neck. "I'm sorry, Mom, I-I'm sorry."

Somewhere, beyond the walls of this illusion, she can hear the sounds of something ripping apart. A small creature, slowly being devoured by the jaws of a newly formed beast.

Isn't someone going to stop it? She— Oh.

Hudie's eyes go half-lidded.

That's her.

"I'm sorry."

She's being devoured.

"..." Her fingers tighten around the side of her neck, looking around the clearing at the soft, domestic scene before her.

It's peaceful here. It doesn't hurt.

"...Can I stay here?" She whispers.

The little boy stares up at her, expression unreadable.

"Yes," he replies, with lips stained by the blood of his own mother. "I'll keep you here, until the end."

The illusion flickers, for just a moment.

"Until I can set you free."

She's laying on the floor of her kiln, staring at the endless cavern overhead. Watching.

Hoards of silver wraith butterflies, flighting another ethereal beast—also formed out of spiritual power.

This time, a dragon—spewing flames of pure energy itself. It's...

There's a faint smile on her face, as her third son, her favorite child, cradles her in his arms.

"You learned how to do it," she whispers, lips trembling as her form starts to fade, bit by bit. Too weak, now, to keep its shape—too much of her spiritual power has been devoured.

It's beautiful.

And Zhao Beitong is so, so proud.

Birth is always a terrifying process.

The action of a host being ripped apart in order to bring in new life. An inherently violent cycle—but you never fear the creature that will spring forth.

Because it is yours, and it is part of you.

A new ghost king stares down at her, a single tear dripping down his cheek.

The blood of the mother who forged him staining his lips.

"I'm sorry," he breathes, watching her slowly fade away. "I'm so sorry."

Zhao Beitong closes her eyes with a tired smile, shaking her head.

"You aren't...supposed to apologize when you win, boy."

But this doesn't feel like winning. This feels like losing something that he never truly had.

“Don’t…” Her eyes blink once, before slipping shut one final time. “Don’t disappoint me, San Lang.”

Hudie has never been afraid of dying, or moving on.

There is no such thing as true destruction. Only changing into something new. When she fades away, there’s a smile on her face.

A soul is a wish. Something that drives you. That makes you hold on, often against all reason.

Souls can grow, they can break—and they can change.

“I won’t,” Hua Cheng whispers, a solemn oath, his head bowed.

If you asked Hudie—a soul is a butterfly.

His arms are empty—and when the Goddess of the Kiln opens her eyes again, she sees the sky.

Hears laughing, and the notes of a flute. Holds her youngest child close.

“San Lang,” she whispers, a true smile on her face, and finally, for the first time in so long—

Nothing hurts.

There’s no pain.

No loss, no fear, no wars.

Just her family.

And Tonglu Hudie never has to leave again.

Hua Cheng stands in the Kiln—alone.

Holding a butterfly.

It stands between his fingertips delicately—the last of the horde wielded but the Goddess of the Kiln.

Wings gently flapping, staring up at him, as if waiting.

For the first time in his life—Hua Cheng has something to mourn other than himself. And no one mourns like a ghost.

Hua Cheng bows his head—and it flies away.

He watches as it drifts across the cavern, towards the slowly opening doors of the kiln.

It drifts through the gates, just as the sun begins to rise over the horizon of the Kingdom of Wuyong for the first time in years.

The Dragon he crafted slowly sinks back down, disappearing back into his form. And with it, comes power.

So much power, that the newly formed ghost king is startled by it—thrumming in every inch of his body. Power, resentment, and...

Warmth.

Hua Cheng has only ever knelt before one man. Prayed to one god. There is only one that he would ever allow to chain him down—for the very reason that he never would.

But now, he bows—his hands clasped before him in a gesture of deep respect.

“...Thank you, Guoshi Tonglu.”

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY:

[image]

(Zhao Beitong and San Lang)

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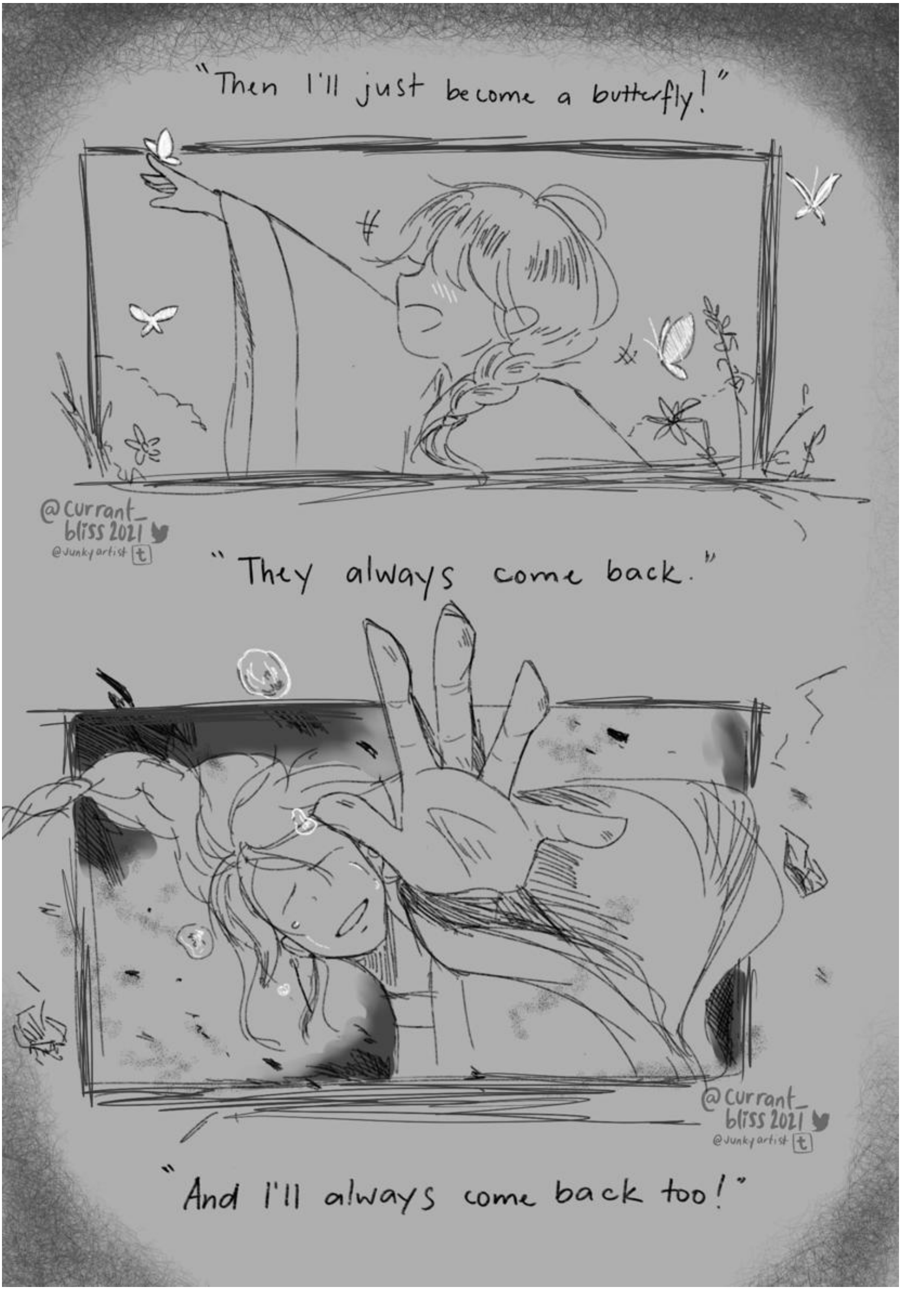
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(The Death of San Lang)

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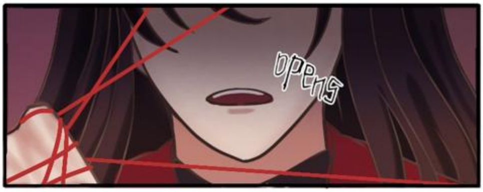

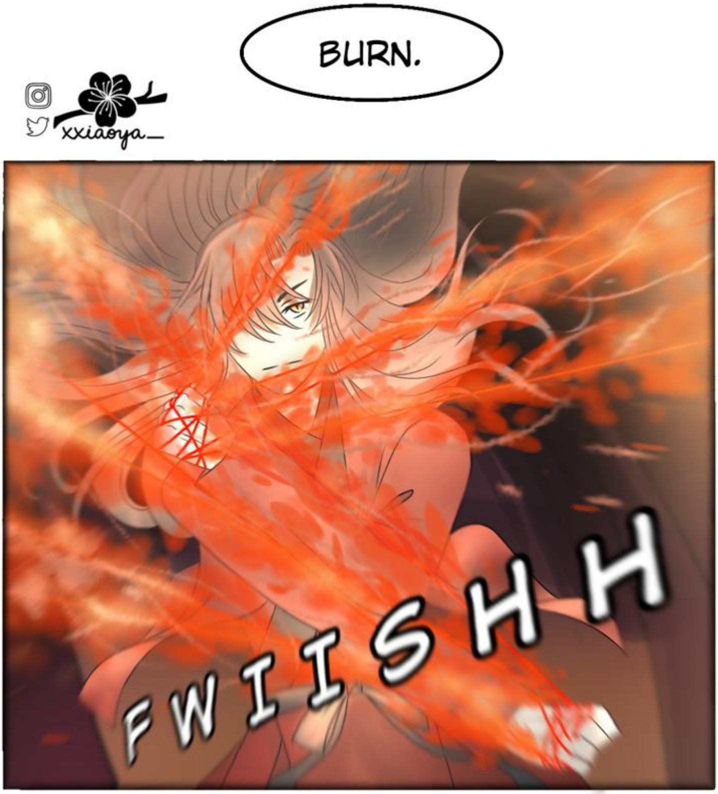
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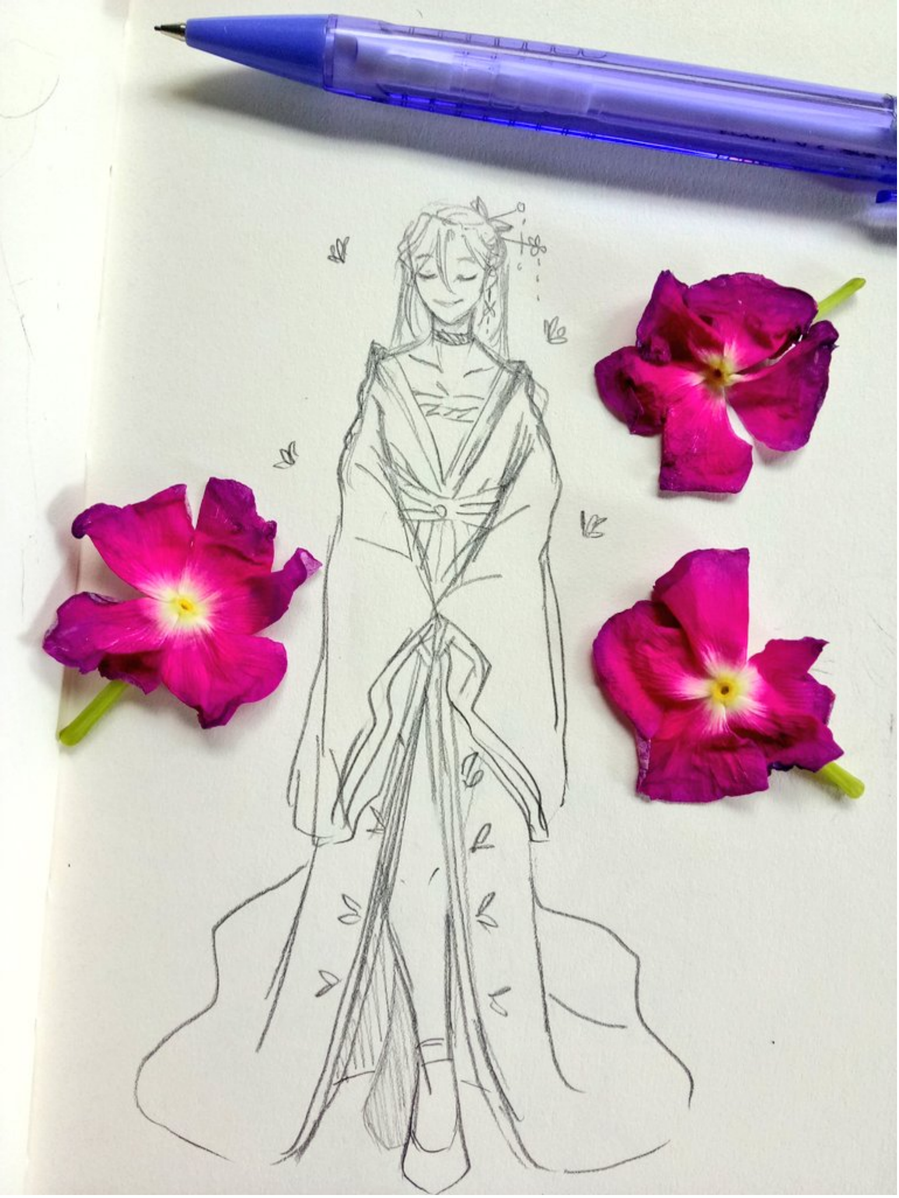

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to Pri, Kat, Lace, Seong and Envy for allowing me to share their beautiful work, and for creating it to begin with! I'm so, so grateful!

xoxo, Evie!

Metamorphosis

Chapter Summary

When he leaves his place, he'll forget.

He'll keep his memories of Hudie—but he'll forget the man who cursed her.

He'll forget the mirror image of Bai Wuxiang, the author of this horrible, sick variation of a fairytale—

The Heavenly Emperor Jun Wu.

Chapter Notes

You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

This story also has some spotify playlists for those who want some fun listening while reading!

No Paths Are Bound: The Playlist
Zhao Beitong's Playlist
The Wu Ming Playlist

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When he lifts his head, he turns away from the door—not exiting the Kiln immediately, no.

Before he does, there is one lesson he wants to make sure he doesn't forget—curse or not.

Deep in the depths of the caverns beneath the mountain, the Ghost King finds something.

Long since abandoned and forgotten.

A hammer, stained with blood and soot, reeking with resentment and power.

Hua Cheng lifts the spiritual tool between his fingers, glancing down at the scimitar, hanging by his waist—

When he smiles, E-Ming trembles with nervous energy.

He returns to the main chamber of the kiln, the blade E-Ming in one hand, the hammer of Guoshi Tonglu in the other. He lifts his scimitar in the air, willing it to hover in front of him at waist height, gripping the hammer with both hands.

When he leaves his place, he'll forget.

He'll keep his memories of Hudie—but he'll forget the man who cursed her.

He'll forget the mirror image of Bai Wuxiang, the author of this horrible, sick variation of a fairytale—

The Heavenly Emperor Jun Wu.

He looks up at the walls of the kiln, drumming his fingers against the handle of the hammer, his eyes flashing red, like the flames of damnation itself, whispering—

"Burn."

Upon his command, like a bloodstained inheritance, the fires of Mount Tonglu spark to life.

CLANG!

With each swing of the hammer, he embeds another layer of the Kiln's spiritual power into E-Ming, making the blade another measure stronger than it was before.

CLANG!

The newly formed muscles in his arms tends with the effort, straining against his sleeves, the heat scorching

CLANG!

With each new layer, he adds memory, violence, and power. Once, twice, three times. A dozen times.

A hundred times over.

CLANG!

When Hua Cheng leaves this place, he will forget, yes. But E-Ming won't.

And spiritual tools, as Hua Cheng's Guoshi taught him...

...They're what you make of them.

By the time he's finished, the spiritual weapon that sits in his hand is a far cry from it's former self.

Longer—wickedly sharp, with a reformed hilt. Absolutely radiating bloodthirst and menace.

And, etched into it's blade...

Are butterflies.

After two years, the kiln of Mount Tonglu reopens.

A small group of survivors sit in the shadow of the mountain, having developed awareness of their situation, but unsure of where to go.

So, they waited.

For two years, they waited.

When the doors screech open, they jump.

"...Bao?" Shuo mumbles, holding the little toddler in his arms closer, watching the mountain gates with wariness. "...What's that?"

The eldest ghost frowns—barely more than a small child himself, but always trying to be brave. "I don't know, but everyone watch out—"

Clink!

They all stop, staring with wonder at the sound of what sounds like a small bell, tinkling softly in the night.

Yanlin clutches her stuffed rabbit, whipping her head all around, mumbling prayers under her breath. To the only god that's ever answered her, to—

There's light.

Soft, ethereal light, floating in front of her face—even as the sun, the first sunrise they've had in years, is slowly setting back over the horizon.

A butterfly, drifting through the twilight.

The little ghost watches with wonder, trying to reach out and catch it, but…

It slips away.

All of the children turn back towards the mountain then, just in time to see a figure slowly descending the slope.

Dressed in crimson robes, with black trousers and fine, leather boots—silver chains and bells attached to them, tinkling softly with each step.

Impossibly tall and broad, with silver vambraces over his forearms, and matching finery around his neck—all etched with the same silver butterflies as the one the little girl saw, just now.

A black patch covering one eye, and a scimitar at his waist—curved, and wickedly sharp.

It's a sight that will strike terror into the hearts of men for centuries to come. But in this moment, it makes the little ghost smile, throwing her hands up with excitement.

"HUA CHENGZHU!" She cries, jumping. "It's Hua Chengzhu!"

"Gege!" Shuo gasps, leaping to his feet.

The children rush to the new Ghost King's side when he reaches the foot of the mountain, jumping with excitement around him, asking a thousand questions,

"Where did you go for so long?!"

"We tried to leave, but we don't know the way!"

"What are you gonna—?"

Shuo falls silent when a hand lands on top of his head, gently ruffling his hair—and that voice is there again, the same one as he remembers, but…

Deeper than before. Ringing with an authority that the young man has never heard before.

"Don't be afraid."

He looks at the group of children around him, a soft smile on his face. A newfound appreciation, now, for how precious little ones can be.

"I know the way."

Yanlin watches, her head tilting to the side with curiosity as the Ghost King reaches behind his back, offering…

A lantern. A small, red lantern, glowing softly against the night.

She takes it between her hands, looking up at Hua Cheng with wide, curious eyes. "… Okay," she whispers, falling into step behind him.

They all do, a line of red lanterns, slowly drifting through the night.

CLACK!

"…Oh for the love of the gods, I'm not letting you roll again." There's a groan, and the sound of pleading—

"C'mon! I'm just having a bad go of it today, let me give 'em an extra shake, it won't be so bad!"

"How many extra shakes have I given you at this point?!"

Fai frowns, puffing his cheeks out. "I would do it if it was you, Xiang! Cut me a break!"

His friend throws his hands up, nearly tipping backwards from his seat at the bench. "You think I haven't?! Have you LOOKED AROUND BUDDY?" He waves his arms at the chamber around them.

"I have given you so many breaks, that the ghost fire population has taken a SIGNIFICANT HIT around here! You know what happens if we run out?!"

They both gulp.

"…We could always try doing what the kid did," Fai mumbles, scratching his chin.

"Betting our entire souls? HA!"

Xiang shakes his head, the loose vertebrae in his neck rattling as he does so. "You first!"

"…" Fai looks down at the dice, taking a deep breath, "Here goes—!"

He gets tackled to the ground before he can actually throw, his friend snatching the dice from him.

“What are YOU THINKING, YOU MORON?!” Xiang wails, practically throttling him. “YOU HAVE HORRIBLE LUCK!”

Fai nods miserably, even as his head is flailing around under Xiang’s attack.

“YOU’RE JUST GONNA LEAVE ME HERE ALONE!? YOU KNOW I CAN’T STAND BEING LEFT WITH MY THOUGHTS!” Xiang cries.

“You’ve always been a sensitive soul, I know—”

“I’m not SENSITIVE!” Xiang sobs, sitting back and wiping his nose, dust falling from his eyes and nose instead of tears and snot. “I-I’m just a social guy, that’s all!”

“I know, Xiang!”

“A talker! Life of the party!”

“I know—!”

SCREEEECH!

They both stop, Fai patting Xiang’s arms in apology, Xiang strangling him, when they hear the sound of a door.

The same sound they heard a little over ten years ago, on the dot.

“...Is fighting not allowed?” Fai whispers nervously.

“They never said anything about that. Are we gonna get in trouble?!”

It’s not like there’s a rule book to eternal purgatory. That wouldn’t be fair!

After a pause, Xiang lets him go, leaping back with his hands thrown up. “He STARTED IT!”

“XIANG?!”

“I’m sorry, but YOU DID!”

They’re both scrambling and kowtowing, ready to apologize to the higher powers that be, to beg for their immortal souls, all of that—but then, the figure that steps through the door is…

A little girl, her hair pulled up into buns on either side of her head.

A stuffed rabbit in one hand, and a small red lantern in the other.

Yanlin tilts her head to the side, slowly examining the two men. "…I thought dumb people didn't go to heaven," she mutters, sniffing with distaste.

Xiang GAWKS, scrambling to his feet, "WHO ARE YOU CALLIN—?!"

He's in the middle of shaking his fist when he sees more red lanterns filtering in through the doorway, his eyes widening with shock.

Almost seventy children, each holding their own piece of light. And now, bringing up the career, is a familiar face.

"…Hua Cheng?!"

Xiang stops, his jaw dropping. "What are you doing back here?!"

"What happened to your eye?!" Fai questions, his own widening with concern. "Did you—?" He stops, eyeing the small toddler that the ghost is carrying on his hip. "… Make poor life choices?"

Shuo blinks, confused.

"…Hua Chengzhu, what's he talking about?"

The young man pinches the bridge of his nose with a sigh. "Don't ask." He mutters, walking past both of them—straight towards the red door.

"But really, why did you come back?" Xiang questions, following after him "Did you die again?!"

"He didn't die," Yanlin glares, crossing her arm, "He's a Ghost King now!"

Xiang glares right back at her. He doesn't like that one, he—

Suddenly, he and Fai both look at each other, their eyes bulging out of their heads. "…A GHOST KING?!" They shriek in unison.

"If that's the case—what the hell are you heading for that door for?!" Xiang mutters, following after him, "Why would you want to reincarnate now?!”

“Not me,” Hua Cheng answers coldly. “Now stop howling, before I decide to rip out your tongue.”

Xiang snaps his jaw shut quickly.

Hua Cheng kneels before the door to the other side, setting the little boy in his arms down at his feet. Those eyes look up at the Ghost King, silently trusting, no longer in pain—after suffering for so, so long.

“...I’m sorry,” the youth mutters. “That I couldn’t help your mom.”

The child doesn’t seem to blame him for that. If anything, it smiles up at him gratefully, patting Hua Cheng’s cheek softly with his palm.

“...” The ghost king leans into it for just a moment, before taking the little boy’s hand, lifting it with his own—and guiding it to knock.

Slowly, the crimson doors leading into the next life lead open—revealing nothing beyond but immense golden light, pouring over them.

Lang Ying’s son hesitates for a moment, cooing uncertainly, but Hua Cheng gives him a gentle push in the small of his back.

“Don’t be afraid.”

Finally, the boy steps forward—disappearing into the light. A few of the other children squirm behind him, staring at the gateway to the beyond with the same uncertainty.

“Is it...really safe?”

“It is,” Hua Cheng reassures them softly.

“And we get to start over again?”

“Yes.”

Most of them go—however slowly, many of them needing several reassurances, or for the Ghost King to hold their hand for a moment before they step through.

But in the end, nearly all of them pass through, moving on to the other side, disappearing in showers of golden sparks.

Hua Cheng watches, his face illuminated with a soft golden glow, the sort that almost makes his skin look alive again, and...

He can't help but smile. Because even if he doesn't know where his beloved is, even if Xie Lian doesn't know that he still exists—if he knew...

If Hua Cheng's god knew what he had done here today, he thinks that Xie Lian would be proud of him.

And that thought—it's enough to carry him through however long it takes to find him.

Finally—he sees that there are three children remaining.

Two brothers,and a girl with a stuffed rabbit in her hands.

"...What's the hold up?" He questions, raising an eyebrow.

"...Thank you for everything you've done," Bao mutters, bowing his head. "But I...if we go..."

He takes a deep breath. "I won't be Shuo's big brother anymore." He squeezes the younger boy's hand. "I don't want that."

Shuo beams up at Hua Cheng, showing that he's missing one of his front teeth. "You helped me find my big brother again! I'm not gonna let him go now."

When he looks at Yanlin, she just shrugs, holding her rabbit a little tighter. "I'm not ready to go yet. I don't have a special reason." She mumbles, pressing her face against its head. "But...if I'm ever ready..." She glances up at Hua Cheng, "Can you bring me back here again?"

Slowly...the ghost king smiles, "I can."

She takes his hand, walking by his side as the small group of ghosts walk back towards the door. "...Hua Chengzhu?"

He looks down at her, raising an eyebrow. "Hmm?"

"Why haven't you gone through that door yet?"

His gaze softens.

His eye seems to see everything, and at the same time—it's always so far away. Thinking about someone that it cannot see.

“Because I still have someone precious in this world,” he murmurs.

Yanlin smiles, holding his hand tighter, skipping.

“That’s a pretty good reason!”

The door swings open again—and this time, Hua Cheng glances back over his shoulder—his eye slightly annoyed, but more patient than it used to be.

“Are you two coming?”

The two gamblers stop and look at one another, for once—completely unable to believe their good fortune.

“…Yes!” Xiang snatches Fai up, scrambling after their former gambling partner, bones rattling as they run. “How…are you able to get that door open whenever you want?” The ghost frowns, following the ghost king through it. “Your luck must be off the charts…”

Hua Cheng smiles.

“…Luck is a choice, sometimes.”

Maybe not for everyone—but it is for him.

The small group of ghosts takes the stairway back up from the realm of the dead, the way lit by red lanterns, each step marked with the soft tinkling of silver bells.

A new Ghost King rises—and the world awaits, opening its doors for him once more.

Hua Cheng stares up at the clear blue sky, the first time he’s seen it in over ten years, his hand reaching for the small coral pearl, braided into his hair—twisting it, remembering a promise.

Not spoken out loud, but echoing in his every thought, word, and action. Wait for me.

Slowly, he raises the bead to his lips, walking down a new path, a small group of followers in tow.

I’m coming—just wait for me.

Now, a new era begins—

That of Crimson Rain Sought Flower.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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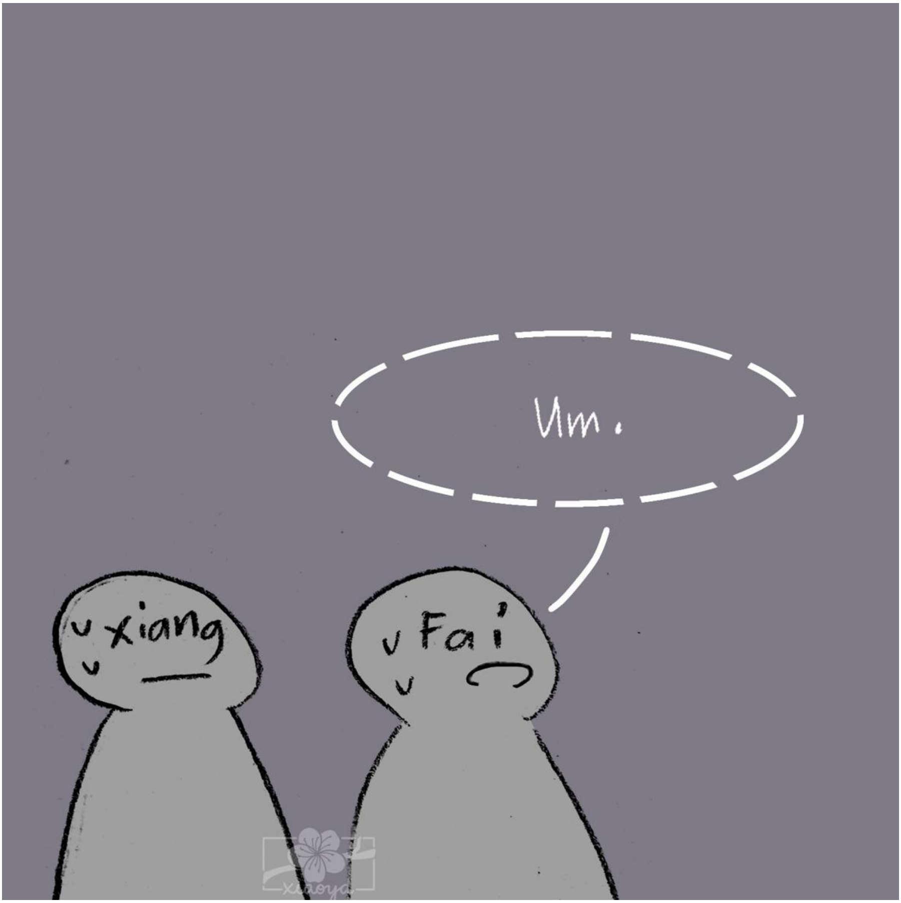
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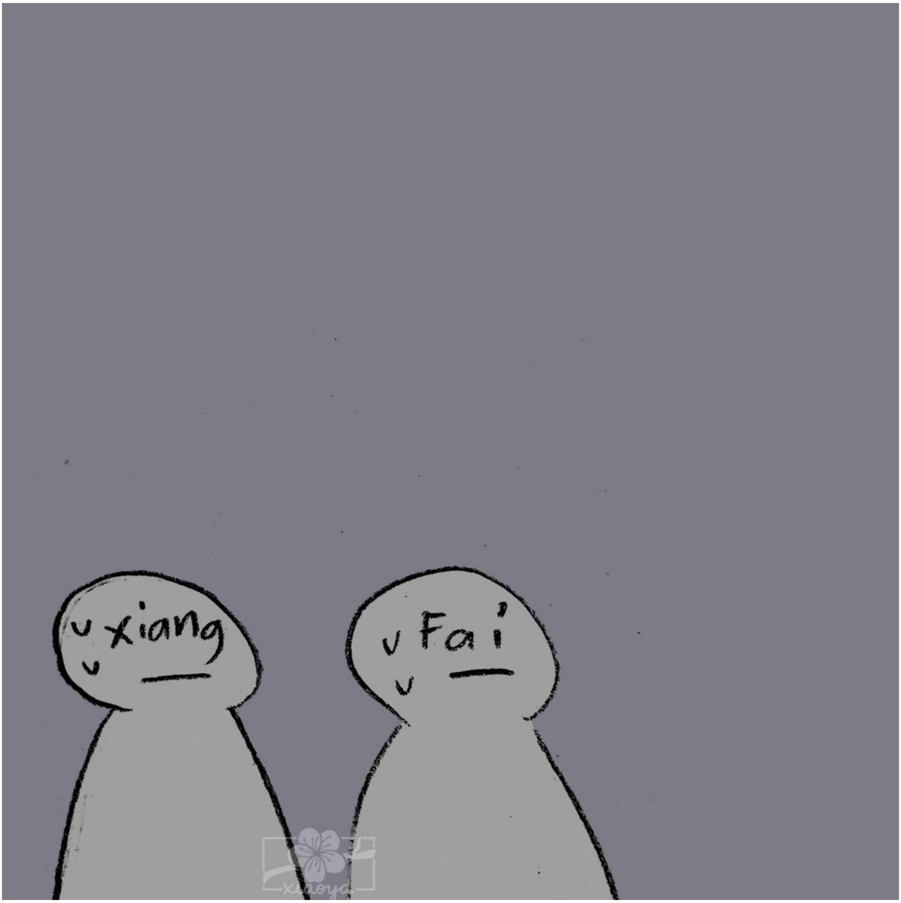
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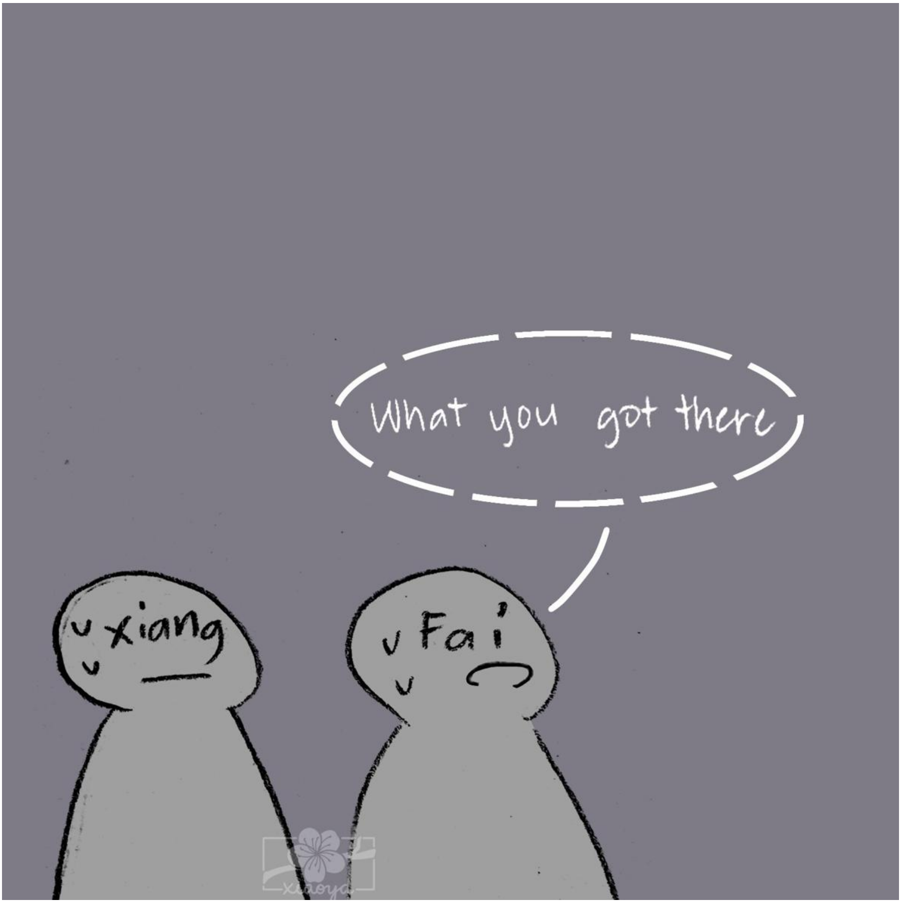
What you got there
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Fai
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None of your business
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THIS MARKS THE END OF THE MOUNT TONGLU ARC, MOVING INTO THE ARC OF "CRIMSON RAIN SOUGHT FLOWER / THE BURNING OF 33 HEAVENLY OFFICIALS."

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO CONTINUE READING FROM TIHS POINT ON VIA TWITTER, START HERE

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to Pri for your beautiful artwork, and allowing me to share it! I'm so grateful!

xoxo, Evie

A Prayer to a Ghost

Chapter Summary

“Are you gonna buy something or not?” A nearby voice interrupts rudely.

A little boy sits on top of a crate, staring at the young girl with an imperious glare, and she blanches slightly, fumbling in her purse for a few coins.

“And don’t short change him either! He’ll know.”

The village girl huffs, crossing her arms. “I wouldn’t ever cheat a blind person!” She says this, but she’s piling a few extra coins into her hand anyway. “How would you know, anyway?!”

The young man flushes with embarrassment. “Because I tried once, alright?!”

And it was embarrassing. Not just a little awkward, mind you—and honestly, it would have been easier if the weaver had just beaten him up for something—but no. No, instead, he cheerfully accompanied the boy home, then, in front of his parents, corrected the mistake.

The worst part was that he was so pleasant about it, explaining “he had a difficult time counting coins when he was young, too” and it was an “easy mistake to make.”

But the boy’s father knew that it wasn’t, and as punishment, he has to help with the stall for an entire month.

And let him tell you—It’s not actually as boring as he thought it was gonna be.

Chapter Notes

You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

⌛ **YEAR THIRTEEN** ⌛

“This work is absolutely exquisite…” The young woman muses, dragging her fingertips over the shawl in front of her. The materials are simple—but the flower pattern is quite intricate. “How did you manage to—?”

She stops awkwardly, realizing her rudeness.

The man sitting behind the stall smiles, the white bandage around his eyes gleaming gently in the sun, “It’s okay—I’m not sensitive about it. I wasn’t born this way—I didn’t lose my sight until recently.”

Well, not exactly recently, but you know.

“…O-Oh,” she laughs stiffly.

“So you can still remember things, and what it was like to…you know…” She clears her throat awkwardly.

“See?” Xie Lian questions, a pleasant smile still in place. He sounds amused, even as the young lady continues to poke around the stall. “Yes, I remember it pretty well.”

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But the boy’s *father* knew that it wasn’t, and as punishment, he has to help with the stall for an entire *month* .

And let him tell you—

It’s not actually as boring as he thought it was gonna be.

“And just trust me—it ain’t worth it,” he mumbles, his ears still stinging from the cuffing his parents gave him.

“How does he know, anyway?!”

“How should I know?! He’s magic!”

This prompts a string of nervous laughter from the young cultivator, waving that statement off, “Hahahaha, Heng, why are you being so silly? I’m just a simple Taoist, the martial arts training helps, that’s all.”

The girl crosses her arms. “What’s that got to do with coins?”

Heng throws his hands up, like she might as well be preaching to the choir. “And if he’s been blind for such a short time, now does he know how to do all this stuff? You’re telling me. The guy’s weird! And… kinda scary.”

Xie Lian’s eyebrow twitches as Heng leans over to her.

“I’ve seen his bandage move on it’s own, sometimes…”

“He doesn’t think I’m scary,” Xie Lian cuts the boy off with a smile. “If he did, he wouldn’t be so comfortable with getting on my nerves, would he?”

The girl thinks that over with a nod, handing over the coins.

(Heng, however, looks slightly nervous.)

“Thanks, mister!” She hums, throwing the shawl around her shoulders. “I’ll tell everyone back home about your shop!”

With that, she prances off—all while Xie Lian slips the coins into the pouch at his waist, reaching for his basket.

Heng leans forward eagerly, but the prince turns away, hugging the basket to his chest.

“Mr. Hua!” The boy whines, “I’m hungry!”

Xie Lian sniffs, pulling out a meat bun for himself, “Go get lunch from someone who isn’t weird and terrifying.”

Heng gawks at him, his jaw slack.

“I didn’t mean it! And I thought Taoists were supposed to be generous and forgiving!”

Well, sure. And usually, Xie Lian is—but he’s gotten rather used to being alone in the last ten years, and the forced, constant contact with Heng has gotten…

Grating.

There are moments when he actually enjoys the kid’s company—it reminds him of Hong-er, sometimes.

…But Hong-er’s occasionally difficult attitude was always cute, because it was never pointed in Xie Lian’s direction.

“Yeah, well—” he nibbles at his bun, “I got kicked out.”

Heng frowns, “Kicked out of what?!”

Xie Lian swallows, “Taoist school.”

The boy’s eyes widen, “There’s a school?!”

The nice thing about the bandages? No one can see when Xie Lian is rolling his eyes. “Yes. Very exclusive.”

“Why’d you get kicked out?”

“…” He huffs out a sigh

“I had a bit of a rough decade,” Xie Lian mutters, and his companion stares.

“…You say the weirdest stuff sometimes,” the kid grumbles, crossing his arms. “…I’m sorry, though, I shouldn’t have called you scary.”

He doesn’t take back the part about Xie Lian being weird, though

"…And I think it's cool that your bandage movies!" Heng adds, noticing the way one end of the wide silk band gives a little wiggle in excitement. "I won't tell anyone else about it again, promise!"

Mr. Hua is a really weird person, Heng has always thought that—but he's nice.

He showed up in the village four years ago, when Heng was still a little kid—and people around have gotten used to him for the most part.

That being said…he's odd. He knows everything, can do stuff that most blind people can't—

And he's completely alone, all the time.

Heng asked his mom about it once—and she got this sad sort of look on her face, explaining that sometimes, it can be pretty tiring, looking after someone who needs extra help. People leave.

Which Heng doesn't understand, because Mr. Hua really doesn't need a lot of "extra help."

Heng has a running theory that he was probably rich before. That would explain why he knows so many things and…

He might be older than Heng, pretty much a grown up, but he's kind of bratty and fussy sometimes.

But now, without looking back—

He offers the boy a meat bun.

"…" Heng grins, reaching out to snatch it up, "Thank you, Mr. Hua!"

All you have to do is be SORT OF nice to Mr. Hua, not even that nice —and he'll always be decent to you. He's a good, trustworthy person.

"You know…I heard something kinda cool today,"

The boy brings up conversationally, chewing.

"Oh?" Xie Lian sighs, picking at the edges of his bun, slowly taking another bite. "What's that?"

"Thaaat there's a new ghost king!" The boy sits forward, grinning.

Xie Lian lifts his chin, tilting his head, "…A ghost king?"

"Yeah! Like, y'know, a calamity?"

The Taoist pales, nearly crushing his meat bun under his fingers as he looks at him more directly, "…Like the white no-face?!"

"…" The kid leans away from him, his eyes a little wide. "No? This is a different one!"

Xie Lian sags.

He clutches his chest with relief for a moment, letting out a shaky breath.

He's gone.

Jun Wu killed him.

His fingers stroke over Hong-er, slowly.

He can't hurt you or anyone else anymore.

"…Okay, there's a new one," Xie Lian mutters. "What's he like?"

"Weird, apparently,"

Heng takes another bite, "Sort of like you!"

Xie Lian tries to give him a look, but, well—it's hard, when you can't actually glare at someone properly. "What's his name?"

"Dunno," the kid shrugs, "but…" he looks over at the Taoist with a grin, "he's gonna be here tonight!"

Xie Lian raises an eyebrow. It's not exactly a…bustling metropolis, this town. It's a decent enough place, near the city—but not exactly somewhere for any major spirits to come to haunt. "Here?"

"Yeah!" Peng's smile widens. "Cause my friend is gonna summon him!"

The ghost king in question, at that moment, isn't haunting anyone.

Technically, he's not even doing his day job.

"Mark it," he growls, not lifting his face from the silk pillow on his chaise lounge.

“…Okay, okay big fella,” Fai sighs, stretching up on his stool.

With a piece of chalk, he adds another tally mark to the wall—which is already covered in them.

Give it up for day four thousand, seven hundred and ninety: with no dianxia. Not even a rumor or a whisper of anyone remotely like him.

Hua Cheng slams his face into the pillow again

How. How is one, very, *very* beautiful, extremely *blind* man who dresses *very* distinctively so *difficult* to find?!

The door swings open, and before Xiang can say a word, Fai waves his hands in warning. “I wouldn’t say anything,” the ghost mumbles. “He’s in a mood.”

“Isn’t he always in a mood?”

“Well,” Fai pauses, because that—that is also true. “He’s in the same mood as yesterday I guess, but it’s not a good mood.”

“And I’m not the one who had something to tell Hua Chengzhu,” Xiang shrugs, crossing his arms. “It was this one.”

‘This one,’ meaning Yanlin, who is standing between Shuo and Bao, shifting her weight from foot to foot, somewhat awkwardly.

“…Hi,” she mumbles, holding her elbow sheepishly.

Hua Cheng lifts his head with a grunt, “That tone does not excite me.”

“It shouldn’t,” Bao grumbles.

“What’s she done now?”

“Nothing bad!” Yanlin mumbles, crossing her arms and looking away. “I was just trying to make friends!”

Which doesn’t sound so bad, until Bao points out—

“ *Human* friends.”

Hua Cheng lets out a heavy sigh. “What did you do?”

“…Told some stories…”

Yanlin mumbles, rubbing the side of her head—and when Bao glares are her, she adds, “…About you…”

The ghost king whips his head around to look at her, and she holds her hands up. “Not BAD stories, they’re great! They make you sound really cool!”

“…In what way?” He questions slowly.

The little girl shifts around, twiddling her thumbs awkwardly, mumbling, “…Have you been getting any…prayers, lately?”

“…Yanlin,” he groans, pressing his hands against his temples. “I’m going to disperse you.”

“I was trying to help!”

“Tell him what you said!” Bao grumbles, irritated with her stalling, and Yanlin huffs.

“Just the truth! That he saved us, and led us home with the lanterns.” She mumbles. “But I wanted the humans to like me, so…I embellished…”

“Embellished.” Hua Cheng repeats flatly.

“I kinda…made it sound like…if they were in trouble, or lost…they could light a lantern and pray to you, and…”

Hua Cheng sinks back down against his chaise lounge. “How many times,” Yanlin shrinks, “How many times do I have to tell you, I am NOT a god?!”

“He rejected the job offer and everything,” Shuo agrees, “It was like, BOOM!” He pantomimes crashing back down to earth by jumping in the air, then rolling on the floor, “Then swoooosh!” He jumps back, up, pretending to swing and an imaginary scimitar, “and ahhhh!”

He’s tired.

Hua Cheng is grateful that fate made him fall in love with a man at a very young age. And that even if he hadn’t, death came for him before he was stupid enough to have children of his own.

They are exhausting, they don’t listen—and they cause more trouble than they're worth.

"Okay, but he *did* ascend, he can answer prayers if he wants to, he's immortal, he has magic powers—" Yanlin lifts up a finger as she lists each piece of evidence to her point "I don't get what difference there is between him and a god!"

"Several practical differences, actually,"

Fai pipes up helpfully. "I'm sure you've noticed young lady—but you haven't stopped aging since your death, have you?"

Yanlin crosses her arms, thinking it over. "I did lose a tooth last month," she comments, wiggling her tongue in the new hole in her overbite. "It was weird."

The older ghost nods, "Just like our bodies decay after death, our spirits age as well. Much more slowly than humans—and more powerful Ghosts like Hua Chengzhu can slow or stop their aging if they choose to do so—but a god's spirit will never age, no matter how long they exist."

Hua Cheng drops his head back into the pillow, making low, irritated noises.

"But…what if I ascended?" Yanlin questions, eyes wide.

Like that's somehow a real possibility for someone who still hasn't learned how, at the literal age of twenty one (and the spiritual age of seven), to lace her own boots. Bao does it for her every morning.

"Would I stay little forever?"

"Children don't ever ascend," Fai waves that off. "But when teenagers do, their spirits will shift to the age of their peak physical form, if they had reached a human life. Hua Chengzhu's body did that when he ascended, isn't that right?"

"I suppose." Hua Cheng grumbles, not interested in the little lesson that's unfolding.

It was more obvious for Xie Lian, who ascended at around the same age Hua Cheng was, when he died—Hua Cheng (who, while the prince didn't know it at the time, was still watching him from afar) watched how the god's body went from that of a teenager, to a man in his early twenties

By contrast, there was a gap of several years between Hua Cheng's death and his ascension—and in that time, his spirit changed forms twice, changing his true form from what it would have been naturally —and then, he ascended into…

A form he hasn't worn again outside of the Kiln.

He shifts his shape somewhat frequently these days—in large part because, like the best predators, he learns from other hunters.

No matter how hard the Ghost King tries, he can't remember Bai Wuxiang's true face. He knows he saw it, in Zhao Beitong's memories —but he can't…

When he does know, however—was that part of the power the ghost possessed stemmed from the fact that no one ever knew what he truly looked like.

Anonymity can, in many ways, be a dangerous weapon.

Aside from that—it's been years since anyone commented negatively on Hua Cheng's appearance. Because he controls what faces they see, how, and when.

After a lifetime of being called hideous, you would become fond of masks too, wouldn't you?

"But…" Yanlin frowns. "If Hua Chengzhu can age, how is he immortal?"

"Because I can use spiritual power to stop aging," Hua Cheng mutters. "If I choose to do so."

Which he has, for the most part. He doesn't want to be too much older than his beloved when he finds him again, after all, but…

When he remembers how his god always used to fawn over him, treating him like a child—particularly how he used to laugh over how cute it was when Hong-er's voice was changing…

Hua Cheng let's his body get a *little* older. Just to…impress the point that he IS a grown man, now.

Physically speaking, he's several years older than Xie Lian by now—

(*Not that it matters,* a voice in the back of his head grumbles, *he won't know I'm Hong-er, anyway.)*

—and when he does find him, if he witnesses Hua Cheng's true form, it won't be one he views as…childish.

"…Okay, but if he can stop aging, he's basically still a god!" Yanlin shrugs. "So, I wasn't wrong, and I didn't—!"

"No, There are other key differences." Fai holds up a finger. "For example, goddesses can still conceive children—female ghosts cannot."

If they could, it would be far more convenient—they'd have less demented little fetus spirits running around, particularly in the wake of the war, that…

Hua Cheng's eyebrows knit together, forcing himself not to contemplate *that* gruesome matter.

"Can gods have children too?"

"Yes, but it hasn't happened in quite some time—it normally never ends well." Fai explains.

Bao frowns, scratching his head. "Wait, does that mean male ghosts can't have kids either?"

"No, they can," Hua Cheng speaks up this time. "But any human woman who carries a ghost's child will die in childbirth. It's a relatively common curse."

Yanlin doesn't seem so happy or curious about the subject of ghost biology anymore, though Hua Cheng really can't understand why, she was the one who brought it up—

"Why would a lady ever let a ghost put a baby inside her if she knew it was gonna kill her?" Shuo frowns. "That's just dumb!"

Xiang sits up eagerly, rubbing his hands together, "Oh, I know the answer to THAT one—!"

"No, you don't." Hua Cheng cuts him off, his tone threatening.

"…" Xian deflates slightly, crossing his arms and looking away. "Yeah, I guess I don't."

Yanlin lifts her chin, finally speaking up again, "Mr. Fai, how do you know so much stuff?"

“Well, I was a teacher when I was alive,” the slightly rotund ghost answers cheerfully.

A teacher with a fatal gambling problem, but yes. A teacher. A private tutor, more specifically—for the same family that owned the gambling den that would lead to his eventual demise.

“Hua Chengzhu has been generous enough to allow this humble ghost to continue his education!”

It’s mutually beneficial, after all—Hua Cheng could only read one language to speak of, upon leaving Mount Tonglu, and it was a dead one.

Fai has poor skills when it comes to risk assessment and common sense—but he’s a good teacher, and he hasn’t said a word about their lessons.

Hua Cheng finds himself slowly learning more about the world, as time goes on. Searching for his god still consumes his time in many ways—but it’s no longer the only noteworthy thing about his existence, and…the ghost king has learned certain things about himself.

He knows now that he likes liquor, but not wine. Enjoys spicy foods, but not particularly sweet things. Hong-er never had the money to develop a ‘palette’ in his human life, and when he was a ghost, following his god…he never had the chance to find out.

And it’s more than that.

He learned as much in the Kiln—but he enjoys creating things, particularly beautiful things, but not always. He enjoys fighting and hunting—he’s terrible with music, as much as he enjoys it, and—

Hua Cheng discovered through Fai, oddly enough, a genuine passion for learning.

About anything. About everything. Sometimes, because it makes him feel as though he could be more useful to his god, when he finds him, or…

Sometimes, there’s a hunger inside of him. A need to devour every text he can get his hands on, to fulfill a burning natural curiosity.

The world was so small, when he was human. So limited, ugly, cruel, and boring.

But when Xie Lian told him stories in the shrine they used to live in—Hua Cheng is fairly certain the god must have thought Hong-er was just being polite, but—he was rapt with interest.

That was Hua Cheng's first hint of interest in the idea of learning more about the world—that it could be more than just this unpleasant, uninteresting thing.

Then, in the Kiln…he learned what it was like to view the world through the eyes of a scholar.

And his curiosity grew.

It makes him happy, sometimes—because he remembers how Xie Lian was the same. How happy he seemed, when he remembered his time studying under the Guoshi, and…

At the time, Hong-er had always assumed himself incapable of following a similar path. Too stupid, imperfect, and human

But now, he's had the chance to discover the fact that he's a fast learner—a hungry learner. And that, one day…

He could catch up.

But none of that has anything to do with the subject at hand.

"The point is," Hua Cheng speaks up, interrupting the debate, "I'm not a god."

Yanlin opens her mouth to argue, and the Ghost King speaks over her, "And now, I have countless children praying to me for…what, exactly?"

"Help," the little girl replies.

"As in—?"

"If they're lost, or if someone's hurting them," she shrugs. "That's all I said."

And from her point of view—saving children from that is exactly what the Ghost King does.

"…" Hua Cheng lets out a heavy sigh, dropping back Down onto his couch. “Stop telling them that, Yanlin.”

“But—!”

He points to the wall of tally marks irritably. “That’s my priority.”

“…” She kicks at some imaginary dirt on the floor with her shoe. “Whatever,” the little girl mumbles, turning on her heel and running out of the room. “Who CARES!”

Shuo watches her go, tilting his head curiously before looking up at Bao. “It sounds like she cares.”

Bao shrugs.

“Girls are crazy, she—” Both boys pause, noticing that Fai’s initial statement…wasn’t incorrect.

Hua Chengzhu is in a *mood* .

Slowly—respectfully—they give him space, and Hua Cheng rolls onto his back, glaring at the ceiling.

Thirteen years.

He’s been out of the Kiln for longer than he was in it—and he still hasn’t gotten any closer to finding his god than he was before. There’s that constant reassurance that he’s alright, that he must be—because Hong-er’s ashes have been undisturbed, but…

Hua Cheng throws an arm over his face with an irritated grumble.

What’s the point of power, if you can’t use it for the things that matter? He—

It’s now, in the quiet, left with his own thoughts, that the Ghost King hears them.

Prayers.

Dozens of quiet pleas—all from children

The stories they tell aren’t pleasant to hear—but nearly all of them, the ghost king is familiar with.

Parents who beat them. Fathers who drink. Constantly being hungry, or forced to do things against their will.

It's horrible, but normal.

But…a few prayers stick out.

All the same. All frightened, terrified voices, whispering—

'Don't let it come for me.'

Hua Cheng's brow furrows, his eyes closed.

'Please—Hua Chengzhu, I'll light as many lanterns as you want—keep me and my baby sister safe? I don't want it to get me—'

'Hua Chengzhu,' a little voice cries out miserably, *'it found me.'*

All of the voices are coming from the same region—and all of them are praying for salvation from one thing. Something hunting them.

And everyone calls it by the same name.

'The Night Touring Green Lantern.'

Xie Lian's presence has become somewhat of a cause for debate.

"Did you have to bring a grown up?" One of the other kids grumbles, crossing her arms. "The Ghost King doesn't help adults, he might not even come now."

Heng rolls his eyes, "Mr. Hua barely counts as a grown up!"

He pulls Xie Lian along by the sleeve—not particularly helpful, he almost makes the god trip over his own feet several times, but the intention to be of assistance is there. "He's scared of spiders and eats food off the floor, just like us!"

"Well—" Xie Lian tries to interrupt,

"I don't think that's completely true—!"

"Yeah it is!" Heng huffs, tugging him along faster, now. "I see you drop your food and pick it up and eat it all the time!"

In his defense, when you can't see things, you drop them a lot—and he can't afford to buy a new meal every time.

He's instituted a five second rule, and he always blows the dust off and rubs it with his sleeve first. That's fine, right?

“He didn’t say he wasn’t scared of spiders, though.” One of the other children mumbles to her friend, speaking behind her hand, and Xie Lian turns his head

“Do YOU like spiders?”

The little girl falls silent, clearly embarrassed—thinking that whispering made it so the Taoist wouldn’t hear her, but clearly that wasn’t the case.

“It’s worse when you can’t see them,” Xie Lian huffs, allowing Heng to pull him along.

He’s never liked bugs, actually—ever since he was a little boy. The exceptions of course being fireflies, ladybugs, and butterflies. Those were pretty, and they didn’t sting, bite, or do anything else horrifying.

Spiders, however? Ugh.

His friends actually found it quite funny.

The famous crown prince of Xianle, a famous, imposing warrior—could often be sent running by the sight of a tiny little arachnid, clinging to Mu Qing’s shirt, dragging him over to smash it with a broom.

‘You’ll hunt demons for sport, but you’re scared of THAT?’

‘Don’t laugh!’

Xie Lian would whine, *‘I’m pretty sure this is the kind that ju—OH, MU QING, IT’S JUMPING—!’*

If it was Feng Xin, he’d just drop all decorum and leap onto his guard’s back, arms wrapped around the guard’s head at one point when they were traveling and came across a tarantula.

Of course, his friend had made some terribly reasonable point about not being able to kill any bugs with Xie Lian’s arms wrapped around his eyes—to which the prince adjusted his grip, but refused to come down until the little creature was slain.

He almost smiles now, remembering

“…” His steps slow slightly, lips abandoning any attempt at happiness, turning back down into a frown, heart aching.

He misses them.

Not every day. It’s not as bad as missing Hong-er, or his parents—because he knows Mu Qing and Feng Xin are alive and well.

They’re happy.

They’re gods now in their own right—even Mu Qing, who hadn’t ascended as an official the last time they fought…

Xie Lian bites his lip, taking a steadying breath. He doesn’t cry as easily as he used to—but his chest often seizes up with the weight of it all, and he feels so…

But it’s okay. It—

It’s okay.

He reminds himself of that, every time. And if it gets too worrisome… he’ll go to one of their temples. Light some incense, leave a bowl of rice. Xie Lian never prays, doesn’t want to trouble them like that—

He doesn’t want their pity, anyway.

“Are you sure this is the spot?” One of the children whines. “I don’t see anything!”

“That’s because I haven’t lit the lantern yet, obviously!” Another voice replies—somewhat snidely now, catching Xie Lian’s attention. “Would you stop rushing me? It’s a delicate operation!”

“Lit the lantern?” He questions softly, dropping to his knees in order to kneel down next to the boy on the grass. “Why do you need to light a lantern?”

The young man sets the red paper lantern down on the ground in front of him, pulling out a set of matches.

“Because that’s how you call him,” the boy grumbles, glancing back at Heng with annoyance. “Did you explain ANYTHING before you brought him?!”

Heng crosses his arms, rubbing his nose with a sniff, “I told him we were summoning a ghost king! What else did I need to say?!”

“He’s probably not gonna be able to do it anyway,” One of the village girls giggles, shaking her head. “I bet he’s just lying again!”

From what Xie Lian can understand—there are about five children in the group, excluding him—and the boy actually performing the summoning…

He doesn't seem particularly popular among them. Xie Lian doubts they're even friends—and the other children are most likely only here to stop and watch the show as it unfolds.

Depressing—but normal, for kids that age.

"SHUT UP!" The boy snaps, fumbling with his matches.

"He'll definitely come, alright?! That's the whole point," he mutters, holding a lit match inside the lantern, slowly sparking the small candle inside to life.

"You're not lost, though," Heng comments.

"…The Ghost King helps lost children?" Xie Lian raises an eyebrow.

"That's…very kind of him."

"And if you tell him that someone is mistreating you," the boy with the lantern stands up, holding it out into the dark. "He'll show up and beat them to death for you!"

The prince's smile fades slightly.

That's…less kind of him, to put it lightly.

But compared to the last ghost king…Xie Lian can't say that it isn't an improvement. Besides—nobody's perfect, right?

"…He feels very strongly about child welfare, then?"

The village girl speaks up again, leaning against a nearby tree. It's gotten dark now—fog creeping in.

"I heard it was cause he was some kid that got tortured to death!" She explains, clearly wanting to take advantage of the slightly chilling atmosphere.

(To Xie Lian, it's all pretty much the same.)

"No…" Heng frowns.

"I heard it was cause he girl he fell in love with got tortured." The boy explains. “The village exiled her, and by the time he found her—she’d already been eaten by wolves.”

Well, somehow that’s even more gruesome—and he has the other children’s attention.

Xie Lian grimaces.

“If that’s true, how did he die?!”

“Well,” Heng sits forward, grinning. “He went mad with grief, and clawed out his own eye!” He receives several horrified gasps in response. “He bled to death. And now, his eye looks down on everyone, and that’s how he sees the lanterns!”

“…I don’t actually think a man can bleed to death from losing an eye,” Xie Lian comments lightly. “And most wouldn’t have the…grit, to do something like that.”

After all—he’s a bit of an expert on pain. He can barely feel it even more—and even he would hesitate to do that.

“Well, that’s what I heard!” Heng shrugs. “Maybe he killed himself after, who knows.”

“Most suicide victims don’t linger as ghosts,” Xie Lian shakes his head again. “They don’t have the will to linger on.”

Unless it was a bitter suicide—and he supposes that situation counts.

Heng crosses his arms, clearly annoyed that the weaver has contradicted him in front of his friends twice, now. “Did they teach you all of this in Taoist school?” He questions dryly.

“…” Xie Lian laughs awkwardly, rubbing the back of his head. “Haha, they sure did!”

“The same one they kicked you out of?”

“Haha—!” Xie Lian stops laughing suddenly, and now they two are glaring at one another. Well—Heng is glaring at him, Xie Lian is just scowling underneath Ruoye in his general direction.

“…Yan, I don’t think he’s coming.” The girl groans.

“Shut up!” The boy snaps again, holding his lantern a little higher. “He’ll definitely come! It’s only been a couple of minutes.”

Xie Lian can’t see the boy—Yan’s—expression, but he sounds…tense, almost nervous.

Heng, seeming to want to kill time, sits down beside the prince.

“Aren’t Taoist’s supposed to be able to do magic tricks?” The boy grumbles, bumping his shoulder against Xie Lian. “Like…breaking swords in half, reading palms, making stuff disappear?”

“Sure,” Xie Lian replies dryly. “We know a thing or two.”

Heng leans forward eagerly.

“Like what—? Ow!” He helps, suddenly going sprawling on his back. The other children don’t actually see what happened, but…

A certain bandage flicked the boy in the forehead. Hard.

“What was that?!”

Xie Lian picks at his nails, “A magic trick.”

“What kind of magic is that?!”

The Taoist glances over, practically sticking his tongue out at the little boy, “Making someone’s dignity disappear.”

Heng gawks, clutching his forehead, and the village girl giggles behind her hand. “I see what you meant about him not being a real grown up now!”

Xie Lian opens his mouth to protest when Heng speaks up again, smug now, “I didn’t even have to tell him about the spider on his leg to prove it to you.”

The god rolls his eyes. “Oh, right, because there’s conveniently a spider on my leg the MOMENT you want to prove a—”

Of course, there’s one thing Xie Lian isn’t used yet:

His newfound, *extremely* rotten luck.

Which is impressed upon him the moment he feels something jump up from his knee, scuttling across his hand.

“…”

The children watch the blood rapidly drain from the Taoist's cheeks.

It's not like he presented this rough around the edges, hyper masculine persona to begin with—but watching him flail his wrist, shrieking like a little girl, they—

"EEEEEEEAK!"

His fist slams into the trunk of a nearby tree—

…Snapping it in half.

The kids stand around in a shocked semi circle, watching as the blind man slams his fist into the trunk two more times to ensure that the spider (which is surely obliterated by now) is gone, reducing it to little more than a pile of splinters.

"…Hah," Xie Lian lets out a shaky sigh, clutching his hand to his chest, trembling slightly. It must seem so silly to some, after everything he's been through, but—

There's so little left that scares him now, when he encounters fear—even over the silliest things, he…struggles.

It takes him a moment to sense the staring, and…

"…Hahaha!" He laughs again, but slightly more nervous and strained than awkward, this time— "And that's…another Taoist magic trick!"

"…" Yan leans over, mumbling to Heng, "…Is Mr. Hua crazy?"

"…Kinda," the boy admits.

"But he's nice, so…"

Slowly, the girl standing behind them shakes herself out of it. "Yan, I really don't think he's coming—me and Jun are going home." She mutters, grabbing her little brother's hand, both of them starting to walk back.

"I told you to wait a minute!"

The boy cries, throwing his hands up as he watches the other boy that came from their village leave too, trailing behind his friends. "…Who needs you anyways! He probably didn't show up because he doesn't like LOSERS!" The kid shouts, turning around with a huff.

"…" Heng grimaces, muttering *'yikes'* under his breath, leaning close to whisper in Xie Lian's ear, "That's why no one likes him, he's always yelling at everyone."

The prince frowns, but with sympathy.

"Well," Heng makes a big show of yawning, stretching his arms over his head. "I'm pretty tired, y'know—helping in the shop all day is pretty tough, so—!"

"Just go, Heng!" Yan snaps. "I'll wait by myself! I don't care!"

He holds the red lantern to his chest stubbornly, and Heng makes a face, rising to his face. "Yeah, yeah, just chase everyone off…That's what you always do." He grumbles, walking away.

"…" Yan sniffs, kneeling back down to the ground, his arms wrapped around his lantern, holding it against his chest. "You think I care? It's fine."

Oh.

Xie Lian's chest begins to ache.

"I'm better off on my own, anyway."

Heng glances back over his shoulder, slightly annoyed. "Hey, Taoist—you coming?"

Yan turns his head, just to see Xie Lian still sitting behind him, shaking out his wrist a little awkwardly.

"…No," the cultivator shakes his head. "You go on home, I'll see you in the morning."

"You sure?"

"Mhm," Xie Lian hums—and all of the irritation before, that short tempered attitude…it's replaced with this calm, patient air that Yan..doesn't know what to do with, watching him awkwardly.

The Taoist smiles, and…his expression is so…

Gentle.

"I want to meet this Ghost King, anyway." Xie Lian hums, crossing his legs underneath him. "I don't mind waiting a little longer."

"…You don't have to stay because you feel sorry for me," Yan grumbles, hugging his lantern tighter. "I don't want that."

"…" The prince snorts.

"I wouldn't worry about that."

"I don't want anyone looking down on me!"

"I don't think I can look down on anyone," Xie Lian points out dryly, making the boy flush with sheepishness.

"…Whatever," he mutters, holding his lantern tighter.

They sit, and they wait—for hours.

Until it must be after midnight—and Xie Lian knows the boy is tired. He can sense it from the way he sways in place, clutching his lantern tight.

The god isn't surprised—while he thought the story of a benevolent ghost king seemed very interesting, he didn't actually believe it.

But…that wasn't why he stayed behind.

"…Yan," He starts. "You—"

"He'll come," the boy shakes his head, his voice exhausted and…thick with anxiety. Desperation, even. "Everyone said he would come!"

Xie Lian falls silent for a moment, listening to the child's heart pound.

"Yan," he finally speaks again, his voice gentler this time. "When you said that he shows up to help mistreated children…was that true?"

The boy nods, hugging himself a little tighter—and after a moment, Xie Lian presses the matter.

"…Is someone mistreating you, Yan?"

Crimson Rain Sought Flower

Chapter Summary

> "I am the Ghost King!" He balls his hands into fists, sitting up on his throne of thorns, "Can't you tell, you ignorant little whelp?! I am the ghost king, Qi Rong! Fresh from the bowels of hell!"
>
> But instead of looking terrified, as he should be—
>
> The little boy looks absolutely delighted.
>
> "A ghost king?" His grin is lopsided, one sharpened canine sticking out. "You?"

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

Answering prayers is a much more complicated affair than one might expect.

For gods, humans do half of the work for them. They explain the problem, leave an offering—and the god knows exactly which temple in their region to respond to.

Obviously, Hua Cheng doesn't have temples.

And, unlike martial gods and the like—his influence doesn't rise and fall depending on location. As the only ghost king, technically speaking—he has jurisdiction over all ghosts, everywhere.

But he isn't looking for ghosts, now—he's looking for children. Human children.

The lanterns provide a small spiritual connection—not enough for him to be able to instantly appear at one's location, but enough for him to follow…somewhat of a trail.

And the further he walks…the more he begins to hear.

Mostly from locals—all charmed by the youthful, handsome face he's been wearing as of late. His body doesn't need rest, food, or drink—but he'll stop in taverns. Drink liquor, while listening to the farmers as they tell their stories.

Stories of children going missing at night.

Mothers waking up to empty beds, running through the house, screaming—but nothing is ever found of them, and they don't return.

Most blame some sort of animal—after all, the search parties that have gone into the forest do find scraps of closing, puddles of blood, but…

If that were the case, how could a beast pluck them straight out of their beds? And do so silently?

No. It was something luring them away. The men in the first tavern Hua Cheng tries suspect a local pervert, known for leering a little closer to the farmers' sons than he should.

Hua Cheng looks into that—on the off chance that it's true, but when he finds the man…

He's disgusting, yes. Pathetic. The Ghost King goes through the effort of rendering him incapable of looking at any children at all—but he's also cowardly, and unlikely to do more than leer.

Still, to be sure—after he takes the man's eyes, he returns the next day —only to find another child missing. This time, a little girl.

And unlike the adults, who look to one another with suspicion…the children tell a very different story.

Of a green light, lurking in the night

Twinkling in the distance—a beautiful, tempting sight. One that entrances any child that looks upon it, drawing them further, further, further—until they can't turn back.

And that, Hua Cheng knows—is no man. No—it's something that falls directly within his purview.

A ghost.

He stays in a local tavern once again, watching the sun slowly begin to set through one of the windows, sipping at his drink. A few of the waitresses have taken an interest—but he never spares more than a passing look when he orders another drink, or settles his tab.

The only thing that /does/ catch his eye over the course of the evening is a young man, wearing a finely made outer robe of blue and silver. Beautifully intricate for something to be worn by a blacksmith's apprentice—and when his companions inquire, the youth brags—

"It's the local weaver back in my village!" He grins, jabbing his thumb against his chest. "The guy doesn't have a family to support or anything, so he sells things like this way under value!"

"Should you really brag about that?" His friend grumbles, shaking his head.

"Have you at least been tipping the man?"

"I mean, sure, I'm not an ass—pah, you think so little of me!"

The mention of the weaver draws a small smile to Hua Cheng's face, fiddling with the red thread tied around his finger.

It...brings back memories. Just then—fate strikes.

Hua Cheng's eyes slip back towards the window—just in time to see the sun slip beneath the horizon entirely.

It's time.

He tilts his head back, Adam's apple bobbing as he swallows the rest of his drink, slamming the empty cup back down as he tosses a few coins to the waitress.

He's out the door before he can hear what the young man has to say next.

"Why would I short change a BLIND man? And a Taoist no less! I'm not that sort of man!

(A fit of bad luck, unfortunately—though not his own.) It's a simple matter, finding a place to lie in wait.

There are six houses on the edge of the village—three of them with children. All Hua Cheng has to do is perch in a nearby tree, waiting in a low crouch.

The ghost isn't particularly clever, haunting the same villagers so frequently—and just like he suspects—

It appears.

Hovering in the dark, bouncing slightly in the air, burning green and bright against the edges of the trees.

Hua Cheng recognizes it, of course—

A ghost fire.

But there's something different about this little spirit. Something…not right. It's been bewitched by something.

He remains in his hiding spot, watching the spiritual power drifting from the little creature in showers of sparks, gently enticing anything that looks upon it. Not more powerful, dangerous beings—Hua Cheng isn't affected in the slightest, but…

The door of a nearby house opens.

Stumbling through the dark comes a little girl, bare foot, hair loose, wearing pink night clothes that must be cold now, out in the wind and the dark—but she doesn't seem to notice.

Hua Cheng follows now, silently dropping onto the ground behind her, slowly following her path.

It winds through the forest, ambling at times, but steadily heading deeper and deeper inside. Away from any help or escape. Like a small insect, slowly being drawn deeper into a spider's web—not realizing that it's already far too late.

The air smells like death and rot.

From…

Hua Cheng glances up, staring at the tree tops, and…he stops.

That's enough.

The little girl stops walking when a set of fingertips press against the back of her head, her eyes coming back into focus.

"I…" She glances around, whimpering with fear. "Where…is—?"

A voice hushes her, and she falls silent.

“Don’t be afraid.”

There’s no green light in front of her anymore—and when she glances around—

There’s no one there at all, so who’s…?

“…Hua Chengzhu?” She whispers.

That was who she had been praying to, after all.

When her feet kept moving, even when she tried to stop them. When she couldn’t scream, no matter how hard she tried, but…she knew she wasn’t dreaming.

“…I’m sorry I didn’t light a lantern,” she whispers, “I—”

“Forget about the lanterns,” a voice replies—a little annoyed.

She pauses, clearly a little confused by how…irritated the voice sounds. Did he like the—?

“But…?”

Before she can question more, though—something catches her eye. Soft, silvery light, flitting past her face—and when she turns around…

There’s a butterfly lighting the path.

The voice doesn’t speak again—but she knows.

If she follows the light—it’ll take her home.

“…Thank you, Hua Chengzhu,” she murmurs, stumbling after it.

Once she leaves the clearing, Hua Cheng reappears, holding the little green ghost fire in his hand, examining it.

“What happened to you?” He murmurs, tilting his head to the side. It’s almost hard to believe now that his spirit was ever this small and fragile. He’s holding an entire soul in his hand—and yet, it feels like little more than a fly.

It would take a savage ghost to do this.

Something powerful, yes, but…clearly not comfortable enough in it’s own ability to hunt to show it’s face directly, or to hunt larger prey.

No, this is a creature that lurks in the dark and preys upon children. His skills in magic and illusion are impressive enough, but…

Hua Cheng suspects, after seeing this ghost's handiwork, that it's combat skills must be subpar at best. And if that's the case—it will run away before the ghost king has the chance to approach it properly.

To make a proper greeting, if you will.

So, Hua Cheng decides to play.

The ghost fire isn't quite so addled now, when he lets it go—bouncing in front of him, waiting for orders—and when Hua Cheng speaks again, his voice is far different from how it was before.

"Take me where you were taking her," He commands. Quickly, the spirit complies.

They go deeper into the woods—and the longer it takes—the more the ghost king starts to notice the smell.

Death and rot. Blood—some of it old, some of it new.

This is practically a slaughterhouse, rather than a savage ghost's lair.

And for what purpose?

It's almost amusing, the way the creature doesn't seem to even be trying to properly hide it's identity, after all…

When Hua Cheng sees a pair of boots tangling through the treetops—he bows who it is.

He's disappointed to find that the creature is still alive—but not surprised

In the center of the forest, there's a place where the roots and branches meet, tangling into a small, tangled little nest. It's hosted many different species of rodent over the years. But never something quite this foul.

A robed figure sits upon a throne of brambles.

Several ghost fires hover around him, highlighting the acidic green hue of his eyes, dark hair falling around his face in a tangled mess as he snatches another spirit between his fingers, examining it.

"...Two silver pieces," he mumbles, discarding it. "How cheap."

He repeats the process over and over, snatching little ghosts between his fingers, estimating just how much they would sell for at the market, fingers trembling and squeezing them with annoyance.

Qi Rong was sold for eight silver pieces, once. What are they worth, in comparison?

Nothing. Nothing. Stupid, worthless souls, barely enough to sell for something interesting, even grouped together like this...

Then, he hears the sound of footsteps—and he sneers, not even bothering to look up. "It took you long enough," Qi Rong hisses. "This better be good."

And, trailing behind the ghost fire is...

A little boy.

Small, probably little more than seven or eight years old—with wild hair, tied into a loose braid over his shoulder.

And big, amber eyes—burning in the darkness.

A fine catch—this child looks like he has a strong soul!

A slow, sadistic grin spreads across Qi Rong's face, full of sharp teeth. Who knew this worthless little place was hiding an expensive creature like this?

"Hello, little one." He hisses, watching the little boy with hungry eyes. "What's your name?"

The child tips his head.

Instead of answering Qi Rong's question, he just takes another step forward, and while he has the voice of a child—he doesn't speak like one.

"Who are you, and what is this place?"

Brave.

A brave little fool.

Qi Rong's smile twists into a sneer.

"I am the Ghost King!" He balls his hands into fists, sitting up on his throne of thorns, "Can't you tell, you ignorant little whelp?! I am the ghost king, Qi Rong! Fresh from the bowels of hell!"

But instead of looking terrified, as he should be—

The little boy looks absolutely delighted.

"A ghost king?" His grin is lopsided, one sharpened canine sticking out. "You?"

The creature practically bears his teeth in response.

"Yes!"

"I thought Qi Rong was cousin to the Crown Prince of Xianle."

The green ghost pauses in the middle of lunging to throttle the child.

"...You know that?" He breathes, eyes widening. Drawn in by the promise of being recognized for what he used to be—

Wealthy. Royalty.

But then he remembers.

How it all came crashing down.

"...He's got nothing to do with me!" Qi Rong snarls. "I ditched that loser ages ago!"

The boy's eyes flash for a moment—but he doesn't waver.

"That's not what I heard."

The green ghost starts to snarl, and the little boy doesn't flinch.

"I heard the crown prince banished you."

Qi Rong pales.

"I heard he was so disgusted, he stripped you of your titles."

Qi Rong stumbles backwards, like he's been slapped. "...Who—who told you that?! It's a LIE! Who told you?! WHO TOLD YOU?!"

The boy doesn't flinch, just smiles even wider.

"Everyone knows that."

Part of Hua Cheng wonders if the green ghost will put the pieces together, but...

His expectations for the green ghost's intelligence were never that high, so he isn't particularly offended when Qi Rong continues to rage—

"IT'S NOT TRUE! IT'S NOT! I left him behind, he was just angry because I didn't wanna worship him anymore, HE'S the disgrace, not ME!"

Of course—that's exactly when he notices it. The rocks on the ground around them— they aren't stones, native to this forest.

They're fragments of marble. Rubble, left behind from...

Divine statues.

There's a face on the ground near his foot—all too familiar.

Suddenly, the air around the clearing is...different, from before. Slightly more menacing.

Qi Rong frowns, glancing around, sniffing—and he catches a whiff of something— something strong.

Spiritual power. More...more than the ghost is used to. But where...is it coming from?

Now, the kid speaks again, his voice cold. "I thought the Ghost King was a red spirit. Not green."

After all, those were the rumors.

Conveniently, Qi Rong seems to ignore the boy's red tunic. "That's just a rumor—it wasn't true! He's definitely green, alright?!"

"...And I thought Ghost Kings were supposed to be tall," the boy drawls, distinctly unimpressed.

A vein bulges in Qi Rong's forehead.

He, of course, doesn't even break 160 centimeters.

"I WAS tall! I don't know why my spirit formed like this, I—!" He grabs the boy by the neck.

In all honesty—Hua Cheng can't remember Qi Rong being taller than Xie Lian, even when he was alive. He was maybe half a head below than the prince—and in this form, he's shrunk even shorter than that.

A small piece of karma, he supposes.

"But can't Ghost Kings change the way they look?" The boy questions.

He doesn't sound like he's being throttled, even with the way he's dangling by Qi Rong's grip on his neck.

His eyes burn in the dark—and his gaze is imperious.

Slowly, the green ghost starts to pause.

"I..." He frowns, his brow pinched. How would a child know that?

"Couldn't you just make yourself taller?" The boy repeats—this time, his voice much lower.

Suddenly, he isn't dangling anymore—and Qi Rong has to reach far over his head to grip the man's neck.

"Like this?"

Suddenly, the clearing goes quiet—dead quiet. No little creatures scurrying in the night. Not even the sound of ghost fires flickering in the wind.

There's nothing, just—

Silence.

His eyes look down on him, burning sharply. Qi Rong's fingers begin to tremble. "...H...Hua Cheng?"

Of course, he knows him by that name. The entire ghost realm does—it was spread to every region of the land of the undead by those who turned back before becoming sealed into the gates of Mount Tonglu.

A beautiful name. A poetic name.

A killer's name.

His smile is just as much of a sneer as Qi Rong's was, sharp, framed with fangs and a cockiness that seems to permeate the air. “I was not aware that there were any other Ghost Kings.” He murmurs—and the moment Qi Rong lets him go, the green ghost is the one left dangling.

He struggles, feet kicking in the air, choking out apologies. “I-I meant no disrespect, young master, I—I—this ancestor didn’t know!”

“You think that makes a difference to me?” He muses, tightening his fingers, watching the ghost’s eyes bulge out of his head.

There was a time when this man towered over Hong-er.

It’s something he’ll forget in time—he always does.

Most people have two different responses to fear: fight, or flight.

Everyone who has ever known the ghost king would say the answer in Hua Cheng’s case was obvious.

Fight.

That wasn’t always true.

There was a different time. One where he was small. Scared. Struggling—but frightened. Because the man forcing him into a sack, dragging him towards that carriage—

His face was so similar to the one Hong-er saw that day.

‘DIANXA! DIANXIA! DIANXIA!’

The screams of the crowd echoed so clearly in his mind back then. The entrancing beauty of that face, the eyes looking down on him, squeezing Hong-er close, as he whispered the words—

‘Don’t be afraid.’

And so, he wasn’t.

But on that day, so many years ago…Hong-er was afraid.

Not of the pain. Even as a child that small—he was used to pain.

Not of dying. Hong-er had barely even lived at all by then—but he was so very ready to die.

He was afraid, when the man with a face so similar to that of his savior threw him into that sack, saying he was Xie Lian's cousin…

Hong-er was afraid that, somehow, the prince knew what was happening. That he knew this man was hurting him, and that he didn't care.

That was frightening. Truly, horrifically frightening.

Not Qi Rong, never Qi Rong—but the thought that the Crown Prince might be someone like him. That the one point of goodness in Hong-er's young life was that of fool's gold.

'My handsome, brave Hong-er.'

That was what his love used to call him—but it isn't very hard to be brave, when you've seen the worst of what the world can do. And there are still things that frighten Hua Cheng. The same things that frightened him when he had a different name. A different face.

But in the end, there was nothing to be afraid of after all.

Because the carriage was stopped—and even though all of the pain, the agony that Hong-er had never been afraid of, not truly—

There was the Crown Prince's face. Xie Lian's horrified, frightened face.

Hua Cheng hasn't felt real fear since that day. Not for himself. He's been afraid on Xie Lian's behalf many, many times, but…

He looks over the trembling, pitiful figure in his grip now.

Hua Cheng has never been frightened by Qi Rong, as a ghost or a human.

Not even when Qi Rong was torturing him. Murdering him.

Hong-er didn't feel fear when the former noble would plunge Fang Xin into his non- fatal point, twisting and sneering, trying to antagonize the teenager into screaming.

That was just pain. It wasn't frightening.

So many people hurt him in his human life—Qi Rong isn't even special in that regard, and as such, the Ghost King wouldn't have held a grudge for his own death normally. Not even for the torture, or the abuse he faced before that—no.

It was for what Qi Rong did after.

Being forced to watch as his god stumbled through the forest, calling out his name. Walking underneath Hong-er's lifeless body, over and over again, fearing—fearing the worst. Desperate to find him.

When Hong-er could only worry about how often Xie Lian was falling.

Scraping his hands, twisting his ankle. Hong-er never would have let him fall before— but now, he's legs wouldn't move. Never would have allowed his prince to continue on in such pain and discomfort before. Xie Lian wasn't so used to pain back then—but he pushed through it.

All to find him. When Hong-er already knew that it was too late. That the worst possible thing had already happened.

He was dead. Hong-er was dead, and all he could do was watch Xie Lian, and worry about it getting cold.

'It's going to snow.'

It was all so unclear back then. He was barely even a ghost fire, struggling to understand why he couldn't answer when Xie Lian called his name.

'It's going to snow soon, gege—you should get back inside.'

His lips wouldn't move, and they felt stiff—cold.

'You hate the cold.'

Hua Cheng has learned so much in the last twenty five years. More than any one human could in a lifetime. But among all of those things, he's learned a very rare secret:

Ghost Fires can weep.

Humans don't think of it that way, when they see sparks drifting from the small flame spirits forms, no. But that's what they are.

They poured from Hong-er's form when he tried to press close to Xie Lian's body in the snow—to keep him warm the way he once did during the nights.

'You have to stop mourning the life you could have had.'

That was what Zhao Beitong said—one of the most important lessons his Guoshi ever taught him. And yet, she was wrong about one thing:

Hong-er didn't mourn the loss of his own future.

At first, he wasn't particularly distressed about his own death at all. It was an afterthought, a frustrating barrier to protecting his god, but...

It was when he realized that he couldn't keep Xie Lian warm anymore —not ever again —that Hong-er truly began to mourn.

He's still mourning that—even now. And nobody mourns like a ghost.

"I...!" Qi Rong's feet are still flailing, his fingers clawing uselessly at Hua Cheng's wrist. "I said I was sorry, there's really no...no need for violence!"

Drawn from his thoughts, the ghost king's lips twist into a sardonic smile. "Was it necessary for you to slaughter so many human children? What was the purpose of that, exactly?"

"It..." Qi Rong's feet jerk slightly when Hua Cheng's thumb crushes into his trachea. "It was...a...Fundraising...effort!" He wheezes, not understanding why the ghost king cares. "What—what difference does it make to you?!"

After all—benevolent ghosts don't make it very far, in the afterlife. To be a ghost king, you have to be *dripping* with resentment and rage.

What are the lives of a few mortal children, in the eyes of a man like that?

Hua Cheng's fingers tighten to the point where the ghost can feel his vertebrae crush and snap. An all too familiar feeling by now, unfortunately—

"You took my name in order to do so." He muses.

As anyone might imagine by now—Hua Cheng has become somewhat protective over his name. He doesn't particularly enjoy seeing it misused.

"R-Really just your title—!" The ghost tries to argue, but when there's more crushing of his spine, he weeps. "Alright, alright, I'm sorry!"

His voice wails out into the night, echoing through the trees—like that of an animal caught in a trap, struggling for life. "You can't possibly mean to d-disperse me, can you?! It—it wasn't so great an offense—!"

It takes so much wealth and privilege, Hua Cheng thinks—for human suffering to be seen through such a warped lens. Bai Wuxiang wasn't wrong, when he said that to Xie Lian before.

Qi Rong only sees his actions through the scale of the severity of the consequences he faces after.

Even that day, when Xie Lian saved Hong-er from being dragged behind his carriage —Qi Rong measured the severity of the action through the consequences he faced from the king and queen. And to some extent, Feng Xin.

He didn't care that a child almost died—no. Not for a second.

He cared that his arm was broken. He cared that his carriage was taken.

And now, Hua Cheng knows—Qi Rong doesn't think Hua Cheng cares about the lives taken. And it certainly won't stop him from doing this again in the future.

For a moment, he considers destroying him.

It wouldn't be particularly difficult, and—he can see, from the way Qi Rong struggles, that the green ghost anticipates that outcome.

There's only one thing that stays his hand, in the end:

The memory of Xie Lian standing in the middle of a feasting hall, holding a flame.

White mourning robes, covered in blood—the curse pattern of his shackles gleaming in his eyes. His skin tinted with a hellish green glow as he held Qi Rong's form close, whispering to him viciously.

Hua Cheng doubts it's a memory the god looks back on fondly now, but…

Just thinking back on it makes the ghost king's heart ache with longing.

"P…Please…!"

And it's irritating, to have this sniveling, irrelevant creature's whining intruding upon such a lovely image.

So, Hua Cheng crushes his throat entirely to silence him. "NNNGH!"

He releases his fingers then, leaving the green ghost to collapse on the ground, clutching his neck as he writhes with pain.

It should be a familiar feeling for him, then.

“I won’t disperse you,” Hua Cheng murmurs, slowly tilting his head.

Not out of a lack of desire.

But because that decision has already been made.

Xie Lian could have dispersed Qi Rong in that moment with ease—but he chose to allow the spirit to continue on.

It was his god’s wish—and Hua Cheng won’t violate that now. “Not quite, anyway.” He flexes his fingers.

But he’ll come to the very brink of it. What happens to the spirit from there, in the end—is up to him.

“You called yourself a ghost king,” he murmurs, standing over Qi Rong’s broken form. “Would you like to see what that means?”

After all—most people don’t.

Bai Wuxiang was a calamity to be feared. A bringer of war, destruction, and plague— but rarely did he ever enter the field of combat directly.

Rarely did the world ever see the true scope of a Ghost King’s strength.

Hua Cheng is still exploring the limits of that strength now. But this, well—

Qi Rong watches as small, silvery creatures creep in on the forest floor around him. Rats.

The butterflies, he thinks, wouldn’t do for dealing with a creature such as him.

The green ghost struggles to move, pained sounds coming out of his throat as the little wraith spirits begin gnawing at the edges of his form, quickly draining his spiritual power.

This doesn’t even feel like so much as flexing one’s pinky. Hardly even an effort at all.

Qi Rong can see that, even now, as he's pushed to the brink of utter destruction, flailing uselessly as the silver spirits crawl all over him, knowing at every exposed piece of flesh—

Hua Cheng isn't even watching. He's examining the dirt under his nails. Like he's bored.

"You don't seem particularly bright, so I'll be explicit with you," he sighs, turning on his heel as the rats reduce Qi Rong to exactly where he started, twenty three years before:

Back into a Ghost Fire.

"I'm not a patient man. When someone pisses me off, well..." He smirks. "Do you want to know what pisses me off, Qi Rong?" The Ghost King continues, slowly starting to walk back down the forest path. The butterflies have returned now, slamming into the ghost fire over and over again, strongarming the little thing into following their master.

His boots crunch softly against the leaves, dry and brittle as autumn begins to settle in. Silver bells chime softly in the breeze.

"When people touch what's mine."

When you're born with nothing, you grab onto the things life gives you—and you hang on tightly.

Up until recently—there was very little in Hua Cheng's life he could truly claim as his own.

There were things he desired to claim before, yes—but he had no right to them, and was forced to let such hopes go.

But he was a lonely child. One who grew into a selfish teenager. And now, Hua Cheng is a possessive man.

"Lay a finger on my worshippers, and I will find you," the ghost king muses, glancing up at the sky. "And I will do this to you again."

It isn't so much of a threat as it is a promise—because he knows Qi Rong can't help himself.

His survival instincts might not be bad—but his impulse control is absolutely abysmal.

But that's fear that Qi Rong has to live with, and Hua Cheng, well...

He gets to enjoy it.

The Ghost King has never acknowledged the fact that he actually has worshippers. Not until now.

He still isn't sure if it counts, given the fact that he willingly descended but... They've been praying to him all this time, and now he's answered.

That forms a certain sort of relationship, whether you want it to or not. When they exit the forest, Hua Cheng finally hears it—

Rain.

The soft pattering of drops falling down through the treetops, only hitting the top of the ghost king's head when they make it out into the open—and when he sticks out his palm—

He finds it stained with red.

"...Again?" He muses, rubbing his fingertips together.

The last time this happened was on Mount Tonglu, back when he first forged E-Ming. At the time, he thought of it more as a...freak incident, more than anything else.

Now, as the blood begins to pour—he feels a rush of power that comes with it, crackling through his veins.

And now, he realizes—he was that one that caused it before. That is causing it now.

That Hua Cheng's rage could be something so profound, that after releasing it upon a creature like Qi Rong—even in what felt like a pitifully small dose—

He could make the sky weep bloody tears.

Something about that satisfies him. Bringing some small measure of peace to the torn, bloody ache in his heart that has haunted him all these years.

The ghost fire trembles behind him, sizzling each time a drop of blood lands on it's form—and Hua Cheng pulls out...

An umbrella.

It unfolds with ease as he lifts it over his head, watching the bloody downpour around him.

Not the first time he's used to the spiritual device—nor the last. And he doubts, in the end, that his god ever knew that he kept it. But...

'If you can't find a meaning in life...'

His fingers tighten around the handle of the umbrella, remembering.

'Allow me to be that meaning.'

Words that were given in kindness—even if Xie Lian likely put very little thought into them at the time. Such a small, forgettable moment to a god.

But those small moments...

He glances down, catching sight of a small white flower on the ground, it's petals slowly becoming stained by the rain

Those moments, so small in the gaze of a god, can mean everything in the life of a child.

He doesn't think much of it then, tipping the umbrella forward to shield the little thing from the downpour.

His mind is already so far away, haunted by memories of how many flowers, just like this, he used to find for his god each day.

Hua Cheng remembers the flower he placed in Xie Lian's hair, the last day he saw him. How wilted and tired it looked beneath the rain.

He tried so hard to protect him as Wu Ming. Knowing that it was often in vain— because Xie Lian had no desire to be saved.

Still, he tried.

Knowing that no pain lasts forever. That eventually, his god would return to himself again—

And how horrified Xie Lian would be, when he saw the things that grief and resentment could lead him to do.

Humans might worship gods on pedestals—but only because those gods placed themselves on those pedestals to begin with.

No one falls further than a god—and no one mourns them quite like a Ghost.

Maybe as Hong-er, he could have said something. Done something to help him more.

Hong-er was someone the prince knew. Someone he trusted. But—

But who was Wu Ming? No one. Nothing. A creature that didn't even have a name.

And it was not his place to interfere in Xie Lian's decisions—not even his own self destruction.

He could only follow—and watch.

Watch as that flower wilted in the rain.

Alone. So, horribly alone.

Until it came under the shelter of a worn out, slightly bent bamboo hat.

Hua Cheng thinks about that, now—watching a slightly bloody flower take shelter from the rain.

He remembers, and it aches.

He doesn't know that a young girl is watching him from her bedroom window, her eyes wide as she peers through the night.

The sight should be frightening, and yet…

She knows, watching the shape of that umbrella tip forward, that the young man holding it is the one who saved her

The Ghost King, the crimson ghost, Hua Chengzhu— No.

More than just a crimson ghost, she thinks—watching the way the bloody rain drops fall all around him.

What she's watching—it doesn't feel like something as simple as a ghost haunting the night, no.

It's more significant.

This feels like something out of a story—no, a fairytale.

And such tales have names that carry the beauty they hold within.

Of all of the times that Hua Cheng would make the sky rain with blood—he found this incident to be among the least significant.

Pest removal, if anything

And yet—it’s the night that earned him his proper title. One verse in a song of four—

‘Crimson Rain Sought Flower.’

At first, he found it a bit off base, but...then again, what else is he doing, if not walking through the bloody rain, constantly seeking the flower?

Xie Lian told himself, when he began his second banishment, that he was going to start over. That this was a new leaf, and he wouldn’t turn to the methods he had once before, when he was foolish and young, determined to unleash his grief on the world.

And he meant it.

In the years since, he hasn’t brought any harm to humans. He hasn’t cheated or stolen from anyone. In general, he’s lived his life by respectable means.

Just a simple Taoist.

But Xie Lian never expected to find himself placed in this sort of situation.

One where he’s expected to stand aside, and allow something horrible to continue— simply because heaven mandates that it isn’t his ‘place’ to interfere.

But Xie Lian isn’t a god. Not right now, anyway, and...He’s regretted his failures to help mortals—but never the act of trying.

Knock knock!

The boy stumbles toward the front door, rubbing his eyes irritably as he opens it, only to find...

A blind Taoist in white cultivation robes, flanked by a thin, angry looking child, half hiding behind his side.

“...Mr. Hua?!”

“Heng,” Xie Lian smiles in return.

“What are you doing here?” He mumbles with a frown. “It’s not even sunrise. I don’t have to work for another four hours! I get to sleep a little more! I—”

“It’s not about that,” Xie Lian shakes his head, pulling Yan out from behind him. “I need you to keep him here with you tonight.”

Heng stumbles back inside the doorway, looking at Yan like he’s a cockroach that the taller boy would rather smash before he makes his way inside.

Yan doesn’t look particularly pleased about the situation either, but...

Xie Lian smiles sweetly, gripping both children by the shoulders as he steers them inside.

“It’s important to make friends at a young age,” he explains calmly. “Otherwise you’ll end up all alone like me, understand?”

“...That’s depressing,” Yan mumbles, hanging his chin.

“At least I won’t end up blind like you!” Heng grumbles, tugging at Xie Lian’s grip on his arm. “And Yan’s already all alone, that’s not my —!”

He stops when the Taoist leans in front of him, still smiling—but there’s a sharpness to it now.

“Do you know how I lost my sight, Heng?”

Slowly, the boy shakes his head—and Xie Lian’s smile widens. “Someone asked me to do a good deed, and I said no.”

Not exactly the truth, but from the way he can hear Heng’s heart throb with terror in response, it’s an effective lie.

The two boys are left behind in the doorway, Yan holding himself tightly while Heng glares, eventually forcing himself to turn back. “If you want to sleep, there’s an extra blanket. But if you try to get in my bed—I’ll kill you.”

The smaller boy is quiet for a moment, then—

"...Okay," he mumbles, stumbling after him.

Xie Lian had Yan carefully describe the path to his father's house to him before—and now, it's a fairly easy path to walk. He stumbles once or twice, occasionally catching himself with his hand against the trunk of a nearby tree.

The bark is wet now—but he can't remember it raining before. There's also a faint smell of iron, like blood...but he can't seem to place it.

Either way, there isn't much time to contemplate it. He has something a little more pressing on his mind, now.

It's a small walk up the hill, to make it to the cottage that Yan described—and the entire way there, Xie Lian is contemplating.

This isn't exactly a situation that can be worked out with words. Maybe Xie Lian would have thought that in his youth, but now...

He isn't so naive.

It's something he's silently wrestling with, walking to the doorstep of the house, rapping on the door with three sharp knocks.

Can he settle this situation without harming the human? Does he—?

"I swear to the GODS if you're not dead, I'll KILL YOU MYSELF!"

...Does he want to?

He feels the door swing open aggressively as Yan's father stumbles outside, liquor coming off of him like a stale stench—hears the rush of air as he swings his head around, trying to catch sight of the child—before his gaze finally settles on Xie Lian.

"...Who are you?!"

"..." The god smiles, clasping his hands in front of him in a friendly gesture. "Good evening—you have a son named Yan, is that correct?"

"...Yes," the farmer grouses, wiping at his nose. "What's it to you?"

"Well, I came across the child with some other kids from town," Xie Lian explains calmly, "and they were trying to summon a Ghost King."

“I…” The man’s eyebrows knit together. “What?! What sort of nonsense is that?! Where’s the little brat now? When I get my hands on him—!”

“I left him with Heng’s family for the evening,” Xie Lian continues, a forced smile in place. “But I hope you aren’t trying to imply you’d resort to violence.”

“…” The farmer stops, breathing heavily, looking the Taoist over. He recognizes him from town, he thinks.

“…Mr. Hua, isn’t it?”

Xie Lian bobs his head politely. “Yes. The children—they seemed to think the Ghost King could help them, if they were being mistreated.”

The farmer stiffens, his shoulders rising defensively. “Would your son have a reason to summon him, you think?”

“…The boy’s been disturbed since his mother died,” the older man mutters, hands balled into fists by his sides. “He’s prone to telling tales to get attention. Nothing to worry yourself over.”

The lines are practiced. He’s said them many times. Xie Lian can tell.

“…I see,” he murmurs. “Well, I thought I should check, nonetheless. Thank you for setting my mind at ease.”

It’s not as though he can use physical violence to threaten the man, can he? “It’s alright, little priest—safe journey home, now.”

Xie Lian turns around with a frown.

It’s been a long time since he was so frustrated with his limitations as a god. And—he knows it wouldn’t be hard to eliminate this man. That no one would miss him, and that some might even thank Xie Lian for it.

But didn’t he swear that he wouldn’t resort to such things again?

He—

“I swear, that boy wants to see ghosts everywhere he looks,” the man mutters when he thinks Xie Lian is out of earshot. “If that’s what he wants, he can go join his dead whore for a mother for all I care.”

The prince pauses in mid step. Ah. There it is.

He reaches into his robes for a moment, slowly working through a newly formed idea in his mind—lifting out a small silver ring, pressing his lips against it.

“I’m sorry, Hong-er.” He murmurs under his breath. “I promised I wouldn’t do this sort of thing anymore, but...”

But this is important.

Finally, Xie Lian turns around, settling his gaze—unseeing, but still unnerving, on the farmer.

(He doesn’t know that, only a few kilometers away, a ghost king rubs the back of his neck with a shiver.)

“Sir?”

The farmer pauses, glancing up.

“...What is it?”

Xie Lian smiles, slowly tipping his head to the side, his voice perfectly pleasant— friendly, even, as he speaks again—

“Yan told me everything.”

The older man goes stock still, eyes bulging out of his head. “He—?!”

“He showed me the scars.” Xie Lian explains.

Of course—Xie Lian had to touch them to know that they were there, but once he did, the prince knew exactly what made them.

A whip.

“And that made me believe he was telling the truth about the rest of it, as well.”

He listens, as Yan’s father’s pulse begins to race.

There were other things the child told Xie Lian. Things that wouldn’t leave scars, but cut all the deeper.

“I’m going to tell,” Xie Lian concludes, turning back around. “That’s why I left Yan somewhere else, tonight. I thought it was only decent to tell you first.”

If this were any other situation—if Xie Lian were any other person, it would be an incredibly foolish thing to do. A naive thing to do.

But now, he simply starts making his way back down the path towards the village— and when he hears quiet footsteps following, he smiles.

Humans can surprise you, in Xie Lian's experience. Many of them have a goodness in them that can come out when you least expect it.

But there are just as many who are never surprising. Who will always disappoint. This man is one of the latter—which works to Xie Lian's advantage

Even if he pretends not to notice, he's expecting it when the farmer creeps up on him from behind.

And this method—it works perfectly for his needs.

When a set of hands wrap around his throat behind, the cultivator makes a big show of gasping, letting out a strangled whimper.

Objectively, he's aware of just how violently the man is squeezing his throat. Can feel his windpipe being crushed as those fingers squeeze tighter with each passing moment.

But it doesn't hurt, not really.

Even when he's lifted from the ground, feet flailing with feigned weakness. His hands tremble as he 'tries' to pull the farmer's fingers off of his throat.

Fingers that Xie Lian could crush with a flick of his wrist, if he desired—but now, he does no such thing.

Then, when he finally goes limp—those hands let him go, and his body goes crumpling down against the dirt.

He lays there for a moment, hair covering his face—utterly still. Not breathing.

The farmer stares down at him, hands trembling, his own breaths becoming ragged.

Xie Lian remains limp, when he feels fingers wrap around his ankles—slowly dragging him into the underbrush.

It's kind of nice, he thinks. Almost like being carried. He can't remember the last time someone ever carried him. The occasional rock bumps his head—but it's not too bad

Eventually, he's left behind a bush—the brilliant plan of a mean spirited drunk to get rid of a body. Very impressive—Xie Lian is trembling with awe of his ingenious little scheme.

He stumbles back towards his house, and Xie Lian feels Ruoye tremble against his throat woefully.

Poor thing, probably feels horrible that the god wouldn't allow it to help. But that wasn't the point.

Xie Lian lies against the forest floor, stroking his fingers over the ring thoughtfully.

'I'm sorry, Hong-er,' he thinks to himself, staring into the dark void of his shackles

'I know I said I wouldn't do this anymore.'

He promised to take better care of himself, in his second banishment. And Xie Lian does try, but...he isn't very good at it, honestly.

'But there was a child in danger this time. You would understand, if you were here—I promise.'

Once his throat finishes the process of reconstructing itself—it takes a little over an hour—he rises to his feet.

He clutches Hong-er between his fingers again—but Xie Lian doesn't bother with apologizing this time. It would seem sincere, given what he's about to do.

In the cottage at the seat of the hill—there's sharp rapping at the door.

Knock, knock, knock!

"..." The farmer rubs his temple, rising to his feet, staggering through the kitchen once more. "Have you finally dragged your miserable ass home, you little—?!"

The door swings open, and he freezes up with terror.

Standing in the doorway—his throat clearly bruised, but otherwise unharmed—is a Taoist.

A blind Taoist, wearing cultivator's robes.

"Hello," Xie Lian smiles kindly. "Are you Yan's father?"

"..." The farmer trembles. "I...I'm..." he takes a step back, his throat dry. Had he...had he not finished the job somehow? "I-I am..."

The Taoist's smile widens, making the older man's heart drop into the pit of his stomach.

"He told me everything," Xie Lian explains, turning around. "I'm going to tell."

He begins his slow walk down the mountain path once more, and once again, he's all too aware of the sound of the farmer stumbling after him.

It almost hurts, the second time—but only because he uses a knife. The feeling of a blade against the god's skin brings back bad memories

He lets out a pained cry when the knife plunges into his back, over and over again, even makes a scene by rolling over onto his back, throwing his arms up to shield his face—before going limp once more, his blood pooling beneath him on the ground.

There's a bit more effort, now.

This time, when he drags Xie Lian into the forest—there's an attempt to bury him. Not fantastic, really—it's barely more than a foot deep, and his boots are sticking out. But he can't say that there's not a very, *very* shallow learning curve when it comes to Yan's father.

Xie Lian lays there again, wiggling his toes. The farmer didn't seem particularly concerned with mopping up the blood spatter—but then again, there was all of that blood around before—maybe Xie Lian's blends in.

How did that happen, anyway? He... Ruoye is writhing in protest now

The spiritual tool is attached to him—more so than most devices of such nature. It's primary purpose is protection, after all—not combat.

Being forced to watch this happen to the prince over and over again...leaves the poor thing distressed.

"I'm sorry," Xie Lian murmurs. "But this is the best way."

After all—Xie Lian can sit up now. He can brush the dirt from his robes, and make his way back up the hill.

Yan wouldn't be able to do that, if his father harmed him. He knocks on the door once more.

It's not the most graceful method, he'll admit.

"He told me everything."

But each time he says those words, the man's eyes widen just a little more with fright. "I'm going to tell."

In the hours before sunrise, Xie Lian is strangled. Stabbed. Drowned in the river at the foot of the hill. And each time, he makes his way back

He never lays a finger on the farmer—not once.

But in the hours after sunrise, there's a light set of knocks on a different door.

The Broken Trio

Chapter Summary

> “I’m back!”
>
> A voice crows, and in the doorway stands a tall, lean young man with long, jet black hair—dressed in dark lavender robes. And in each hand, he holds a rabbit. “Ma, I thought you might want something nice for tonight’s dinner to welcome me back!” He exclaims, dropping them down.
>
> “Where’s my little brother? I thought he’d be waiting at the door to greet—”
>
> He stops, however, when he sees a dark haired beauty dressed at their table, dressed in red silk, and his eyes go wide.

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE
>
> CONTENT WARNING: MENTIONED SUICIDE

The tradesman yawns, scratching the back of his head as he walks past his wife, in the middle of starting breakfast. “Did you order something?”`

She glances back over her shoulder, shaking her head, “Between waking up and cooking your breakfast, did I have time to order something from the market? No.” She grouses, wiping her hands off on a cloth.

Her husband sighs, rubbing his neck. “No need for the attitude, my love…”

When he opens the door—there’s a figure standing there, and for a moment, he almost doesn’t recognize him.

“…Mr. Hua?!” He finally gasps, looking him over.

After all, his hair is loose now—and he isn’t wearing his typical white robes.

Actually, with the cut, and the red and gold color of the cloth...

He almost mistook the young cultivator for a bride. If not for the bandage around his face, he wouldn't have recognized him at all.

Xie Lian smiles awkwardly, "I know, I must look strange..."

It's not as though he could walk around in dirty, bloodstained robes after all. And he does normally keep an extra set of his white robes at all times, but...

He still hasn't replaced the set he lost in a house fire two months before, so it couldn't be helped.

"My robes kept on getting dirty. I don't know if you've had the chance to notice, but... there's a lot of blood on the road, for some reason."

"I did notice that," the huntsman's wife frowns, turning around. "What on earth do you think could have happened?"

"I don't know,"

Xie Lian shakes his head, letting out a sigh. "But I'm afraid I have some very unfortunate news."

"Oh?" The wife sets down the cloth she was using to wipe off her hands, her expression stern. "Was it something Heng did? I swear, Mr. Hua, if he's given you any trouble—!"

"No!"

The young man is quick to correct her, shaking his head. "He was actually quite a help to me last night! I think...he had some sense that one of the local children was in trouble. Yan? I brought him here last night."

"...Yes," the huntsman agrees, rubbing his chin. "We saw."

"He told me some...concerning things about his situation," Xie Lian explains, his eyebrows knitting as he frowns deeply. "And he showed me...proof, left behind on his body."

The parents look at each other, silently horrified.

Of course—everyone knew that Yan's father had a tendency towards alcohol and violence. Particularly after the...questionable circumstances of his wife's passing. He was vile, and everyone knew it. But…

Yan wasn’t exactly a reliable narrator either, so no one ever listened.

But they’re deeply religious folk—and their trust in the young Taoist is absolute. Now, they have to believe the veracity of the tales.

“Oh, that poor child…” The wife whispers, covering her mouth. “I…I’m so sorry that we didn’t…”

“It’s taken care of now,” Xie Lian sighs. “But now the situation has gotten a little bit messy.”

The parents stare at him, waiting—and now…the Taoist enters questionable territory.

Lying—but for a good reason.

“Well, after leaving Yan here, I went to tell his father what the child had told me…” The Taoist frowns.

“And that I would be reporting it to the authorities. It only seemed like the right thing to do. I even came back at sunrise, to see if he wanted to come and turn himself in before I had to, but…” He hangs his head. “I suppose my warning pushed him to…”

“Oh!” The wife gasps. “That’s…that’s just horrible, I…”

Xie Lian nods, his lower lip wobbling slightly. “I can’t help but wonder if things would have been different, if I had waited until morning…”

“Don’t blame yourself, young man,” the huntsman shakes his head, patting Xie Lian’s arm. “You did the right thing.”

“Yes…” Xie Lian sighs, turning his head in the direction of Heng’s room, “but that poor boy, I can’t imagine what will become of him now…”

The parents look at one another—not unaware of the underlying question in the cultivator’s words.

“…I suppose I could use the extra hand around here…” The huntsman mutters, scratching his head. “It would do Heng good, to have a child his age around.”

Xie Lian thinks Heng might prefer drowning himself in the river, but he smiles pleasantly. “I was thinking the same thing!”

“...If we do this,” the wife speaks up, “Could we ask just a small favor in return? It shouldn’t trouble you too much, hopefully.”

Xie Lian considers the matter, tapping his chin. “What is it?”

“It’s our eldest son, Kuo,” she explains, reaching over to pour the tea.

“He’s been a ranger for a little while now, working for the local magistrates, but...” She sighs, looking to her husband, who shakes his head with exasperation. “He’s restless.”

“Thinks he’s too good for this place, is what it is.” The huntsman huffs, crossing his arms.

“I’ve tried to knock some sense into him, it’s no good.”

Xie Lian tilts his head, arching an eyebrow. “I’m not sure how I could help with restlessness—”

“He wants to study cultivation,” The Huntsman’s wife explains. “We sent him to study under a master in the city, but...”

Her husband glares at the wall stormily. “He’s never exactly been good with following strict rules.”

Well, that explains why Heng kept bringing up the fact that Xie Lian got kicked out over and over again. Initially, the god assumed the child was just being difficult, but...

The child was clearly anxious for his older brother. Actually, it explains a lot of the behavioral issues, he...

“...I’m hardly worthy of being anyone’s teacher,” Xie Lian mutters, shaking his head, prepared to explain (vaguely) his own failings, but...

Before he can, the huntsman’s wife reaches for his hand, squeezing gently. “You have much to offer the world, young man.” She reassures him. “A person is so much more than just their eyes.”

Xie Lian pauses—because that’s not what he meant, but... He finds himself genuinely moved

“...I’ll be traveling soon,” Xie Lian explains. “South. It’s not good for my cultivation method if I stay in one place for too long, but...”

(Really, it’s got nothing to do with that—but Xie Lian’s bad luck tends to drag others down if he lingers for too long.)

"He could travel with me, if he would like." The god murmurs, bowing his head in assent. "Though not for too long—I'm sure he'll want to return to his family quickly."

The huntsman seems doubtful of that—and in that moment, the front door slams open.

"I'm back!"

A voice crows, and in the doorway stands a tall, lean young man with long, jet black hair—dressed in dark lavender robes. And in each hand, he holds a rabbit. "Ma, I thought you might want something nice for tonight's dinner to welcome me back!" He exclaims, dropping them down.

"Where's my little brother? I thought he'd be waiting at the door to greet—"

He stops, however, when he sees a dark haired beauty dressed at their table, dressed in red silk, and his eyes go wide.

"You didn't..." He starts, pointing a trembling finger in the stranger's direction "I'm not ready to get married!" He cries, slightly terrified—but when the stranger turns their head, his expression changes slightly upon seeing an...admittedly lovely face.

"..." Xie Lian isn't sure how to react when he hears the sound of someone scrambling to kneel before him.

He feels a hand grasping his own firmly, giving it a gentle squeeze—and then the young man (Kuo) speaks again, this time clearly trying to lower his voice in order to sound a little manlier, "...I will dedicate my entire life to you, my precious flower!"

Xie Lian doesn't react immediately, his face frozen with shock—and across the table, the huntsman drops his head into his hands with an irritated groan.

"You are making a fool out of yourself, boy!"

"Love at first sight can make a man a fool!" Kuo exclaims with no hint of shame.

"I don't know," Xie Lian replies dryly, allowing the young man to kiss the back of his hand—it feels oddly reminiscent of his younger days. Men and women alike would travel for thousands of miles to present themselves before the Crown Prince of Xianle…

…Only to experience sharp disappointment when they learned the conditions of his cultivation method. "It sounded like you were afraid of commitment, before."

Kuo starts, a little surprised by how deep his bride's voice is—but not deterred in the least! "I've changed!"

"In the last thirty seconds," his mother replies, her tone just as dry as Xie Lian's.

"Yes!" Kuo nods emphatically, clutching Xie Lian's hand against his cheek. "Thank you mother, you couldn't have picked a better match—!"

"If we picked a match for you, it wouldn't be Hua—!"

His father snarls, his face slowly starting to turn purple, and Kuo squeezes Xie Lian's hand, looking terribly offended on his behalf.

"You think I care that she's blind?! I don't! I can see plenty for both of us!"

'Oh,' Xie Lian thinks offhandedly, allowing his hand to be tugged to and fro in Kuo's grip, *'that's actually rather sweet.'*

An idiotic young man, but clearly a decent one.

"He's NOT A WOMAN!" The huntsman stands up, his chair screeching. "That is a MAN!"

There's a pause.

Xie Lian smiles awkwardly, waiting for the young man to cringe away or howl with disgust about being tricked, but—

Kuo doesn't let go of his hand, if anything—just holds on tighter. "And I'm OPEN MINDED!"

His mother lets out an irritated cry, "STOP EMBARRASSING US!"

The huntsman is on the brink of ripping his hair out at this rate. "We go through ALL of the trouble of finding you a cultivation master that ISN'T obligated to kick you out after three weeks of your behavior, and you ruin it in FIVE SECONDS—!"

“He’s a CULTIVATION MASTER?!” Kuo cries, “My wife is a—?!”

Xie Lian is whipping his head around, trying to keep up with the shouting voices, when he hears the sound of Kuo getting slapped upside the head by his father—hard.

“HE. IS. NOT. YOUR. WIFE!” The older man howls, “Would you GET IT TOGETHER?!”

“...I’m not offended,” Xie Lian finally speaks up, managing to get the group to fall into stormy silence. Well—Kuo’s parents are scowling, the young man is still holding Xie Lian’s hand, looking up at him with big, starstruck eyes. “But...”

He scrambles for some explanation that will satisfy the parents,while also letting the boy down easy, so...

Carefully, the cultivator pulls at the silver chain around his neck, lifting out a finely crafted ring—a ruby set in its face.

“I’m already married,” he explains gently.

Another lie, one of many that he’s told this morning—but the first he almost wishes was the truth.

“Is that so?” The huntsman speaks up, eyes wide. “You never mentioned a wife before, Mr. Hua.”

“...They’re no longer with us,” Xie Lian explains with a tight smile in place.

“Oh,” Kuo’s mother frowns, leaning over to squeeze Xie Lian’s shoulder, “I’m so sorry to hear that, dear...”

The rest of the arrangements are quick enough to work out—to the couple’s shock, the Taoist isn’t so disgusted by their son’s overtures that he would go back on their deal

By the time the sun has fully risen, Xie Lian has changed into a slightly less ostentatious set of blue robes (he’ll have to make another white set the next time they stop), and kneels between Yan and Heng very seriously, holding both of their hands in his firmly.

“...You two need to look after one another now, understand?” He murmurs, his tone stern.

“...” Heng looks away with a huff, glaring with annoyance. “I already have a shitty big brother that leaves all the time, I don't need an even shittier little brother!"

"Who said I wanted a big brother like YOU, anyway?! Besides, I'm barely younger than you, piss off!" Yan cries with a glare—but he holds onto Xie Lian's hand tightly.

"...Because it's just the two of you now," the cultivator explains, his gaze clearly strained beneath Ruoye.

Both boys stop, looking down at him. "I won't be around to make you stop fighting anymore," Xie Lian explains, his voice slightly unsteady, like...

Like he's thinking about something else.

"So, you have to try and get along, okay?" He squeezes their hands even tighter.

No one can see it—but beneath Ruoye, his eyes are hot and swimming with tears. *'Because you're going the rest of the way without me.'*

'And I am so, so glad that you are.'

"...Mr. Hua? Are you...?"

He can't see them, but even if he could—he would see something else.

Xie Lian would see a gangly palace guard, crossing his arms and scowling in the opposite direction—and a young servant, clutching a broom between fingers that tremble with anger.

'I just wish we could have done it together, that's all.'

"...I'm alright," he reassures them both.

Then, Xie Lian smiles—a shaky one, the sort that hurts—

But it's a good hurt. The kind that feels like letting out a deep sigh after a good cry. It's just...growing.

And that hurts, sometimes.

"Let me tell you a secret," He murmurs—and both boys lean closer, listening closely.

Xie Lian's smile brightens—then it softens.

Heng has complained every single moment that he's spent with the Taoist. They haven't gotten along—and that's mostly his fault—but now, he realizes...

He's going to miss Xie Lian, when he goes. Yan clings to his hand even tighter.

"...The most important people in your life," the cultivator explains gently, looking back and forth between the two of them, "are the ones who grow up with you."

You never realize it when it's happening—because life is always so fast and out of focus when you're young.

Xie Lian always kept his eyes pointed forward—and he never stopped to look at the people around him. He thought he did. Thought he was a good friend, a good ruler, a good son, but...

When he finally stopped to look at the people that once stood beside him...there was no one left.

All he could do was sit by the sea, taking in the sunset one last time—and realize that there was no one to blame but him.

Not his parents, not his friends—not even Bai Wuxiang—

And never Hong-er. Never, in any world, would he ever blame Hong-er.

The only one to blame was him.

He pushed them away, or didn't fight hard enough to keep them safe, or—

Or he just didn't listen.

The boys glance at one another again, this time with slightly less distaste, and—to Xie Lian's surprise, it's Heng who speaks up first.

"...Yeah, fine." He mumbles, looking away. "I won't beat him up, or whatever."

It's not exactly a glowing promise to live together in peace and harmony, but...That wasn't what Xie Lian was asking for, anyway.

It's been several years since he came to this village, and the region surrounding. Long enough to get used to it.

Now, it almost feels like starting a new path all over again. Like...this is one juncture, where his life could have gone in two very different directions. It's hard to know if he chose the right one—Xie Lian never does, until it's very far behind him.

"You said you wanted to go south?" Kuo muses from his side, holding a truly *massive* crate of Xie Lian's weaving supplies in his arms, along with his own belongings on his back.

(Xie Lian can lift the crate with one finger, but the young man insisted.)

"I know a great spot!"

He explains. "There's a TON of natural hot springs and rivers. Bet you feel nervous about using public baths, right? Worried someone might take advantage? Well," the youth beams, "now you've got me!"

Xie Lian smiles, half amused, half sardonic. "Oh, thank goodness." He replies.

"And the food—you'll love it! You like spicy food, right? Ah, well, if you don't, you just gotta try the right kind—" He stops, noticing the way that Xie Lian has come to a halt in the street beside him. "...You alright, Mr. Hua?"

"...Is that a temple?" Xie Lian murmurs.

"It is," Kuo agrees, tilting his head to the side. "You wanna get some prayers done before we hit the road? I don't usually go to that one, but—"

"Which god is it for?"

(Come to think of it, Kuo doesn't know how his teacher *knew* it was a temple, but he lets it go.)

A few minutes later, Xie Lian finds himself kneeling on a small pillow left out for worshippers, hands clasped in his lap, struggling to think of what to say. If—If he should even say anything at all, an incense stick burning before him.

Around him, other visitors whisper.

"His divine statue is lovely, don't you think? The general must be so handsome!"

"Oh," a woman laughs softly behind her hand. "I heard that if any of his divine statues aren't to his liking, he'll destroy them and send a deputy to sculpt another."

"Hah?! Really?!"

"So vain!"

Xie Lian bites back laughter, shaking his head fondly. That sounds like him.

'I spent so long being angry with you…' He thinks to himself, fiddling with a thin piece of thread between his fingers. *'But I never stopped to think about why…about what was going on in your life.'*

It's hard, growing up with the expectation that you'll always be the center of your own story. Everyone else in your life becomes a member of the supporting cast, and in a way…

It stops you from thinking of them as their own people. With their own lives, and their own…

Xie Lian tilts his chin up, staring blankly at the divine statue before him, wondering if it's a close likeness at all, or the face of an insecure boy, trying to place expensive masks over his expression.

Like that could make him feel as though he belongs.

'…That boy reminded me so much of you,' he thinks.

Difficult to deal with. Always lashing out and making the other children run away, complaining about his bad personality.

And when he tried to tell the other villagers that he was in pain, no one listened to his story.

They just complained about his 'bad' personality, brushing the rest off.

Had Xie Lian allowed others to do that around him, before? Not that his friend ever tried to say anything of the sort, but…

Had the prince ever really given him a chance?

'Was someone hurting you, too?' Xie Lian's fingers tremble in his lap. *'If you had told me, would I have listened?'*

He spent so long just assuming a friendship was there—only because

Xie Lian wanted it to be. Because having a normal person in his life was refreshing.

But did he ever pay attention, really?

If he's taking a brutal moral inventory of his actions—Xie Lian doesn't think he did. There were moments when it was obvious that his friend was in a difficult situation.

Even that one time, when he stopped the guards from scolding him for taking fruit from the orchard home to his family…Xie Lian never asked the boy *why* he needed to take them. Just told his friend that he could take as much fruit as he wanted, whenever he wanted.

That was all Xie Lian ever did. In his mind, the only real problem in his friend's life came from poverty. So, if Xie Lian just gave him things—food, money, opportunities —then he just magically wouldn't have problems anymore.

Because Mu Qing was two dimensional to him, then.

Xie Lian never considered his situation that deeply. Just offered him everything he could, over and over again—and felt irritation when Mu Qing viewed his generosity with suspicion.

'I'm not doing it so you'll thank me, or so you'll owe me,' Xie Lian used to think to himself.

'I'm doing it because we're friends.'

But what was Xie Lian thinking, when Mu Qing didn't help him that day, on the mountain? What was he thinking when Mu Qing said those words in anger in front of Feng Xin?

'How could you?'

That's what he had thought.

'How could you?!'

After everything Xie Lian had done for him, how could he?

And that—that doesn't sound like friendly generosity, or kindness for the sake of it that…

Sounds like an attempt at buying friendship from someone that was far too proud to ever accept the premise of such a thing.

When, all of that time—if Xie Lian really wanted them to be friends, he could have asked Mu Qing what he was really thinking. Away from Feng Xin, and all the others. Because when it was just the two of them, they never fought.

If he had just asked—

'Is someone hurting you?'

"Mu Qing, I..."

The prince freezes, only realizing in that moment that he had accidentally opened his mouth in prayer—and underneath Ruoye, his eyes widen, because...

...on the off chance that he was listening, would Xie Lian know what to say? Would it help? Or would it just...

Xie Lian's lips tremble as he rises to his feet, shaking his head.

He isn't ready for this.

Not yet. He's still got his own hurt and anger, weighing heavy, and—

Mu Qing is the last person that would ever want to hear from him, anyway. He shouldn't have come here.

The prince turns on his heel, walking out of the temple without another word, the doors slamming shut behind him.

His heart is still pounding when he descends the temple steps, quick to get away as quickly as

possible—and he isn't even annoyed by Kuo's boisterous voice.

"Ready to go?" He calls out, falling into step beside the cultivator.

There's one thing that Xie Lian came to notice about his student very early on—is that, unless you tell him that you want to talk, he doesn't ask what's bothering you.

Xie Lian appreciates that—especially now

"...Yes," he agrees, arms tightening around himself slightly.

The young man leads the way eagerly, broad shoulders and arms clearing a path for Xie Lian to walk through the crowd without ever bumping into anyone.

“You know, now that we’re going on an adventure…” Kuo muses, rubbing his chin, “I should probably start going by my courtesy name. Put on a more serious front, you know?”

Xie Lian almost smiles. “It’s hardly an adventure. What’s your courtesy name, then?”

“Chi,” he replies. “You can still call me Kuo, though. Besides, isn’t first love always an adventure?” He waggles his eyebrows, bumping Xie Lian gently with his shoulder.

The cultivator has been faintly amused—though not encouraging—by his flirting all morning. But now…he doesn’t smile at all.

“…” The youth glances away, sniffing awkwardly—but he’s never been one to give up so easily. “Your husband,” he starts, glancing at Xie Lian through the corner of his eye, “…you still miss him?”

Xie Lian’s fingers reach for the chain around his neck without thinking.

Xie Lian finds it interesting that Kuo presumes his partner was male. He never said anything to indicate his preference one way or the other, but…he doesn’t correct it.

“…I’ll always miss him,” he answers softly.

You stop missing people when you forget them, after all.

And that isn’t possible for Xie Lian. Even if they were never married. And their relationship, it never truly reached that point, but…

Kuo considers that for a moment, squaring his shoulders. “Well, I’m not giving up, alright? I’ll make you get over him—for sure!”

“…” for the first time in ages, Xie Lian actually laughs. Throws his head back and laughs hard, straight from his gut.

“Hey! It’s not funny! I’m gonna work really hard!” Kuo whines, not seeming that upset—and it only makes his teacher laugh even harder, shaking his head.

“A flower can only be plucked by the stem once,” Xie Lian wipes at the corners of his eyes underneath Ruoye, smiling. “After that, it won't bloom again.”

And someone has already picked the crown prince, in the end. “What kind of saying is that?! It’s so DEPRESSING!” Kuo cries.

Xie Lian has already bloomed in someone else’s eyes—and has no desire to do so again.

What he didn’t know then, was just how desperately someone was still seeking the flower.

And, that in the heavenly capital above, someone had stopped in mid step, eyes wide. “...General?”

One of his deputies stumbles to a halt beside him, nearly dropping the basket of items he had been carrying back to his superior’s palace. “General Xuan Zhen?”

The young god doesn’t answer immediately, his expression unreadable, then—

“Go on without me.”

“But—!”

“Now.”

The deputy gives him an odd look before nodding, continuing on down the street, and...

He squeezes his eyes shut, remembering the way those words sounded in his head.

‘Mu Qing, I...’

It—It was...

It was him, wasn’t it?

And Xie Lian would never know, out of all of his prayers, this was the first time someone tried to answer.

‘Your highness?’ Mu Qing mutters, pressing his fingers to his temple. But...there’s no reply.

‘Why would he call me?’

Out of all of everyone on earth, god and mortal...

…Mu Qing knows that he's the last person Xie Lian would try to talk to.

And Xie Lian never knew, in the centuries that followed, that the great General Xuan Zhan took the time to descend to his temple immediately after, searching the crowds.

'Your highness?'

'Are you—?'

But no matter where he looked—there was no sign of him. Even when he changed into a mortal form, asking one of the worshippers in the temple…

They explained a blind Taoist had indeed been there, leaving his offering—and then left.

And why…

Why would he do that?

Mu Qing stands over an incense stick, long since burnt out—his eyes filled with far too many emotions to untangle fully, thinking—

'*Why did you do that?'*

Part of him wants to discard it as an oddity.

A moment of the crown prince faking kindness, just to show everyone how forgiving he is. How decency comes so easily to him, when all Mu Qing knows how to do is fake…

His hands ball into fists at his sides, trembling.

…But what if it wasn't that? What else could it be?

Mu Qing has always been a worrier. Even Xie Lian knew that, but…

The crown prince never knew just how much his friend worried about him. And he wouldn't—not for a very long time.

Worried enough to go to the one person that Mu Qing would have always preferred to avoid.

Feng Xin doesn't even look up from where he sits by the fire in his palace, sharpening one of his blades to a fine point, his posture tense.

"Get out."

Mu Qing rolls his eyes, crossing his arms as he leans against the doorframe. "You think I'd be here if I had a choice?"

"...Then what could be so important?" His f—e—

Mu Qing's former co-worker, turned enemy, now co-worker once again replies icily.

"..." The martial god looks down at the floor, slowly fiddling with a longer piece of his hair, twirling it around his finger. "I heard something."

Feng Xin never so much as looks up at him, working on his sword slightly more aggressively. "You hear a lot of things, Mu Qing. I've never cared to hear about them before."

"..." And since he doesn't look up, he never sees how complicated the look in the god's eye actually is.

Feng Xin never really looks at Mu Qing to begin with. Only ever reacts to the sharpness of his tone when he speaks.

"Xie Lian."

The larger man stiffens, his knuckles suddenly white where they grip the handle of his sword. "Excuse me?"

"I heard Xie Lian," Mu Qing replies.

"He prayed to me this afternoon."

Well. He doesn't know if it actually counted. After all—the crown prince barely said more than his name before disappearing again, but...

Mu Qing knows that Feng Xin has been looking for Xie Lian too, all this time—even if it's never been said.

"Did he say anything to you?"

Naturally, if it was what Mu Qing suspects it was—a cry for help—the prince would have called out to Feng Xin first, but...

Feng Xin sets the sword down against his legs, and he sounds so *tired* . "I don't have time for whatever this is, Mu Qing."

The god freezes as Feng Xin runs his fingers through his hair, sagging forward with a mixture between exhaustion and resentment. “If you want to fight, come back and start lying to get my attention tomorrow—I don’t have the energy today.”

“I…” Mu Qing sputters, eyes narrowed.

“I’m not lying!”

“Sure you’re not,” Feng Xin rolls his eyes, finally looking up to meet Mu Qing’s gaze. “He didn’t pray to me,” he replies, clearly indulging what he thinks is an antagonistic question. “And in what universe would he EVER want to pray to someone like you?”

Someone like him.

“…” Mu Qing hangs his head for a moment, his hair obscuring his face.

It’s funny, sometimes—how saying the right thing can completely changing the trajectory of a man’s life…

And so can saying the wrong thing.

“…you are SUCH a self righteous bastard.”

Mu Qing mutters. “At least I can say I left. He didn’t send me away because I wasn’t any good to him anymo—”

THUD!

The slam is so violent, several scrolls topple down from a nearby shelf. Feng Xin doesn’t care, just glares down at Mu Qing hatefully.

Mu Qing never flinches.

Not even now, with Feng Xin’s fingers easily encircling his entire throat. He just smirks up at the general, smug with the knowledge that he clearly struck a nerve. “You wanna know why he’ll never pray to you, Feng Xin?”

The god squeezes tighter, and Mu Qing grins fiercely.

“Because you set these *high* expectations for everyone else…and when people don’t know how to meet them…you end up alone,” Mu Qing explains, fingers delicately grasping Feng Xin’s wrist. Not trying to push him away, no—

He's trying to hurt him.

The same way Mu Qing hurts.

Because the way Mu Qing's thumb brushes over the inside of Feng Xin's wrist is reminiscent of an intimate caress.

A reminder of the fact that, of the two people that the martial god has desired in his life—both left him for that exact reason.

They won't ever touch him that way—and now, the only person who will is the likes of Mu Qing, in a situation like this—taunting him.

And Feng Xin has never desired Mu Qing.

Mu Qing is more painfully aware of that fact than anyone else.

"...I never expect anything but the worst from you," Feng Xin mutters, eyes acidic with anger. This is a side of him that Xie Lian never knew. A side of the god that almost no one ever knows. "And somehow, I still end up disappointed."

Feng Xin's passing moments of cruelty will always belong to Mu Qing.

Mu Qing tips his head slightly, his cheek bumping against Feng Xin's fingers, eyes slightly narrowed as he murmurs, "But I'm the only one that's left, aren't I?"

Briefly, there's a spark in Feng Xin's gaze.

A self loathing sort of heat, one that he can't help—and just the sight of it makes Mu Qing's stomach lurch, but—

The hand gripping his throat lets him go, and Feng Xin turns his back on him.

"You left a long time ago Mu Qing. It doesn't matter that we're on the same side now."

After all—Xie Lian wasn't actually there when Mu Qing left. He was off god knows where, doing god knows what, it—

Feng Xin was the one that Mu Qing left behind that day. And neither of them has ever forgotten it.

"Get out."

This time—Mu Qing listens.

They’ve had countless fights over the years—but this is the first time that both come to regret an argument in the aftermath. Each too proud to go to the other and investigate the truth behind what happened, and…

The crown prince does not pray to Mu Qing again.

We Always Come Back Here

Chapter Summary

> The scroll is snatched from her fingers after a moment, held in front of a tall, rather imposing figure, his armor gleaming in the light of the martial hall.
>
> “...This is so specific,” Pei Ming lets out a slightly amused chuckle, “I wonder what you all have done to offend him.”
>
> One of the martial gods listed glares, crossing his arms. “I’m glad you find this amusing, Ming Guang.”
>
> “Well, of course I do!” The general smirks, barking out a laugh. “I thought I was a polarizing figure—but somehow the lot of you have managed to offend a newborn devastation!” He shakes his head. “Enough so for him to bet his own soul on losing—I don’t ever think I’ve seen stakes that high.”

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE
>
> tw// this chapter once again displays negative attitudes towards sex work

See the end of the chapter for more notes

YEAR THIRTY TWO

“Sir?” The waitress smiles, bowing her head politely. “Do you mind if I ask your name?”

It only seems polite at this point—she’s been constantly refilling the young man’s glass with liquor all night.

Hua Cheng smiles, reclining in his seat. “Zhang Wei.”

He’s been using that alias with this face for a few years now—always prepared to cycle through others if necessary.

“Are you traveling alone?” She muses, filling his cup once more. “We don't often get outsiders coming this far south."

"I can imagine," he murmurs.

"I am—but I'm looking for someone."

The young woman raises an eyebrow, leaning a little closer out of curiosity—and maybe also because this Zhang Wei is rather handsome...in a wicked sort of way. "Is that so? Someone around here? Maybe I could help."

"I imagine you can," Hua Cheng never stops smiling at her, his tone positively charming. "As I understand it, he owns this establishment."

Along with several other properties in this small fishing settlement, built on the banks of several river deltas.

It's new, barely twenty years old—but lively.

The people moving here are young families—fishermen and cultivators alike, looking to start anew. And Hua Cheng can imagine that it must be a beautiful place for children to grow up—from the mountains on the horizon, to the lotus blossoms floating in the rivers and streams.

When the waitress realizes what he means—her eyes widen slightly with surprise. "...You're looking for Jiang Chi?" She muses, looking the traveler over. "I didn't take you for a cultivator."

Hua Cheng smiles, the gesture slightly lopsided—but enticing. "I'm not," he assures her.

"But we have a mutual friend who just so happens to be the person that I'm looking for."

As one of the more successful cultivators in the region—there are rumors about the man. Among them, that his cultivation master was actually a blind Taoist.

Such a rumor couldn't be ignored

"Is that so?" Her eyes light up with interest. "You know Mr. Hua?"

That gives the young man pause, his eyebrows raising slightly.

Is that what he's going by, these days?

"Do you?"

"When I was a little girl," she laughs softly. "I'll let Mr. Jiang know that you're here."

Hua Cheng never had any concerns about whether or not the cultivator would be willing to meet with him—he has a way of getting what he wants in that sense.

What he did not expect, however, was the ease and swiftness with which he was able to secure an audience.

"Mr. Zhang!" A voice booms upon entering the sitting room. "Welcome to Lotus Cove!"

Despite the fact that the red clad youth is clearly in his twenties, and Jiang Chi is now a man on the cusp of middle age—he raises an eyebrow, sizing him up with the eye of an elder.

"Lotus Cove?"

The cultivator frowns, scratching his ear. "You don't like it? I've been trying to think of an official name for this place. Something with a little more...flair, you know?"

That, Hua Cheng can understand. "Names are important," he agrees.

"Better to not make them boring."

And it's fitting, anyway—given just how many blossoms he saw on his way here.

Jiang Chi grins, gesturing for the youth to follow him. "A man after my own heart, come in, come in! Any friend of Hua Laoshi is a friend of mine! Sit, sit!"

He complies, watching as several servants scurry around, bringing more and more trays of food—enough to feed an army, it would seem, when it's clearly just the two of them.

"...I've never seen a cultivator with such...secular tastes," Hua Cheng comments, raising an eyebrow.

"Eh? You think so?" Jiang Chi smiles, lifting a bite of meat to his lips. "Hua Laoshi used to say the same thing, but he also said that it was no good to get so focused on your cultivation that you lose track of the world around you."

Hearing that makes Hua Cheng smile.

“So, I try to enjoy things,” The cultivation master shrugs. “Li Qiao told me that you were looking for Hua Laoshi. When was the last time you saw him?”

“…” Hua Cheng fiddles with his chopsticks, toying with his food rather than consuming it. “It’s been a few years.”

Jiang Chi stares down at his own cup of liquor with a sigh. “…Then I doubt it’s been sooner than when I saw him last.”

A woman in lavender silk finery walks in, bending over to whisper in Jiang Chi’s ear for a moment, and from the intimacy between the two—she must be his wife.

And Hua Cheng can’t help but notice…

Just how strikingly similar she looks to the crown prince. Not enough so to imply any relation, but…the shade and shape of her eyes, the way she wears her hair…the way she carries herself…

Even the Ghost King finds himself drawn in.

Madam Jiang glances in his direction, offering him a kind smile before bowing her head politely. “Welcome to our home, young master Zhang Wei. Is the food to your liking? Have enough to drink?”

“…Yes,” Hua Cheng agrees, glancing away sharply, his cheeks slightly warm. “Thank you.”

Madam Jiang seems to find it terribly amusing that such a handsome, imposing young man could be left flustered by a smile from a woman of her age—but her eyes are gentle, and she doesn’t tease him. “I’m glad to hear it.”

She presses a kiss against her husband’s cheek. “I hope you two will forgive me for not joining you—our youngest is still recovering from a fever…”

“It’s no trouble,” Hua Cheng agrees quickly, sipping from his glass, staring at a painting on the wall until she’s left the room.

Once they’re alone, Jiang Chi turns his face back to the young man, his expression suddenly serious. “So,” he muses, reaching for a silver bell sitting on top of the table, bound in purple thread. He rolls it softly under his fingertip, the metal clinking gently. “What are you?”

Hua Cheng doesn’t respond immediately, but from the look in the mortal’s eye—it’s clear that he knows something is amiss.

“What do you mean?”

“Hua Laoshi left 15 years ago,” he explains calmly. “For you to look the age you do, and be retracing his steps all the way back here…”

The ghost’s eyes widen slightly.

Ah, so the man isn’t as stupid as he seems. Or maybe—he uses his jovial nature to allow people to underestimate his intelligence. Either way—it’s clear that he’s more clever than Hua Cheng’s initial estimate.

“What do you think I am?”

“Either you’re another heavenly official—in which case, I would be surprised,” Jiang Chi muses, the bell still ringing under his finger, “Or, you’re a ghost. Which is equally confusing—but I’m less hostile towards that possibility.”

Hua Cheng tilts his head out of curiosity.

“You knew his true identity?”

“…Powerful creatures such as yourselves don’t work particularly hard to hide,” Jiang Chi admits with a small smile. “You assume most people don’t pay attention—which is true. But to the ones who do, it can become quite obvious.”

After all—he spent five years studying under the god. Much longer than what they initially agreed. Long enough to notice the fact that his skin, while fair and delicate, never scarred permanently. Or that, even in that span of time—Xie Lian didn’t age at all. Not the tiniest bit.

An entire human lifetime hadn’t passed since the fall of Xianle—so there were still quite a few portraits laying around with a somewhat accurate likeness that hadn’t yet been burned, and from that—Kuo put the pieces together.

“You’re an odd man,” Hua Cheng muses.

“I don’t think I’ve ever met a cultivator who openly expressed distaste for the rest of the heavenly court."

"I cultivate under General Ming Guang," Jiang Chi explains with a shrug. "I would have done so under Taizi Dianxia, but..." He trails off with a sigh. "I was forbidden."

Hua Cheng's eyes narrow. "...Forbidden?"

"By Hua Laoshi himself," the cultivator assures him, waving a hand before the ghost king can become too riled up. "He was convinced it would bring bad luck, and said I had better not. And..."

Across the table, Hua Cheng stares. "And?:

"...I don't think I'll be answering any more of your questions until you answer mine," Jiang Chi counters, his tone firm. After a moment of silence—instead of rolling the bell under his fingertip—he gives it a sharp flick.

Ding!

Hua Cheng's flinch is very subtle, but present.

The cultivation master smirks, pressing his fingertip down onto the bell to make it stop. "A ghost, then."

"..." Hua Cheng's gaze settles on the spiritual device, slightly irritated. "That's an interesting tool you have there."

"Thank you," Jiang Chi smiles, drawing it back. "You must be a strong ghost, at that—any low level specter would have taken damage."

"You could say that," Hua Cheng agrees.

"As a matter of fact, given how perfect that mask of yours is..." The cultivator raises an eyebrow. "There's a short list of ghosts that could do that."

They stare at one another, the tension somewhat thick in the air—and eventually, Kuo smiles, throwing his hands up in a shrug. "Such things don't bother me—after all, you're the one who has pointed out twice now that I'm not a conventional cultivator."

Indeed, he has...

"But I would prefer it if I could speak to you without a disguise," Jiang Chi points out. "It would seem more respectful, that way."

Hua Cheng raises an eyebrow. No one has seen his true form—and he has no intention of breaking that pattern now.

But he can indulge the human.

In human years—he'd be older than Jiang Chi by now, and though his true form sits somewhere in it's mid twenties...

This time, he chooses a mask that's slightly more reflective of their positions, shifting his face to something in it's mid forties. Still handsome, yes—but mature.

There are slight creases at the corners of his eyes and mouth, a hint of gray at his right temple. He almost looks like a respectable man that might have a wife and family of his own, somewhere—if not for the slight glint of mischief in his eye.

"Better?" He sighs.

"Much."

"Back to my questions." Hua Cheng smiles thinly—tolerating the human's impertinence, but only because dianxia clearly favored him in the past.

"You said that he left thirteen years ago, and that you followed him for five years before that?"

"That sounds about correct."

Jiang Chi sighs, leaning his chin on his hand. "I tried to explain that I would follow him for a lifetime—but I had made a name for myself here, and a girl was sweet on me...Hua Laoshi always spoiled me as a student, but he made it clear he had no intention of marrying me—"

He stops when he sees the glass in Hua Cheng's hand has cracked in three places, his eyebrows raising. "...You alright there, my friend?"

"You two were intimate?" His voice is soft—but his tone is as cold as a winter wind.

Seemingly oblivious to the fact that his life is in mortal danger—Jiang Chi snorts. "Intimate?! No, no way—not because I didn't make it clear that I was open to it—"

Another crack appears in the side of the cup, liquor dripping between the ghost king's knuckles. "...You what?"

“Hey, relax, would you?” The cultivator waves his hand, looking at the glass morosely. “His cultivation method didn’t allow for that sort of thing anyway. The closest I ever got to ‘intimacy’ was going into the public baths with him, and…”

Jiang Chi pouts, downing his own glass.

“He made me wear Ruoye over my eyes after he caught me trying to sneak a look, so I never even saw much of his body.”

Now, the glass outright shatters—no, it collapses into a pile of dust underneath Hua Cheng’s hand, and Jiang Chi watches, his eyes slightly wide.

“…It’s like that between you two?!” He gasps, covering his mouth with one hand, but then it occurs to him—

And in a twist of fate, his next words inadvertently save his own life. “You aren’t the husband, are you?”

Hua Cheng chokes on whatever liquor remains in his throat.

He’s trapped between two instincts—to ask Jiang Chi what the hell he’s talking about, and to…

“What did Xie Lian tell you about that?” He questions flatly. Rarely ever has he called the prince by his given name (it gives him a quiet thrill, even now.)

“Just that he was married, the guy was dead, and that he was never ever getting over him,” Jiang Chi grumbles with a sigh. “Ever.”

It sounds like a polite way that Xie Lian would opt to let someone down easily. Hua Cheng knows him well enough to understand that, but…

Could it be true? It—

Dianxia never seemed interested in romance, when Hong-er was with him, but…

When Hua Cheng remembers the longing sadness in the prince’s expression when he asked Wu Ming to kiss him…

Maybe he *did* want that level of intimacy with another person.

Between Hua Cheng’s time in the kiln, and the unaccounted for time before Jiang Chi started traveling with the god…

That's over twenty years. Plenty of time to…form a meaningful…

His chest stabs with an agonized form of jealousy. And…

Hua Cheng knows he doesn't have a right to feel that way. That just because he thinks everyone else is unworthy—that doesn't mean that he deserves Xie Lian's love either. He knows that, but—

"So, are you?"

The Ghost King lifts his chin, his expression unreadable. "I am."

He tells himself it's perfectly reasonable to lie about dianxia in this situation—but only because, as his husband, Hua Cheng would be more entitled to information about his whereabouts.

"…Well, I certainly meant no offense," Jiang Chi smiles awkwardly, scratching his head.

"Oh—" Now, his eyes widen, and he gets a little pale. "Oh—you're—" He points at the ghost king with a slightly shaky finger, realizing exactly who he's speaking to—

"You're Hua Cheng!"

It takes a moment the older man to understand how he put that together, then—

Oh.

Xie Lian took that surname as an alias, so, to Jiang Chi, it must seem like…

The thought of that warms his chest slightly, in spite of everything. It's just a lucky coincidence really, but…

"…Did you keep it a secret or something?" Jiang Chi questions.

Or, well—maybe he wouldn't have to. After all, it's not as though anyone knows that his human identity and ghost identities were one in the same. But—

"I can't imagine the Heavenly Court ever knew that the Crown Prince was married, given how they speak about him."

“...Speak about him?” Hua Cheng questions flatly. “What do they say?”

“I mean...” Jiang Chi shrugs. “Everything you would expect.”

Cultivators often share an open line of communication with the gods they serve, many of them rising and falling as deputy gods.

As such—rumors about the inner workings of the heavens are often flying around.

“But...there’s a thread of it that...would certainly imply that he wasn’t married,” Jiang Chi frowns, his expression suddenly stormy with defensive anger on his Laoshi’s behalf. “It’s truly classless.”

After all—Jiang Chi didn’t need to ask Xie Lian a word about it to know that none of it was true. Not a single word. They were together every day for years—and he never saw the god engage in more intimacy than holding someone’s hand. And even that was rare.

The rumors of his promiscuity, as a result...just seemed petty and mean spirited. Like kicking a man that was already down.

“That’s why I ended up cultivating under General Ming Guang,” Jiang Chi explains, pouring himself another glass.

“What does he have to do with it?”

“He was one of the only gods that tried to speak against those rumors,” The cultivator scowls, remembering the way the discussions flew around between different sects of cultivation. “Even Xuan Zhen and Nan Yang didn’t say a word. They used to be his friends, right?”

“...They did,” Hua Cheng agrees stiffly, and Jiang Chi clicks his tongue with distaste.

“Well, Ming Guang dismissed a pretty prominent deputy of his for spreading such rumors without evidence—so, I decided I would commit my merits and cultivation to him.” He explains with a shrug “As far as I’m concerned—the rest aren’t worth bothering with.”

It’s thanks to that statement, and that statement alone, that Hua Cheng and Jiang Chi part on relatively good terms.

There are many small interactions in a man’s life that can change his fate in the blink of an eye.

For Jiang Chi, it was the mere mention of a husband that ended up saving his life. And, the life of the son he would sire later that year.

A young man that would take his father's unorthodox ideologies, as his first and only disciple—and pass them on to others.

From then on—the cultivators who trained in the settlement of Lotus Pier would be known as members of the Jiang Sect.

And from them, much more was to come.

Such a small action changed the direction of the mortal realm.

It's not such an uncommon thing to happen.

After all—it was an equally innocuous comment made by a relatively irrelevant ghost, that would forever change the shape of the Heavenly Court itself.

"...Hua Chengzhu," Fai bows his head, carefully serving tea. "I thought your journey was relatively fruitful. Don't you?"

He's been trying to ease the youth's mood for the past three days—but there's been no helping it.

After all—he is a ghost king to the outside world. And to many of the ghost children that have grown to the point of a small settlement around his lair, he's practically a god, but—

In many more ways than that, the great and terrible Crimson Rain Sought Flower is almost like a teenager, unable to let things go. Sulking for weeks on end when he doesn't get his way.

"...He was headed west fifteen years ago," Hua Cheng glares at the ceiling. "Very fruitful."

"..." The ghost stands there awkwardly, holding the teapot between his hands—and honestly, the innocence of his intentions almost makes the consequences of his actions comical. "You know, Hua Chengzhu, I'm pretty good at finding things— because I have a trick!" He offers kindly.

The ghost king turns his gaze to him, clearly listening—and the former school master explains;

"Whenever I've been working at a problem for too long with no solution, or searching for a lost item with no success—I take a break in order to reorient myself."

Hua Cheng frowns.

"...Are you suggesting I take a vacation while he's out there suffering?" The ghost king questions flatly.

"No, not at all," Fai shakes his head vehemently. "I just mean that approaching a problem from a new angle increases your likelihood of success! And..." he lets out a sigh. "For someone as sly as you, I'm honestly surprised you never learned the phrase, *'Work smarter, not harder.'* "

Hua Cheng sits up with a frown, raising an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"Surely you've realized by now—being a devastation level ghost isn't just about raw strength."

Now, Hua Cheng actually seems to stop and listen. "...I know," he agrees.

Bai Wuxiang didn't exactly leave behind a model for how ghost kings were supposed to behave—other than destroying an entire nation in the span of a year.

When Hua Cheng rose, people expected the same.

It's not as though the Ghost King is not capable of doing such a thing—he certainly is, no one has disputed that—but he's also had no inclination to do so.

As a result, humans and gods alike view him with some form of curiosity—and some have taken his silence as weakness.

Fai continues to point out—

"You have countless spirits at your disposal. Is it really efficient for you to spend all of your time searching when you could delegate such matters?"

Doing so feels almost disrespectful—given that it's his most important task. But... He has a point

"Aren't there other things you want to see taken care of by the time you reunite with your god?" Fai offers helpfully. "Surely, you must have other matters to resolve."

He says this, thinking of possibly building a new home. Or maybe working on some self improvement.

Meditation. Balancing one's mind and body. That sort of thing.

But after a moment of contemplation—he sees a slow, hungry grin spread across the ghost king's face.

"...You know what, Fai—I think you're correct."

The short, slightly rotund ghost blinks owlishly. "...I am?"

One month later, there's a stir in the streets of the heavenly capital.

'Did you hear?'

'I—yes, but he can't possibly be serious, can he?'

'I think it might be some sort of prank...'

'No, no—I can feel the demonic energy on the scroll—it's from him!'

And all of that—it's SUPREMELY irritating to Feng Xin, who is dealing with a much more serious issue right now.

Glaring down at the dark haired man before him, his hands braced against the marble walls that make up the side of Xuan Zhen's palace, caging the martial god in.

"Who did it?" He questions, his voice low, trembling with anger.

Mu Qing arches an eyebrow. The two of them are equally skilled by means of combat —if he wanted to shove Feng Xin off, it would be a fair fight.

But instead, he cleans back against the wall, crossing his arms.

He tilts his head to the side, and he smirks, and Feng Xin hates it.

Hates it because it makes him look so cocky and arrogant, when he really doesn't know shit about the situation half of the time. Hates it because Mu Qing's hair is so much longer now than it used to be, and...

And he's started wearing this black choker around his neck—and it's highlighted when he tilts his head to the side like that, and he—

Feng Xin squeezes his eyes shut, punching the wall next to Mu Qing's head until it fractures in several places.

"Who DID IT?!"

"Oh, my..."

Mu Qing sighs, turning his head to look at the damage. "That'll probably cost you... what? A hundred thousand merits? My building materials aren't cheap, you know."

"I don't have time to run around with you all day," Feng Xin grouses, his scowl darkening.

"But I'm not leaving until you tell me."

A soft laugh slips from Mu Qing as he leans his head back against the wall, raising an eyebrow. "That makes it sound like you do have time, Feng Xin."

"Shut up!" He snaps. "Stop stalling!"

"It wasn't me," Mu Qing laughs even more now.

"I don't know how the typo happened, but I had nothing to do with it."

That's the truth, but he highly doubts Feng Xin is going to believe him. He's never believed Mu Qing before.

"Sometimes these things really do just happen," Mu Qing continues, still giggling as he remembers the look on Feng Xin's face when he saw how red he got. "You just get..." He covers his mouth in an almost coy fashion—and in spite of it all, Feng Xin's stomach lurches. "Unlucky!"

Feng Xin hangs his head for a moment, his cheeks burning slightly with the reminder, but he spits out between clenched teeth—

"I'm not TALKING about the dick thing, asshole!"

Just phrasing it like that makes Mu Qing laugh even harder, clutching his stomach. "Now you are!"

But that laughter comes to an immediate halt when fingers grip his chin firmly, forcing Mu Qing to look up, his eyes suddenly wide as Feng Xin glares down at him, his expression conflicted.

“...What the fuck are you doing?” The martial god questions flatly. (His heart pounds.)

Feng Xin’s fingertip taps a small welt on My Qing's cheek—just beneath his orbital bone.

If there’s one thing that the man has always been vain about—it’s his face. He was a beauty from a young age—only surpassed by the crown prince.

“Who did it?”

Mu Qing stares, slack jawed.

“...Why? You wanna send them a thank you note?” He hisses, trying to yank his chin out of Feng Xin’s grip—but the other god holds firm, his gaze sharpening.

“Just answer the damn question, Mu Qing.” He growls. “I don’t have to explain myself.”

“Then neither do I!”

Mu Qing is as indignant as ever, his eyes burning with irritation of his own now. “Why the fuck do you CARE?”

“I don’t!” Feng Xin starts, then stops, opening his mouth and snapping it shut, before finally getting exasperated. “Heavenly officials shouldn’t be brawling, so just—!”

“Who said it was a heavenly official?” Mu Qing sneers. “What? You think people are still giving me a hard time because I was someone’s servant? Or because I left my post?”

It’s clear from Feng Xin’s expression—he thinks it’s both. “Well, you did the SAME thing!”

Mu Qing hisses. “So before you go and start feeling sorry for me, think about whether or not any officials have been giving YOU a hard time, huh?!”

Feng Xin’s hands ball into fists next to Mu Qing’s head. “Why are you ALWAYS like this when ANYONE tries to be nice to you?!”

“You aren’t being NICE to me!” The dark haired man snaps. “You’re being PATRONIZING to make yourself FEEL BETTER, because you were an ASS the last time we talked. And your version of being ‘nice?’

It just makes you look like an invasive JACKASS!"

"How am /I/ the jackass here?!"

Feng Xin snarls. "I'm just trying to get you to tell me so I can—!"

"So you can WHAT?" Mu Qing shakes his head. "Hold it over my head?! I don't fucking think so—!"

"God, you make it SO hard not to hate you—" "Oh, shut up, you ALREADY hate me!" He glares.

"If you want to help someone that'll just fawn over you, say thank you, suck your dick, all of that—go annoy someone else!"

Feng Xin lets go of Mu Qing's chin, only to wipe his hand down his own face with irritation. "You know, for someone who can't have sex, you talk about it a lot."

It's the things he says offhandedly, these casual observations, that end up making Mu Qing choke, his face turning red. "It's a figure of speech, you MORON!"

"I mean, sure," Feng Xin nods. "But you brought up the typo thing."

Mu Qing sputters. "I only brought that up because I thought it was why you were INTERROGATING me, I—!"

"And you mention something about me wanting someone to suck my dick pretty much every time we argue," Feng Xin mutters, his eyebrows knitting together as he contemplates.

He's not a particularly observant person, and he's even worse when it comes to subjective matters like feelings—and now, watching him edge in around the WORST possible topic, Mu Qing is starting to panic.

"Like I said, it's a FIGURE OF SPEECH!" "It makes you sound jealous."

Before the martial god can completely collapse into a puddle of distress, Feng Xin adds, "Of my cultivation method."

Of—

Of his cultivation method.

Mu Qing takes a shaky breath, his face hot, heart pounding—

And he sneers.

“I don’t think I’m missing out on much, thanks.”

He lifts his nails in front of his face, examining his cuticles. “Besides, it’s not exactly like you get around without the limitation, so you really aren’t one to talk.”

Then, Feng Xin unintentionally goes and ruins his life.

“...Who says I don’t get around?” He questions.

Mu Qing stares.

The worst part is—Feng Xin doesn’t say it defensively. No, it’s just an honest question, asked with a confused glance and a furrowed brow.

Meaning—that he—

“Y—you mean...” The raven haired man struggles to put the facts together. He can, he just doesn’t want to.

Feng Xin shakes his head, and it’s a bit of an awkward conversation to have, but—

Enemies or not, hate each other or not, Mu Qing is the only person in the Heavenly Capital who knows Feng Xin with any level of intimacy. Who else would he tell?

“I’m not a virgin, Mu Qing.”

“I knew that!” The former servant blurts out, normally fair skin now blotchy and red. “I just figured it was the one...the one time—”

“What one time?” Feng Xin frowns, getting ready to press the matter, but— But then two hands are shoving his chest—hard.

“Who the FUCK are you—” Mu Qing starts, then shoves him again, “You—!”

“What?!”

“Who are you FUCKING around HERE?!”

Feng Xin stumbles back, shocked, then—

“...are you MAD? And—I never said it was a heavenly official! NOW who's being invasive?!"

"You fucking HYPOCRITE!"

Mu Qing snarls, and sure, he's a trained martial artist, specializing in blades—he can fight with the best of them. But right now? Right now he's just blindly pounding his fists against Feng Xin's chest. "Always poking around in MY business, JUDGING me, when you—!"

"Would you CALM DOWN?!" Feng Xin snaps, eventually losing his patience with it— and while Mu Qing is quicker and much more agile than him, the former guard has always been stronger, so he's able to catch at least one of My Qing's wrists, pinning him back against the wall with ease

And when the dark haired man thrashes, Feng Xin catches his other wrist, pinning both above Mu Qing's head. "Who do you think you're calling a hypocrite?! I know you've done things before—!"

He pauses, cheeks heating up from the memory—and Mu Qing's glare is absolutely venomous.

"General Nan Yang? General Xuan Zhen? Are you two fighting again?"

The two pause—with Mu Qing glaring in the opposite direction, and Feng Xin dropping his wrists, obviously sheepish.

"...We're busy," Mu Qing hisses. "Go away." The junior official pauses. "But..."

He glances back and forth between the two men, clearly confused about whatever is supposed to be going on. "There...something's happening—?"

"Did you hear what he just said?!" Feng Xin—normally the polite one of the two— snaps. "We're busy—now get lost!"

"But—!"

"NOW."

The official scrambles off, and Feng Xin lets out a heavy sigh, turning back around to face Mu Qing—and probably apologize, because...

Feng Xin knows he shouldn't have brought up what happened that day. But then—

"You weren't my first kiss, you know."

...Mu Qing gets spiteful.

Feng Xin's expression is frozen, and the dark haired man smiles slyly, leaning back against the wall. "You really thought you were, right? Felt bad about it this whole time? Because of what you said?"

The other martial god blanches, and Mu Qing lets out a vindictive little laugh

"No. It wasn't my first, and it wasn't my last, and it definitely didn't make me question my decision to remain celibate," Mu Qing shrugs. "So no, I'm not jealous of your cultivation method. I just feel sorry for whatever poor woman has to deal with you now—"

"Who."

Mu Qing pauses in the middle of his snide little speech. "...What?"

"Who was it with, then?" Feng Xin questions sharply. Because they were together almost every day as teenagers, and there was no other real possibility—

"...Sorry, but I don't kiss and tell," Mu Qing shrugs.

In all honesty—if Mu Qing did tell him the circumstances of his first kiss, it wouldn't aid his goal in hurting Feng Xin. If anything—it might just make the other man worry. Or worse, pity him.

"Just know that you're terrible at it, and I honestly wish I could repress the—hey—!"

And then—

'Oh.'

Mu Qing's shout of protest cuts out when his mouth is otherwise occupied, and he's pinned against the wall of his own palace once more.

'We're back here, again.'

And he wishes he could tell himself that he's above it, but— His lips part with a sharp gasp.

There's something they never really explain, but—

Smell is one of the senses most directly connected to memory. The one most likely to trigger an immediate emotional response.

Feng Xin has always smelled like leather and wood fire smoke. Ever since they were kids.

Mu Qing used to snort and complain that he smelled like a military camp every time they were forced to be in close proximity, but…

Now, he breathes it in deeply, a deep shiver running through his body when he feels a tongue moving against his own.

Oh.

And then, there's teeth.

Scraping against his lower lip, and all Mu Qing can manage to do is let out a soft, reluctant sound of want—but his hands aren't nearly so hesitant, wrenching free of Feng Xin's grip, scraping against the nape of his neck as he pulls the general in closer.

Mu Qing has this way of sinking into kisses—hunching his shoulders in until he feels smaller than he actually is in Feng Xin's arms, like the man who hisses whenever his underbelly is exposed might actually enjoy being vulnerable.

And kissing him—it never makes things better. In all honesty—it feels bad.

It's good, physically. It's everything Mu Qing has ever wanted any touch to be, and he hates it. Hates that his skin only ever seems to sing under Feng Xin's lips.

But mentally—

Every kiss Mu Qing has ever had has made him really fucking sad.

Because he's never what the person against him wants. Just a stand in, a generic version of a person he could never actually be.

That hurts even more than being alone. Worse than never being touched at all. But oh god, he wants Feng Xin to touch him more. To kiss him more.

And he wants to rip him to shreds. To scream and cry out into the universe, only to watch it inevitably fall back on him as resentment from the people around him.

That’s how it always goes.

Mu Qing wants to pick him to shreds, until he doesn’t come back.

And then, Mu Qing wants to cry himself to sleep and feel sorry for himself over the fact that Feng Xin left.

Because that’s what he always does. Breaks things, just to hear the sound of them shattering. And he can’t explain why he did it, when people ask, so he just—

Sneers.

And in all of that time, no one has ever asked him the simplest question in the world:

‘Was someone hurting you?’

Feng Xin pulls back, his breaths ragged—and there’s this raw edge to his voice, the kind he only gets when he’s slightly undone.

“The worst you’ve ever had, huh?”

Mu Qing’s lips tremble as he pulls him back in, fingers knotted in Feng Xin’s hair.

“Shut the fuck up,” he whispers sharply, arms wrapped around Feng Xin’s shoulders, arching slightly when strong arms wrap around his waist.

‘Why do I always end up back here?’

Feng Xin wasn’t Mu Qing’s first kiss. But he was the second, third, fourth—so many after. Back then, it was like every argument they ever had ended that way.

Never going too far, and Mu Qing would always smirk when he saw the self loathing in Feng Xin’s eyes when he pulled away.

It made him want to die.

Reminded him of how damaged, discarded, and worthless he felt.

And he told himself that couldn’t be true, because they didn’t stop. That, to be a placeholder for a prince—he must have some level of appeal to him, right?

There must have been something there that was worth wanting, right?

They barely break for air, with Mu Qing cursing and muttering insults each time, but then Feng Xin's fingers are threading through his hair, cradling the back of his head as he mutters against Mu Qing's lips—

"…You taste the same," he mutters, his brow furrowed.

It's been over thirty years—how could it be exactly like it was back then?

He barely notices the way Mu Qing's lips tremble before they're crushing against his all over again.

"I fucking *hate* you," he whispers.

Mu Qing doesn't think he's ever tried so hard to mean something in his life.

He lies a lot. More than most people, but mostly to himself.

That lie is the one he's told more than any other—to the point where he's forgotten that it wasn't true. Not in the beginning.

The hand on the back of his head makes him tilt back, guiding him into deepening the kiss, every breath coming out hitched and fragile, and he thinks—

His teeth sink into Feng Xin's lip, sucking sharply, fingers tugging at his hair, and the martial god moans, low and rumbling.

He doesn't moan Mu Qing's name. He never has, but—

'At least he isn't saying someone else's name,' Mu Qing thinks to himself, goosebumps racing down his arms when Feng Xin's knee slides between his thighs.

'Even if he won't say mine—'

They press closer, each of them gasping.

'At least he isn't saying his, either.'

Every kiss Mu Qing has ever had has made him really fucking sad. But none of them hurt as badly as the day he left.

And when he thought he heard it, that day—

'Mu Qing, I…'

There was only one thing he wanted to say, back then.

'I wasn't trying to hurt you.'

That was all he wanted to explain. The only thing he wanted to say every single day after Xie Lian chased him out of that house.

'I just wanted him to know what it felt like. I was trying to hurt him, not—not you.'

But that's the problem.

Mu Qing has always been good at sharpening his knives, making them get to the point where they can cut as deep as anything.

But his aim—sometimes that's off. And he ends up hurting someone he never intended to. Because he just—

He just wanted Feng Xin to know what it was like.

To love someone—to want them so badly, and to know that they wanted someone else.

That it fucking sucks, and there's nothing you can do about it but try to get over it. Which might not be possible—in Mu Qing's experience at least, because, well—

He always ends up back here.

And Mu Qing knows why he always comes back to this. Understands the twisted, slightly warped part of him that needs the validation of the fact that Feng Xin wants him physically, but—

But now he knows that Feng Xin has other options, options that he's actively pursuing.

And now, Mu Qing can't make himself understand—

Why does Feng Xin keep coming back? After all this time, when they clearly loathe one another? Why would he do that? He—

That thigh rubs a little closer between his knees, and the moan Mu Qing lets out is nothing less than needy.

That's when an answer comes to him. The most cynical, hateful thing that Mu Qing can think of.

So, naturally, he thinks it’s true.

Feng Xin is so lost in it, he’s too disoriented to do anything about it when Mu Qing shoves him again, this time so hard, he’s sent stumbling.

“What…” He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, shaking his head irritably. “What the FUCK is your problem?!”

“You think I’m STUPID?!” Mu Qing snarls—and leaning back against the wall is the only thing that stops his knees from buckling.

“I—what the fuck?!”

“I know how much you hate the fact that I’M here, but *he’s* not,” the dark haired man hisses, adjusting the front of his robes. “You’re just trying to ruin my cultivation method!”

“I—are you—are you INSANE?!”

“You can’t fucking STAND me!” Mu Qing cries, hands balled into fists. “Why else would you be doing this if you’re such a lady killer, huh?! Why would you bother?!”

Feng Xin stops, his mouth hanging open, his face slightly pale, and—

In Mu Qing’s mind, it confirms everything he was thinking, because Feng Xin clearly doesn’t have an answer.

“…I didn’t think so,” he mutters, shaking his head.

Mu Qing worked his ass off to be here—and he isn’t falling because of Feng Xin. No. Not again.

“Stay the fuck away from me, understand?” He hisses in the martial god’s direction— turning on his heel and stomping off.

It’s not a moment that either of the men will look back on with any fondness in the centuries that follow, but, ironically enough…

It saved their lives.

In the Great Martial Hall, there’s quite a bit of a store as the gods gather, staring at the list of names.

“...He can’t be serious, can he?” One civil god mutters, handing the list over to Ling Wen—the up and coming deputy of the chief civil god, who looks the scroll over with a serious eye.

“It all seems very in order to me. I doubt it’s a joke.” She murmurs after an examination.

The scroll is snatched from her fingers after a moment, held in front of a tall, rather imposing figure, his armor gleaming in the light of the martial hall.

“...This is so specific,” Pei Ming lets out a slightly amused chuckle, “I wonder what you all have done to offend him.”

One of the martial gods listed glares, crossing his arms. “I’m glad you find this amusing, Ming Guang.”

“Well, of course I do!” The general smirks, barking out a laugh. “I thought I was a polarizing figure—but somehow the lot of you have managed to offend a newborn devastation!” He shakes his head. “Enough so for him to bet his own soul on losing—I don’t ever think I’ve seen stakes that high.”

“...Can he even do that?” One of the civil gods grumbles, glancing over Pei Ming’s shoulder to read over the terms again. “Why not just offer his ashes?”

“You say that like offering one’s ashes is a small thing,” Ling Wen mutters dryly—only for her co-worker to flash the young upstart an annoyed glance.

“But isn’t offering his soul just as serious? What would that even mean, anyway?!” “He’s offering to permanently remove himself from the reincarnation cycle.”

They all pause in the middle of their bickering at the sound of the heavenly emperor speaking.

“Essentially binding himself to purgatory for all eternity,” Jun Wu sighs, reclining in his throne.

“And if he isn’t offering up his ashes—that’s likely because he doesn’t have them.”

“...What kind of ghost doesn’t have their own ashes?!” A martial god cries out, and for once, Ming Guang is rather helpful.

“Ghosts often give them to their lovers as a sign of devotion,”

He would know. It’s not uncommon for female ghosts to offer him their ashes, after all.

“Soul or ashes—the result is relatively the same,” Jun Wu shrugs.

All of the gods present look at one another considering...after all, with all of them together...They could kill a Ghost King!

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Pei muses, examining some of the names on the list. “After all—it took Jun Wu himself to handle the last calamity.”

“Yes, but there will be thirty five of us,” one of the gods replies dryly. “Forgive me for feeling confident.”

“Thirty three,” Ling Wen corrects him calmly, stepping closer to Pei so she can examine the scroll in more detail. “It doesn’t seem as though Nan Yang or Xuan Zhen are coming. That’s significant.”

It’s a polite way of saying that they were among the most powerful martial gods invited.

“Not to mention that eleven of you are civil gods,” Pei points out.

“I didn’t realize being a ghost king required much of a formal education,” one of said civil gods replies snippily, crossing her arms. “I’d be surprised if the beast could read at all, much less debate.”

“I didn’t realize you were an expert on calamities,” Ling Wen murmurs, taking the scroll when Pei Ming offers it to her, carefully rolling it up before placing it under her sleeve. “That must explain how you managed to offend one so easily.”

She turns on her heel, leaving them.

Her heels click against marble floors, echoing throughout the martial hall as the other gods look at one another, grumbling.

“Jing Wen had better get a good grip on her, she’s so big headed!”

“And what should you expect, from a common shoe maker?” A fellow civil god sneers.

"I'd think more carefully about who you call common," Pei Ming muses, covering his mouth with a yawn. "Compared to some of those that you insult, the lot of you would be lucky to consider yourself shoemakers. Or the subjects of the very rumors you spread."

He begins to descend the steps of the martial hall, following after the junior civil god, and there's an indignant cry from behind him—

"Do you mean to compare us to *concubines* , Ming Guang?!"

"...No," The general turns his head, fixing the younger god with a steely glare.

"It takes a backbone to do such work. I see no comparison."

The one who called after him—a young martial god by the name of Gao He—glares, whipping his head around in the direction of Jun Wu. "Is he truly allowed to speak in such a way without reprimand?!"

The Heavenly Emperor surveys the scene without much of a reaction, holding one fingertip against his temple—and he seems relatively unbothered by the conflict. "It's for you to settle among yourselves."

"But—!"

A hand lands heavily on his shoulder, and Gao He freezes.

"I'm terribly sorry that no one here has given you the memo," Pei Ming's voice comes from directly beside his ear, and the younger god's heart skips a beat.

He hadn't even heard the general move.

"But I can say whatever I like to you," the elder god explains, oh so patiently. "Because I'm better than you."

Gao He's jaw locks, muscles working tightly, remembering another god who spoke to him in such a way—even when he had fallen to practically nothing.

"No matter how hard you work," the general smiles, "I will always be better than you."

It's rare to see the great martial god Ming Guang truly angry. Even now, he levels every insult with an easy going smile, but...

Many forget—there is only one other martial god that has ever stood in the same class as that of Ming Guang and Jun Wu.

Only one, among all of them, that he ever would have considered a peer. None of the warriors who stand before him will ever come close to that.

“It’s easy to say that now, general,” Gao He sneers, fists clenched, knuckles white. “But that arrogance could be the end of you.”

Pei Ming’s hand tightens on his shoulder—not visibly to anyone observing, but enough so that it makes the younger martial god wince.

“Maybe so,” he agrees. “But I don’t have to demean others to make myself bigger. I stood tall to begin with.”

With that, he lets Gao He go.

He turns once more to leave, and Gao He clenches his teeth. “You think I’ll take such insults from you?”

A slow smile spreads across Pei Ming’s face. “Oh, you wanna fight then?” He only meets silence in return.

“Which would you rather have a go at first—me, or the calamity?”

After another long span of silence, the general smirks. He didn’t think so. “I suppose you prefer a battle when you have more than twenty friends to help, don’t you?” He shrugs, lifting his hand from his sword. “Just remember—”

He exits the Grand Martial Hall, kicking the doors. “When the lot of you come crying to me,” Because they will come, Pei Ming is all too aware. “I will not help you.”

The doors slam shut, leaving thirty three officials behind, glancing at one another. “...He’s always been rather dramatic,” one of the civil gods offers.

The others nod quickly, trying to soothe themselves.

“It did say he would fight us all at once, didn’t it?”

“One of you marked the date and time?”

Among the fighting, one of the civil gods—the one who questioned Hua Cheng’s ability to read—stops, surveying the group.

"..." She tilts her head to the side, considering. Of course—it's very possible that they all could have individually done something to offend the calamity, but unlikely. After all, how could he have had so many interactions with heavenly officials without anyone knowing?

What seems far more probable is that they, as a group, offended the calamity on a single occasion—so viscerally, that it turned to this.

But wouldn't she remember such a thing? And this group—most of them haven't worked together since they were junior officials.

Decades ago.

What did this calamity use to connect them all together? And whatever it is...how could it be so serious?

Outside the grand martial hall, Pei Ming has to put his naturally long legs to their full use in order to catch up to the brisk stride of Ling Wen.

"I hope you didn't hear..."

"About them calling me a shoemaker?" She questions calmly, not looking up—and Pei Ming winces. "It was only slightly inaccurate. I sold shoes. I didn't make them."

"...Right," Pei Ming sighs, scratching the side of his head. "Look...they're trash." He assures her. "Most of them were appointed by family connections and bribery before they were able to properly ascend—seeing someone rise on their own merits makes them feel threatened. It's not a reflection on you."

Ling Wen doesn't look at him, her pace remaining brisk.

"I know that," she replies evenly. "But it is considerate of you to say so."

Pei Ming shrugs, smiling pleasantly—and with that, he's prepared to take his leave of the conversation, when the deputy god makes a comment of her own:

"I hope you aren't comforting me with any ulterior motive," now, she does send him a side glance—her gaze sharp.

"Oh, no—nothing like that," Pei Ming shakes his head—not offended. After all, he very much earned his reputation.

"I see." Ling Wen replies flatly.

The general watches her keenly, raising an eyebrow, "Why does that irritate you? You just said—"

"You just scolded others for looking down on me for my status in my mortal life," Ling Wen's eyes return to gazing firmly ahead. "But a shoe seller is the only goddess in the heavens that you have never expressed any interest toward. Including those who are married."

Pei Ming smiles awkwardly, and Ling Wen doesn't spare him a glance.

"I find that makes your previous sentiments seem disingenuous."

She really is the sort who can phrase criticism in such a matter of fact way, it's almost difficult to find it rude.

"That sort of thing really doesn't matter to me," Pei Ming assures her with ease. "I love all women—from all walks of life. And I find you quite beautiful." Ling Wen seems utterly unmoved by the compliment, and he continues, "In my experience, taking a lover with too serious of a personality tends to overcomplicate things—because they'll over think. Even so, I would have expressed interest in you, if..."

He watches her closely.

"...I thought you had such interests in men."

Ling Wen stops walking.

Her expression doesn't change—but her shoulders are suddenly rather stiff. Pei Ming doesn't press her—just watches, his hands clasped behind his back.

When she does reply, her tone is far more stiff than it was before.

"If you had such suspicions, why would you not have reported them to the appropriate authorities?" She mutters, fingers gripping the scrolls under her arm just a little bit more tightly. "And why bother to defend me from criticism?"

When the general answers—his tone is uncharacteristically soft, sensitive, even, to the goddess's underlying distress.

"Because it isn't my business or anyone else's. And they were wrong to speak ill of you."

Her fingers tremble.

It’s not something that she could be cast out for. Not openly. But as a junior official— she could be removed from her role for any number of reasons, real or manufactured. And...

While many in the heavens are kind and open minded to others, there are just as many who are not.

And if Jing Wen knew, he would...

“...You know,” Pei Ming muses, watching the vexed look in her eye, “I’ve never found it entertaining, but there are many officials in the higher court who will change their forms when going about their business.”

Ling Wen stops in mid thought, sending him a baffled glance. “...What does that have to do with this?”

The general shrugs. “There are things you might be able to enjoy on occasion in a male form, for example, without judgement from others.”

It’s not an ideal solution—but he can tell from the way that Ling Wen’s eyes widen slightly in response that it had genuinely never occurred to the goddess until this very moment.

“...You say this with the presumption that I’ll ascend at some point,” the civil goddess mutters.

At this rate, she highly doubts her superior would ever allow it. He’s gotten a little too accustomed to having someone wait on him hand and foot, doing nearly all of his work for him.

“Because I’ve always had pretty good instincts,” Pei shrugs, “and they tell me that you will.”

“Right.” Ling Wen repeats flatly, shaking her head—and when she does, Pei Ming’s quiet, gentle tone disappears. Suddenly, he’s his jovial self again—slinging an arm around the goddess’s shoulders.

“And when you do,” he exclaims with a smirk, “I’ll teach you how to get women!”

“No, thank you.” She replies, and Pei crows with offense,

“Ling Wen! Don’t be cold to me when I’m in the middle of being generous! Women don't like that—!" He pauses. "Well, some of them do, actually—but still—!"

Over the course of the afternoon, a fledgling friendship is born—with the junior official tolerating General Pei following her about her daily duties—and at the end of the day, over dinner, the general remarks on the original matter at hand—

"Do you know why he sent it?"

"The invitation?" Ling Wen questions, sipping from her cup of tea. "No idea. If I had to guess, some drive to satisfy his own ego. Or a woman."

Pei leans back in his chair, raising an eyebrow. "Why would you guess that?"

She shrugs. "Why else do men challenge each other?"

"It could also be some violated sense of honor," he points out, rubbing his chin thoughtfully—and his companion raises an eyebrow.

"Do Ghost Kings care about honor?"

That makes the general pause, his eyebrows knitting together. "...You know, I have absolutely no idea."

Then—

"A few of them are planning on broadcasting the confrontation to their followers in their dreams, you know."

Ling Wen tips her face forward, pinching the bridge of her nose. "...They really are hopelessly vain, aren't they?"

"And shortsighted," Pei Ming agrees.

"But who knows? Some of the martial gods among them aren't exactly weak, and with the number challenged..." He shrugs. "The odds are in their favor."

Ling Wen doesn't reply, sipping her tea.

Betting one's soul isn't something a man does when he thinks there's a chance of losing.

Either he's just that arrogant about his own skills—or, he's far more powerful than anyone’s estimation.

In truth, however—the answer was both.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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JIANG CHI (KUO)

[image]

CREDIT: LACE, support the artwork HERE

...Wait for me.
DO NOT REPOST
@RoseNightshade

CREDIT: Dru, support the artwork (it's a really cool gif!! look at it!!) HERE

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you so much to Lace and Dru for your artwork, and allowing me to share it! It means so much!!
>
> xoxo, Evie

Thirty Three Heavenly Officials

Chapter Summary

> "SHOW YOURSELF, HUA CHENG!"
>
> In the shadows, there's a lopsided smile. Not anxious in the least—but the expression of a man who has always loved a good fight.
>
> "As you wish."

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

Three days later, a group of thirty three officials stand in an open field—waiting for one more to arrive:

The Ghost King, Hua Cheng.

"...How do you think he chose this place?" One of them questions, squinting as they look around. The mortal realm makes sense, after all—but he can't think of anything special about this particular region.

Gao He shrugs, stretching his arms over his head, watching the horizon. "Most of the spiritual power in this land has already been used," he muses, nodding towards the mountain in the foreground. "Maybe he doesn't want us to be able to cultivate more energy mid-battle?"

One of the civil gods, a scowling woman by the name of Yao Meifen, crosses her arm. "As ascended officials we can draw on merits from our worshippers at any time. Does he not know that?"

"Who knows," Gao He rolls his eyes. "Let's just hope we can get this over with quickly."

After all—it's a relatively simple task, taking one enemy in such a large group. But the glory in killing a ghost king? A task only achieved by the likes of Jun Wu?

That prospect leaves them all hungry for the fame and respect it would bring with it. But the afternoon draws on...

And there's no sign of any ghost king, leading to stirrings of impatience among the group.

"...You don't think this was some sort of prank, do you?"

"If it was, then we certainly must look like fools to him."

"Hardly, he looks like a coward!"

"Is he a coward if his only intention was to make us look like idiots?" One of them grumbles—and Gao He cuts all of them off.

"If you're so offended, why don't you go ahead and get lost?"

One of them tries to do just that, but...when they reach the edge of the field, they stop.

"Changed your mind?" One of the martial gods jeers, but she whips her head around with a glare.

"No, I can't get through! There's some sort of barrier!"

"...What?!"

Yao Meifen draws over to her side, touching the barrier with a frown. "It's an array." She murmurs. "Powerful."

"Is this some sort of trap?! He just lured us in so he could trap us here?!"

"What reason would he have for that?!"

"A ghost king doesn't need a reason—!"

"Oh, calm down." A voice drawls—low, but carrying through the group with ease. Every single Heavenly Official goes still.

"It's to ensure that none of you will leave before we conclude our duel,"

They all whip back and forth, looking among themselves to see where the voice is coming from—but they see nothing.

"Once we have finished, you will be free to leave."

Gao He's lips twist into a sneer.

"Oh, how GENEROUS of you!" He calls out, hands balled into fists. "SHOW YOURSELF, HUA CHENG!"

In the shadows, there's a lopsided smile. Not anxious in the least—but the expression of a man who has always loved a good fight.

"As you wish."

Suddenly, standing in the middle of the group is a tall, slender young man. Long, raven hair tied above his head in a neat ponytail, wearing deep crimson robes, with black breeches and leather boots underneath.

Slowly, he turns to face them.

What the officials see now isn't the twisted, mangled face of a monster —no.

He's a handsome young man, likely somewhere in his early twenties—his left eye dark and calm, his right covered by an eyepatch.

His hands are clasped behind him, shoulders thrown back. He...

Gao He looks him over, his expression twisted with hostility.

'I don't need to demean others to make myself seem bigger.'

The youth steps forward, lifting his chin—and he looks down on every single one of them imperiously.

'I already stood tall.'

"Shall we?"

There's a slight flash in his eye when he speaks—in a voice that sounds far older, far more self assured, than the face that he wears.

Several of the martial gods present stiffen, their hands going to their weapons and spiritual tools.

Hua Cheng doesn't reach for anything.

He maintains that calm, elegant posture, watching the others with a gleam in his eye, waiting for someone to make the first move.

Few do, watching the ghost king with slightly unsure expressions, before Gao He, exasperated, shouts, "WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

MOVE!”

The minute they obey him, launching into action—he sees the corner of Hua Cheng’s mouth tip up slightly, into a calm, knowing smirk.

Then, there’s a flash of silvery light—and then, the clash of steel on steel. The Ghost King hasn’t lifted a single finger, and yet...

There’s quite the fray unfolding around them, a spiritual weapon moving so quickly between the combatants—it’s more of a flash than a solid object.

“THAT’S—!” One of the civil gods, who works in compiling research on the ghost realm, “THAT’S HIS SCIMITAR, E-MING!”

“What do you know about the thing?!”

“Not much!” The civil god cries, “Just that it was forged in Mount Tonglu!”

Gao He makes a face, clicking his tongue with annoyance. Their weapons have been forged by their own hands, or were gifted from the Heavenly Emperor’s collection.

Surely, any weapon of demonic origin couldn’t hope to compare—?

CLANG!

It’s solely on his instincts and reflexes that he’s able to block the blow before it hits his cheek, his sword coming up to parry the scimitar—only for him to stagger back from the force of it, gasping.

How...on earth—?

“FOCUS ON HIS RIGHT!” One of the martial gods cries in the communication array, his eyes focusing in on the ghost king’s eye patch, leading several to do so immediately.

Surely, Hua Cheng couldn’t have heard—but Gao He sees his smirk deepen. “WAIT—!”

Before anyone can react, several of the officials are blown back by near invisible strikes from E-Ming—but one remains, hands trembling where they grip his sword, and—

Hua Cheng holds it by the blade—with only his fingertips, completely unscathed, examining it.

'This was one of hers.'

Twenty seven layers of steel, balanced on the center—oiled leather on the grip.

And it's weak point—

Hua Cheng's fingers slide three quarters up the length of the blade, and with a flick of his wrist, it shatters into a dozen separate pieces.

"You think you can cut me with a toy like that?" He muses, glancing back over his shoulder with a sanguine, lopsided smile. "How disappointing."

Another official tries to take advantage of him being distracted, attacking from behind—only to be caught by a hand around his throat.

"...None of you have changed, I see." He sighs, squeezing until the heavenly official shrieks, eyes bulging out of his head, then using a simple flick of his fingers to throw him like a rag doll.

So violently, he slams into three other martial gods before hitting the barrier.

"What is that supposed to mean?!" Gao He mutters under his breath, lifting his sword again before finally throwing himself into the battle.

And it's—

No matter how hard the martial god strikes, no matter how quickly he moves, that scimitar is always there before he can close in

"How do you know ANY OF US?!" He shouts, infuriated, sweat dripping from his brow as he watches the Ghost King send another martial god flying with a flick against his forehead.

Still, he hasn't taken a single step from his original stance. "We've met before," Hua Cheng replies

"Have you forgotten so easily?"

A few of the martial gods look to one another, unsure—and many seem to conclude that it's a trick, some attempt to make them stop and wonder what he means, all while the Ghost King is preparing to finish them off.

But it's more than clear by now that the ghost king doesn't need to distract anyone— that this fight is more like...

Like he's *toying* with them.

"It's a shame Nan Yang and Xuan Zhen couldn't be bothered to reply," Hua Cheng sighs, catching another blade between his fingers.

"Then this might have been closer to a challenge."

Again, the blade shatters—though this time, it blows into so many pieces, it practically turns into dust before crumbling to the ground.

"It's been so long since I fought someone worth my time."

Not since his days in the kiln.

None of them present much of a challenge—only when they attack in large numbers. And even then, they're uncoordinated, making the group attacks less difficult to deal with.

His muscles feel underworked—thrumming with energy, but nothing to direct it towards.

But there are other forms of satisfaction to be derived from moments like this—Hua Cheng has learned that much, by now.

"Tell me something," he sighs, catching E-Ming between his fingertips now, twirling the scimitar with such speed, it almost looks like a disk in his grip.

"You all clearly didn't do any research before coming down here to face me," he surveys the bloody and beaten martial gods before him, and this time, he lashes out, slashing E-Ming manually—and just the impact is enough to shatter a broadsword with one blow.

"Did you know anything about me at all?"

"..." A silver haired martial blood spits out blood, knees shaking as he rises back to his feet. "Just that your name is Crimson Rain Sought Flower—and that children often pray to you for vengeance."

A bizarre, macabre form of worship.

One of the others wipes at the sweat from his brow, glaring, "And that you gouged out your own eye."

Hua Cheng smiles, letting E-Ming go, attacking autonomously once again—just to clap his hands in slow, sarcastic applause.

“Both are correct. And let me guess...” He glances around the group with a sly, sarcastic smile, “Absolutely none of you have any idea why you’re here?” The ghost king receives blank, frustrated stares in return—and his amusement doesn’t fade.

“Because you wanted to show the world that you’ve got guts?!” Gao He snaps. Hua Cheng snorts.

He doesn’t need to prove that. His very existence is evidence. One doesn’t walk into the kiln and walk out alive without a will of steel—and a heart like stone.

His still aches, from the things he had to do. “Let me explain it like this,” he takes a step.

“I’m sure you all heard the rumors of a new heavenly official ascending, oh...” His eyes flash. “Thirty two years ago?”

The group falls silent, looking at one another—because they all know what he means. There was only one new ascension that year—and no one met the man.

He cast himself down immediately after speaking to the heavenly emperor and Lord Jing Wen. But...he...

“...You?!” Gao He sneers. “You expect us to believe that was YOU?” The Ghost King doesn’t seem offended by his incredulity.

He’s never needed recognition for his ascension before—and Gao He’s desire to deny it doesn’t offend him now.

“You’ve never wondered why a ghost king was willing to accept worshippers?” He muses, fiddling with something braided into his hair—but no one can see exactly what.

“...To expand your own powers?” Gao He sneers, noticing the other martial gods beginning to falter, but refusing to back down,“To pretend to be one of us?!”

“I haven’t used any spiritual power thus far,” Hua Cheng’s voice is soft—and it startles the other martial gods present.

...Because he *hasn’t* . E-Ming is directly connected to the ghost’s soul, clearly— merely operating the tool doesn't require spiritual powers, and...

The rest, the Ghost King has done with his bare hands. One hand, really.

"...Fine," One of the civil goddesses, speaks up, a literary goddess by the name of Mo Kang. "If that's the case, why cast yourself back down?"

Hua Cheng's smile widens, "I'm so glad you asked," he murmurs, E-Ming snapping the bow out of a martial god's hand before he can fire.

"You see," He clasps his hands behind his back again, taking smooth, confident strides as he walks among the martial gods, "Many years ago, when I was a far lesser being—I sat there, on that mountain," he murmurs, "and I saw something rather strange."

The group stops, looking at one another, whispering among themselves. ...So, there was a particular reason for choosing this place?

"I watched a group of junior officials come here to cultivate," several of them stiffen, eyes widening with recognition.

"And when they came across a fallen heavenly official—I found the way they treated him rather..." Hua Cheng's head tilts to the side, and his smile sharpens with anger,

"Hypocritical."

"...You're referring to the crown prince of Xianle?" Gao He sputters, his jaw hanging open.

"You're doing this for HIM?"

Hua Cheng watches him coldly, not responding one way or the other —giving the Heavenly Official the chance to barrel forward into what may as well be a verbal death trap.

"If you—if you were there that day, you know WHY we looked down on him!"

"Because he was less fortunate than you?" The Ghost King questions, one eye slightly narrowed—but still, he allows Gao He to continue to speak.

“Because no matter HOW unfortunate any of us were, we would NEVER resort to the things that he did! He deserved what he got!”

Gao He snarls. “Whores play stupid games, and they win stupid prizes!” That’s an interesting phrase. Hua Cheng likes it, despite the circumstances.

The martial god crosses his arms, waiting for the Ghost King to respond—almost like he expects Hua Cheng to change his mind.

Instead, the Crimson Rain’s gaze remains ice cold.

If he was still the impulsive young man that he was, he would fly into an immediate rage, screaming in his god’s defense. The way he did as a teenager, trying to stop mobs from burning down dianxia’s temples.

But he isn’t.

Hua Cheng is a man now—one who has seen far too much of the world. And he knows —if he vigorously defends Xie Lian on his devotion for him alone...

The Ghost King will never be ashamed of his devotion—but he knows that, as a former heavenly official, being associated with Hua Cheng would complicate things for Xie Lian.

When he replies, his voice is soft—deathly so. “What was that you called him, just now?”

Gao He can sense something amiss, but he doesn’t retreat. “A whore. You think it’s just a rumor?! I saw him with a customer once myself—it’s a fact, and after resorting to such things, he—

“My mother was a whore.”

Gao He falls silent, choking on his words.

“...What?”

Hua Cheng turns from the others, walking towards him. The ground rumbles subtly under his feet when he does, like small earthquakes triggered by each passing step.

“My mother,” he explains calmly. “By your standards, she would have been called a ‘whore.’”

It’s not something most men—practically any man, really—would say openly. Even if it was true—they would lie, or desperately fight to hide it.

Crimson Rain doesn't seem interested in burying that truth. If anything, he's perfectly willing to lay it out in the open.

"You said before—no matter how low any of you feel, you would never stoop to that," Hua Cheng stops directly in front of Gao He—a tall man, by most standards, but the Ghost King makes him look small.

One eye, black as pitch, looks down on him.

"If you believe that," he tilts his head down, making the martial god feel absolutely dwarfed by his physical presence, heart squeezing with terror, "then you've never truly been hungry."

Gao He takes a stumbling step backwards, hands trembling, and the Ghost King follows.

"You've never been forced to watch your child starve," Hua Cheng murmurs, "Knowing that your choices would be to give him away, or sell whatever you had left to offer."

And who could his mother have given him to, with that eye of his? There was no choice. There never was.

"...There's always..." Gao He starts, swallowing dryly. "Another...he...his situation wasn't..."

"How would you know?" The Ghost King stares him down. He remembers him. Remembers all of their faces—

Hua Cheng took the time to memorize every single one. He remembers Gao He well.

"Because he was a prince! A god higher than any of us—as he seemed so EAGER to remind everyone! It was his OWN choices that put him in that situation! He had all of the opportunities, and he WASTED them—!"

CRACK!

Gao He's head whips to the side from the force of the slap.

"I haven't finished talking," The Ghost King replies coldly.

The martial god spits up blood—and when he does, two teeth land in the grass.

Hua Cheng turns to face the others, continuing his slow, ambling pace —like a lecturer before a group of students.

“I watched,” he explains, “as these junior officials eagerly leapt upon someone less fortunate. Taking advantage of their status and their numbers—as I’m sure many of you thought you would against me, today.”

At least two of the officials have the sense to look sheepish.

“And I found it strange,” the ghost king shakes his head, “it was baffling to me, watching their ascensions. After all—the best show of a man’s character is how he treats those who are less powerful. But it wasn’t only the cowardly opportunism shown by the lot of you, no.”

He doesn’t pause in his speech as another official charges him—allowing E-Ming to strike him so viciously, he’s sent flying backwards until he slams against the barrier of the magical array with a crunch.

“What I found strange was that a group of individuals who could not even meet their own standards managed to ascend at all.”

There’s a stir as a few of them begin to quietly protest, but Hua Cheng’s eye snaps back to their ringleader.

“What was that you said before?” He calls.

“That whores play stupid games, and they win stupid prizes?” He repeats the phrase carefully, his eye narrowed.

“What about the men who buy them, Gao He?”

The martial god pales, his mouth gaping like something akin to a fish. “I-I...I don’t know what you’re trying to...”

“Do you see why I thought it strange, now?” Hua Cheng questions. “That a man who spent his mortal life frequenting brothels—and continues to do so as a Heavenly Official—would look down on anyone for providing a service he so frequently indulges in?”

Gao He flounders, his heart pounding, face splotchy and pale as he glances around the group of officials, watching them gasp and whisper among themselves—watching him with judging eyes.
“You...they...I...I’m not...” He rasps, voice trembling.

Hua Cheng steps in close once more.

“Ashamed that your little secret is out?” His eye is wide now, feral as it bears down on him, and his smile turns absolutely vicious. When he speaks again, his tone is almost sneering, “Don’t worry, Gao He.”

He leans in, baring his fangs.

“They won’t tell anyone, will they?”

Hua Cheng remembers every face from that day.

He didn’t forget a single one.

He remembers how vulnerable and heartbroken his god seemed, looking in Gao He’s direction when he heard the man speak, crying out—

‘You promised you wouldn’t tell anyone!’

Let’s see, Hua Cheng thinks. Let’s see how quiet they’ll keep for you. How bitter that shame feels.

Then, the Ghost King turns to the silver haired official who spoke out before, his tone remaining as cold as ever, “Why are you smirking?”

The Martial God’s expression falters.

“At least Gao He obtained lovers through transactional means,” Hua Cheng stares at him coldly. “You forced yourself upon each of yours.”

One can’t even hear a pin drop, now.

Hua Cheng doesn’t lift his head when he hears an attack coming from behind—simply reaches back.

He catches Gao He’s blade against the palm of his hand—and it doesn’t even break his skin before he manages to twist his fingers through the metal, snapping it in two.

Another one of hers—a later model, finer make—more difficult to shatter, but still, he breaks it.

One by one, he meets each martial god—shattering their weapons, and calling each of them what they truly are.

Gamblers. Thieves. Embezzlers. Wife beaters. War Criminals. Each one with their own unique atrocities.

They each lay on the ground when he's done with them, limp.

The few who have strength left to move are pinned to the dirt by hordes of wraith butterflies, silvery little creatures feasting upon their spiritual power as Hua Cheng walks among the bodies.

"You said before that claimed to have ascended because I wanted to be one of you," the Ghost King laughs softly, shaking his head. "I watched all of this, and when I did have the chance to ascend—I left."

He surveys the group of defeated warriors with an icy gaze.

"Because I didn't want the misfortune of ever having to call any of you my peers." He stops before Gao He, one black boot coming to rest on top of his head, stomping his face down into the dirt, letting him taste how low he's fallen.

His eye burns crimson. "Worthless trash."

When he lifts his foot—Gao He doesn't even have the strength to lift himself from the small crater that Hua Cheng formed in the earth beneath his head, just lays there, bloody and beaten.

"In spite of all of that," Hua Cheng shrugs with a sigh, "I'm still a religious man."

He throws his hands up. "When I see so many mortals deceived into worshipping false idols under the premise of their 'goodness,' well..."

His gaze sweeps over the crowd of bleeding, broken men before him. "I decided something had to be done about it."

"And that," he spreads his hands, gesturing to everyone around him, "is why you all are here today."

Finally, the Ghost king turns to the civil gods—eleven of them, huddled against the edge of the magical barrier, wide eyed.

He smiles, his eye glinting viciously. "Shall we?"

Many of the other civil gods shrink back, but Yao Meifen—the one who called him illiterate, before, steps forward, her head held high.

"Very well."

Many hear the term ‘civil god’ and undervalue what it actually means.

It’s the broadest term within the heavenly court.

Martial Gods fall within a specific, self-explanatory category: warriors. Most of them former generals, royalty, etcetera.

Then there are the elemental masters—of which many roles now sit vacant. The rest, however, are called ‘civil gods.’

Their domain is as wide as academia itself—and due to it’s less flashy nature, it is often viewed as the ‘easier’ form of ascension.

(After all, there are those like the Goddess Ling Wen, who can write one average essay, catch the interest of a senior god, and rise as a deputy.)

However, this is a misconception—as is proven by Yao Meifen’s skilled eloquence in debate. She proves herself knowledgeable in ancient histories, literature, and ethics— Known as a foremost expert on each, and yet—

A Ghost King—a son of a whore, by his own telling—one who likely received little to no formal education—is able to meet her in an argument with ease, never faltering before giving his response. Each point is measured and clear.

One of the other Civil Goddesses, Mo Kang, had tried to point out to her that Hua Cheng was speaking eloquently during his battle with the martial gods, but...

Yao Meifen had scoffed.

And now, as they slowly circle one another, she finds herself... Struggling.

Debating with a King of Hell, about...The Moral High Ground.

“The Heavenly Court defines the moral structure of the mortal realm,” Her nails dig into her palms, but she fights to remain calm—poised. “The mere fact of their ascension makes Heavenly Officials beyond reproach.”

“The Moral Structure of the Mortal realm,” Hua Cheng muses, hands clasped behind his back—one sharpened canine peeking through the corner of his mouth as he speaks, “And what of the Mandate of

Heaven?”

Yao Meifen pauses, startled that Crimson Rain has studied things such as… Political Philosophy, of all things.

“If a mortal ruler is overthrown—it is because he has lost his heavenly mandate due to being unjust.” Hua Cheng glances around at the fallen martial gods around them. “Is heaven not subject to its own mandate?”

The Civil Goddess glares.

“That would be akin to a snake eating its own tail, don’t you think?”

“Every god is born as a human being,” Hua Cheng reasons as they continue their slow circle around one another, like two lions on the hunt. “They are subject to mortal laws before their ascension.”

“Laws,” Yao Meifen points out with a smug, victorious smile, “by the will of heaven.”

“How does the heavenly realm feel about rape, then?” Hua Cheng arches an eyebrow —and the goddess pales. “You heard what I said about your comrade, before. What he’s done to women.”

The martial god writhes against the ground, humiliated, struggling to voice his protests—saying that those ‘rats’ were lying, that they were angry that he refused to marry them, nothing more.

But they are not the cries of an innocent man. Hua Cheng levels his gaze upon her.

“Does the ‘mere fact of his ascension’ leave him beyond reproach?”

Yao Meifen grits her teeth, unable to answer for that, but—

“If ascension itself is this declaration of moral infallibility, then how do gods fall?” Her face darkens, and Hua Cheng smirks, shaking his head.

“Gods ascend for the same reasons as any leader, mortal or otherwise.” The Ghost king argues. “Because they have a societal advantage—or because other humans believe in them enough to follow them. And when humans stop believing—those gods fade.”

Her throat aches from how hard she’s fighting back emotion, biting her own tongue until she spits blood, but Yao Meifen still doesn’t relent.

“Gods fall because they fail to meet an ethical code—but that code is STILL dictated by the will of heaven—!”

“What is heaven, then?” Hua Cheng counters, never missing a single beat or taking a pause, as though he’s already considered her argument to its conclusion before she speaks. “Is there some permanent figure among you who writes out this moral code from on high? Is it a democracy? No—” He laughs.

“You all kiss the boots of your heavenly emperor. But he wasn’t the first, was he? And why should he be the last?”

The suggestion of that makes several of the Heavenly Officials balk, turning pale.

“If Heaven was all knowing, dictating morals to mortals from on high…”

He steps closer, watching as Yao Meifen shrinks, her eyes suddenly unsure— Questioning herself.

“Why do laws change?” He questions. “You’re older than me, aren’t you? In your lifetime, how much have the morals of humans changed around you? What did that have to do with Heaven?”

“Of course…” She starts, then stops, her eyebrows knitting together, “They—They have to change. The world is never stagnant. People evolve—”

“But if Heaven was all knowing and infallible, it would already have a perfect set of morals for them, wouldn’t it?”

She falters.

“If that was true, why would the heavens need to evolve?” He questions again.

“…Maybe…alright, maybe Heaven isn’t infallible,” Yao Meifen concedes, “But it still acts as a moral leader—”

“Without infallibility, what right do the heavens have to dictate morality to anyone?”

Hua Cheng muses, deftly backing her argument deeper into a corner, “If immortality doesn’t grant one infallibility—if rapists, philanderers, and gamblers can ascend through heaven's doors, their mandate is no different from that of any mortal ruler."

"That's—!"

"And if the heavens are found to be unjust—people stop worshipping them, or they are cast out by other officials." They stand face to face now, with her leaning back, one hand clutching against her chest with frustration. "It's just another political power structure."

Yao Meifen flushes. "I thought you said that you were a religious man! If all of that was true—then what point would there be in ascension at all?! Why do gods even exist? To serve as an example—!"

"To serve mortals." Hua Cheng cuts her off flatly.

"I—what?"

"Cultivators are expected to protect the weak and serve their communities before they ascend," he never takes his eyes from her. "They serve their communities—in turn, people believe in them, and they ascend, gaining immense power."

"That has NEVER been the way of heaven, we—!"

"Don't interfere with mortal affairs," Hua Cheng agrees, and just when Yao Meifen thinks the argument has returned in her favor—

The Ghost King smirks.

"Your way is to spout morals and do nothing to enforce them. Only interfering when Ghosts threaten your own power structures."

Finally, the civil goddess falls backwards, spitting up more blood, until it trails down her chin—and she—

The Ghost King leans over her, tilting his head.

"I am a religious man," he repeats, "but worship is something that much be earned, and—"

Hua Cheng looks her over.

"I don't believe in you."

...She's been beaten.

One by one, Hua Cheng debates each of them. On everything from the accessibility of ascension—

Pointing out that, while there is a civil exams system that allows commoners to rise, it does nothing for those who live in poverty.

That while an orphan born with nothing might be able to ascend through great sacrifice or physical might—it is nearly impossible for them to gain the education required to ascend as a civil god.

And to achieve such great physical might—that often requires being taught as well.

Even sacrificial, selfless acts—often viewed as the great equalizer among ascensions— are usually only capable of being performed by those born with strong fates, or the luck to be noticed by the heavens.

Meaning, the system is inherently unequal.

Hua Cheng argues that point doggedly and tirelessly.

That they are flawed—and heaven is flawed. That they are corrupt, and that heaven is corrupted.

The only way to save a dying tree is to peel away the diseased bark and start anew, is it not?

One by one, they fall.

Receiving the same treatment as their martial counterparts before them. Their own secrets and personal shames being revealed.

A plagiarized paper here, an accepted bribe there. Some even having gone as far as to forge the answers on their civil exams.

Each and every one of them is a liar in some way. A cheat. A thief. Living off of the fruits of their indiscretions.

And when the last civil god collapses, clutching his hands over his mouth as he coughs up blood, Hua Cheng stares over the group.

All thirty three of them.

“I’m sure you remember my conditions,” he murmurs, and with a flick of his wrist, E- Ming returns to his hip, sliding into it’s sheathe. “You have until the full moon to fulfill your end of the deal.”

Just as he promised—now that the fight is over, the magical barrier drops away.

And just like that, silver bells tinkling with each step he takes, Crimson Rain Sought Flower leaves the battle field, and thirty three gods, bleeding in the dirt.

Humiliated, beaten, and broken.

And he smiles, pleased with his work—knowing that it has been done well.

When the sun rises on another day—the world is not immediately upended, but subtle changes quickly begin to be seen.

A king awakens—telling his advisors to cease construction on a new temple for General Gao He. Upon being asked why—he simply blames it on a change of heart.

There are fewer worshippers in the temples of Yao Meifen and Mo Kang—among many others.

And even within the heavenly realm—there are whispers.

It begins as a self serving act of paranoia, among the thirty three.

'Don't believe him, when he calls me a thief—he's a whoremonger!'

'Who called me that?! Well—she's a cheat, she forged half of her civil exams!'

'As if I'll take this gossip from a man who preys upon women!'

"Don't worry, they won't tell anyone."

Those were the words the Ghost King used to taunt them.

But oh, how they tell.

Far and wide these birds fly, singing their traitorous little songs before they crawl back to their nests, nursing their wounds. Reeking of indignation and self pity.

They do as much damage to their reputations as the Ghost King himself—not even realizing what they're doing.

And one by one, they each make one final mistake:

They presume that it never occurred to the ghost king that they might not honor their word. Fail to consider why he let them go, rather than slaying each and every one of them upon their loss.

And oh, what a fatal error it was.

Hua Cheng let them go, because that's how you deal with an infestation of rats. Rather than killing them immediately, you lace one with poison—allowing it to flee back to the nest, killing the problem at it's source.

And, because the Ghost King does this in his god's name—and dianxia was always known for showing mercy, when it was appropriate.

Out of respect for that—he gives each and every of them the chance to descend on their own. Allowing them the chance to survive and cultivate anew.

None of them take it. Not a single one.

They tell themselves snide little justifications. That it's only reasonable—after all, who could expect them to honor a deal with a ghost king?

That if they stay in seclusion and lick their wounds—people will forget. They always do.

But not a ghost.

Ghosts, in the end, rarely forget. Their memories are long, bitter, and vicious.

Crimson Rain Sought Flower is no exception.

He sits upon the steps of a manor in the middle of construction, red columns sprouting up around him—watching the full moon rising.

Several children play in the street below, chasing silver butterflies, giggling among themselves. Yanlin is among them, occasionally stopping to glance back at Hua Cheng, but—

She leaves him be, seeing the look in his eye.

Fai stands beside him, somewhat awkward. "Well..."

The older man clears his throat, trying to think of a way to soothe the young Ghost King, "I suppose the lesson to be learned here is that heavenly officials aren't particularly...trust worthy. But you still did what you set out to do, yes? It was quite impressive—"

"Not quite."

Hua Cheng watches as the moon rises high into the sky, and he rises with it, stretching out his legs as Fai watches him, his expression somewhat anxious.

"What...do you mean by that, Hua Chengzhu?"

The youth shrugs, long tresses of dark hair swinging gently behind his back.

Bells chime softly in the night, and with each step he takes, the moon seems to shine brighter, taking on an almost amber glow.

"I allowed them to fail," he murmurs, staring ahead, watching silver wraith butterflies fly from his vambraces, disappearing into the night.

"And now, I am going to help them fulfill their responsibilities."
"You..." Fai starts, swallowing dryly, "You should really—!"

But before he can finish speaking, there's the soft rattle of dice—and the Ghost King disappears into the night, just as the butterflies before him.

Within the realm of the dead, there are many different forms of creature—goblins, demons, spirits of every shape and size—but, most common among them all, is the ghost.

A ghost can remain on earth after death for many reasons.

Malicious or benevolent, it doesn't matter—they need only the will to remain. But it is the malicious ones who thrive, rising in power.

And among these ghosts, are four ranks:

A malice, only strong enough to focus on single targets.

A menace, able to wipe out an entire clan.

A savage, possessing the strength to wipe out a city on it's own.

Malices and Menaces make up the majority of ghosts—with only a few powerful, savage ghosts rising to the top of the pile.

And even fewer among them, are those who are born from the Kiln of

Mount Tonglu.

Supremes. Devastations. Calamities.

To most, simply called Ghost Kings. Capable of bringing down a nation in a single night—and unleashing chaos upon the world.

For all of written memory, there was only one: The White Clothed Calamity. Bai Wuxiang.

The Destroyer of Xianle.

Bringer of Plague, Death, and Suffering.

So frightening, his devastation so all encompassing, that many feared to even speak his name. So powerful, it took the Heavenly Emperor himself to bring the creature down.

And with him, people believed the age of The Ghost King had ended

That there would not be another. And with that, the heavens breathed a sigh of relief. Became comfortable, in the knowledge that there were none left who could threaten their power.

They built their golden palaces, indulged, became lazy and corrupt. And slowly, they forgot.

Forgot the days of war and plague. Of the damage that could be done, by a single ghost.

They forgot that it meant to be vulnerable.

Forgot that to be targeted by a ghost king is to be marked for death.

But after tonight, they will not forget again.

That won't be possible.

Across the continent, far and wide, silver butterflies drift through the night—moving closer to their targets with dainty flaps of their wings.

Hua Cheng stands beneath the full moon, spreading his palms out on either side of him, breathing in the night air. Crisp—freeing.

The last time he was in a fight—a real fight—it was against a being so powerful, he felt like a paper boat being tossed about in a flood. Surviving on luck and wits alone.

And his opponent—while worthy—was not one that Hua Cheng took any pleasure in defeating.

Ever since, every fight has felt like a shadow in comparison. Irritating—but only in the sense that they never provide a challenge.

This, however, feels like stretching his legs for the first time in decades. Finally flexing muscles that have been dying to be used properly.

The Ghost King takes deep breaths, long and slow, allowing the spiritual power to build up in his chest until his hands are sparking with it—reaching out with his mind, until he can feel tens of thousands of wraith butterflies, scattered from one end of the horizon to the other.

It's far more than anything he's ever attempted before—and yet, before he even says the words—Hua Cheng can feel it there, in his gut: that all of the destructive power in the world lays within his hands.

A Ghost King can bring chaos to the mortal realm—this is well known. On this night, the world learns something new.

When Hua Cheng opens his eye once more—it scorches under the moon with the light of a cursed star.

"Burn," he growls.

On this night, the world learns that a Ghost King can also bring Heaven itself to it's knees.

In an instant, the same, singular blink of an eye—the wraith butterflies burst into small infernos, setting flame to everything around them.

In an instant, thousands—no, tens of thousands—of temples are suddenly pyres, flames roaring up into the sky.

The fires rage until nothing but ash remains—with so much smoke rising into the sky from all around, the moonlight itself begins to dim, slowly changing colors with the ash and fog.

And in the heavens, thirty three gods are forced to watch as all of their temples burn.

Not just a few, or even most—but all. They're forced to watch as the merits stop coming. As the money dries up, and the prayers fade.

As their worshippers—those which many of these officials had begun to take for granted—leave, and they don't return.

And when the officials try to rectify the situation by building more?

Hua Cheng burns those, as well—until no respectable human would dare waste their money in building temples for gods that bring such rotten luck. And who could blame them?

As the desperation builds—they go to the one place they can think of for help. Not Jun Wu, who would certainly judge them for breaking their word, but...

They reach out to the only god they can think of outside of Ju Wu that might be capable of dealing with the calamity:

Just as General Ming Guang predicted, each and every one of them comes crawling to him, pleading for help. And each time, he reminds them of what he said in the very beginning:

That, when the situation turned against them, he would not help them. Pei Ming keeps his promise.

He sits back—and with a keen eye, he watches them burn. Some brightly, with the heat of an inferno—and others slowly, gradually fading into obscurity, becoming forgotten.

The last to disappear is General Gao He—and as his life finally sparks out, he remembers his own words.

'Whores play stupid games, and they win stupid prizes.'

What did he play, but the stupidest game of all? Gambling with a Ghost King.

To think, there was ever a time in his life when he thought he could slay such a creature.

His prize?

Disgrace—and eventually, oblivion.

In the next meeting within the Grand Martial Hall, Crimson Rain Sought Flower, the Ghost King Hua Cheng, is bestowed with a new title:

The Scourge of the Heavens. A title not even the White Clothed Calamity ever dared to achieve.

Jun Wu's gaze is cold, surveying the damage.

Many press him about what shall be done about Hua Cheng—but his response is always the same:

That the Heavenly Officials agreed to the fight and it's terms, only to refuse to fulfill them once the battle was lost.

Hua Cheng was within his rights, holding them to their word.

Eventually, he turns his attention to the only two survivors from the entire ordeal:

General Nan Yang, and General Xuan Zhen.

"It was quite astute of the two of you to ignore his invitation," the heavenly emperor murmurs, looking them over. "But I do wonder why you did so."

Neither of the men responds immediately. Nan Yang stares off into the middle distance, his jaw locked as he struggles for words.

Xuan Zhen is the one who speaks—calm and collected, arms crossed, "Nan Yang blamed me for a clerical error with a few of his temples."

There's no need for an explanation for anyone to know *what* clerical error he means, and Feng Xin's face flushes indignantly—but still, he doesn't say a word.

He hasn't responded to Mu Qing's antagonizing behavior in months.

"We were arguing about it, and by the time we finished..."

Mu Qing shrugs, flicking his hair back over his shoulder, "The matter was already settled.

No one even questions it—because it sounds exactly like them.

And it's close to the truth—though not quite honest.

When the meeting disperses, Feng Xin looks to him.

Hidden by the crowd of gods moving around them to exit the martial hall—he reaches for Mu Qing, but...

The martial god has already turned on his heel, making his exit.

Feng Xin's fingertips brush against his hair as he disappears into the crowd—but nothing more.

Time passes, and the actions of Crimson Rain Sought Flower, the Ghost King Hua Cheng, are passed along. Painful reminders, to heavenly officials—but to humans, they become a thing of folklore.

Those who once worshipped in the halls of Gao He, Yao Meifen, and Mo Kang now light incense and leave offerings in his name.

His wraith butterflies become a sign of comfort and safety to orphans —and terror, among the gods.

The Scimitar E-Ming becomes the subject of nightmares.

And when people see blood begin to fall from the sky like rain—they know to flee, because calamity is not far behind.

The people forgot, once, what it was like to have a Ghost King.

Then, Hua Cheng brought half of the upper court down, and set the sky aflame in a single night.

And even as the Ghost King's power grows—he never ceases in his task. Searching far and wide, scouring the realms for his love. Each time coming up with nothing but rumors and smoke.

It's been long—so long. Far too long. But still, Hua Cheng never stops.

Even when the task seems utterly fruitless. Even when fate itself seems to have turned against his success—he doesn't give up.

But with each passing year, his heartache and impatience grow.

And as the time slips by, Hua Cheng always finds himself reaching for the coral pearl braided into his hair, twisting it thoughtfully.

There was a time in his life when he didn't pray for anything—or, when he did, Hong- er never expected any sort of answer.

Now, the Ghost King only prays for one thing: over and over again, almost like a mantra;

'Wait for me.'

No matter how long it takes.

'I'm coming for you—just wait for me.'

And every now and then—he feels that distinctive shiver down his neck, and he knows:

Somewhere, wherever he is, dianxia is touching his ashes. That he still has them, carrying them with him wherever he goes.

It's the safest place in the world for them to be—and Hua Cheng would give anything in the world to be able to join them.

That, however, is a matter of time.

And time, in Hua Cheng's experience—is a cruel master.

There's too little of it when you're happy—and far too much of it when you're alone. And all things, gods, ghosts, or mortals, are subject to it's clutches in the end.

Money Over Life and Gains Over Shame

Chapter Summary

Between the realms of ghosts and mortals, there is something that is neither or. To some, an abomination—to others, a haven.

What began as Crimson Rain's lair and a small settlement of orphans is now...more like a city.

A City of Ghosts.

Chapter Notes

You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

Content Warning: for existential dread and death (not main character death)

YEAR THREE HUNDRED AND THIRTEEN

Between the realms of ghosts and mortals, there is something that is neither or. To some, an abomination—to others, a haven.

What began as Crimson Rain's lair and a small settlement of orphans is now...more like a city.

A City of Ghosts.

In the center of that city, one will find the red pillars and spires of a grand estate, lanterns gleaming all throughout the night.

It is where the Lord of Ghost City resides, within the walls of Paradise Manner.

Among one of the most opulent residences in the three realms, many wonder why the Ghost King went to such great expense. Many speculate that it was to lure in a potential bride—and others believe Crimson Rain to be a widower, paying respects to a long dead wife.

Either way, whether the rumors are true or not—Paradise Manor is not a home, but simply a place of residence; with one inhabitant.

And tonight, the Lord of Ghost City is not there.

There are many smaller dwellings where Ghost children are known to play—giggling mischievously.

They play pranks on passing mortals, or chase wraith butterflies through the night. Often looked after by the spirits of mothers who have lost their children—they are rarely alone.

There's even a small schoolhouse in the city's outer rings—where a short, elderly ghost teaches.

But the fields around ghost city are silent, on this night. The children do not play, and school desks stand empty.

Only a few city blocks from Paradise Manor stands a large, imposing structure— painted crimson.

A Gambler's Den.

A place where one might lose life and limb if they don't play their cards right—but the odds are always even, and the bets are always fair.

Two ghosts are often seen at the table toward the front, laughing as they toss a set of dice back and forth, crowing to the Ghost King.

Taunting him to join in—or scolding him for being such a grouch. When horrified visitors inquire—one of the children will explain that the men are practically Hua Chengzhu's uncles—

And that, when it comes to gambling, they taught the Ghost King everything he knows.

A lie, of course—the two have never been anything but trouble with a set of cards— but Crimson Rain Sought Flower is generous, and he allows the misconception to continue.

But today, the gambler's den sits empty and silent, no dice rolling around with a—

CLACK, CLACK, CLACK!

On this night, the streets of Ghost City remain vacant. The lanterns go dark. Not a single butterfly lights the path through the night. No children laughing, merchants shouting, or dice rolling.

For the human travelers passing through, it's a bizarre—almost haunting sight. Where on earth would so many ghosts disappear to?

What is happening on that evening is not quite so unusual. It's normal, when it's time comes, for a ghost to be accompanied by companions on the journey in order to receive a proper send off.

Usually only their loved ones, to hold their hand—and the great Hua Chengzhu, of course, to lead their way through the night.

The only thing that marks this occasion as different from the others is just how beloved and well known the ghosts in question have become.

They are older than the city walls—and nearly every man, woman, and child in Ghost City—mortal and undead alike, has grown up in their presence.

Now, the city residents gather in a grand hall, holding a sea of red lanterns, moving in a slow, solemn procession.

In the front—two frail, withered ghosts stand before a black door. Impossibly broad and vast, surrounded by the flames of green ghost fires.

By their side, a young woman weeps. In the throws of her teenage years, hair braided into neat buns on either side of her head.

"It's not fair!" Yanlin sobs, clinging to the front of Xiang's shirt, trembling with anger, fear, and...

Endless sadness.

"Hua Chengzhu, you—you can't let this happen, it—!"

The Ghost King stands back, expression unreadable.

"It's SO unfair!"

Worn, gnarled fingers stroke through Yanlin's hair. And when Xiang speaks—his voice is rough and brittle with age.

"Don't you blame the brat, Yanlin," he mutters gruffly, giving the girl a one armed hug. "He's done everything that he can."

"More than most would have done." Fai offers quietly, rubbing a hand over Yanlin's back.

"...It's not right," From Hua Cheng's side, Bao's hands clench into fists, trembling as he hangs his head—angry and helpless. Of age, now—a man in his own right.

"They don't deserve it."

After all—they've lived fairly decent lives. Made mistakes, yes—but in their time with the residents of ghost city, each ghost has done far more good than harm.

"...It's not about what we deserve, lad," Xiang sighs. "It just is what it is."

They were never meant to come back, after all—Ghosts don't do that, after losing their ashes.

What Hua Cheng did was unprecedented—but it was also never something that could last.

"I could still give you more time," The Ghost King offers, his tone... Quiet. Difficult to read.

"...No," Fai smiles, shaking his head. "You've expended an enormous amount of spiritual power on us over the last century, Hua Chengzhu. It—it was very kind," his voice trembles—but he forces himself to remain calm.

To put on a brave face.

"But there's nothing more to be done."

Their ages have progressed to the point of near inhumanity—and with it, the toll that time takes on a man's mind.

They have clearer days, and bad ones. When Hua Cheng is there, constantly providing them a flow of power—they are themselves.

Laughing, playful—and harmless.

But when Hua Cheng isn't there—attending to other business, or continuing his search—

They deteriorate rapidly.

Skin wasting away, their minds fading until only wrathful, violent spirits remain. And then, they become dangerous. Not only to humans—but other ghosts, as well.

That's why they're here, today.

Because on Hua Cheng's last trip away from the City—Fai's mind faded again, and when it did...he...

The spirit of a young boy, one of his students, ended up being dispersed. Fai knew then that it was time.

And Xiang would never let him go alone.

Normally—these ceremonies are never sad.

It's a time of ache, yes—because the ghosts who are left behind will mourn their companions. But also one of happiness—because the spirit that is moving on is rejoining the living. Being reborn anew.

But that isn't what this is.

The door they stand before isn't red—symbolizing new life, rejoining a never ending cycle.

Those lives, those futures—they were stolen from Fai and Xiang long ago. Now, they stand before a black door.

Evil lays behind—and untold suffering.

Bao wasn't wrong before.

They don't belong there.

Neither of them have done anything to deserve eternal damnation and punishment. And the pain such a loss causes—it doesn't only harm them, but...

An entire city of ghosts, who have come to love the two like their own family.

Yanlin wasn't wrong either.

It isn't fair.

It's horribly, wretchedly unjust. So much so, that even the most cynical and bitter of the ghosts in the crowd are left with a sour taste.

This is what it is, to scatter a ghost's ashes.

This is what it is, to steal a soul's future.

Hua Cheng closes his eyes.

This ache in his chest isn’t entirely unfamiliar, but he won’t think on it now.

When he opens them, Xiang and Fai have turned to face the residents of Ghost City, looking upon them one last time.

Xiang, who has never been one for kind words or sentimental gestures—smiles wide.

“I never did much good in my human life,” he mutters, shaking his head, “but...it was an honor, to be your neighbor.”

Fai nods, echoing the sentiment, smiling upon his students, who cling to their caretakers and weep.

“Among the greatest honors of my life,” the ghost agrees.

They bow—and slowly, in unison, the whole of ghost city bows to them in return, thousands of red lanterns glimmering as they move in unison.

It would be a beautiful sight, were it not paired with the taste of heartbreak. “Thank you, wise masters,” the citizens speak as one.

Slowly, they make their way back towards the gates.

There wasn’t always a third door in this hall—gleaming and white. But after so many trips back and forth, it has remained permanently present for the ghost king, and those he ferries through.

Hua Cheng rolls the dice against his palm—

CLACK!

CLACK!

And with that, the doors swing open—and the ghostly funeral procession makes its way through, singing soft hymns of loss and longing, drifting through the night.

Now, only six figures remain.

Two elderly ghosts, not long for the mortal realm. Three teenagers, standing before them in disarray—and one Ghost King, standing towards the back, his arms crossed.

Since the first brick was laid in the streets of Ghost City—it has always been the six of them.

Back then, Bao, Shuo, and Yanlin were children of only ten, eight, and six.

Now, Bao is a young man approaching nineteen in physical years. Shuo, somewhere around seventeen—and Yanlin, all of fifteen.

And while they have been under Hua Cheng's protection for centuries...

On the day to day, it was Fai and Xiang who looked after them. Who, in many ways, raised them more than their human parents ever had the chance to.

"...I'm sorry," Bao spits out between clenched teeth. "That we couldn't help you two." Always the big brother, that one.

Trying to protect everyone. To take responsibility for things that were never his fault —but still, he tries.

Fai smiles, reaching over to squeeze his arm. "You helped more than you could know."

Yanlin wipes at her eyes—desperately trying to calm down, but the tears won't stop.

"Ah, get back here little one," Xiang sighs, pulling her into another tight hug. "What are you cryin' so much for? You ain't the one that's leaving."

Yanlin sniffles, hugging him tightly. "Because I—I—I don't want you to go!" She sobs, pressed against his chest. I'm not ready!"

"That ain't how life works," Xiang sighs, rubbing her back. "Now, you look after those two knuckleheads for me, alright? Someone's gotta keep a good head on their shoulders around here."

She nods, muffling a sob against his shirt—and the ghost whispers, just between them:

"And look after the boss too, understand?" He whispers. After all—if she doesn't, who else will?

The young ghost sniffles and nods, her shoulders trembling. When she lets go, she can only turn and fling herself into Bao's arms, trying not to weep too loudly.

He holds her tight, rubbing the back of her head, letting her weep into his shoulder— and when he makes eye contact over her hair, he and Xiang share a quiet nod of understanding.

They've said goodbye often over the course of the day—neither of them can bear to say anymore.

Finally, they begin to make their way towards the doors—where the rest of the citizens of ghost city just took their leave.

Shuo remains, his head slightly bowed, lips pressed so tightly together, they've lost any remaining color.

"...There really isn't another way?" He mumbles.

Fai reaches out—much shorter than the young man now, who now stands a few inches below Hua Cheng's height—patting the top of his head.

"I'm afraid not, lad." The teacher sighs, shaking his head. "But you work hard, alright?" Shuo nods, lips trembling "Don't lose that potential."

He glances over Shuo's shoulder, looking Hua Cheng in the eye, "You have to nurture that."

Of the three, the middle child has always shown the greatest promise. Yanlin has remained a malice—but both Shuo and his brother have become Menace ghosts.

They'll be powerful, in time.

And Shuo has the potential to rise even higher. He'll likely become a savage ghost, by the time he's a grown man—of comparable strength to what Hua Cheng possessed as Wu Ming.

The Ghost King's gaze does not waver. "I will," he agrees softly.

Even if he isn't much of a teacher.

Eventually, Shuo knows that he has to go. He takes one shaky step back, green eyes flickering down to the red string tied around Hua Cheng's finger, hopeful, just as he was as a child, but—

"I'm sorry,"

The Ghost King seldom says such words. “But it wont’ work this time.”

“...” Shuo nods, fighting to hide a bitter vein of disappointment—but Hua Cheng does allow the boy to take one end of the string, carrying it with him towards the door back to the mortal realm.

A small act of reassurance—reminding Kuo that one of the three left behind will return

Then, he disappears through the doorway as well—and when Hua Cheng turns around, it’s just as it was before.

Him, and two ghosts—standing on the edge of human existence. In a space between hell and the next life.

Back then, he was a spirit without strength. Hope. Even a name.

“I haven’t seen you wear that face in a long time,” Xiang comments, his hands shoved into his pockets, rocking back on his heels.

He’s never been particularly good with goodbyes.

“It’s the face you were wearing when we met,” Fai comments with a soft smile, appreciative.

“...It’s the face I was born with,” Hua Cheng admits. His scars and his nose healed when his spirit reformed, and he’s simulating having two eyes—but it’s the closest he’s been to himself in centuries.

And that seems to please both ghosts. After all—it’s a show of great trust.

“Well,” Xiang smiles, crossing his arms as he tilts his head to the side, bones in his spine creaking as he looks him over, “who would’ve known that you were a good lookin’ fella all this time?”

“We always knew that,” Fai cuts in, trying to soften it—

But Hua Cheng laughs.

“Compared to you?” He smirks, looking the old ghost over, “Anyone’s a prince.”

Fai gawks, looking back and forth between the two, slightly stressed—but then Xiang throws his head back and cackles, dust puffing out between his teeth, his jaw rattling.

"You little BASTARD!"

"I'm…" He wipes at his eyes, shaking his head. "I'm not gonna miss you at all!"

Both of their smiles fade—and Hua Cheng takes a deep breath.

"…I thought I could work it out," he mutters, "I didn't realize…"

He thought they would have more time.

"Listen, kid…" Xiang sighs.

You'd think, now that he's three and a half centuries old, people would stop calling him that, but…well…

Not these two.

"…We made our own choices," he gestures between himself and Fai. "And yeah, we got a ROTTEN deal, I won't lie—but it's noting to do with you."

"I know."

Hua Cheng agrees.

But when he was fighting in the fields of Mount Tonglu—that was always with the intention of getting strong enough to protect his god. That's still his motive behind everything he does, but—

Even now, after how much strength he's gained…

He can't save them.

From what he knows to be an objectively horrible fate.

Rapists, wife beaters, and thieves are allowed to ascend to the highest ranks of the heavens, but…

A loaded set of dice can land two men here.

And even the most powerful ghost in all three realms cannot stop it.

In a moment like this—Hua Cheng almost understands the desire to rule the world from the high seats of heaven. To enforce laws and justice on mortal men—

So they won't end up here, taking a punishment that far outweighs any crime.

But the heavens couldn't have stopped this.

Watching the morose look on Hua Cheng's face, Xiang shakes his head, "Look at me."

The younger man complies, eyes snapping up, and Xiang jabs one skeletal thumb against his chest, then points at Hua Cheng with his index finger, his gaze determined.

Unafraid.

"Kids like you and me—who weren't born with anything—we gotta take risks." He explains. "And every time we do—we know we might lose it all, but—"

Xiang grins, his eyes far away—like he's reliving a happier memory. "That moment—just before the dice land—it's like nothin' else."

He breathes, bubbling with an excitement that he hasn't held since his youth—the kind that he only ever seems to have when he's putting his luck on the line. "Because in that moment—you could be seconds away from being rich. Being somebody." He lets out a shaky breath.

"For most people—that moment is as close as we ever get. And we chase it, over and over, knowing that it's no good for us—knowing that we'll strike out, again and again...but damn," he laughs, exhilarated, "it's so much fun, getting that close."

"You were someone."

Xiang sniffs, "...Nah," he shakes his head. " *You* made me someone. Made us *both* somebodies," he nods towards Fai. "But I was a screw up before that. Still am—but you know what?" He slaps Fai's arm with a wide grin "That's fine—because I had a DAMN good time playing with you two!"

He trembles a little with fear each time he looks back towards that door—but the bravado never leaves his voice. "So, don't you DARE tell me sorry, or pity me— understand?"

"...Yeah," The Ghost King agrees, dipping his head. "I do."

"..." Xiang lets out a shaky breath, nodding. "Good, now—" He extends his hand, “What do we always say?”

Hua Cheng stares down at the ghost’s outstretched palm for a moment — remembering a time when he looked down on the man. Thought of him as little more than a foolish, shortsighted little gambler.

One unworthy of respect.

He didn’t know then, what a loyal friend Xiang was. Trustworthy— and brave, in spite of holding so much fear.

Slowly, the ghost king reaches out to take his hand, shaking it firmly. “...Gains over shame,” he repeats, unable to hold back a small smile.

Xiang beams back at him, squeezing his hand tightly, “And money over life!” The irony of the statement makes him cackle, his teeth rattling together from the sound—

“HAHAHA!”

He drops Hua Cheng’s hand, turning around to face the door before him, rolling his shoulders.

“...Hey,” he calls back, “if someone ever kicks the doors to hell open— I’m gonna find you, and we’re gonna play another round, alright?”

Something about that makes Hua Cheng’s mouth quirk at the corners. “...Just listen for the flute,” he mutters, half under his breath.

“Huh?” Xiang croaks, confused—and the ghost king shakes his head, clearing his throat.

“I’ll play a round with you any time, my friend.” He calls out. “There’s always a seat for you.”

Hua Cheng can’t see the way Xiang’s lips wobble. He’s never called Xiang a friend before.

He gives a shallow nod—turning to Fai, “...I know you hate going first,” Xiang mutters, glancing back towards the door “I’ll go on ahead, alright?”

The shorter man frowns, his eyes filled with emotion, “Xiang—”

“I’ll see you on the other side, alright? It ain’t such a big deal,”

Xiang takes a shaky breath, facing the door one final time. “It’s just...”

he reaches forward, grasping the handle, huffing out his last breaths—

“Just a new game, that’s all!”

The door to hell wrenches open—and when it does, dark, cloud-like hands reach out, gasping him.

“XIANG!” Fai cries out, eyes wide and frightened, but before he can rush forward— Xiang holds up one hand in a shaky thumbs up, offering a fierce grin as he gets dragged in.

“It ain’t so bad, I’ll...see you...in the shithole, got it?! Don’t—be such a wuss!”

BAM!

The door slams shut—and Fai is left there, pale and frightened, but...when he looks back to Hua Cheng, he tries not to be.

“...That didn’t look so bad,” he starts, forcing a cheerful tone— “Don’t lie.”

“It looked absolutely horrific, and I’d rather die again,” Fai mutters.

He bites his lip, staring at that door, his eyes strained.

“...He’s always done that,” the ghost admits after a moment. “Charged ahead of me.”

“He’s a show off,” Hua Cheng drawls, trying to set him at ease, but... Fai’s smile is bittersweet, eyes slightly wet.

“He does it because he knows I won’t be as scared if I know he’s waiting for me,” he explains, wiping at his nose. “He’s been jumping in headfirst since we were boys, and...that’s probably part of why...”

Why they ended up here.

It was Fai’s gambling debts, after all.

“...He never blamed you for that,” Hua Cheng reminds him quietly, and Fai nods, his mouth tightening at the corners.

“I know,” the ghost agrees, “he wouldn’t. I just...” Slowly, he turns to face Hua Cheng.

“I wanted to wait, to tell you...I...”

He bows low, hands clasped.

“Thank you, Hua Chengzhu.” Fai mutters fervently, and Hua Cheng—the sight of it—

Something about it sets him on edge, and he shakes his head, his voice low with shame.

“Don’t thank me.”

‘I couldn’t do anything but delay this, in the end.’

“...It’s important for me to say this,” the elder presses on, not lifting out of his bow. “I died...in disgrace,” he admits, his voice shaking. “My family was so ashamed—they couldn’t even tell the truth of what happened. Simply said it was an accident. I was...I was nothing.”

Just the memories seem to be enough to swallow him whole—still, he doesn’t stop.

“...But then you came along,” Fai smiles, lifting his head, “and in these last centuries, I’ve had purpose again. I’ve—I’ve been a teacher again.”

Tears slip down his cheeks—not happy or sad.

They exist somewhere in between.

“So, thank you, Hua Chengzhu.” Fai mutters, casting his eyes to the side.

He’s always thought of himself as a small, insignificant creature. Not as loud or action driven as Xiang. Certainly nobody worth remembering, but...

He’s been lucky to spend his life following so many memorable people. He doesn’t regret a single moment of that—only his own mistakes.

“...” The ghost smiles, beaming with encouragement—just as he did when he was teaching Hua Cheng his first characters and numbers.

“And your god—whenever you find him—”

The words he speaks next make Hua Cheng’s eyes widen sharply, and...

“—he will be *lucky* to have you.”

They're among the kindest words anyone has ever said to the Ghost King. Enough so to leave his throat thick with emotion.

"So, please." Fai repeats, bowing his head once more. "If you could do one last kindness for me—accept my humble, deepest gratitude."

There's a pause, his head hanging low with respect, before he hears the Ghost King reply—

"Only if you accept mine."

Fai pauses, surprised.

"Your—?"

When he looks up, his breath catches with shock.

Before him, Crimson Rain Sought Flower, lord of Ghost City, the calamity Hua Cheng —

He's bowing to Fai.

A murdered gambler, who came from nothing—and died with nothing. A failure, forgotten by most who knew him.

And the leader of the ghost realm is bowing to him. Hands clasped before him in respect.

"Thank you for your lessons, Fai Laoshi," Hua Cheng murmurs. "I will not forget them."

The number of people—dead or alive—that the Ghost King would bow before is incredibly small.

First, and always—to his god. Second, to his Guoshi. And now, to his teacher.

"..." Fai's lips tremble, and then he smiles. So wide, his crumbling jaw cracks from the strain—and tears pour down his cheeks.

Tears of happiness, from a man about to face hell itself.

"...Hua Chengzhu," he whispers, feeling the need to try and remind the Ghost King of how ludicrous this is, "I have made so many mistakes—"

"I'm not interested in being taught by someone who has not made mistakes," Hua Cheng corrects him—his voice uncharacteristically gentle. "I'd rather study under someone who has learned from them."

The tears pour even faster now, and the gift Hua Cheng has brought Fai, in this moment—is absolutely immeasurable.

A wound, a sense of inadequacy that has long festered in Fai's heart—is now closed.

Peace.

In this final moment, Hua Cheng brought Fai's soul peace.

He mirrors Hua Cheng's posture, like that of a teacher bowing to their own student upon graduation.

It's a different sort of goodbye—and far more bittersweet. But no one is ever really gone.

"The greatest honor I could ever have," Fai murmurs, his hands trembling, "was having you as my student."

Both men straighten, and finally, Fai turns to face the door.

A great, black maw—ready to open its jaws and swallow him whole.

"Do you need—?"

"It's alright."

Fai glances over his shoulder, offering Hua Cheng one last smile.

"Xiang is waiting for me."

That sentence alone is enough to make Hua Cheng stop, fingers outstretched—his throat suddenly thick.

His fingers wrap around the handle, and finally, in one last act of courage...

Fai throws the door to hell wide open, watching as clouds of dark smoke stretch out towards him, wrapping around his old, withering form.

And he smiles.

Because sometimes, in the face of such horror—

Smiling is the bravest thing a person can do.

BAM!

The door slams shut.

Hua Cheng stands alone, in a field of ghost fires, staring down that empty, black door. Knowing what lays behind it. And—

And that it's all so unfair.

'Not everyone is meant to live forever.'

That was something Fai used to say, when Yanlin asked why he and Xiang aged so much faster than the other ghosts in the city.

Of course—almost no one does live forever. Not really.

Mortals inevitably perish. Even if they linger as ghosts—almost all of them will eventually fade.

The Gods themselves aren't eternal. There was a Heavenly Dynasty before that of Jun Wu. Most gods will fade to obscurity after a few centuries.

(And, as Hua Cheng has shown, one can speed up the process.)

And among the tens of millions of ghosts across the realms...

Hua Cheng is the only one among them that is capable of sustaining himself for eternity.

A feat he achieved in the pursuit of his god. A desire to be stronger. To be useful to him, for as long as Xie Lian walked the earth.

Hua Cheng never thought of it as pursuing immortality.

He was chasing power. Usefulness. But he was also ready to die at a moment's notice, if that was what his god needed of him.

And now that he's achieved it, however unintentionally, Hua Cheng is forced to reconcile himself to what immortality truly means.

Saying goodbye.

The moment he meets a person, Hua Cheng is already thinking of the ways that he'll say goodbye to them, in the end. Because outliving them has become a simple reality.

Even if some wouldn't call this living—it's more like haunting. But all immortals are like ghosts, really.

They live off of memories alone, watching the world pass them by, unable to live among it was they once did—always mourning something that is already long gone.

And of course—no one mourns like a ghost.

It's a price Hua Cheng accepts, in his pursuit of his beloved.

But oh, what a heavy price it is to pay.

He turns his back on the door, making his way towards his own exit, following the small trail of red thread, marking the way home.

Each step feels heavy—and it aches with a pain that Hua Cheng knows he will not soon forget.

He bears it.

Makes his way up each and every step, as he has a million times before—reminding himself of a difficult truth.

Hua Cheng can destroy nations. He can topple gods. He can make the sky rain blood.

But he cannot save everyone.

There was a time where he never desired to.

A time where only one person in his life mattered—and aside from him, Hua Cheng didn't care if the world itself burned to the ground.

And his god—he still sits high above the rest in Hua Cheng's affections. He's still his drive. His focus, his—

His meaning.

But in these last three centuries—Hua Cheng has learned that he isn't incapable of forming other attachments. Even if they're dwarfed by his devotion to Xie Lian—he's still able to feel friendship. Connections.

He can't help but wonder if it's worth the pain of losing them. "Are they gone?"

He doesn't realize he's finished the journey back to the surface until he hears Shuo's voice.

The boy is sitting back against a boulder on the outskirts of ghost city, his knees pulled up against his chest.

"...Yes," The Ghost King admits. "They are." "Is there...a way for them to ever come back?"

Hua Cheng thinks on it for a moment, but—tired, he shakes his head with a heavy sigh. "I don't know."

He takes the other end of the string back when Shuo offers it, prepared to return to Paradise Manor for the night, when—

"Hua Chengzhu?"

The ghost glances back over his shoulder—and Shuo hasn't moved from his spot. Still holding his knees close against his chest, lips trembling as he stares straight ahead.

"...Yes?"

"Are your ashes somewhere safe?" Shuo bites his lip. "Like— *really* safe?"

Oh.

He—

He's worried.

Hua Cheng's gaze softens slightly—and he nods.

"They're in the safest place they could be," he assures him—and Shuo hugs himself a little tighter, unsure.

"How do you know that?"

"Because..." The dark haired man turns his gaze up to the stars, growing quiet. "...if the place where they're kept no longer existed," Hua Cheng explains slowly, "I would have no reason to exist either."

Shuo's eyebrows knit together—and he's clearly startled by the concept, "...It's that important?"

"Nothing could ever be more important," he replies.

He makes to turn back now—knowing that tomorrow will not be any easier. Nor the day after that.

But over the centuries Hua Cheng has learned that, with enough determination, it is possible to drink himself into a stupor, and he plans to do just that.

Shuo still has questions.

“...What kind of person scatters someone’s ashes?” He whispers, glaring into the dark, struggling to understand.

Hua Cheng can’t imagine the feeling. The cruelty that humans are capable of has never confused him. It simply is.

“Was it someone who hated them?”

Shuo mutters, trying so hard to make sense of it. To find a reason. “What could they have done that was so awful?”

In truth—scattering ashes is only justified when a ghost is so powerful, so dangerously malicious, that them returning to the mortal realm is too great a risk.

There are very few ghosts who rise to such a level of danger.

As for mortals...Murder. Rape. Crimes such as those are often viewed as a worthy excuse.

Hua Cheng has scattered a man’s ashes before.

Several, actually.

In a bloodstained temple, many years ago.

Hua Cheng doesn’t feel any remorse over that. Not after what they did. Not after that they /tried/ to do.

And if he came across his beloved and found that someone had tried to harm him again—the ghost king would repeat the sin without pause.

But Fai and Xiang did no such thing.

And there’s no logical answer that Hua Cheng can give.

“...I don’t think that they did,” he admits. “I think there was a desire to make an example out of them, and…"

"And?"

"Sometimes, men do things because they can."

Shuo seems to understand that much, eyes narrowing.

"…Rich men do that," he mutters, fingernails digging into his trousers where they grip his knees. "It was a rich family, right?"

When Hua Cheng thinks back on it—

"Yeah."

Merchants. From the kingdom of Xuli.

"I hate rich people," Shuo whispers, eyes burning with resentment.

It seems to run deeper for him than just this one instance—that much is obvious. But he doesn't seem inclined to share, and…

Hua Cheng is tired, so he doesn't ask.

When he's back in paradise manor that evening, he takes reports from his wraith butterflies, watching images from thousands of locations form across the continent, but…

Just like every other night, his god isn't there.

Hua Cheng doesn't reach for the bottle of liquor on his desk, the way he had planned to.

He doesn't have an actual need to sleep, no reason to own a bed even, but…

Centuries of wishful thinking have left the ghost king with a fondness for dreaming.

He only has one, after all.

When it comes, he opens both eyes, just to find a warm, ethereal gaze staring back up at him.

His fingers drift out, tangling with smaller, softer hands—so warm against his palms.

And he always knows that it's a dream—

But it's his own, and dianxia's smile feels real.

"Hong-er," he murmurs, raising their joined fingers up, pressing them against his cheek, "you're tired."

That's how he can always recognize the dreams for what they are.

Because when Xie Lian says his name, Hua Cheng can answer.

"I know," he whispers. "I'm sorry."

Xie Lian turns his cheek into Hua Cheng's palm, pressing a soft kiss there.

The ghost shivers, the way he always does—but that's another way to know that it is a dream.

His god would never touch him in such a way. Not if he knew who Hua Cheng truly was.

"...And sad."

The god frowns more now, his eyes scanning over Hua Cheng's face. "What happened?"

It's probably a coping mechanism of some sort, if he's being honest with himself—his emotions trying to find a slightly less bothersome way to process things.

But Hua Cheng chooses to pretend.

One of his arms slides around the crown prince's waist, pulling him in—and once he's close enough, Hua Cheng's face presses against his hair, letting out a shuddering sigh.

"I miss you," he admits.

It's the answer he always gives.

Arms wrap around his back, hugging him closer.

Even if it's more intimate than what the reality would be, it's far closer than the dreams Zhao Beitong tried to show him in the kiln.

Close enough, that there are moments when he forgets that he's dreaming. “I know,” his god whispers. “But there’s more, isn’t there?”

Hua Cheng is quiet, fingers stroking through his hair. He could choose to just be rude, to cling to him and remain sullenly quiet like the brat that he once was, but—

Dream or not, he can’t bring himself to do that.

“...I lost something today,” he admits. “It...was painful.”

The god doesn’t question, doesn’t press—his fingers just draw invisible patterns against the ghost king’s back through his tunic, and eventually, he continues—

“They were...my friends,” saying it feels so strange to him, so alien. “And I couldn’t save them.”

“...Oh, Hong-er,” Xie Lian sighs, arms tightening around Hua Cheng’s back, “I’m so sorry.”

He leans his cheek against the Ghost King’s head, the weight of it comforting. “But you can’t save everyone.”

“...I know,” Hua Cheng whispers.

“Just like I couldn’t save you,” The god mutters, his tone suddenly self-deprecating. Hua Cheng’s arms tighten, holding him so close, he half expects the dream to shatter.

“You did.” The ghost mutters, shaking his head. “So many times.” Xie Lian never believes it, but he smiles

It’s a dream, yes—not particularly close to reality.

But Hua Cheng doesn’t need it to be.

And when he wakes in the morning—it always aches just a little bit less than the night before.

He calls that better than nothing, and...

Hua Cheng is curious now, remembering Shuo’s words

‘They were rich, right?’

A wealthy family, in the Kingdom of Xuli. Among the most powerful merchants in the land.

Once, Xiang asked Hua Cheng to find them and enact revenge—telling them that Xiang had sent him from hell.

And now, it feels like…

A visit might be in Order.

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The Way of Elder Brothers

Chapter Summary

> "I know where the Shi family lives!"
>
> Hua Cheng turns around, glancing around the crowd at first before looking down—
>
> To find a little girl beaming up at him.

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE
>
> tw// there is a moment in this chapter that could be perceived as transphobic to some audiences, but does not rise to being explicit transphobia (as the character in question does not identify as transgender when the statement is directed at them)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There's a port city, in the Kingdom of Xuli. A glittering jewel in the middle of the coast, filled with ships from every corner of the earth, of every shape and color.

Merchants toss catches of fish between the aisles of their stalls—and the scent of spices lingers on the wind.

Hua Cheng spent his younger years in a country torn by war—and in the years since, he was so consumed by his search that he never stopped to look, but...

He stops, lifting his chin, finding the faintly familiar shape of a pagoda rising in the distance.

It's covered in paints—greens, reds, and golds. Likely kept up through the centuries, one of the oldest temples for the martial god of the region.

Hua Cheng often forgets after all this time that he was born in the kingdom of Xuli. His memories are faint at best, but...

He remembers that temple.

His mother prayed there, before they left on their journey to Xianle. Hua Cheng can still remember the way she looked, knelt before the divine statue, offering a small bowl of rice, her brow furrowed with concentration.

She would always try to get him to pray, before—at any of the other temples they frequented. She did that often, hoping to scrounge enough coins through begging that she wouldn't have to go out in the night, but...

She didn't try to convince her son to pray that day.

No—she rose to her feet with a determined expression, spinning on her heel and walking out without a word, grabbing Hong-er's hand tightly as she hurried down the street, not looking back once.

He couldn't tell you if this was the city where he was born—or just where they lived last, before Xianle.

It doesn't feel much like coming home. And yet—he does like this place.

There's laughter and talk no matter where you look, children rushing forward to watch the ships.

Musicians play in the street, rattling bells and tambourines, flute notes drifting through the voices in the crowd.

Hua Cheng wears the face of a wealthy, well to do young man—clad in crimson silk robes and fur lined boots.

The sort of person you listen to, when they speak.

He turns his gaze to a nearby merchant, lining up rows of finely made tapestries. The side of them makes him smile faintly, remembering.

"Did you make those yourself?"

"With these hands?" The merchant snorts, holding up worn, thick fingers. "Hardly—I source them from out west."

"Where out west?" The stall owner shrugs, crossing his arms, leveling a stern look in his direction.

"You expect me to give out trade secrets just like that? Pah!" He shakes his head. "You want something, I'll get it for you—but I won't give up my sources."

“That so?” Hua Cheng muses, crossing his arms. “There’s something else I’m looking for. Maybe you could help me.”

The merchant rubs his shin, thinking. He’s a serious looking fellow—with a square jaw, and a scar through the right corner of his mouth. “I reckon I could. What is it?”

“The Shi family,” the teenager sighs, stretching his arms over his head. “I heard they were merchants in the area. Or have they moved on?”

“Moved on?” The stall owner sputters. “They own half of the city, so I very much doubt that.”

“Can you point me in their direction?”

“Even if I could...” He sighs, “Honestly, if you’re not royalty or something, they aren’t gonna bother with you. Is it really that important?”

“Oh, I’m certain,” Hua Cheng smiles faintly, his eyes unreadable. “Just tell me where their manor is, I’ll handle the rest.”

The stall owner seems a little unsure of his intentions now, frowning—and that’s when another voice pipes up eagerly.

“I know where the Shi family lives!”

Hua Cheng turns around, glancing around the crowd at first before looking down—

To find a little girl beaming up at him.

She’s small—barely tall enough for the top of her head to reach Hua Cheng’s ribs, but he suspects she might be a bit older than she looks, and...she’s a striking child.

Delicate chestnut waves frame her face, pouring down her back—and emerald eyes shine up at him brightly.

The stall owner looks even more wary now, opening his mouth to speak—but Hua Cheng beats him to it, kneeling down before the child with a smile. “Is that so?”

She bobs her head, rocking on the balls of her feet. Her dress is finely made—leaves embroidered into her sleeves.

“I can take you there, if...” She clasps her hands behind her back, her eyes twinkling with an almost infectious level of excitement, “You get me some candies?”

“...” The ghost king tilts his head, watching her for a moment—his smile remaining. “What kind would you like?”

“Mmm...” She thinks it over, pointing towards a nearby stall, selling spun sugar pulled into different shapes. “That one!”

“Alright,” he agrees, standing back up.

In a matter of moments, she’s skipping down the street with a rabbit shaped snack, Hua Cheng walking by her side.

“So, whatcha looking for the Shi family for?” She hums, taking a big bite—a little messy. Hua Cheng doesn’t see well-to-do girls eat that way often, but he doesn’t comment.

“I’m investigating a matter that might relate to them,” he shrugs. “What’s your name?”

She opens her mouth immediately, “Sh—!”

Then, she stops.

“Sshhhhheeesh, this is good!” She hums, quickly stuffing her mouth full with spun sugar, her tongue sticking to the roof of her palette S she chews.

“It’s—um—mmmphrepmh!”

“I didn’t catch that,” Hua Cheng replies dryly.

She swallows thickly, coughing a little, “It’s...Mingxia,” she rasps. “What’s yours?”

Hua Cheng can guess her family name by now, so he doesn’t press for it. “Bolin.” He replies calmly. “Are we close?”

“...Yes,” the young girl nods. “Just a little further!”

Now—Hua Cheng has gained many skills over the years, one of them slightly more refined than the others.

He follows her lead, bells chiming at his waist with each step. Eventually, he speaks up.

"Mingxia?"

She glances back up at him with a friendly smile, "Yeah, Mr. Bolin?"

He leans down, arms clasped behind his back, watching her closely—"Were you telling me the truth before, about your name?"

"…" Her smile fades, eyes suddenly unsure.

Hua Cheng can see a liar a mile away—especially a bad one.

"Um…I wasn't trying to be rude or anything!"

She assures him. "I'm just not allowed to tell anyone! I could get in a LOT of trouble."

That certainly does catch his notice. "Trouble?"

They stop in the street, and she bites her lip, looking down at what remains of her candy. "I…um…"

"Hey!" A voice barks from around the corner, sharp and accusing, "What's going on here?"

Hua Cheng looks away from the little girl, just in time to see a teenage boy making his way toward them, his expression dark, but…

Mingxia's face lights up happily. "Gege! I'm back!"

Her older brother is just as striking as she is—with darker hair, loose down his back, half of it pulled up with an element silver hairpiece, and piercing blue eyes.

Eyes that are fixed on his younger sister with a stormy expression. "What have I told you about wandering off?!"

He snatches the little girl up into his arms, hitching her on his hip as he sends the stranger accompanying her a suspicious glare. "Who is this?"

"…Mr. Bolin!" Mingxia exclaims. "He said he was looking for us!"

Her brother's eyes narrow—and Hua Cheng smiles.

"Ah, so Shi is your family name. I suspected."

The elder glares, annoyed, and Mingxia winces, "I didn't say that we were—!”

“Who are you, and what do you want?”

“Hua Bolin,” the ghost king replies, crossing his arms. “Are you forbidden from giving your real name as well?”

He sends Mingxia a look, and the little girl winces. “I gave him the name, and he didn’t believe me...”

‘The name.’ So, it’s an agreement worked out between the two of them?

The young man heaves out a sigh. “You’re addressing Shi Wudu, eldest son and heir to the Shi family.”

He looks Hua Cheng over once more, his gaze tense with suspicion. “Why were you looking for us?”

The Ghost King glances around the marketplace, reaching up to toy with the pearl braided into his hair. “I’m a cultivator.”

As far from the truth as it gets, but believable.

“I’ve been investigating a possible curse, and it led me to your family tree.” He explains with a shrug. “Do you keep genealogical records?”

At the mention of the word *‘curse* ,’ Shi Wudu’s expression instantly changes—moving from suspicious, to shocked, to...

Hopeful.

“...We do,” he agrees, his tone suddenly far more polite than it was before. “How did it lead you to us?”

Hua Cheng glances around the bustling marketplace, “You wouldn’t want me to explain it here.”

He says it with such certainty that...the teenager sighs, turning around.

“Alright, come with me.” He mutters—never setting his younger sibling down. He clutches the child close in his arms, constantly glancing about—and he only seems to relax once they’re inside the gates of the family manor.

Hua Cheng finds it all slightly...strange. It isn’t odd for siblings to be close, but…

He suspects Mingxia must be somewhere close to ten years old, and Shi Wudu is carrying her around like she might as well be a toddler—even when they step inside, he doesn't set her down.

"Young master, you've returned! And who—?"

Shi Wudu is quick to wave the servants off, feet clicking softly against marble floors as he strides down the corridor, a handsome young stranger at his side. "I'll be hosting a guest in the library. I'll send for you if we require anything."

He has a rather…uptight demeanor.

Unusual for a young man of that age—Hua Cheng doubts he could be older than sixteen or seventeen—and the first trait about Shi Wudu that really sticks out to him is…

Pride.

A stiffness that seems to exude from wounded pride, and a need to repair it.

(A fatal flaw.)

When the library doors shut behind them, he finally sets his little sister down, placing her on one of the couches before he goes off to find the genealogy scroll that Hua Cheng requested, and in the meantime…

Hua Cheng kneels in front of the little girl, watching her closely.

"Is it alright if we talk now?" He questions, resting his forearms against his knees.

"…" She squirms, glancing in her brother's direction—clearly wary of disobeying him, though she doesn't seem sure if this *counts* as disobedience. "I think so…"

"Your name," Hua Cheng's tone is calm, which seems to make her relax just a little bit. "Why would you get in trouble for saying it?"

She glances from Hua Cheng, then to her brother, and back to him again.

"…I'm hiding," she whispers, her eyes wide.

He raises an eyebrow.

She doesn't seem to be hiding at all. She hasn't hidden who her family is—and was playing in plain sight in the market square.

(Even if her elder brother did disapprove.)

"...Hiding from what?" He questions.

"The bad thing."

She doesn't seem to have the words to explain *what* . Hua Cheng doesn't hold that against her—and, in any case, it seems clear when he considers Shi Wudu's reaction to the word *'curse* ,' well...

It's something supernatural.

A scroll lands on the desk behind them with a heavy slam

Hua Cheng rises to his feet, offering Shi Wudu—who is now standing behind them, watching the two with a wary eye, his arms crossed—a thin smile. "How far back does it trace?"

"...Four Centuries," the teenager frowns. "I thought that might be excessive, but—"

"It'll do."

Hua Cheng doesn't say much more as he rolls the scroll out across the desk's surface, tracing the lineage

back from one generation to the next, keeping track of the years in his head.

Shi Wudu shifts his stance slightly, so he's standing between the stranger and his sister.

"...I've never seen a cultivator like you before," he comments slowly, looking over 'Mr. Bolin's' form.

He dresses well, in fine clothes—silver jewelry. Not like a man that has dedicated himself to a spiritual path.

"There are unorthodox cultivators around," Hua Cheng murmurs, not looking up from the scroll.

"...Which temple do you cultivate under, anyway?" The teenager presses, eyes slightly narrowed. And now, the Ghost King understands that SHi Wudu's paranoia is not unfounded.

"Ming Guang," the dark haired stranger replies, his gaze intently focused on the scroll, and Shi Wudu snorts with surprise.

"What? I've never seen you around here before."

Hua Cheng might be able to sniff out a bad liar—but telling lies is just as natural to him.

Pei Ming is one of the few gods in the heavenly court that doesn't mandate a certain type of cultivation in order to send merits through his temples—and, as a result, his following is...diverse, with many eclectic figures.

"His territory is broad," Hua Cheng shrugs. "I came from further south."

Finally, he reaches the appropriate year, and...

There it is.

Shi Jinhai. He heard that name enough times over the years—from both Fai and Xiang—to recognize it.

Old Man Shi.

Ten generations back—but still, it's the same bloodline.

"..." Hua Cheng leans back, crossing his arms. "I'm assuming from the odd behavior, something has been targeting your little sister?"

Shi Wudu remains silent, his lips pressed tightly together. Tension and exhaustion radiate from the young man in equal measure.

Hua Cheng's eyes remain heavy on him—and he doesn't drop the subject. "It would have begun in the last nine years or so."

After another moment without an answer, he shrugs—rolling the scroll back up. "I already got what I came here for, it makes no difference to me."

"...Yes."

He's slow to admit it, but he does. "The family has...experienced a decline in the last ten years, but when I became an older brother..."

his eyes slide over to his sibling. “Things became more complicated.”

The younger Shi sibling shrinks slightly—almost like she feels guilty.

Hua Cheng doesn’t press, and still—even though he seems to understand that the newcomer isn’t here to do harm—

Shi Wudu is hesitant.

“This...thing, that’s been hunting her—it’s always lurking nearby,” he explains carefully, his brow pinched.

“We’ve managed to trick it for years, but if I say too much—”

“It’s not here right now,” Hua Cheng assures him—and that almost seems to exasperate the young man, his eyes flashing with annoyance.

“I haven’t even said what it is!” He snaps. “And how would you know if it’s here?”

“There isn’t a malicious presence here.” He sounds utterly assured in that, enough so that the young man is inclined to believe him. “I would sense it if there was.”

Whatever it is—it’s staying away.

Likely...by Hua Cheng’s sheer presence alone, it doesn’t dare come too close.

Shi Wudu frowns deeply, finding that doubtful. “It’s a crafty spirit. That’s part of the problem. It could slip right under your—”

“It isn’t here,” Hua Cheng repeats—his tone ringing once again with certainty, and... Finally, the teenager relents, hanging his head with a sigh.

“...Introduce yourself,” he mutters, wiping a hand down his face. Hua Cheng is almost baffled by that, since he already has, but—

The little girl slips out of her chair eagerly, as though her brother’s permission lifted invisible chains from her feet.

She rushes over, grasping Hua Cheng’s hand, shaking it as she grins up at him cheerfully, dimples in her cheeks.

“Hello, Mr. Bolin!” She tips her head to the side, vibrating with excitement—as though this is something the child rarely ever gets to do:

“My name is Shi Qingxuan!”

And that—

Oh.

Hua Cheng’s eyebrows shoot up as he sends Shi Wudu a curious look. That certainly isn’t a name he would have thought of as a—

“...” The elder sibling takes a deep breath, “When my little brother was born, my parents wanted his fortune told.”

Little...brother.

Hua Cheng glances back at Shi Qingxuan, looking over the dress he’s wearing—the way his hair has been styled. Even his air is distinctively feminine—in a way that most boys that age couldn’t fake so easily.

‘I’m hiding.’

Hiding is one way to phrase it.

“There was an experienced fortune teller staying in a local temple, and he...” Shi Wudu’s eyes linger over his little brother, filled with so much worry, for someone so young. “He warned my parents not to celebrate Shi Qingxuan’s birth. Not to draw any attention to him, but...”

“They didn’t listen?” Hua Cheng guesses, his voice slightly dry.

After all—it would be difficult for a family of wealthy merchants to resist showing off the blessing of a second son, securing the bloodline for a generation.

“...” Shi Wudu shakes his head. “And when they did...” He grimaces, like just recalling that day still haunts him, all these years later. “... There was a voice, promising...that his life would have a horrible beginning, and a...”

His gaze flickers over to the little boy, who is still watching both of the older men intently.

“...” Shi Wudu points toward his head, and Shi Qingxuan huffs—but immediately covers his ears, mumbling something about never being allowed to listen—and when he does, the elder brother turns back to

Hua Cheng.

"...A horrible end," he finishes, slightly pale.

"He got so sick after that—none of us actually knew if he was going to make it. My parents returned to the fortune teller—and he told them the only way to protect Shi Qingxuan was to hide him from the creature that had latched onto him. So...he was raised as a daughter, instead."

Shi Wudu crosses his arms, leaning against the desk beside Hua Cheng, watching his little brother—

(Whose hands are still clasped over his ears.)

"...Our parents passed when he was four," he continues. "It's just been the two of us since then."

And a constant battle with their cousins over the family inheritance. Shi Wudu has run their businesses to some amount of success, when you consider his age, but...it's been a constant battle.

Between that, and protecting his brother—the teenager seems almost prematurely aged.

"We've hired countless cultivators to look into the matter over the years, but...they've always told us that this kind of spirit is particularly difficult to deal with," Shi Wudu mutters, his brow furrowed. "That it won't let go, not until he's..."

Dead. It won't stop until then.

"A jinx monster," Hua Cheng sighs, shaking his head. "You're referring to a jinx monster."

Shi Wudu nods—holding his arms around himself so tightly, it makes him hunch over slightly."You think that has something to do with our family tree? What really brought you here, anyway?"

The ghost doesn't immediately answer, glancing over the Shi siblings, his expression unreadable.

Finally, he answers:

"An ancestor of yours committed a heinous act, bringing bad karma to your bloodline. It would seem..." His eyes settle on Shi Qingxuan. "It's landed on him."

Shi Wudu looks to his brother too now, his eyes filled with veiled terror. Hua Cheng almost feels sympathy for the teenager, really.

He knows what it's like, to desperately want to protect someone that the universe seems determined to curse.

"A heinous act?"

It's difficult, speaking about the matter as thought it means nothing to him, but...Hua Cheng shows no sign of strain, his arms still calmly crossed over his chest.

"Shi Jinhai," he nods back in the direction of the scroll, "caught two gamblers using loaded dice in his hall."

Shi Wudu doesn't try to deny that their family used to own such establishments—he knows that they did.

"As their punishment," Hua Cheng continues, his tone slightly tense, eyes never leaving Shi Qingxuan's face, "he had their throats cut, bodies burned, and ashes scattered."

The young merchant pales, reaching down to grip the table in order to steady himself. He doesn't bother pointing out the fact that it was an overreaction—that much was obvious, but—

"...He did something that foolish?!" Shi Wudu hisses, eyes slightly infuriated. "How could he risk bringing that down on his descendants?!"

He doesn't seem to mourn the tragedy of what happened to Xiang and Fai, only it's resulting impact on his brother's fate—which Hua Cheng supposes is fair. It's all somewhat removed from him.

"You'd be surprised," the ghost mutters, his expression briefly turning dark, "the things men will do, when they think wealth and power can protect them from the consequences."

Shi Wudu barely listens—and that is a mistake.

Hua Cheng's words, in his case, will be prophetic.

"...But...Shi Jinhai lived nearly four centuries ago..."

Yes. A blood debt that is older than even Hua Cheng—who can no longer be called young by any standard.

“…Why is it only catching up to our family now?!”

Well.

The dark haired man blows out a heavy breath.

“The men in question—their spirits were rescued from purgatory by the Ghost King, Hua Cheng.” The man himself explains, “Their spirits began to degrade nine years ago—and passed on to hell very recently.”

The blood debt didn’t go into effect until then.

“…So, because of that…” Shi Wudu’s nails dig into the table, his shoulders shaking slightly with emotion, “Now, my little brother has to suffer for something that happened four centuries ago?!”

Far more severe now, then the initial bad karma would have been.

The negative energy had a long time to fester, after all. It’s quite potent, now.

“This is all the Ghost King’s fault, then?!”

“No.”

Most people struggle deeply with feelings of guilt and shame—even over the smallest things. Hua Cheng, however, can usually see things clearly.

“The only one to blame for this is your ancestor.”

After all—Hua Cheng had only shown the two mercy, and would have kept them in the mortal realm indefinitely, if possible. He may have delayed the curse’s effect—but he didn’t cause it.

And yet, he can see how unfair it is.

Particularly when he looks upon the little boy standing before him now. Bright eyed, shining with a kind of warmth that few souls ever truly possess.

Clearly, he isn’t a cruel person. Doesn’t deserve such a vicious fate. And yet, sometimes, life isn’t about what you deserve.

“So…” Shi Wudu swallows dryly, trying to wrap his mind around their situation—and struggling to do so. “What do we do?”

After a moment, Hua Cheng turns his gaze away from the child—focusing on the elder sibling once more. “Better if he doesn’t hear the rest.”

Ears covered or not—risking him overhearing seems unnecessary.

After a moment—Shi Wudu nods, looking towards his little brother. “Go play outside in the courtyard, alright? We’ll be out in a moment.”

The little boy lowers his hands to hear him, then pouts. “But...”

“Now.”

“...” Shi Qingxuan makes a face, his lower lip jutting out with disappointment, but he nods. “Okay...”

It’s fine. He’s used to playing by himself, after all.

He turns to make his way out the door—and he catches the stranger, Mr. Bolin, giving him a small wink just as he does.

He doesn’t know what to make of it at first, but...

When he steps out into the courtyard, he sees a small, silvery butterfly floating ahead of him.

Shi Qingxuan reaches out, curious, but the little light darts out of reach before he can touch it—and he smiles.

“...Pretty!” He whispers, chasing after it, giggling as he runs and jumps around the stone pathway.

For once, in the brief space of that moment, the carefree child that he deserves to be.

Back inside the library, Shi Wudu hears words that make his blood run cold. “Nothing.”

He stares at the cultivator for a moment—taking in Hua Cheng’s cold, matter of fact expression, trying to piece together what he means. “...Excuse me?”

“You asked me what you should do now,” The ghost continues, straightening away from the desk. “And the answer is nothing.”

“That’s impossible,” the merchant mumbles, his heart squeezing with dread. “How could you expect me to let him suffer?”

"The fortune teller your parents spoke to already gave you the best advice there is," Hua Cheng shrugs. "Allow Mingxia to become a permanent identity for him." He glances in the direction of the door towards the courtyard. "He could live a relatively normal life, if he remains hidden."

"As a WOMAN?" Shi Wudu exclaims, shaking his head, "How?! How is that fair to him? He—he could be so much more than that—!"

"...Than a woman?" Hua Cheng arches an eyebrow, and Shi Wudu flushes with annoyance.

"You know damn well what I mean! He doesn't deserve to be forced to spend a lifetime pretending to be someone he isn't!"

"...He didn't exactly seem to mind, other than the name." The ghost king points out.

"But even so—how could we keep it up indefinitely?! It's easy now, he's a child, but who knows how his body will change?!" Shi Wudu groans, rubbing his temples. "What if he grows into someone that we can't pass off as a woman?! What do we do then?!"

It's obviously impossible to predict such things—but Shi Qingxuan is a small, delicately featured child. Hua Cheng finds it hard to believe he would change so drastically moving into adulthood, but he shrugs.

"Allow the jinx monster to think he's a homely woman?"

The merchant stares, his expression infuriated. "...Is this *funny* to you?!"

"No," Hua Cheng shakes his head. "But you're trying to argue your way into a better solution by saying how unpleasant your current situation is—and there isn't one."

"There has to be!"

"Look," he turns around, struggling to explain it in the way that a normal cultivator would, rather than an omnipotent being—

(He's honestly lucky that Shi Wudu has been too distressed to wonder how 'Mr. Bolin' came to know the story of the two ghosts.)

"Jinx Monsters are difficult for humans to deal with in the first place. The best bet is to trick them, or kill them. This one seems stronger than the others, if it was able to sicken your brother at the outset, which makes killing it as a mortal nearly impossible." Hua Cheng shrugs, "Even if you managed to capture the assistance of a god, or become one yourself—a significant part of your brother's life will have already gone by."

"Couldn't we just..." Shi Wudu starts, the wheels in his mind working frantically.

He's not stupid, Hua Cheng can see that much—and that's precisely part of the problem.

Intelligent people always think, no matter how intractable a problem might be, they can think their way out of it.

Hua Cheng is guilty of doing the same thing at times—he would know.

And if the person being targeted was his god—Hua Cheng can't say that he wouldn't be equally desperate to protect him.

"Couldn't we just make the monster target someone else?" Shi Wudu mutters. "Wouldn't it forget about my brother, after that?"

Hua Cheng stiffens.

"...That would be extremely difficult," he mutters, his eyes slightly narrowed. "And it would only be a short term solution."

"How?! You said that they don't stop until the target is dead—if we make him think he's found my brother, then he won't—!"

"Because this is a curse."

A response to an act of evil. Avoiding it by committing another evil act—it would only cause the resentment to rebound and multiply into something worse.

"You can face it head on, or hide—but you can't pass it on to someone else without consequence."

Hua Cheng glances back out the window, watching Shi Qingxuan playing among the flowers outside, chasing one of his butterflies.

"The best thing you can do for your brother is teach him to be more independent. Jinx Monsters thrive on weakness and fear."

When he glances back at the teenager, Shi Wudu has his arms crossed—and he's shooting Hua Cheng a frustrated glare.

"All you're doing by coddling him is making him better prey."

"I don't coddle him!" The younger man snaps. "You met him—he's silly! An airhead!"

He throws his arms up, "The best I can do is stop him from getting kidnapped, eating something poisonous, or revealing his name to that damn thing!"

"He won't learn until you allow him to."

In spite of everything, Hua Cheng doesn't possess universal contempt for the wealthy. He knows that being born to privilege doesn't make one incapable of learning.

Xie Lian was born among the highest, most blessed of the earth—and still, he was able to show decency and kindness. And through training in cultivation, he became strong, built endurance.

Shi Qingxuan is a sheltered child now, yes—but only because his older brother is keeping him that way. He could learn, if given the chance. Anyone can.

"Those are the only solutions I can offer you," Hua Cheng mutters, shaking his head. "It's up to you, if you decide to listen."

He makes his way to leave, and Shi Wudu stands alone in the center of the library, hanging his head, hands balled into fists.

"Why would you come here asking about the curse, if you weren't going to help us?!" Hua Cheng stops, his hand on the door, and he lifts his chin.

In all honesty—he didn't have much of a reason. He knew that the crime was so far removed from the consequences—it wouldn't make him feel any better to bring vengeance down on Shi's ancestor's four centuries later.

Hua Cheng simply came because he was listless. Lost. And...

His teacher told him once, that when he felt lost—like he couldn't find a solution to a problem, no matter how many different ways he looked at it—the best solution would be to distract himself before reproaching it from a different angle.

Hua Cheng came because he was sad.

Because he missed his friends, and wanted to see what their suffering had come to.

In the end, he doesn't know if this made him feel better—but it did bring some small amount of closure.

"When I heard the story, I became curious," he replies with a shrug. "That's all."

He leaves Shi Wudu there, alone.

And resentment isn't the only thing that's left to fester.

The young man stares down at his palms, fingertips trembling slightly, his heart pounding with the terrifying prospect of not being able to save the only family that remains to him.

Slowly, his hands curl into fists, his spine stiffening with resolve.

He won't.

Shi Wudu won't lose his little brother—no matter what he has to give up in sacrifice. Even—

Even if it means he has to stave off this curse for the rest of his life. He won't lose Shi Qingxuan.

When the little boy looks up, he sees the cultivator leaving, his arms folded behind his back. "...Mr. Bolin!" He calls out, waving. "It was nice meeting you!"

"..." The cultivator stops, turning to look the boy's way, and...

The smile he offers is half-hearted.

"You too."

When Hua Cheng leaves the Shi manor, he thinks a story has ended. That he's closing the door on a painful chapter, and allowing it to pass on.

He's rarely ever been so wrong.

Shi Qingxuan’s brother comes to him that afternoon—and tells him that they’re leaving the city.

That Shi Wudu found a master on a mountain a few towns over—and that he’s going to learn to become a cultivator.

He’ll take care of everything. Get stronger, do whatever it takes to keep his little brother safe—Shi Qingxuan only has one task:

To never reveal his name.

A task that the child would always be doomed to fail.

Hua Cheng leaves this place, and he tells himself that he has washed his hands of the. matter, returning to the streets of Ghost City.

On the other side of the port, the markets still bustle, cries filling the air.

“...” The vendor squirms awkwardly, counting the coins in his hand, before looking down at the rows of tapestry laid out on the ground in front of him. “...You...sure are getting stiff with the prices, huh?”

The weaver tips his head to the side, not turning away from his loom. “Thread has gotten more expensive.” He shrugs. “Is that a problem?” “No, it just—”

“It makes it more difficult to resell them at a profit?”

The vendor jumps, his face flushing—but Xie Lian smiles, shaking his head as he turns back around. “It’s fine—I don’t really mind.”

As long as he has a meal at the end of the day, what more could he ask for? He’s done better than usual this year. No near fatal injuries or accidents—one horrible bout of sickness when a plague came through, but that was all.

Oh—and the incident with the beauty pageant.

Xie Lian doesn’t necessarily know if that counts as good luck, or bad—either way, he doesn’t like to look back on it often.

“Do you still want them?”

“...I suppose, yes.” The merchant mutters, setting down the small stack of coins, lifting the tapestries up into his arms.

“Could you try to make them look a little more exotic next time?”

Xie Lian tilts his head, confused. “...I could. Why?”

The merchant at least has the nerve to look a little sheepish. “...I’m trying to pass them off as being from further out west.”

The weaver snorts. “I see.”

Across the square, a group of children play, kicking a small, grain-filled sack back and forth, racing until one of them can make it to the goal set up on the other end of the alleyway.

“Ha!” One of them crows victoriously, slamming it in. “Another round on us!”

“No fair!” A child on the other team, a boy with short hair, cropped close to his head and ruddy cheeks complains. “We’re one man down!”

“Not my fault!” His opponent grins. “One more point, and we get the front seats during the fire parade tonight!”

That was the bet, you see.

There are a limited number of seats for spectators who can’t afford seats in the stands, or to look down from the high windows of their manors. Those who want to get in close on the street level often compete for it.

“...” The ruddy cheek boy turns around with a glare. “He Xuan!”

From the front of the alleyway, his head bowed low, the other boy doesn’t look up.

“I’m busy.”

“...” His friend glares, stomping over. “Busy doing what?!”

The dark haired boy is hunched over a pile of rope, knotting them together with some odd piece of metal—

It’s weird.

But He Xuan has always been that way. He’s nice enough—but always fidgeting with things that other people don't ever seem to understand.

"Building something. Do you really need me to play your game anyway?" He sighs. "Why don't you ask Xu Fan?"

"Because he SUCKS!"

Another one of their teammates jogs over with a frown. "What's he doing?"

"..." The ruddy-faced boy rolls his eyes, crossing his arms. "He Xuan here thinks he's gonna be a ship builder, one day."

The dark haired boy glances up at him sharply. "That's not what I'm doing."

"No, but you think you're smarter than everyone!" The other child snaps. "You won't even help out—and you're the best player we have!"

After all—the boy has always been good at everything he tries—athletics being among them.

"If I *was* a ship builder, they wouldn't sink as much." He Xuan mutters, looking back down at his little project. "And I don't wanna play."

The ruddy cheeks boy looks over at their playmate, annoyed. "See what I mean about thinking he's too good for everyone else?"

"..." The other child glares, kicking the piece of metal that He Xuan has been working with out of his hand—making it skitter across the cobblestones of the street with a clatter.

"Hey!" The dark haired boy cries out, leaping to his feet, "What are you doing?!"

"Whatever you're making is stupid!" The neighborhood kid snaps. "Stop being such a jerk and play!"

"...Piss off!" He Xuan glares, turning around—and it's only then that the other two seem to remember just how big he is for his age, even if he is slender—and they cower a little.

But instead of going at them—which honestly, he's been provoked at that point—he just turns around with an angry huff, chasing the metal piece across the city street, ropes still piled in his arms, looking all over for it, slightly frantic, until—

“Is this yours?”

The child stops, turning around to see the metal gear held between a pair of long, slender fingers.

“...” He nods, then, when he notices the bandage over the man’s eyes, he clears his throat. “...Yeah, sorry.”

He reaches out to take it, and Xie Lian smiles. “That’s alright.”

Once it’s back in He Xuan’s hand, the weaver questions— “Did you make that yourself?”

“...No,” the child shakes his head. “I collect scraps from the shipyards sometimes. Make it into other stuff.”

Xie Lian tips his head. “That’s very resourceful. What are you using it for?”

He Xuan shifts his weight back and forth, sizing up the stranger. “...A present. For my little sister,” he admits.

Xie Lian’s smile softens. “Is that so?” The little boy’s ears redden slightly.”Well, she’s very lucky to have such a kind older brother.”

The Taoist can’t see it—but there’s a small smile on the boy’s face now. A slight twitch of his lips—but he seems happy, if not a little embarrassed.

“...Thanks,” he mumbles. His eyes drift to the side, and he comments, “...one of the turnbuckles on your loom is messed up.”

Xie Lian lets out a sigh, looking back at the machine tiredly. “That makes sense, I suppose. It’s pretty old now.”

“...” He Xuan fiddles with the gear in his hands before dropping it into his pocket. “I can fix it,” he offers.

When the Taoist raises an eyebrow, surprised, he explains— “I’m good at fixing stuff, so if you let me try...”

Slowly, Xie Lian smiles. What a sweet little boy.

He moves out of the way, sweeping his hand toward the loom, “By all means, feel free.”

He Xuan steps forward, quickly setting himself to the task—fiddling with different parts here and there, taking two of the turnbuckles down, using a small pair of pliers from his pocket to move them back into the right shape.

And when he's finished—true to his word—the loom moves smoother than it has in years.

Xie Lian glances back at him with a smile, fiddling with the silver chain around his neck. "Thank you—you've been a big help."

He Xuan shrugs, fiddling with his sleeve. "It's no big deal."

Xie Lian glances over the loom, humming for a moment. It might not be a big deal to him—but for the god, it saves him hours of work, and his hands quite a bit of strain.

"Still—I appreciate it. Here." He reaches for one of the coins the vendor just left him with, pressing it into He Xuan's palm. "Take this."

It's just a copper piece—barely enough to buy a meal, but it's more than any money He Xuan has ever had of his own, and his eyes are wide when he looks up at the Taoist.

"...You don't have to," he mumbles, trying to give it back—after all, the man is blind, his robes are well kept, but...he clearly doesn't have a lot of money to spare, but—

Xie Lian shakes his head. "Nope—that's yours now, you keep it, and...this."

He reaches into his bag, pulling out a meat bun for the child. Fresh, he just bought it this morning, meant to be his dinner, but...

Well, he's a growing boy—he probably needs it more anyway.

"You take this, and you finish that gift for your sister, alright?" He hands it over.

He Xuan takes it, turning it over in his hands. He'd try to be polite and give it back, but, well...

He's always had a huge appetite.

His smile isn't small now—it's big, from ear to ear, and he bobs his head. "Okay!"

He crams the meat bun into his mouth in one bite, running off

The path home is familiar, dodging through the same alleyways and paths he always takes—until he slips into the small flat, pressing a kiss to his mother's cheek.

Mrs. He smiles fondly, ruffling his hair. "No trouble today?"

Her son shakes his head innocently. "No, Ma!"

Her eyes sparkle down at him—a deep, almost electric shade of blue, like the sea after lightning strikes.

Just like his.

"Good boy," she murmurs, "your father isn't back yet. Are you and your sister eating before you leave?"

He shakes his head, bouncing with excitement.

"We're gonna go early," he mumbles, fishing for the bronze piece in his pocket, "I got this, so we're gonna eat there."

His mother eyes the coin curiously. "How did you get this?"

"The weaver on Gushan street? I helped him fix his loom," He Xuan explains.

"I told him he didn't have to pay me, but he insisted."

That makes his mother smile softly, watching him with such fondness.

Their family doesn't have much—but her son has always been their greatest blessing. Handsome, kind, so talented in everything he tries.

"That's my clever He Sheng," she murmurs, setting down her book. "How about you sit down for a second? Your hair's a mess."

"It's fine..."

"It's falling all over the place," she snorts, patting the space on the bench beside her. "Come here."

Reluctantly, he complies.

Once he's seated beside her, she undoes the leather cord holding his hair up, combing it for a few minutes, humming while she works, before tying it back up in a high, neat ponytail.

He Sheng leans against her as she does so, eyes half lidded and content. “Isn’t that better?”

The young man looks up at her—and he smiles.

“Yeah,” he agrees, pressing closer against her, “it’s better.”

Mrs. He smiles back at him, giving him a one armed hug, kissing the top of his head. Such a good son.

Finally, there’s the sound of feet coming down the steps.

“Gege?”

A small girl appears in the doorway—with matching dark hair, plaited into two neat braids down her back, and clear gray eyes, shining with excitement. “Can we go now?”

He Sheng looks up at his mother for permission—and she smiles, nodding. “Don’t let her out of your sight!”

“I won’t,” He Sheng agrees, leaping to his feet, hurrying towards the door. “Hold her hand the entire time!”

“I will!” He snatches her smaller fingers up in his own before they’re even out of sight, and her mother watches them go with a smile.

It’s their last fire festival, after all—her husband found work in a smaller village further up the coast. It’ll be less expensive than the city—and their family desperately needs the money.

But both of her children adore the festival—and she wants them to enjoy it one last time

“Gege,” He Zhong chirps, holding his hand tightly as He Sheng leads her through the ground, “What’s the rope for?”

Her brother glances down at her with a smile, pulling her closer whenever the crowds get too thick. “A surprise for you.”

“Really?” Her eyes widen. “What is it?” “I’ll show you when we get there, alright?”

They stop by a food stand on the way, picking out a pouch of snacks to split between the two of them—and there’s enough left over for He

Sheng to get her one of the paper butterfly kites all the other children have.

“...What?” He watches the little kite floating over their heads with a smile as they walk towards the city center. “You’re praying to Hua Chengzhu? I thought he only helped out unfortunate kids,” he reaches down, poking her cheek. “And you’re pretty lucky.”

He Zhong sticks her tongue out at him. “I’m gonna ask him to bring us gold, dummy! So you can go to one of those fancy schools!”

Her brother’s smile suddenly becomes a little strained, but he squeezes her hand. “... That’s not Hua Chengzhu’s thing, A-Zhong.”

“Isn’t he rich?”

“Yeah, but he kills the people who are mean to you, he doesn’t bring you money...”

“We’ll see,” He Zhong hums, skipping by his side. “Maybe he’ll try something new!”

He Sheng rolls his eyes, but—they’re in the right spot now.

“Ready for your surprise?”

She practically vibrates with excitement, braids bouncing about her shoulders as He Zhong jumps up and down. “Show me, show me!”

“Alright,” He Sheng un-loops the ropes from around his shoulder. “But you have to be a little brave for me, alright? And do exactly as I tell you.”

His little sister nods eagerly. “I can! I’m super brave, I can do it!”

“...” He Sheng smiles, handing her the bag of snacks. “Alright, give me a second.”

He does the dangerous part by himself—scaling a gutter on the side of the building, attaching one end of his contraption to the ceramic tiles on the rooftop, testing it with his own body weight to make sure it’s secure—then he lowers himself back down as He Zhong watches, curious

“What’s that, gege? What are you doing? It looks kinda dangerous, are you sure it’s —?”

“It’s called a pulley,” He Sheng explains once he’s back on the ground, taking the bag of snacks from her. “That way I can pull you up, but you don’t have to climb.”

“Ooooh…”

He Zhong murmurs, her eyes wide. “That’s why you need me to be brave?”

Her brother nods, showing her how to sit down on a makeshift seat between the ropes—and to hold onto both handles tightly so she won’t fall.

“I definitely won’t drop you,” he assures her, and she grins.

“I know!” She swings her feet lightly as her brother starts to raise her up, a little nervous when the ground shrinks away, but otherwise fine, “I trust you, gege—you’re amazing!”

He Sheng rolls his eyes, and when she reaches the top, he calls up, “Swing your legs over!”

She does, crawling up the rest of the way onto the roof safely—and once he attaches a counterweight, He Sheng is able to raise himself up as well, climbing up to sit beside her.

“How did you learn how to make that?” She breathes, glancing around with wonder.

You can see the entire city from here—and the sea beyond, the sun setting slowly over the horizon, making it look like a pool of liquid gold.

He Xuan shrugs, handing her the bag of snacks once more. “I read about it somewhere.”

The engineering is pretty basic, after all.

The hard part was finding a metal piece that he could work into something like a gear —but once he found it, the rest was simple.

“Oh!” He Zhong gasps, watching as the fires start to light up in the streets below. “Gege! We have the best seats ever!”

He Sheng grins, brighter than he has all day. “Right? You like it?”

From here, they can see the entire parade—and the fireworks as they shoot out across the water. It's...

He Zhong smiles up at him, holding his hand tightly. "I love it! It's the best fire parade EVER!"

"It's just..." Her smile fades slightly. "I wish we didn't have to move," she mumbles, her expression dimming.

"..." He Sheng leans a little closer, bumping their shoulders together. "I know." "I'll miss my friends..."

"Yeah," he agrees—then smiles down at her.

"But I'll be there—and I'm your best friend. Right, A-Zhong?"

"..." The little girl smiles up at him, holding his hand tightly, and in the other, the string to her butterfly kite. "Yeah! And we'll always be together, right?"

He Sheng nods emphatically, ruffling her hair.

"Always."

Across the city—another set of eyes watches the fireworks behind expensive panes of glass.

Shi Qingxuan asked his brother to watch with him, but he's been busy packing all afternoon.

"Do we have to go?" He mumbles, watching the fireworks sadly.

Shi Wudu doesn't look up, cramming most of their belongings into a few different chests. They'll be gone before the night is out—and with that, leaving the only home they've ever known.

"This is the best way for me to keep you safe—and us together."

He turns from his work—not to watch the festival, but to place a hand on Shi Qingxuan's chin, making the boy look at him. "And that's what brothers do. We *always* stick together, understand?"

Shi Qingxuan stares up at him, his eyes wide. "...I understand," he agrees with a nod.

Family ties are strong—stronger than most things in this world. It brings out the very best in some—and the worst in others.

It can pull you up from the abyss—or, it can become your undoing.

For the elder brothers of the families of Shi and He, it would be the latter.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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Baby Shi Qingxuan (posing as lil Mingxia)!

[image]

CREDIT: Envy, support the artwork HERE

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you so much Envy for your beautiful artwork, and allowing me to include it! I'm so grateful!
>
> xoxo, Evie

Selling Souls and Twisting Fates

Chapter Summary

Each day, he brings more gold, jewels, and grain. And each day, he prays more fervently.

For the power to destroy the jinx monster himself. For an answer. A way to trick the monster again. For meaning, in this suffering that they are enduring. What have they ever done to deserve such misfortune?

Two ghosts, mistreated four centuries ago—why torture them for that?

He would do anything, give anything, sacrifice it all—just to spare his brother from such a fate. That's what he's thinking one evening, his knees aching from how many hours he's been kneeling—

When, for the first time, a voice answers.

"Do you really mean that?"

Chapter Notes

You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

Tw// there is a scene in this chapter that is intended to be reminiscent of grooming / an inappropriate power dynamic. This might be triggering to some readers.

He Sheng finds a home in a new town, on the northern edge of the sea shores. Likes the waters less—so dark and cold compared to the emerald shores where he was born.

Craggy cliffs make up the edge of town, and from there—he can watch the sea when the storms roll in.

Flashes of lightning filling up the entire sky, churning black waters tossing ships back and forth as they approach the shore.

It's often cold and bleak during the winters—but summer always comes, bringing with it a warm wind, stirring the leaves in the trees around him.

His father takes work with a local shipbuilder—hard labor, but the pay is enough to keep food on their table each night.

He Sheng takes to tagging along, pulling extra chores, climbing up to help fasten masts or welding anchors—and he spends the money he makes on books.

Books on anything, everything—and he's tucked behind the cover of a history text one summer afternoon, when an apple drops into his lap.

When he looks up—a face is smiling down at him.

Warm, clear brown eyes, a mouth that dimples slightly at the corners—soft dark curls.

The freckles across the bridge of her nose would be called a blemish to some—but to He Sheng, they look like tiny constellations across her skin, marking subtle paths across her expression.

The ship maker's daughter.

She asks him what he's reading about—and he can barely speak.

He Sheng has never been particularly talkative, but he's also never been shy. Speaking to her, however, feels completely daunting.

He's so determined to show her how clever he is without trying too hard. To find ways to make her smile that seem unintentional on his part.

The young man succeeds in making her smile every time—but she never quite seems to believe that it was unintentional.

They were so young then—each of them only eleven years old. Childhood best friends, slowly falling deeper into a story in the process of unfolding.

A story that is told with lingering fondness during a wedding celebration, sheepish smiles exchanged as they recall tender years.

Chasing one another down dirt paths, sneaking out late in the night to whisper ghost stories back and forth by lantern light, A-Zhong trailing behind

As they grow older, the feeling becomes stronger—winding deeper and deeper into his heart, until he can no longer bear it remaining unspoken.

And yet, he's terrified of saying it aloud, only to never hear those words spoken back to him.

Time passes, and his good fortune grows.

He's grown into a handsome young man—strong and capable, with people already whispering that he might be able to take the National exams very soon.

A loving family, the loveliest girl in the village by his side.

Even the local cultivators whisper that he is destined to ascend.

But destiny is a funny thing. Never bound on iron, the way the legends always seem to tell it.

They are fluid creatures. Small threads being pulled by unseen fingers into a greater tapestry.

And you never know, in the end, the intentions behind the pattern being woven.

All it takes is one small decision, one minor deviation from the set path, to change many futures.

In this case, it was a simple mistake.

A young man cultivating on the mountainside—forgetting the time, working far past dinner.

His little brother, worried—going to look for him

And in the process of doing so, he makes a mistake.

After stopping in the woods to relieve himself, he hears a voice call his name.

Not Shi Mingxia, no.

His real name.

And in a moment of petrified terror: the boy answers to it.

Then, he hears the laughter.

Reeking of evil.

Echoing off the trees in the dark, sneering as the boy cringes with terror—it asks him his birthday.

Shi Qingxuan is petrified, and he is alone.

He's never been in a situation like this before—never even wandered out by himself after dark, his brother never allowed it.

Too frightened to think clearly—he answered.

And from then on, there was no escape.

Every moment he found himself starting to fall at ease, that could s was back.

Whispering insults, cursing him, haunting his every step.

And all Shi Wudu could do was watch, desperate.

Watch as Shi Qingxuan—his sweet tempered, kind little brother, began to crumble and fracture under the fear and paranoia.

Waking up screaming in the night. Sitting in one corner of their bedroom day in and day out, hands over his ears, sobbing.

Begging someone to make it stop.

Each night, the Shi brothers would pray.

The younger would sit on the front steps of their home, arms clutching a red lantern to his chest, staring out into the dark, whimpering out pleas for salvation.

'Hua Chengzhu, help me.'

'I'm so tired, please—please, help me!'

That voice would creep in, whispering in the darkness around him.

"He won't come."

Even as terrified tears slip down the boy's cheeks, the voice never stops.

"No one will ever come for you."

Shi Qingxuan trembles, whispering his prayers faster, rocking back and forth.

“Until the end, it will be you and me.”

The elder brother prays in the largest temple in the area, bowed on his hands and knees, forehead pressed to the floor as incense sticks burn.

Each day, he brings more gold, jewels, and grain. And each day, he prays more fervently.

For the power to destroy the jinx monster himself. For an answer. A way to trick the monster again.

For meaning, in this suffering that they are enduring. What have they ever done to deserve such misfortune?

Two ghosts, mistreated four centuries ago—why torture them for that?

He would do anything, give anything, sacrifice it all—just to spare his brother from such a fate.

That’s what he’s thinking one evening, his knees aching from how many hours he’s been kneeling—

When, for the first time, a voice answers.

“Do you really mean that?”

Shi Wudu’s head snaps up, shocked—

And before him stands a figure that gleams in the candlelight, shadows flickering across his face, wearing robes of white and silver.

Handsome—but almost in an aggressive way. The mortal can barely stand to look upon him.

And he trembles.

“Y—you—!” Shi Wudu chokes, barely catching himself on his hands as he scrambles backwards, his heart pounding.

“Don’t be afraid,” the heavenly emperor smiles, stepping forward. “You were the one who called me.”

It’s Jun Wu’s temple, after all.

“I…I…” The mortal stammers.

He’s a man now—of age, but just barely. And in the presence of Jun Wu, he feels more like a frightened child than anything else.

“I’ve been watching you for some time, you know,” the god muses, watching as the young man’s eyes grow impossibly wide.

“Y…you have?”

The heavenly emperor nods, watching him with kind eyes—brimming with sympathy.

“Your cultivation level has been worthy of ascension for some time now, and yet…you have not come to me.”

The way he says it—it makes Shi Wudu feel almost ashamed, hanging his head, swallowing hard.

“I—I meant no disrespect,” the young man replies, lips trembling. “But I—I couldn’t leave. My little brother…”

“…Yes,” Jun Wu murmurs. “I’ve been listening to your prayers about him for many nights. Did you mean what you said before?”

“What…What I said?” Shi Wudu whispers.

“That you would do anything,” Jim Wu repeats, “Did you mean that?”

The young cultivator is frozen for a moment.

It’s hard to quantify, sometimes, just how much pressure it can be—having Jun Wu looking down on you.

The most powerful being in the universe—showing you attention.

“Yes,” Shi Wudu admits, his lips trembling. “Anything. If It meant…”

If it meant that his brother would be safe.

The martial god looks down upon him, his expression unreadable—and eventually, he offers the young cultivator his hand.

For a moment, Shi Wudu stares, trembling.

Wondering why this is happening to him, if he dares to reach out, but —

When a god comes down from the heavens to offer you his hand, who are you, not to take it?

Slowly he reaches back, and the heavenly emperor pulls him to his feet.

“It’s horrible, watching the ones you love suffer,” he murmurs, shaking his head with sympathy. “There is no greater terror in this world.”

Shi Wudu nods, his chin dipping low, shoulders slumped.

He was a beautiful child, one who grew into a handsome young man.

Dressed in blue silks, silver and sapphire jewelry holding up silky dark hair, dangling from his ears.

He’s halfway between delicate and sharp—like a large cat of pray, one that hasn’t yet learned how to use his claws.

But he can be taught. He was so proud, once.

Proud of his wealth. His beauty. His intelligence and his talents. His family name. And oh, how that pride lifted him up—pushed him so high, he found himself standing on top of a towering pedestal, far above everyone else.

But he was also dragging someone else up with him.

Clutching his little brother’s hand as he dragged them both higher and higher—and now, he finds Shi Qingxuan hanging off of the edge of that pedestal, dangling towards the abyss.

Shi Wudu is left with two choices—to hold on, or to let him go.

There was only one path he could ever choose.

“…I don’t know if I actually…belong there,” he mutters, his eyebrows tense.

For the first time in his young life—that pride is wavering.

Jun Wu watches him with a keen eye.

It’s rare that he ever shows great favor to anyone.

The last time he extended his hand in help, it was slapped away so easily. So ungratefully.

Maybe the mistake had been to choose someone with such a strong sense of right and wrong.

Someone who wasn't desperate.

His hand squeezes Shi Wudu's firmly, reaching for the other.

"Your place," he murmurs, his voice low and reassuring, gathering both in the cultivator's hands in his own, holding them until they stop shaking, "is wherever you wish to be."

The eyes staring up at him are wide, vulnerable—

Moldable.

"..But I can't save him."

Shi Wudu whispers the words, like admitting to some sort of shameful frailty.

He isn't a son anymore. His mother and father are dead. Isn't a friend, he's cast all of those aside in his journey to cultivation.

He has no close companions, not even lovers, he—

He's just a big brother.

Being Shi Qingxuan's older brother is all that Shi Wudu is now, and without that, he...

Years ago, a crimson clad cultivator looked him in the eye, and told him that there was nothing he could do to save Shi Qingxuan.

Absolutely nothing.

Now, the leader of heaven himself looks Shi Wudu in the eye, and he says the words he's been praying to hear for so long now—

"There is something."

The young cultivator goes completely still in Jun Wu's grip, his gaze entranced—like someone caught under a spell.

So desperate to be relieved of this constant state of fear that he's been living in—for most of his life, now—that he'll do anything.

Anything. "...What?"

"You've thought of the answer yourself before, haven't you?" Jun Wu smiles, saying the words almost like praise.

In truth, he has.

Tricking the monster again. Setting its sights on someone else.

"...Someone told me..." he starts, then stops, his gaze fretful. "That it would only make things worse..."

"Not if you do it properly," the Heavenly Emperor assures him. "You're more than capable."

Properly. As though there's...a method to it?

Shi Wudu's eyes narrow slightly with confusion, and Jun Wu let's their joined hands drop turning around to face his own divine statue.

"I had a wife once, you know."

The cultivator goes still, watching the back of Jun Wu's head.

He speaks softly as though he's even surprised himself.

"...I've never told anyone from the Heavenly Court that before," the Emperor admits with a soft laugh, and Shi Wudu is left...

With his jaw hanging open, wondering...if he wouldn't even tell a god such things...

Why tell him?

He's a mortal. A talented, wealthy mortal, but still—

Jun Wu glances back at Shi Wudu over his shoulder with a tired smile, shrugging his shoulders. "I suppose...you're the first person I've spoken to in centuries that might understand."

It's a heady, addictive feeling—to have someone so powerful make you feel so important. And Shi Wudu—

His eyes are entranced now, wide—so young, so desperate for the answers that the god is promising, that he listens.

"And sons," Jun Wu adds, his eyes suddenly far away.

“I was a father.” He tilts his chin back, staring his divine statue in the face.

Much more mature looking now, than the youthful structures they used to build for him in Wuyong.

“We lost our first two,” he explains. “Both were stolen from us, and each time—it destroyed her.”

Shi Wudu’s expression shifts into one of sympathy. “...My parents were stolen from me,” he mutters, glaring at the temple floor.

Killed, in a robbery gone awry.

Shi Qingxuan was too young to remember. He thinks it was a sickness that took them to this day, but...

He saw everything.

Curled up, hiding inside a wardrobe, hands covering his mouth, watching through the cracks in the doors as the thieves tore through their home, taking his parents, and—

Shi Wudu was so afraid back then. So infuriated by his own helplessness.

He’s never forgiven himself for it. For not being able to save them—even if he was a child then himself.

“I know,” Jun Wu murmurs, not turning around—and Shi Wudu’s breath catches in his throat.

“...You do?” He whispers.

“You prayed to me, back then.” The Emperor explains.

An interesting twist of events—as most children in danger have taken to praying to someone else. It caught Jun Wu’s attention.

Shi Wudu presses one palm against his forehead, skin still tingling where the heavenly emperor grasped it before, trying to wrap his head around it.

“You...heard me?”

He can’t see Jun Wu’s expression, staring up at the divine statue now.

The way his eyes have narrowed into an expression that's almost hateful—but his voice remans warm and gentle.

“Those men didn't find you, did they?” Shi Wudu leans back against a pillar, his knees suddenly weak. “They didn't hurt your brother.”

The cultivator's face rests in his hands, heart thudding in his chest.

He lost his parents so young. Was responsible for raising Shi Qingxuan when he was still a child himself.

Shi Wudu forgot what it felt like, to feel...protected. Looked after. And on one hand— his skin thrums with this feeling of relief, of comfort, but...

He also isn't accustomed to the feeling of being indebted to someone. “My youngest son,” Jun Wu continues, “I lost him too.”

He lowers his chin, shaking his head. “Tragically. Unnecessarily . He could have been saved—but no one would help me.”

There's such bitterness in his tone when he speaks on the matter, spite biting in every word—

Shi Wudu believes him.

Jun Wu turns back to face him.

“I wouldn't stand by and watch someone else suffer that way,” he murmurs, shaking his head. “Not senselessly. I'll help you.”

The human lets out a choked sound, knees nearly buckling under him, lips quivering, “Thank—” he chokes, tears slipping down his cheeks, “Thank you, I—”

“If,” the heavenly emperor continues, speaking over him as he walks across the temple floor, approaching the human, “you accept my terms.”

“...Terms?” Shi Wudu questions, his eyebrows creasing. “Yes, I'll accept anything, anything you ask, I—”

Fingers grip his chin tightly.

The young man falls silent, heart pounding to the point where it's almost become uncomfortable, staring up into Jun Wu's gaze.

“You will tell no one else,” he murmurs, thumb digging in slightly beneath Shi Wudu’s lower lip, until the cultivator squirms with discomfort.

“The rules of heaven are limiting at times—even for me. Most of the heavenly officials have never experienced suffering. Not in the way that we have. They won’t understand the things we do.”

It isn’t a difficult decision for the human to make.

Even if he told the truth of whatever the matter was—who would believe his word, that of an ordinary human, against that of Jun Wu himself?

Agreeing to silence isn’t a risk on his part.

When he nods, Jun Wu smiles—slow and wide, pleased.

Desperation, it seems, was the key.

He lets go of the human’s face, stepping back—and when he gestures for Shi Wudu to follow, the cultivator falls into step by his side without complaint.

“Tell me,” the heavenly emperor murmurs, his footsteps echoing through the hall, “What you now about switching fates?”

Three months later, the cultivator Shi Wudu faces a heavenly calamity out over the north eastern sea. A twisting maelstrom that threatens to pull several merchant ships into it’s hold, dragging them straight down.

Even among heavenly calamities—it’s particularly challenging.

But this young man fights with a might the world has not seen in years. Decades, even —and when he strikes the heavenly spectacle down, all who watch expect him to ascend in a flash of golden light—

And yet, he does not.

He returns to the shore with the others, helping the injured from their ships, surveying the damage—and it’s then, when fate twists itself into a knot.

An intersection of different threads, one that cannot be undone.

Not until one of them breaks.

"He Xuan!"

Shi Wudu's head sticks up sharply, whipping around to see a dark haired young man trailing behind one of the shipmasters, carrying a bag of tools over his shoulder.

"I've got it—three compartments are flooded, but the bulkheads are salvageable." He mutters, his gaze focused.

Shi Wudu remains silent, watching the young man move from one damaged ship to the other, taking notes for one of the master ship builders. And, despite the fact that he couldn't be more than Shi Qingxuan's age—

It's like watching someone miles ahead in capability.

It's a simple matter, finding an excuse to learn the man's birthday. As a show of thanks, before he parts ways with the locals—he reads palms and tells fortunes.

Not his strongest technique—but that doesn't matter. It wasn't ever the point. And when it's He Xuan's turn...

The birth dates are the same.

"...So?" The teenager raises an eyebrow, tilting his head. "What does it say?" For a moment, there's hesitation.

After all—he knows it isn't right. In the centuries that follow, he'll force himself to forget this moment. To pretend it didn't happen

But he knew, even back then, that it was wrong. Remembering the words of a cultivator, telling him that curses could be faced, or they could be avoided—

And yet, if you push them onto someone else, it will always come back down on your own head, but worse by another measure.

"...It says you'll find luck in love, soon." Shi Wudu mutters, letting the young man's hand go, giving a shallow nod. "Thank you for your assistance."

He leaves without another word, the rest of the shipbuilders not knowing what to make of his odd, rushed exit.

He Sheng, however, is focused on other things—staring down at his palm with thinly veiled excitement, biting the inside of his cheek.

...Luck in love, huh?

When Shi Wudu does ascend—it's with his younger brother watching from the mountainside.

He sits on the ground, hugging his knees, his face pale and drawn.

The voice hasn't come today. Hasn't said a word—but still, the boy waits. And he watches, now, as his brother rises to the world above.

And he tries, so hard, to be happy for him. Even if he's afraid.

Absolutely terrified of the prospect of being alone now, of what it will mean for him, to have a brother as a god, but—

But just as soon as that golden light rose into the sky—it comes crashing back down, landing before him.

Shi Qingxuan jumps at first, scrambling back, then...

"G...Gege?" He whispers.

His brother has always been blessed with good looks—both of them have, but now—

Now, Shi Wudu shines.

Dressed in robes of sapphire silks, dripping in jewels, his hair elaborately styled.

And just as he's always done, he reaches for his little brother.

Lifts him up, pulls him higher—onto the highest pedestal of all, holding Shi Qingxuan close against his chest.

"What did I tell you before, you little fool?" Shi Wudu murmurs against his hair, the wind rushing around them.

Shi Qingxuan's eyes are wide, filled with tears.

Realizing now, after a lifetime of living in fear, always hiding, always wondering when the creature was going to get him—forever hunted by it, unable to escape...

"Brothers always stick together." The elder whispers fiercely, "Always."

...Finally, Shi Qingxuan is free.

But oh, does that freedom come at a cost.

A heavy price—one that the newly appointed water master carries with him when they walk through the streets of the heavenly capital, holding his newly appointed deputy general close against his side.

Guilt, shame—and dread.

Because he knows, in his heart—there's a chance that Jun Wu could have been wrong, and the cultivator who came to him when he was young was telling the truth.

That, in delaying Shi Qingxuan's demise, he could have brought something worse on them both, but...

Now, he has time.

Time to get stronger—to build power and security. And then, if and when whatever the consequences are for them...

Shi Wudu's fingers tighten around Shi Qingxuan's shoulders, his gaze determined.

He'll be ready to face it.

When the sun sets, he's ordained as the new Water Master in the Grand Martial Temple, kneeling before the throne of Jun Wu as a fan—a powerful spiritual tool, is lowered into his hands.

General Ming Guang watches closely—leaning against a pillar on the far side of the hall.

The newly appointed head civil god, Lord Ling Wen, stands by his side—in a far less relaxed posture, his back straight, hands clasped in front of him—holding the scroll containing the details of the new water master's appointment.

Much to Pei Ming's disappointment—his friend doesn't use the male form for romantic purposes. He had hoped they could go out on the town together, and he could show the civil god some of his favorite lines, but, well—

Ling Wen uses this form in ceremonial events, most often.

Even so, stiff posture and lack of a social life and all—the civil god gives Pei Ming a strange look, watching his friend from the corner of his eye.

“What is it?”

“...” The martial god tips his head, watching the way the Heavenly Emperor watches Shi Wudu, handing the fan over.

“Don’t you think there’s something odd between them?”

Ling Wen follows Pei Ming’s gaze, watching the exchange—particularly the way that Jun Wu’s eyes seem to linger. It’s subtle—but present.

“You’re the senior between the two of us,” Ling Wen shrugs, crossing his arms.

“You would remember better than me—but didn’t he show similar favor to the Crown Prince of Xianle?”

“No,” Pei Ming mutters, shaking his head. “It wasn’t like this.”

The Emperor was quite open about his interest in Xie Lian’s future as a god—this feels almost...secretive.

As though there was something about this that they weren’t supposed to notice.

“...” Ling Wen shrugs, “He’s probably the most promising god to ascend since the Crown Prince of Xianle, and before that, you. Not to mention being eye-catching.”

General Pei’s eyebrows shoot up.

“...I don’t think I’ve ever heard you refer to any man as eye catching before,” he comments dryly—but Ling Wen’s reply makes him pause.

“I was referring to you, actually.” The civil god sighs, his eyes returning to the ceremony.

“...What is that supposed to mean?”

Ling Wen shrugs, watching as the newly appointed water god rises to his feet, clapping politely along with the rest of the crowd.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you show such an immediate keen interest in something that didn’t have breasts attached.”

"That's not true!"

Pei Ming has the nerve to sound a little bit offended. "I was interested in the Crown Prince of Xianle's ascension before—you just weren't around to see it."

"Ah, now he has two things in common with the crown prince," Ling Wen sighs. "That doesn't bode well."

In that sense, Ming Guang agrees—it doesn't bode well for the young god.

After all—shining so bright so young...catching the attention of so many powerful people...it can all come down on you one day, before you even realize it.

Pei Ming watched it happen—and he remembers.

Which starts out as his justification, for taking an interest in the new Water Mater, the illustrious Shi Wudu.

Quickly gaining attention with the nickname, *'The Water Tyrant.'*

To the Gods of the Middle Court, he's an arrogant, demanding official —expecting the highest respect.

To General Ming Guang, who already sits among the highest of the martial gods—the behavior is somewhat amusing.

That of a prematurely confident little brat—but unlike the rest of the Heavenly Court —he doesn't find the behavior unappealing.

What he finds less amusing, however, is the attitude of the new water master's deputy general—his little brother, Shi Qingxuan.

A silly little creature, always clinging onto his elder brother like a child far younger than his actual years—

And, for some reason, he loathes Pei.

He even mentions as much, holding onto his elder brother's sleeve one evening, glaring as he watches the martial god leave their palace.

"...Don't be rude," Shi Wudu scolds him, his voice stern—but he never raises a hand to the deputy god. Not even once. "He's your senior."

Shi Qingxuan shrinks a little under correction—after all, he always listens closely when his brother criticizes him, but…

“I just don’t like him,” the young man mutters, his eyes slightly narrowed. “He seems slimy.”

Shi Wudu snorts, rolling his eyes. “There are worse things.”

After all—of all of the devils he would ever make deals with—Pei Ming would be the least of them.

The Water Master’s career would be among the most illustrious in all the heavens— leaving him beyond reproach.

And yet, even if no one else could see it…

Shi Wudu wore his own cursed shackle. It wrapped around him tightly, weighing him down with every year that passed. Even as he tried to tell himself that he felt no shame. That it was what had to be done—and put it out of his might.

The weight of it remained.

Black Water Sinking Ships

Chapter Summary

> “If you want to help your fiancé, try bribing someone next time.”
>
> Qin Meirong takes a couple of steps after him, her voice desperate. “What about you, then?”
>
> Hua Cheng stops, one foot already on the steps up to his dais. “What about me?”
>
> “Could—could I bribe you?”
>
> Several nearby ghosts cackle and jeer. A mere mortal with only years to spare
>
> What could she offer a ghost king?

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE
>
> CONTENT WARNING: violence, minor character death, mentions of suicide, implied sexual violence.

YEAR THREE HUNDRED AND TWENTY FIVE

CLACK!

CLACK!

CLACK!

“HA!”

Three ghouls sit across the table, one of them beaming brighter than the others, pulling a pile of bones towards his side. “That’s two fives for me! Take THAT!”

“Lucky roll!” His companion grouses.

“You won’t get so lucky next round. You’ve used up too much of it!”

“Oi!” HIs friend crows back at him with a glare. “I ain’t doing anything unnatural! I just have a lot of luck! Don’t be jealous!”

“...Could I play?”

The three ghosts fall silent, turning to...

A human.

A girl.

Warm eyes—soft, dark curls, a spray of freckles across her nose. She seems rather well to do—an odd addition to a place like this, but...

The Gambler’s Den in Ghost City is open to anyone, that is the rule. So, the spirits make room for her at their table—and hand her the dice. “What are your terms?”

“Um...” The young woman frowns, staring at the dice in her hand—heavy against her palm, made of black jade, numbers painted in gold. “...I’m looking to win some luck,” she explains. “Is that something you can do, here?”

She heard you could bet on anything, in the Gambler’s Den of Ghost City.

The trio of ghosts look at one another—then nod. “Sure,” one of them agrees. “We bet for luck all the time—but what are you going to put up in exchange?”

“Um...” She thinks about it carefully.

It’s not like she has much in the way of money to offer—not anymore. And not in an amount that she would need, so...

The ghosts fall silent, a little stunned by the offer the young woman makes—

“Two years of my life? How does that sound?”

Time is a dangerous thing to gamble.

Particularly for Humans who never know how much of it they might have left—and betting against ghosts, who have an endless well in comparison.

And yet—the odds are fair. The bets are proportional, and…

In Ghost City, those are the only rules that must be followed.

“Very well,” one of the ghosts agrees, eyes flashing eagerly. “Shall we?”

It’s simple—odds and evens. She takes evens, they take odds, but…

On her first roll, she receives a one and a three.

Odds.

And in that action two years of her natural life—they’re gone in an instant. But…

Her eyes narrow with determination, and she rolls up the sleeves to her dress, looking at the table around her.

“Double or nothing?”

There’s a quiet hush as they glance towards the raised dais in the center of the room.

At the end of the day—there are limits.

Particularly when it comes to humans, and what ghosts are allowed to take from them.

The Lord of Ghost City is a relatively relaxed ruler—he’ll allow humans to bet themselves into the grave, if they’re stupid enough.

But he doesn’t like it when the ghouls get opportunistic.

That being said…

Hua Chengzhu has become distracted, as of late. Hasn’t been monitoring the city as closely as he was before. No one knows what the reason is, behind the Ghost King’s change in demeanor, but…

One of the Ghouls grins, his eyes lighting up eagerly.

“By all means, we can play as many rounds as you like, little lady!”

It manages to draw some attention—the way she seems willing to bet over and over again, to the point of near madness. After all, who could need luck so badly? What could be so important?

It’s only when the stakes have reached ten—ten entire years, that they hear some rustling from above.

The young woman doesn’t look up from her dice, ready to throw again —but those who were once playing against her have fallen completely silent, their own rolls coming to a halt.

It isn’t until she hears the thuds of footsteps that she realizes *why* everyone is so tense, their eyes on the dais—and when the curtains open, her own heart stammers. Half in fright, but also with...

Wonder.

The man who descends the steps looks younger than her—an impish teenage boy. Dressed in crimson, black boots thudding on each stair—

But the eyes that look down upon her burn a deep shade of gold—and they seem ancient.

“H-Hua Chengzhu,” one of the ghouls stammers. “We...We didn’t mean...”

A hand lands heavily on his shoulder, nails long and black—almost like talons, and when he speaks, it’s in a voice that is far deeper than what the woman was expecting.

“That’s enough,” he hisses, eyes flashing. “Or you’ll be betting against me, next time.”

It’s no small thing, to play with the lord of Ghost City. After all—his luck is beyond all others—and most don’t mind playing with him, even if it’s only to lose.

But when you play a round as a punishment? There’s only one thing being bet as collateral.

Souls.

“But...” The young woman stands when Hua Cheng turns around to leave, her lower lip wobbling. “I knew the stakes, sir! I just—please, let me keep playing?”

The Ghost King stops, one foot on the steps back up to his dais, his eyes focusing on her face when he turns his head.

“...Who are you?” He questions flatly—unfamiliar with her face.

After all—most humans willing to bet on such dangerous things are typically habitual gamblers. And yet, she's certainly not a frequenter.

The human fidgets slightly, but her voice is steady, "Qin Meirong."

A nice name—pretty enough, but certainly not one that the Ghost King has heard before. "...And why have you come here?

She's quiet for a moment—clearly struggling with whether or not answering would do her any good, but...There doesn't seem to be much of a choice, at this point.

"...It's my fiancé," she explains, clasping her hands together tightly, "He's taking his civil exams next week, and I—!"

Hua Cheng rolls his eyes. If he had to count how many young women came into this place, willing to throw their lives away for utterly inadequate partners...

"Don't look at me like that," she frowns, noticing the Ghost King's expression. "He's brilliant, and he deserves to pass! He just..." she trails off, biting her lip, and Hua Cheng watches, mildly impressed.

No mortal has ever dared to scold him—not in this form.

"He just what?"

Qin Meirong is a beautiful woman, with finely shaped features and clear eyes.

But worry and fear have aged her prematurely, creasing around the corners of her gaze.

"...The test examiners—they don't like him. They hide his results. He's just...in an unlucky spell, that's all!"

There's a difference between bad luck and sabotage, but...

There is something odd about this woman. Hua Cheng watches with mild curiosity, one eyebrow raised, because...

The air around her is that of someone with a naturally blessed fate. But it's been tainted with bad luck.

The air of a curse.

Contagious, like a plague that spreads through contact. Something parasitic, and...

Almost familiar.

“...We’ll settle your tab at six years,” the ghost king sighs, turning around. “If you want to help your fiancé, try bribing someone next time.”

Qin Meirong takes a couple of steps after him, her voice desperate. “What about you, then?”

Hua Cheng stops, one foot already on the steps up to his dais. “What about me?”

“Could—could I bribe you?”

Several nearby ghosts cackle and jeer.

A mere mortal with only years to spare.

What could she offer a ghost king?

But, oddly enough—Hua Cheng seems to be listening.

It’s baffling, to anyone watching. The lord of Ghost City is fair, yes—and when it comes to children, he is often generous.

But as for why he would show kindness to this woman... ...that’s anyone’s guess.

Hua Cheng, however, does have one point of softness that the world does not recognize. Could never know about.

All she wants, in the end, is to protect someone precious to her. He can empathize with that feeling rather well.

“In exchange for what?”

“I...” She trails off, thinking—and eventually, knowing that her odds of success are admittedly low, but determined to try—she lifts her chin, eyes determined. “I can cook a meal for you!”

Qin Meirong has always been an excellent cook—He Xuan never leaves a plate empty.

Several of the ghosts around the room look at one another, clearly prepared to laugh at such an offer, but...

Crimson Rain isn't laughing.

The human stares up at him hopefully, her lips trembling—and his mouth quirks up at the corner.

"...I accept."

There's a stir in response.

"...Hua Chengzhu," one of the ghouls comments, his jaw hanging open, teeth rattling as he speaks. "You can't possibly be SERIOUS!"

"Why shouldn't I be?" He murmurs, clasping his hands behind his back as he follows the young woman down the steps. "Who are you to say?"

The ghosts fall silent, watching their king leave the hall of the gambler's den with... A mortal. All on the promise of what could only be a mediocre meal.

Nearly all of them seem baffled by the action—except for one young ghost, watching with vaguely bitter eyes.

Shuo watches Yanlin closely, not speaking at first—but when Hua Cheng disappears out the doors of the gamblers den, he sends his companion a warning look.

"It's better not to lose perspective, Yanlin."

Her mouth tightens at the corners.

No one is close with the Ghost King.

Not really. Not in a way that matters. Fai and Xiang got closer than just about anyone, but...

No one knows him, from before his days on Mount Tonglu. No one knows why he knows the things that he does.

The only thing that Yanlin, Shuo, and Bao have always known, is his priority

He's looking for something. Someone. A blind taoist. None of them know why—but given that the search has been going on for three centuries now, he's clearly some sort of immortal.

Whoever that person is—he belongs to Hua Cheng's past. A part of him they never get to know.

That can be hard to square yourself with, when you've been following someone for centuries. Always at an arm's length. He's never cruel, but...

"My perspective is just fine, thanks." She mutters, turning away.

He's the one who doesn't see things clearly—not her.

The village is quiet--a little dreary, in the rainy season, but never unpleasant.

And while Hua Cheng has often been given much more for doing far less, Qin Meirong cooks a lovely meal.

Nothing overly fancy—but warm, filling, with the taste of something that evokes nostalgia.

Not of something that he's ever actually had, no...

Hua Cheng's mother never had the kind of resources to cook that kind of meal, and the last home he had...

He smiles faintly at the memory, remembering Xie Lian's few, disastrous attempts to cook a proper meal.

It took him ages to realize he wasn't any good—because Hong-er would always smile, and eat more than his share, pretending to be greedy for once, letting the god eat what they already had pre-made instead.

And dianxia was so frustrated, when he actually tasted it for himself.

'Why did you say it was good?!' He would groan, coughing and gagging on the one bite he had managed to swallow, *'You don't need to spare my feelings!'*

And Hong-er would just beam, taking another bite from his own plate. Xie Lian could never see his smile—but always heard it.

'Because gege made it for me!'

Hua Cheng stops, chopsticks lingering against his mouth, swallowing one last bite. Technically, he doesn't need to eat. But...

He always takes some small amount of happiness in remembering the meals he used to share.

"Are the rumors true?"

"Rumors?"

She stands at the counter, gathering the leftovers from their meal, using a cloth to wipe off her hands. "Everyone says that you're a widower—and that's why you always dress in red."

Like a bridegroom.

"..." Hua Cheng snorts, shaking his head. "Not exactly."

Few ever have the confidence to ask him such questions directly anymore. Not without feeling a twinge of fear.

"I was younger than him," The ghost explains, not caring very much about sparing the details with one, irrelevant mortal. "I don't think he realized what I wanted."

Qin Meirong takes that in, the cloth going still between her fingers for a moment, and when she speaks again, she doesn't seem perturbed. "Is he gone?"

"...I'll find him, one day."

It's a matter of time, Hua Cheng knows that.

He just never realized how *much* time it would be.

"..." The young woman smiles, reaching out to take the Ghost King's empty plate. "That's beautiful."

Hua Cheng pauses, a little surprised by that descriptor. The few people who are...aware of his situation—they never call it anything but...

Hopeless. Foolhardy. A waste.

"You think so?"

Qin Meirong nods, setting the cloth down so she can lean against the counter. "I...just before He Xuan and his family came to the village, I lost my sister."

It's been over teen years now, but just remembering it brings heartache to her tone. "We were twins."

There was a horrible sickness that came through the kingdom that year, ripping through the common people like flames. The worst plague since the outbreak of Human Face Disease in Xianle, years ago...

Qin Meirong survived, but her sister... Faded, like smoldering embers.

"...I know," she sighs, shaking her head. "I know that ghosts are real, and the gods, and everything else—if I didn't I wouldn't have come to find you, but I..."

She glances out the window, her eyes filled with an endless ache. Two halves aren't meant to be torn apart.

He Sheng and He Zhong have helped fill some of those gaps in her family, made her feel something close to whole, but...

The void remains.

"I always told myself, if she was still out there—she'd come and find me again," Qin Meirong explains with a soft sigh.

"But time went by, and when she didn't, I thought...she just moved on."

She lifts her chin, her eyes sparkling with an aching kind of happiness. Bitter sweet, living inside of a love that only exists in flashbacks.

Hua Cheng knows the feeling all too well.

"But now, hearing you say that, it's like..." A hand comes up as she wipes the tears gathering at the corners of her eyes. "It makes me think somewhere, she might be looking for me. Watching over me. I think that's what we all want, when we learn that ghosts are real."

Hua Cheng watches her, his expression unreadable as Qin Meirong laughs sheepishly, shaking her head. "I...I'm sorry, for going on like that. I just think—he'd be happy, if he knew what you were doing."

He almost smiles, but...

'If your precious person knew...'

'...If they knew they were the reason that you couldn't move on, it might trouble them.'

The answer for Hua Cheng, has always been simple:

He'll just never let his god know why he hasn't gone. Not because he doesn't want to, but because...

He doesn't have a choice.

His chopsticks land on the table with a soft thud as he pushes his chair back, rising to his feet. "Well, that fulfills your end of the bargain," he murmurs.

He doesn't acknowledge the kindness of her words—or the emotions they bring out in him.

And she doesn't expect him to.

"It's time for me to carry out mine."

She smiles, watching the Ghost King walk out the door. It's a rare thing, to make a deal with the devil—particularly the greatest devil of them all, but...

Sometimes, they aren't so bad. They even make very polite dinner guests.

The next morning, she's right there, leaping into her fiancé's arms before he leaves for the city, off to take yet another score of exams.

"You," she emphasizes, gripping his cheeks with both hands, "are going to make it through just fine this time, I swear."

"..." He Xuan smiles at that, pressing their foreheads together, his arms around her waist. "I'm glad someone thinks so," he murmurs.

It feels almost fruitless now, like he's throwing himself at a brick wall over and over again, only to come back empty handed each time. But...

Qin Meirong never seemed to stop believing it would be different if he just tried again. Even when he thought she would leave, because he couldn't offer her the things she deserved--

Her faith in him remained unchanged.

"You're going to be late if you don't hurry," she smiles.

He Xuan hums, not letting her go—not at first. "...I'll make it all worth it," he mutters. "I promise."

It's almost assumed that men will take what they're given in life, never noticing the sacrifices and efforts of the people around them.

He Xuan has never been like that.

He takes note of every sacrifice. Every moment of support--and expresses his gratitude. There's never a moment taken for granted, never a second when she doesn't know that he cares, and...

Even if he hadn't said so, she would have known.

"I know you will," she whispers back.

In truth, he already has.

These last few years—even if they were marked with just as many disappointments as triumphs, have been among the happiest of her life.

And she knows the man she's going to marry. Knows how kind, honest, and brilliant he is.

It *will* be worth it.

She rocks up on her toes, pressing a soft kiss against his lips, and when they pull apart, Qin Meirong smiles, fixing his hair as she steps back.

"I'll be waiting for you when you get back."

He Xuan smiles in return, giving her one last look.

"I know."

They part ways—her, going back home.

Him, returning to the city where he was born.

Hua Cheng realizes that, falling into the human's shadows, following him through the tree lined path.

Both of them, born in the same place—three centuries apart.

It’s funny, he thinks, how time and pain can separate so many different paths—but in the end, they always lead you back to the same destination.

The young man—the scholar, He Sheng, also known as He Xuan—he walks with his back straight, and his head held high.

Something stirs.

Deep in the recesses of Hua Cheng's mind, a feeling—almost like a memory of something that he buried deep, but—

Hua Cheng closes his eyes, pushing that down.

She's been more difficult to suppress, as of late—but he's long since become accustomed to keeping her subdued.

The Civil Exams are held in a small, nondescript building in the city center, many studious, stern faced young students gathering together to write their essays in total silence, only the scribbles of pens against scrolls filling the air.

Hua Cheng watches from underneath the shroud of a glamor, leaning back against a pillar, boredom staining his features, a dagger twirling between his fingers.

'You've lost focus,' a voice in his mind whispers—and his eyebrow pinches.

'Push it down,' he thinks to himself.

It's easy when he's focusing on the task at hand, watching as He Xuan hands off the exam scroll to one of the proctors, finishing earlier than any of the others—

And yet, he seems utterly calm about the entire matter, his expression smooth.

Like someone who knows his answers are completely correct—and that it won't matter in the end.

Hua Cheng watches him bow to the instructors before leaving the room, the sun reaching high in the sky—and he sees to his end of things, following the instructors into the back.

He watches as the scroll the young scholar gave them is discarded, switched out with another before being placed into a pile of scrolls to be sent to the board for review, and...

Qin Meirong wasn't wrong, it seems—there was wrong doing going on.

When the proctors leave the room, Hua Cheng is there, the glamor slowly shrinking from his form, lifting the scroll they just placed into the pile, and He Xuan's, which they discarded—comparing the two.

One is well written, clearly a passing result, and the other…

Is Blank.

Hua Cheng doesn't make mistakes often. Isn't prone to such things. He's meticulous, determined, and focused.

Well, he usually is.

So, he's unaccustomed to making careless errors. Missteps that he'll come to regret later.

"…What are you doing here?!"

The voice jars him.

Is a human…here? How did they enter without him noticing? But—

But when Hua Cheng turns his head, one of those proctors is there,standing in the doorway, and…

Hua Cheng isn't wearing the face of a mischievous youth today, no:

His current form is something more sinister.

Far more reflective of his mood.

Tall, broad shouldered, dark eyes, sharp teeth—long nails. A shape he was wearing underneath a glamor, not expecting to be seen by any mortals, but now…

Now, there's a tiny little human, trembling in the doorway, looking at him like… Like he's some sort of monster.

And typically, this is when Hua Cheng would sneer, throw his head back and make some mocking little speech to frighten the human into silence, but…

"Well," he glances down at He Xuan's scroll, annoyed. "…That's a complication."

"GUARDS—!"

Before the proctor can finish crying out, a scroll hits him in the temple with a sharp thunk!

His eyes go wide, and then he crumples to the floor, limp, while Hua Cheng rolls his eyes, spinning He Xuan's scroll in between his fingertips.

Things just became...complicated.

When the guards do enter the room, they find proctor Mao Xue hunched over the exam table, gathering scrolls, his brow furrowed with irritation.

"Sir? You called?"

The young professor straightens, sending them a glare. "No thanks to you incompetent fools!"

The guards pause.

Mao Xue glares, hands resting on his hips as he turns around. He's a short man, forced to crane his neck to level an annoyed stare at the guards, but he endeavors.

"Do you know how long it's been since I called?!"

The guards fall silent, looking at one another.

"...We don't—"

"Forty five seconds!" The professor snaps. "If there was truly an emergency, any ruffian could have had their way with me. And you call yourselves professionals!"

"Apologies, sir, we—!"

"You're damn right you're sorry!" Mao Xue huffs, snatching up the pile of scrolls.

"I was going to ask one of you imbeciles to deliver these scrolls to the board for me— but now it's clear that I'll have to do it myself!"

"Sir—!"

"Out of my way!"

They watch as Mao Xue storms past them, scrolls in hand, properly chagrined. But… He was acting odd, wasn't he?

In the time it takes for Hua Cheng to deliver the scroll to the examination board himself—He Xuan lingers in the marketplace, looking for a small gift for his bride-to- be.

A thank you, for everything she's done in the last few years.

The weaver that once worked on this street has long since moved on—to where, He Xuan could not say, but a younger generation of artisans have taken up several of the patterns he was known for, weaving them into sashes, belts, and robes.

He stops to examine one sash in particular

Black thread, with gold threads making it look like waves cutting through the water. Like the sea at night.

It's not the sort of thing Qin Meirong would ever buy for herself, but…Black has always been He Xuan's color.

Such a small delay, one that barely takes up the afternoon.

But in the space of those few hours, He Xuan's life changed—and he didn't even know it.

On the walk home to his village—he has no idea that today won't be like the others. The wind feels the same—the path is familiar. The taste of salt is ever present in the air.

It felt…normal.

Sometimes, they say that you just know—instantly feel it, when something has been taken from you. When you've lost something precious.

It wasn't like that for him.

He didn't know, not until he was standing on the path leading towards his family's home, and…He saw his mother.

Kneeling in the grass in front of their home, her eyes streaked with tears, hands clutching at the earth in front of her, and…

For the first time, her gaze is just…

Empty.

That was the day when He Xuan's heart died.

A literal, physical feeling.

He felt it wasting away.

It would take longer for his mind to break and bend—that part of him has always been solid, rooted in the iron foundations that make up the core of who he is, but—

But He Xuan's heart—it was gentle, back then. Before it was twisted and mangled into something else.

It cracked, when his mother told him that a group of men had come to their village, and that they had tried to take He Zhong.

That crack deepened, when she explained how Qin Meirong tried to stop them—but—

In the end, they were both taken away.

That crack in his heart, it ached and stung with regret. Wondering why he hadn't been there. Why he had delayed in returning from the city—

Why had he even bothered taking that damn test again to begin with, because why did it matter, now?

But oh, it was easy, when the pain in his heart was only a crack.

It widened into a chasm when he learned who took them. A wealthy family, one that owned nearly half of the village—formerly a side branch of the Shi's, but later expelled for their constant indiscretions.

And what they had wanted A-Zhong, and later Qin Meirong, for? Concubines.

Then, it felt as though his heart was split down the middle, the crack widening until it was nearly severed in two, a cold wind blowing through.

Because he knew—he knew that they would refuse.

Part of He Xuan wished that they wouldn't—knowing that whatever the Sheung's would do, it wouldn't be worth refusal, it—

But when he arrived at the manor, prepared to fight for their freedom, the truth was worse than he could have imagined.

For so long, He Xuan was only a big brother. Only ever thought of ways to find his sister a better spot from which she could watch the parade for the fire festival. How to keep her safe. To always keep an eye, and never let go of her hand.

His heart shattered when he found A-Zhong's body.

Left out in the front courtyard—abandoned and discarded, still limp, not yet stiff.

Meaning that he was close. That if he'd just had more time, he could have stopped it. He could have...

'I promise, I won't drop you.'

'I know you won't!'

Her face was so small then, beaming up at him with such believe—such faith.

'You're amazing, gege!'

Now it's drained of color, stained with blood—eyes staring up at him, cold and unseeing.

'I'm your best friend, right?'

They'll never shine again.

'Always!'

But the moment his heart died, was when he heard broken, fractured gasps—no, that isn't what he would call them.

They were last breaths.

And there, beaten nearly beyond recognition, left alone in the cold, he found Qin Meirong.

Whimpering his name with bruised lips.

"H...He...X...Xuan..."

Reaching for him, even then—her limbs shattered and broken.

Then, He Xuan felt the remains of a heart that still beats—in defiance of all reason— begin to fade into ash.

As he held her in his arms, gently shushing her, trying to soothe her pain, but…

There was nothing left to be done.

The dark curls that once felt so smooth under his fingers were sticky and matted with blood.

The freckles he once compared to constellations now bloodstained. But when those eyes looked up at him one last time—

They were still so warm.

“He X-Xuan,” she repeated his name, blood bubbling past her lips with every word she spoke, but still, when he tried to shush her—she pressed on, “I-It’s alright,” she whispered, her eyes turned over his shoulder, looking past him—at something he couldn’t see.

“S…she found me.” Her lips pulled up into a faint, broken smile, “H-He was right…”

“I don’t…” He Xuan’s voice was nearly incapable of speech, “I don’t understand…”

Her breaths were rattling towards the end, broken ribs protesting each attempt at air —

But she clutched the front of his robes.

“You’re a g…good man,” Qin Meirong’s last words would never leave him, her eyes still so clear, even towards the end, staring up at him with a determined light, “Don’t….don’t let them…make you f-forget that, He Xuan…”

Oh, but he would.

For centuries, he would forget.

“You’re…a good man.”

The light and warmth faded from her eyes, all as he watched. And in that moment, no heart remained within He Xuan’s chest. Something was still there, still beating, but that wasn’t a heart. That was an unfamiliar beast, no longer an accepted part of him.

When Qin Meirong left the world, she took He Xuan's smile with her. Took his joy, his curiosity, and his kindness.

His hope, his faith, and his ambitions.

It would be centuries before he would smile or laugh again, even reluctantly.

Centuries before He Xuan would love again.

And when he did, it would come on the breath of the wind, swirling all around him, trying to stir those parts of him to life.

Oh, how He Xuan would resent that love. Fear and distrust it.

How he would deny it and do everything in his power to break it, to snuff it out.

Oh, the things He Xuan would do, all while telling himself that he no longer had a heart.

And god, the way it would break again, the next time he heard those words, from a very different set of lips—

'You're a good man, Ming...H-He Xuan.'

They would break him all over again.

Hua Cheng watches.

Not because he has no reason to interfere—he does. He had a fondness for that young woman, and was disgusted to learn what became of her, no—

He watches now, out of some morbid sense of fascination. Because He Xuan doesn't snap. Not immediately.

Even as Hua Cheng watches the murderers of his sister and fiancé drag him through the streets, cold and shattered, he just hangs limp in their arms, eyes dark and uncaring.

And at first, the ghost king thought the human had simply given up. But the longer he watches...

The more clear it becomes, that something is forcing the human to linger on.

Even as Hua Cheng can see it now, the heavy dark aura that lingers around the young man—so vile, it permeates the it around him—

It's a curse.

A parasitic curse, latched deeply to the man's soul.

Whispering hateful words to He Xuan, as the youth sits day in and day out, glaring at the blank walls of a dark, empty cell.

Wasting away from starvation, until he looks far closer to death than Hua Cheng ever has, alive or otherwise.

His face nearly skeletal, eyes sunken in.

And that voice whispers to him, all the while, that he will lose everything.

That he will die alone, in the cold. That he might as well die here.

He Xuan doesn't—against all hope or reason, he lingers on, but Hua Cheng—he recognizes this curse for exactly what it is.

A Jinx Monster.

And slowly, as he watches it struggle and fight to feed off of He Xuan, who possesses little to no fear at this point, Hua Cheng realizes the truth behind what has happened. Slowly, then all at once.

After all—he didn't tell Shi Wudu how to switch fates.

But that doesn't mean that Hua Cheng wasn't more than aware of how to do so himself.

The two of them share names, after all. Even the same birthday.

History has an odd way of repeating itself, at times. No matter how hard you try to learn, and teach it's lessons to others.

Because Hua Cheng warned him.

In so many different ways, curses can be faced or they can be hidden from, but they can not be cast aside and forced onto another.

And now, he watches the bloody harvest of the sins that Shi Wudu has sewn.

Watches as He Xuan's captors nearly starve him to death—and still, he does not die.

Watches, as the young man is released from jail—only to learn that his mother passed away from illness during his time in a cell, because no one was well enough to look after her.

And still, the young man doesn't break.

He watches—with great interest—as He Xuan returns to his ailing father, too old and fragile now, to work on the ships he once helped build.

And even now, with his exams passed, when he must want to leave this village behind...

He stays—and he becomes a shipbuilder himself, starting a business. Small, at first, but...more and more successful, as time goes on.

After all—if there's one thing He Xuan's ships are known for...it's that they don't sink. And, however briefly—he manages to thrive.

But it could never last. Not with that creature on his back—and not with the humans that linger in this place. Petty, angry, and jealous.

Hua Cheng watches, as they take everything he has. Over and over and over again. But each time, He Xuan rises back up.

Over and over again.

Like the waves crashing back up after a storm, he surges with every downfall.

Hua Cheng almost pities the Jinx Monster, lingering on his back—desperately trying to feed off of the mortal, but...

He Xuan doesn't face his problems with fear. Doesn't hide from his curses. Any lesser creature would have abandoned the hunt long ago, but...

Hua Cheng knows every creature and creation that has ever emerged from the Kilns of Zhao Beitong—

And he recognizes the Reverend of Empty Words for what it is. Still, this human endures it against all reason.

Until he can't.

Still, on the day that He Xuan snapped, there wasn’t fear.

Hua Cheng saw frustration, when the shipmaster saw that yet another one of his boats had been commandeered by the local clan leader.

Building anger, when the bank refused to extend his loan payments.

The final straw comes in the late afternoon, when he’s returning from work.

Gaunt, thin—a tall man, once a muscular youth—but he never quite recovered from the starvation he endured in prison.

Still alive, but he looks far more like a wraith.

And when he returns to his family home, he finds the last living relative he has—his father—has passed away.

Alone, sitting in a chair by the window, his head turned to look out.

Waiting for him to return home one last time. He Sheng, his pride and joy.

Always such a good son.

Hua Cheng watches the human, as he has for so long now—more attention than he’s paid to any mortal, in his time as a ghost.

He Xuan kneels by his father’s chair, holding one hand between his own. It’s gone stiff and cold by now.

His expression is unreadable—mouth unmoving.

He doesn’t cry. In all of the time since the deaths of He Zhong and Qin Meirong, Hua Cheng hasn’t seen the human shed a single tear.

But the expression on his face—the look in his eye as He Xuan looks upon his father one last time—

It’s one of deep respect and affection.

Hua Cheng can’t understand that feeling.

Doesn’t know the meaning of what it is to honor one’s father.

He never had one. Never had anything that came close.

He's had a mother. In many ways, more than one.

That's the only familial bond he's ever known.

And now, watching this scene—the Ghost King finds himself almost...

Envious, in spite of it's dreariness. The blatant horror of it all.

After some time, He Xuan rises to his feet once more, gently setting his father's hand back down in his lap.

He Xuan's walk back to town is slow, unhurried—and his request is so simple, so small, in the face of it all—

He just asks around in the local tavern, for someone to help him lay his father to rest. There's no other family to assist him—and it's a difficult job for one person.

More than one of the local townspeople are willing to help. He Xuan is liked and respected by many in the village, as was his father before him, but...

The son of the local clan leader sneers, slamming his cup down on the bar counter, his eyes narrowed.

"Why should he need help?" The young man murmurs, arching one eyebrow.

He's stereotypically handsome—but he's also got a unique brand of cruelty in his eyes, the kind that can be recognized with a single glance.

"It should only take one man to bury a dog."

A dog.

This is the heir to the Sheung family.

The same family that took his sister.

The same family that took Qin Meirong.

The same family that threw him in prison, and left him there to rot.

The same family that repeatedly commandeered his ships, leaving He Xuan drowning in debts.

The shipmaster doesn't speak immediately—doesn't react.

But there's a flash in his eyes, and Hua Cheng sees a thread, worn so thin over the last few years, finally begin to snap.

No one will raise a hand to help now, fearing retribution from the young master of the Sheung clan.

That's fine. That's better, actually.

Hua Cheng watches He Xuan make the trek back to his home. Taking the ax that he (and his father before him) once used to build their ships, chopping wood from a nearby forest to make a pyre.

It's careful, methodical—never hurried.

The young man burns his father's body—gathers the ashes, and buries them in the family grave.

He's buried a fiancé, a sister, a mother, and now his father.

He Xuan stands before the tombstone now, staring at his family name, and it occurs to him.

Who is going to bury him?

There's not going to be anyone left, he—

"You're going to die alone," a voice whispers next to his ear, cruel and jeering. "Alone in the cold, with no one left to mourn you."

"..."

Hua Cheng watches with rapt attention as the youth stares down at the family grave, silent.

Finally, a smile spreads across his face.

Slow, lopsided. Not the muted, almost shy smiles that He Xuan showed the world as a child. Nor the quiet, confident grins he used to share with the girl that he loved.

There's no trace of sanity in this smile. "Is that so?" He whispers

Even the Reverend of Empty Words seems to balk at his reaction, falling silent as He Xuan turns away from the grave, ax still in hand.

“...I suppose there isn’t a point, then.” He mutters, dragging it on the ground beside him, the blade slowly cutting through blades of grass.

No one answers, but He Xuan seems to have developed some level of awareness that a creature is stalking him. Listening to his every word.

And he smiles even wider.

“In being someone worth mourning.”

Life is one long cascade of decisions and consequences.

Nearly four centuries ago, a gambler didn’t know when to stop rolling. A friend tried to save him with a set of loaded dice. A merchant reacted out of spite and anger.

Decades later, a young ghost saved the two men on a whim. Kept them from their fate for as long as he could. And when they could no longer be held back, their curse fell on two brothers, one unwilling to let go of the other.

In his refusal to allow him to suffer, he cast that curse upon someone else.

Every single one of those decisions led to He Xuan lifting up his ax that night.

Not a single one of those decisions were his own.

But when he reaches town once more, his third time making the trek in a single day— he sees the lights.

Dozens of torches, flickering in the streets. It’s—

It’s the fire festival, Just like every other year.

Not like the festivals he used to watch with A-Zhong, when he was a boy. He even took Qin Meirong back there one year, using the same trick he had with his little sister when they were children, sneaking them up to the rooftops.

That was the first time He Xuan kissed her.

She looked over at him, admitting that she wouldn’t have cared where they watched— as long as she got to watch them with him.

And in that moment—it seemed too difficult not to kiss her. Like keeping himself away was an act of physical restraint.

His heart pounded, back then. Now, it's nearly silent in his chest.

It doesn't feel an ounce of remorse or anxiety as he walks through the crowds, dragging his ax behind him.

It's almost as though he's been dead for years now, and his body is the only one that hasn't accepted the news, carrying him onward.

Slowly at first, then stumbling towards the front of the crowd, no one ever bothering to look too closely. After all, he's just their neighbor. Their quiet, patient, ever enduring neighbor.

No one sees the look in his eye until the final moment— Especially not his first victim.

The swing lands squarely on the back of the young man's skull, splitting it open like a melon.

The heir to the house of Sheung isn't dead by the time he hits the ground, eyes wide, mouth gaping with shock, pained moans escaping him.

Silenced with the next swing of the axe.

For a moment—no one moves. Everyone around is frozen with shock. The music stops, along with the chanting and singing.

Dozens of torches stand still, flickering in the night.

He Xuan stands over the corpse, his once tan face now pale, sunken in —splattered with blood.

There's no loud declaration of rage, no elaborate, angry speech against those who have wronged him—no.

The shipmaster places his boot against young master Sheung's chin, yanking the axe out of his chest without a word, stalking towards the bank.

No one stops him. Not a soul.

There was no family that suffered under the Sheungs quite like the Hes—but they have lorded over this village for several decades now.

They have been greedy, selfish, and cruel.

The normal townsfolk watch, as the kind, bright eyed boy they once knew slaughters the bankers.

Some even begin to trail behind him, torches in hand, as He Xuan runs from one target to the next. And somehow, no matter how much they try to run away, no matter how desperately they try to defend themselves…

It all comes to nothing.

He Xuan moves like a man possessed.

When the handle on his ax breaks, he takes the splintered handle in his hand, driving it into the men who beat his fiancé to death over and over again—occasionally stopping to laugh, like he's taunting some invisible presence that no one else can see.

Does he seem afraid, hmm?

When there's nothing left of his ax handle, he takes up a knife from a nearby butcher stall, hacking until the tip of the blade breaks off in the heart of one of the men who stole from his father.

The night deepens, thunder rolling in as a storm rages over the sea.

But the storm in the village rages on, voices screaming out in the night as a dark, bloody figure darts through the night, ripping them apart with any weapon he can get his hands on.

Slowly, the other villagers begin to egg him on. Some—some even start to cheer. To thank him.

There's no sorrow, for the loss of a clan that had been tormenting the locals for an entire lifetime. No pity, as the townsfolk watch the Sheung's reap what they have sowed.

Until finally, only the clan leader is left—scrambling backwards on his hands and knees, pleading.

One of his knees has already been smashed by the hammer clutched between the shipmaster's fingers, blood dripping down his chin.

"L-look," Lord Sheung stammers, his voice weak and trembling as he looks around the crowd, desperate for a single soul to help him.

They won't.

"I have money—power, position—anything you desire, I can give it to you, just—!"

"Go back in time, then." He Xuan replies flatly, speaking for the first time since he began his rampage—and his voice—

It's cold, almost rational.

"Give me my family back, and I'll let you go."

"I…" Lord Sheung stares up at him, his lips trembling. "You know I can't, that's not possible—!"

He cuts himself off with a pained shriek when the young man takes his other knee, as well.

"Then it's not possible for me to have mercy on you," He Xuan sneers. "What a shame."

This man cannot bring his family back—and He Xuan cannot find it in him to show him mercy.

There's no room inside of him for kindness, when he smashes the hammer into the man's face, over and over again—until nothing recognizable remains.

Oh, the things He Xuan would do, while telling himself that he didn't have a heart.

It died long ago.

He's just waiting for his body to catch up.

There's no instance to point to, of a human surviving a curse of a jinx monster. He Xuan is no exception.

Yet, it isn't the creature that brings him to an end. Gravity does that.

When He Xuan is panting, soaked from the rain and the blood of his tormentors, a hammer clutched loosely between his fingers.

He takes one staggering step back—not realizing that he was already standing on the ledge.

He Xuan had been standing on that ledge for a long time. Years, now. Never realizing that the cliffs lay behind him.

The villagers who watched the slaughter without a word try to help him now, but… It's too late.

They rush forward—and He Xuan plummets out of sight,

SPLASH!

Cold.

The thunder roars, and He Xuan sinks, his eyes just as dark and deep as the waters that grip him, staring up blankly.

It's cold, and he's alone.

Crushed under the weight of the waves, dragged further and further below—

Only darkness remains as air slips away.

The sea floor hits his back, the immense weight of the water crushing down on him, squeezing out whatever life remains.

For a moment—He Xuan almost prays to the water master for relief—But he has no desire for that. And even if he did—

He Xuan's prayers would go unanswered.

They always do.

And there isn't fear in his last moments. There's no sadness, self pity, or hopelessness.

Only rage remains. Deep and bitter, churning with the same ferocity as the waves overhead as his body dies, and the Reverend of Empty words goes without another meal.

He Xuan's body lays against the seafloor, limp, eyes unseeing—illuminated by a pale, unearthly green light.

That of a ghost fire.

It hovers for a moment, a sole flickering point of color in the endless void of the ocean.

Then, it howls.

Shrieks into the darkness, unheard—sound cannot carry through water, after all.

And yet, the sea rises in response. Churning with violence, crashing into the ships that float near the harbor with renewed menace.

The sea swallows them whole, dragging them down into the abyss.

For years to come, people will remember the storm that swept through the coast that night, and the young man who raged beneath it.

The lives that were lost by land, underneath his blades—and the countless souls who were lost at sea.

Remembered as a night of tragedy. A night of justice. A night of revenge.

But what people remember the most, is the daunting height and size of the waves as they smashed massive cargo ships to bits.

It was a night of blood and death.

A night of black water sinking ships.

Love and Vengeance

Chapter Summary

Zhao Beitong forged three ghost kings.

Lost the first two—though in the end, it was the last one that ended up losing her.

She sees no need to forge another.

And yet.

Chapter Notes

You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

A ghost king stands on wet sand, watching the sea roil, arms crossed.

In the end, while his own actions indirectly caused this—there was nothing Hua Cheng could have done to prevent it.

Diverting the curse from He Xuan would have meant casting it back upon Shi Qingxuan.

Interfering with the Reverend of Empty Words without killing it would have simply made the curse worse than it was before. And if Hua Cheng *had* destroyed the creature...

The debt created by Xiang and Fai's deaths would have remained. He knows all of this, and yet...

When he thinks back on a brave, clear eyed young woman, willing to bet her entire future on the man that she loved, so certain that he would be worth it...

Hua Cheng feels some small measure of remorse.

The storm doesn't end. It only worsens, clouds darkening and swirling.

A typhoon is brewing, one that might sweep broad portions of the coastline away with it. At first, Hua Cheng thinks it's odd—for the death of one spirit to cause such an uproar. But then...

Pain.

Sharp and stabbing, echoing throughout his skull as he sinks to his hands and knees

Like there's a balloon swelling inside his skull—something that has long since been buried fighting to rip it's way out.

The Ghost King's fingers claw into wet sand, gritty texture sliding underneath his nails, biting his lip until it bleeds.

This isn't just one spirit at all.

Somewhere, between the known and unknown, on the very edge of consciousness, lies a garden.

A calm place. A gentle place.

One where a young man sleeps in his father's arms, listening as his mother tells ghost stories.

Where the youngest child stands behind his mother, braiding flowers into her hair, occasionally stopping to chase after butterflies—but always returning to her side.

Always.

This time, he stops in the middle of the clearing—sending her a tense look, one filled with worry.

His mother smiles, reaching for him with open arms, "What's wrong, my love? Come back here."

San Lang stands before her, unmoving, his expression rapt with concentration. "... You're waking up," he mutters, shaking his head. "Or...is it the..."

Oh.

For the first time in centuries, Hudie remembers that this is a dream. A beautiful dream. A merciful dream.

But still, a dream.

She turns her eyes to Zhang Wei, where he leans against a tree, watching his brothers, calmly playing the notes from his flute.

To Mei Nianqing, cradling Bolin in his arms, occasionally looking her way with a gentle smile and a warm gaze.

And finally, back to San Lang—watching her with a look of quiet frustration and sadness.

When she speaks again—it is not with the soft notes of Tonglu Hudie.

It is in the flat, matter of fact tone of Zhao Beitong.

“What was the first lesson you learned in the Kiln, child?”

Hua Cheng opens his mouth to respond—then winces, clutching a hand to his temple. “...Pressure,” he finally mutters, his voice strained.

“What about it?”

“It...” Hua Cheng presses both hands to his temples, his skull pounding—realizing this is what she must have felt, when Mount Tonglu opened before. “It has to be... released...or else....”

A pressure relief valve. That was how she explained the existence of the Kiln to him. Or else the entire system implodes, taking everything else down with it.

Even if Hua Cheng has absorbed Zhao Beitong’s consciousness into his own spirit, even if she can no longer take form on her own—

The Kiln will still open. The fields of Mount Tonglu will still call.

But now, the hammer—the tools to forge a new ghost king, or to bring it to ruin—

They lay within Hua Cheng’s hands.

“You will go,” Zhao Beitong murmurs, tilting her head back, looking up towards the night sky.

So many stars.

“Try and fight it as you might, you will go.”

And oh, how he does.

He returned to the gates of Ghost City. His butterflies continue their search across the continent for his love, finding nothing but dead ends.

The Ghost King watches gamblers from his throne, and he pretends that the world around him remains still.

Even as more and more ghosts flood to the fields of Mount Tonglu. Their screams and the raging battle carrying far and wide, howling towards a final confrontation.

In the years that follow, Hua Cheng hangs back—knowing, if he goes, what he will find waiting for him.

And yet, that pull remains.

'So much waiting has made you tired,' a voice whispers in his mind. *'You're retreating from the world.'*

Hua Cheng denies it with scowls and sneers. Spends his days scouring reports, his nights, dreaming of his love in his arms.

He's become far better at dreaming than he used to be.

The Xie Lian straddling his waist now is smiling, hair hanging all around them like a silk canopy as he leans over Hua Cheng, lips pressed against his forehead, his cheeks, before finally bringing their mouths together.

Every kiss Hua Cheng has ever dreamed of sharing with his god is based off of one memory, reframed over and over again, hundreds of times, until now, they feel so heart achingly familiar.

Until eventually—they frown against him. "You're unhappy again," the prince whispers.

Hua Cheng's fingers reach up, toying with the strands of Xie Lian's hair that surround him, letting out a tired sigh.

"...I just miss you," he mutters. It's the same answer that he has always given, without fail.

But this time, his dream offers a slightly different reply.

"It was harder, today." Xie Lian admits, his voice slightly weak. It startles the Ghost King, because that's true, it *was* harder today, but...

"There were so many things I wanted to talk to you about," the god whispers, his voice unsteady.

Now, even Hua Cheng's dreams sound distressed.

"…" He frowns, arms sliding around Xie Lian's shoulders, pulling the prince down until he lays flat against Hua Cheng's chest, head tucked underneath his chin. "You can always talk to me, dianxia," he murmurs.

Xie Lian shivers.

"…I know," he whispers, pressing his nose against the side of the Ghost King's neck. "But I…"

It feels almost like a reluctant admission, one that stabs straight through Hua Cheng's core.

"I get so *lonely* , Hong-er," the god clings to him. "I'm trying, but…it's hard."

"I'll come back," Hua Cheng promises, his fingers tucking underneath Xie Lian's chin, tilting his face up, pressing their foreheads together. "I'll definitely come back, your highness."

The god's eyes remain closed, and his lips tremble.

"…Believe me," the ghost pleads softly.

Something about that statement makes Xie Lian stiffen, his lips going still, eyebrows knitting together as he reaches for Hua Cheng's face.

His fingertips stroke over his cheeks, and he whispers.

"Hong-er…are you…?"

Hua Cheng catches him by the wrist, his grip so gentle.

"Am I what?" He murmurs, pressing Xie Lian's palm against his cheek.

It takes the god a moment to answer, his expression wracked with thought, and… A voice echoes through the dream, reverberating in Hua Cheng's head.

"This is the one lesson you never learned."

Hua Cheng's grip on Xie Lian's wrist never tightens, and the kiss he presses against his forehead is featherlight, so tender—

But when he speaks, his tone is dark with anger. "Get out."

It's his dream. And he doesn't want to share it. "This is what you've been mourning.”

This time. Something he has no way of knowing if he ever could have had, and still, he aches for it.

“You turn your back on the world,” she murmurs, “and you say that it’s all for him.” Hua Cheng’s arms tighten around Xie Lian, who frowns with confusion.

He just wants to dream

Just a little longer.

He can still remember his god saying that, the way his arms felt around Wu Ming’s neck, how it felt to be held so close, with Xie Lian whispering against his lips, pleading—

‘Just a little longer.’

But Zhao Beitong’s words echo now, striking a chord.

“This world is his future.”

The words cut deep. And—

They wouldn’t hurt so much if they weren’t true.

After all, was that not the reason that he chose to remain?

‘Because I still have someone precious in this world.’

In *this* world.

“...I know,” he rasps, agonized.

Because he doesn’t want to wake up. Not quite yet. Just wants...

Just wants this moment to last a little bit longer.

“Hong-er,” The god frowns, clinging to his arms. “What’s—?”

The Ghost King opens his eyes, glaring at the red silks of the canopy above, arms splayed out.

He doesn’t know that, hundreds of miles away, a blind Taoist stirs in the night, fingers drifting up towards his lips.

Hua Cheng doesn’t know how badly it frustrates the fallen god, who can never even manage to remember his dreams as clearly as he would like.

They're always present in the moments after he wakes up, flashing before his eyes like fireworks, but...They fade so quickly, leaving him with only vague recollections.

Hua Cheng doesn't know how the prince shivers, curling in on himself, clutching the chain around his throat.

And the god doesn't know that his dreams have shape and voice, that the creature who walks among them now crosses the paths of the continent, a journey he has walked once before...

But far more reluctantly this time, hesitant as the gates of Mount Tonglu loom before him.

They've been shut for three years now, locking millions of ghosts and spirits inside, dooming them to fight until only one remains.

For most, when the gates are shut, they become impassible.

As Hua Cheng stands there, a wraith butterfly returns to him, landing on his shoulder.

And he knows in that moment, before he takes a step forward— The gates will open for him.

Groaning and creaking with protest, mountains of earth and stone stretch apart, making a path.

Beyond, lies a wasteland. A bloodbath. Hua Cheng's pace is slow, unhurried.

His boots make dull thuds against the rocks beneath his feet, audible under the roars and screams of the battles unfolding before him.

Fewer, in the end, than Hua Cheng expected.

The majority of the fields have already been picked clean of weaker prey, left barren and empty.

Of the savage ghosts that remain—all have already fled within the confines of the kiln, even if the mountain has not fully sealed itself.

Hua Cheng can remember a time when ghosts of similar caliber left him on the verge of utter destruction.

They seem like ants to him now.

When he came to this place—he did so unsure of what his intentions were.

On one hand—he knows what his Guoshi would have done, placed in his position.

Exactly what she had done twice before. What she had attempted to do to him:

Destroy whatever creation emerges as the victor.

After all, she would never allow herself to issue a half formed creation —

And she would never allow the creation of more ghost kings. Not ever the reign of Bai Wuxiang's destruction.

Which begs the question—which will this be? A misshapen, ill destined beast—

Or a Ghost King?

He approaches just on the final figure in the kiln descends on it's last opponent, blood streaming from the figure's jaw as he defeats—no, devours—the other savage ghost's form.

Consumption isn't common, even among ghosts. For the strength it requires, and... For the memories.

You carry the weight of them with you, afterwards. Never quite able to shirk them in the years that follow, but...

The figure straightens—and in an instant, Hua Cheng recognizes that face. Remembers the night the seas roared, and the sky screamed back.

And in the end—part of him wonders if this is what Zhao Beitong felt, when she watched him crashing back down from the heavens.

Not surprise, no. Hua Cheng isn't shocked to find that He Xuan survived, or that he answered the call of the Kiln.

He's seen what the man can endure.

Come to think of it, aside from one other—

Hua Cheng never spent that much time watching a human. And in this man's case, it was out of sheer curiosity, to see how long it would take for him to break.

And now, seeing him here, the Ghost King feels almost...

Proud, oddly enough.

And resentful.

The savage ghost stands in the kiln, dark hair hanging around his face in a tangled mess, matted with blood, swaying in the breeze.

Hua Cheng's memories of this place are muddled—but he remembers one thing:

He had to devour something he loved in order to escape.

It's not a matter of whether or not he's *willing* to kill He Xuan.

If it was a choice between the younger ghost's survival and his own, Hua Cheng would —without question.

And yet, Hua Cheng is resentful of the thought that such a life could come to utter waste.

That must have been what Zhao Beitong thought, watching him crash back down. He knows that now.

Because she knew what it would take, for the Kiln doors to shut.

And that once they did, only one of them would be coming back out.

Hua Cheng will always be the one to walk away.

He takes one step forward, watching He Xuan's posture tense in response—seeming to sense what's coming, but—

When the calamity's hand comes into contact with the wall of the Kiln, his foot standing on the threshold, he stops.

He Xuan waits, trembling with anticipation, and...

Hua Cheng doesn't move, one hand braced against the frame to the cavern, his eye wide—

Remembering.

Thud .

His memories from the kiln have always been fragmented, disjointed. One face was always missing. Completely erased.

One name always left blank.

Thud .

'IF YOU TELL ME, I CAN KILL HIM FOR YOU!'

Slowly, his vision hazy, unsteady—his eye drags upwards, just in time to see He Xuan running towards him, likely in an effort to strike first, while Crimson Rain is clearly distracted.

'DON'T YOU THINK I'VE TRIED THAT ALREADY?!'

Hua Cheng's fingers claw at the kiln door, his temples stabbing with the memories rushing before his mind's eye.

A garden filled with flowers.

A butterfly, pinned in a gilded box.

A young man, plunging into darkness.

And one man, standing at the center of it all.

Jun Wu.

A voice snarls in his mind, baring it's fangs.

'He cursed me.'

Hua Cheng knows so much more now, about the world, than he did when he first walked free from the bowels of the Kiln.

His lips curl back into a snarl, and he whispers. "He cursed him."

The rage is immeasurable.

'HE USED ME!'

Used her, shattered her, then told her the cracks he placed in Hudie's heart were of her own making. Her own shortcomings and failings.

When Hua Cheng told Zhao Beitong of the death of Bai Wuxiang, she laughed— shrieking—

'He only knows one trick, doesn't he?'

She had meant the masks—the tricks. Taking credit for saving the day, when he was the cause of danger in the first place.

But ever since Hudie's fall from grace, Jun Wu has been playing the same trick, over and over again.

Forcing people to make impossible choices.

Between losing what they love, and doing nothing.

Between drowning in their own grief, and taking revenge.

And he always punishes them for choosing wrong.

Over the years, Hua Cheng has learned to treasure self determination above all else. The freedom to choose his own path.

And now, he's remembering the stories of the Crown Prince's second banishment— and understanding what the Heavenly Emperor truly did.

He stole Xie Lian's freedom.

Hua Cheng's god walked back into the cage willingly. Offered his neck up for the shackle with no resistance.

Because Jun Wu made him think that he deserved it. Make Xie Lian think the punishment was earned.

And when Hua Cheng leaves this place—he'll forget again.

Suddenly, the crazed fits of rage Zhao Beitong displayed before seem completely rational.

For a moment, it feels hopeless.

But Hua Cheng has faced hopeless situations before. Has dealt with problems that have always seemed as though they didn't have an answer.

He turned his back on heaven, after all. He has looked death on the face—and he has said no.

And after a moment—he begins to think.

He Xuan stands before him, ready to strike—and it only takes a simple flick of Hua Cheng's wrist to send him flying, slamming into the far wall of the kiln, the cavern rumbling in protest from the force of it.

Even if Hua Cheng could walk away from here with his memories intact—

He couldn't deal with Jun Wu. Not with the way things are now. As strong as Hua Cheng might be...

He's dealing with someone that doesn't play fair. Who will always get the upper hand when you fight him one on one, so...

Hua Cheng takes a step back over the threshold of the Kiln. So, the key must be not facing him alone.

Hua Cheng won't next time.

He'll consider it a lesson learned.

'*What are you—?'*

His palm presses against the door of the Kin, sealing He Xuan in once more.

Seemingly alone.

BOOM!

The doors to the kiln slam shut.

When He Xuan wakes again—it's inside of a cavern.

The walls and ceilings are a pure shade of white. And the inside—it's impossibly vast.

It takes him a moment to realize that he has company—standing in the very middle, his body tensing in response.

A woman.

Wearing silks of black, red, and gold.

Her hands remain clasped behind here, shoulders thrown back.

"...What is this?" He snaps, wiping the blood from his chin as he rises up onto his knees.

She doesn't answer, head tilted back, speaking to something He Xuan cannot see. A hammer trembles between his fingertips as he stalks forward, eyes narrowed. He's come too far, to be stopped here.

Again, he snarls—

"What IS THIS?!"

After a moment, the stranger finally answers, her posture ever unchanging.

"...This is my home."

He Xuan staggers slightly, clutching the side of his head, one hand pressing his weapon against the wall of the kiln, fighting to steady himself.

"...Crimson Rain..." He Xuan spits, his eyes narrowed. "Where did he go?" He knows the Ghost King by description. Everyone does.

The woman turns her head towards the sealed gates of the kiln, hair spilling over her shoulders as she does so.

"...The Kiln would not close without me inside," she explains, her eyebrows tense. "But if he entered, he would be forced to kill you in order to survive."

Her eyes flash as she turns back to face him.

"Of course, he assumes that I'll allow you to live."

A silvery flash of light flickers past her ear, the ghost's eyes flashing red. "Precocious little brat."

"Who are you?" He Xuan glares, watching the butterfly as it drifts closer.

"And what do you have to do with this place?!"

"..." The female ghost draws herself up to her full height, wiping a hand down her face. "I am Zhao Beitong. And Hua Cheng set me free to..." She looks He Xuan up and down, "...Deal with you."

The water demon glares.

"Please, don't hide your displeasure with the inconvenience on my account," he hisses, his voice snide.

Zhao Beitong raises an eyebrow. “I wasn’t.”

She reaches and, seemingly out of thin air, draws a blade. It gleams the same shade of silver as the butterflies that flock to her

It’s long, wickedly sharp—and then He Xuan watches it change shape between her fingertips, like it’s fluid—made from rays of pure energy—twisting and bending until it forms a spear.

Satisfied, she lunges—clicking her tongue with displeasure when He Xuan barely manages to parry.

“Sloppy,” she mutters, twisting the pole arm expertly, sliding it between He Xuan’s hammer and his body, forcing the water demon to open his stance as he retreats, arms spread—and that’s when she stabs forward with the end of the spear, piercing He Xuan between his ribs.

He snarls with pain, dropping down and rolling to get away from her, blood dripping sluggishly from his wounds—and when he rolls onto his hands and knees, panting, Zhao Beitong stands tall, the spear spinning lazily between her fingertips.

“Your reflexes aren’t terrible,”

She mutters, circling him like a lioness that has pinned down her prey, eyes burning against the glaring light of the kiln, footsteps echoing against the cavern walls. “But you’re no trained fighter.”

He could be, given time. There’s natural talent.

“...But you’re no San Lang,” she mutters under her breath, shaking her head.

He Xuan forces himself to his feet, spitting blood out onto white marble. “Who?”

Rather than answer his question, Zhao Beitong poses one of her own, her spear shifting into a scimitar.

Almost familiar.

She flips it into a reverse grip, the circumference of the circle she’s pacing ever shrinking as she closes in on the water ghost.

“...Or maybe he knew that I wouldn’t let you win,” Zhao Beitong mutters, her brow furrowed.

After all, he knows her better than anyone.

Which would mean that Hua Cheng saw something in this creature that made him think that He Xuan was capable of surviving her.

The thought of that makes her lip curl into a snarl.

Tonglu Hudie birthed three sons.

Lost them all—and while one survived, she had to let him go.

Zhao Beitong forged three ghost kings.

Lost the first two—though in the end, it was the last one that ended up losing her.

She sees no need to forge another.

And yet.

The Goddess of the Kiln watches He Xuan use spiritual energy to heal his wound, his gaze sharp. Calculating.

No, he isn't a prodigy in battle. Not like Hua Cheng.

But she can't say there's no glimmer of potential, either.

She watches the water demon run through countless scenarios in his mind—settling on the fact that, for now, direct combat is the only option.

He isn't a fool.

The two charge toward one another, weapons raised—his hammer, hardly what she would call a fine spiritual tool, but wielded with such ferocity—clashing against her blade of spiritual energy with a great—

CLANG!

And then, there is no kiln. No shrieking.

No wraith butterflies

He Xuan stands on a rooftop, overlooking a city.

The sun is just now starting to set, making the bay look like a sea of liquid flame, matching the long path of torches that light up the streets below.

He remembers this place.

His fingertips twitch by his sides, eyes wide. This is—

“Gege!” A voice calls from behind him, and the water demon stops—his eyes wide, filled with emotions he had long forgotten how to feel. “You got us the best seats ever!”

“...” He Sheng doesn’t move at first, his lips trembling—like he doesn’t know whether to enjoy the memory, or to resent the fact that he’s being forced to remember what he lost.

And yet, the boy can’t stop himself from turning around, a small smile on his face. “You like it?”

A-Zhong beams up at him, her eyes sparkling with happiness.

He forgot how happy they were that day, in the years that followed.

“I love it—you’re really amazing, you know that?”

“...” He Sheng’s smile is slightly lopsided as he kneels down, resting one hand on top of her head.

“...I’m only amazing because I want to make your life special,” he admits, ruffling her hair.

A-Zhong’s expression doesn’t change, smiling up at him happily, and He Sheng’s mouth trembles at the corners.

“I’m sorry that I didn’t—”

“She won’t answer, you know.” A voice calls out

He Sheng stiffens, not looking away from A-Zhong’s face as Zhao Beitong’s voice grows closer, pointing out the truth in a calm, almost distant manner.

“Because that isn’t what you said that day,” the ghost explains. “It’s what you wish you had said but you never did.”

A regret that he had for many years, after her death.

The words he often left unsaid growing up out of some misplaced sense of sheepishness. It all seems so foolish now, but...

He Sheng grits his teeth, his shoulders hunched.

“...Get lost,” he mutters. “It isn’t your business.”

Zhao Beitong’s smile is bitter, but bracing—knowing what will come next.

“Oh,” the ghost mutters, shaking her head. “You have no idea, boy.”

Of course—he charges her, and when he does, the memory goes black.

No kiln, no fire festival. No ghost kings, no younger sisters.

He Xuan rises to his feet once more, this time—standing in what seems to be a workshop.

Shelves of raw ore, finished blades—leather gloves cast aside here and there. The smell of soot and hot iron.

And the repeated sounds of a hammer slamming down.

CLANG!

CLANG!

CLANG!

It’s a dance that has played out before. Many times.

The boy turned scholar, then murderer—and then a savage ghost, the water demon He Xuan—

He watches as a bladesmith is turned to a Guoshi, then a princess, to a Queen, and finally—

The Goddess of the Kiln, Zhao Beitong.

The threads of their memories intertwine and knot together, flashes of scenes passing before their eyes.

Two children, walking down autumn paths, hand in hand.

A garden of butterflies—and then one sealed and pinned inside a gilded box.

He Xuan is quicker than her last pupil to understand the purpose of this exercise—

After all, he's devoured many souls himself before.

Life left him with an endless hunger. Consuming is what he knows, now.

They're chasing one another towards the end—and the victor will survive

But he also knows that—in spite of his own victories on the fields of Mount Tonglu— and Zhao Beitong's severely weakened state—

He's no match. Not in the ways of combat. Not right now.

But He Xuan is no fool—and he's always been aware of his own weaknesses.

As such, he's more than aware of his own strengths.

Now, he stands at the edge of his own memories.

On the edge of a cliff—a bloody hammer in one hand, the black waters of a wrathful sea churning below.

But there's a missing piece to this. A gap in the record.

"...Why did you let him go?" He Xuan mutters. He isn't exactly asking Zhao Beitong— he knows the answer already.

Hua Cheng tricked her. Soothed her with her own memories as she was devoured, then left her remains there to enjoy the dream until the end.

But there's more to it.

While He Xuan was watching, taking in someone else's life, he saw more than just Tonglu Hudie, or the monstrous creature that she would become.

He saw her memories of the Crimson Ghost as well.

Before he was the scourge of the heavens. The Crimson Rain Sought Flower.

The Ghost King, Hua Cheng.

He Xuan knows—maybe Hua Cheng was powerful enough—or even clever enough— to trick her. But to contain her entirely?

No.

He was merely a deadbolt in front of a door that would always be thrown open. That's why they're here again, now.

But why is always the primary question, ringing in He Xuan's skull like a gong. It always has been, all of his life.

Why, why, why.

When he was small, he would ask himself why he was so blessed—and as he grew, what he had done to deserve such ill fortune.

He's still asking now, even if the circumstances have changed.

Why, why, why.

But now, he knows why. It's right there in front of him.

"...You think he can kill Jun Wu," He Xuan mutters, rain pelting his bloodstained cheeks.

Thunder roars, the sea churns—and her eyes flash.

But Hua Cheng has made no actions towards the Heavenly Emperor in his time since his ascension as a Ghost King. There's the famed duel with Thirty Three heavenly officials, but no one knows *why* Hua Cheng did that, or why generals Xuan Zhen and Nan Yang were spared.

A few of the officials on that list were rather respected members of heavenly society— but their downfall didn't weaken the heavens as a whole. It only embarrassed the heavenly court, in the end.

One could argue that Hua Cheng is biding his time. Building his power..

And he has. There's no sense in denying that. Crimson Rain is well known as the most powerful creature in the Ghost Realm. That isn't in dispute.

His wealth puts even the most indulgent monarchies to shame. But still, his spiritual power cannot rival that of Jun Wu.

Even if it did—He Xuan has also learned the conditions of the curse by now. Hua Cheng forgets the truth of the Heavenly Emperor's identity when he leaves. How could he fulfill her wishes, in that case?

It places his actions—as well as that of Zhao Beitong—in a new perspective.

Just as the spirit rushes towards him, prepared to shove him off the cliff side, to end his memories and devour him, He Xuan mutters something under his breath.

“He needs me.”

Zhao Beitong stops, her claws inches from his throat.

Slowly, He Xuan meets her gaze.

“He needs me.”

When he repeats the words, he says them with even more conviction—his eyes burning brighter than they have in years.

Since the heart in his chest began to beat like a useless instrument, disloyal to the body it was meant to propel.

“Why do you think that he needs me?”

The Ghost is stopped before him, the violets and reds of her eyes burning like twin alchemical flames, threatening to burn him to ash—

But He Xuan isn’t afraid.

“You haven’t figured that part out yet,” he murmurs, a wry smile twisting his lips, “Have you?”

Her fingers seal around his throat just then, lips parted into an irritated snarl. “You think you can condescend to ME, child?”

He dangles over the edge now, the black waters churning below.

He Xuan’s expression remains unchanged.

He told a god something once. Many years ago.

“I can figure it out, if you let me,” he murmurs, dark hair hugging his cheeks wetly, eyes burning an unnatural shade of blue against the night. “I’m good at that sort of thing.”

Zhao Beitong’s eyes narrow sharply.

‘I can fix it, if you let me.’

Back then, life was so simple.

'I'm good at fixing things.'

"…If you still have no idea, why should I believe you can find an answer now?" She glares, her voice lowered to a hiss.

"Oh, I have figured something out," He Xuan shakes his head. "I just don't know the context."

"By all means, please SHARE!" She snarls, squeezing him tighter.

Instead of flailing, or reacting with discomfort, He Xuan simply lifts his chin, looking towards the skies. Watching as the clouds darken and churn.

"The heavens are my enemy as well," the scholar explains, "I just don't know why yet."

"…And I'm supposed to expect you to figure that out?" She glares, nails digging into his skin. Her words filled with venom, eyes with distrust.

"Open the gates," He Xuan murmurs. "If I fail, you can destroy us both—can't you?"

Zhao Beitong doesn't seem as confident about that.

Her power has long since been divided, with Hua Cheng absorbing her stores of spiritual power over time—and building up his own massive reserves.

He isn't the savage ghost that he was when they met. It would be a fair fight this time.

Perhaps He Xuan could tip the scales.

That presumes that he would attack the Ghost King, instead of both of them turning on her, but…

When she looks up into the water demon's eyes, she knows; They both want their answers.

The last time the doors of the Kiln slammed shut, it took two years for them to open again.

Now, the gates reopen after only a matter of weeks.

Weeks that Hua Cheng spent waiting, his palm pressed against the gates, allowing the spirit that has long been contained within his own soul to temper the water demon He Xuan into something that would suit his own needs.

But when he looks into the cavern—he doesn't see Zhao Beitong feasting on He Xuan's remains.

Or He Xuan, risen as a newly formed Ghost King.

He sees the two standing side by side—

And a gleaming silver whip clutched between Zhao Beitong's fingers.

Hua Cheng arches an eyebrow.

He steps back into the chamber, hands clasped behind his back, his scimitar gleaming at his hip.

"It seems like you two made friends," he comments, glancing back and forth between the two of them.

He Xuan carries no weapon.

He lifts his hands, pulling his hair up.

His mother always used to chide him for allowing it to fall in his face, explaining that it would be harder for him to concentrate that way.

Now, he ties it up over his head in a high, neat ponytail. 'See?'

He watches the Ghost King with a keen eye.

'That's better, isn't it?'

Ultimately, he knows that Zhao Beitong won't harm Hua Cheng, her affection for the ghost is deep—almost maternal.

But even a mother will raise her hand to her son, on occasion.

That gives him time.

"Keep him occupied," He Xuan mutters, rolling up the sleeves of his robe.

The goddess rolls her eyes, cracking the whip between her fingers, wraith butterflies beginning to pour from the ceiling of the kiln.

“Weren’t you paying attention before?” She replies, the end of the weapon curling around Hua Cheng’s ankle—

Dragging him back inside the Kiln. “Keeping men occupied is what I do.”

The scimitar E-Ming comes hurling out of it’s sheath, crashing against the line of the whip until it shatters, only to be reformed into a blade of matching power, the two clashing as hordes of Wraith Butterflies tear through the kiln.

CLANG!

The clouds of spiritual energy rip at one another as two of the most powerful beings to ever walk the earth clash, the air roaring with power.

Among them, He Xuan is a paper ship in a hurricane, tossed around by the current. His fingers clutch at the walls of the Kiln.

He refuses to be swallowed whole by it now.

Even when the force of the blows becomes to powerful, it knocks him off his feet— Each time, He Xuan repeats what he has always done.

He rises back up, like the waves returning to the shore after a storm.

Rushing forward like a willful tide—just as Hua Cheng clashes with Zhao Beitong in another blow, struggling to suppress her, the water demon’s hands collide with his back.

And they fall back into the path of the Kiln.

There’s no brilliant white cavern. No clash of blades.

When He Xuan opens his eyes again, he hears screaming.

DIANXIA!

DIANXIA!

DIANXIA!

He rises to his feet, standing in the middle of a crowd, flowers pouring down from every direction—

Now, he sees him.

A golden masked figure, moving like a painting brought to life.

Then the screaming as the crowd begins to see a red figure plunging from the sky, crashing towards the ground.

It's only when the Crown Prince catches the boy, his mask slipping from his face, that He Xuan realizes that he's seen the man before.

The weaver.

The blind Taoist.

The Greatest of all of the Martial deities, the Crown Prince who Pleased the Gods, cradling the child that would become the wrath of hell, King of Ghosts, the Crimson Rain Sought Flower in his arms.

It's a flashpoint—an intersection of two fates, changed forever by one encounter One act of kindness.

He Xuan watches the memories fly past—never lifting a hand to protest as Crimson Rain's mind flickers through his own.

There's a moment, when the Ghost King's gaze flashes over He Xuan's memories of Qin Meirong, when the water demon almost protests.

But instead, he straightens his spine from his usual slouch, throwing his shoulders back, hands clasped behind him.

After all, he's here with questions of his own, walking a quiet path deeper into the Ghost King's mind.

Hua Cheng keeps replaying one of He Xuan's memories.

Over and over again, like a gambler that doesn't know when to stop throwing his dice, even if he ends up with snake eyes over and over again.

He stands in a market, watching a white robed cultivator speak with a child clad in dark robes.

Smiling and laughing.

Watches the way that the blind Taoist fiddles with a silver chain around his neck as he speaks, thanking the local boy for fixing his loom.

Hua Cheng hasn't seen his love since that day.

His last memory of Xie Lian's face are of tear stained cheeks and frightened screams.

'You promised you would never lie to me.'

Oh, how the crown prince wept on the day that Wu Ming left this world, leaving only a white blossom and dark blade behind.

Hua Cheng kneels before his figure now, fingertips trembling as they stroke the memory's cheek, eyes wide.

He's always been so beautiful.

It's not that Hua Cheng has ever forgotten this. That would be impossible. But he's been a ghost, mourning for centuries, clutching onto a limited reel of memories, looking over the same images of Xie Lian's face over and over again.

In that time, the god almost ceased to be a living, breathing thing to him. He became a treasured memory, something that Hua Cheng would prefer to lose himself in, over and over again, as the world moved on around him, often forgetting—

Xie Lian was still living in this world.

All these years, even if Hua Cheng couldn't see him, couldn't find him—Xie Lian was still smiling and laughing with children, offering them encouragement. Even giving little He Sheng his own dinner.

'You turn your back on this world—and you tell yourself it's all for his sake.'

Xie Lian watches as He Sheng runs off, a quiet, happy smile on his face—fingertips still toying with the silver chain around his neck.

'But this world is his future.'

Centuries ago, a god clutched Hong-er's ashes and wept, apologizing, over and over again.

"I'm sorry!"

He Xuan stands inside that memory now, watching as a broken idol weeps beneath the rain, his head covered by a bamboo hat—clutching a smooth black stone against his chest.

"Hong-er—I'm so sorry!"

Inside someone else's memories, Hua Cheng whispers the same thing.

"I'm sorry."

His hands cradle Xie Lian's face, wishing he could speak to his god again.

Never before has the child prayed with the expectation of an answer, but god, how desperate he is for his love to look on his face one last time.

To hear his voice when he speaks, and give him an answer.

He Xuan listens as Xie Lian hunches over on himself, making a solemn oath:

"I won't do it again. I won't—I won't ever give up again!"

Centuries separated, with a different voice, a different body, a different name—the oath is repeated.

"I won't do it again," he whispers.

Hua Cheng doesn't remember the moment his faith began to waver. Not in Xie Lian— never in him.

But in himself.

In his ability to find his god again. To protect him.

Somewhere in the last three and a half centuries, doubt began to creep in. "I won't doubt myself," he mutters.

"Not ever again."

Xie Lian doesn't turn his head, doesn't look at him, his smile unchanging.

After all—this isn't Hua Cheng's memory.

That's where He Xuan stands now, diving deeper—and there, he finds it.

The answer to the question he's been asking all his life:

Why.

Before him, stands a little girl.

Dressed in green and white silks, warm brown locks of hair pulled back and away from her face, dimples in her cheeks as she smiles up at the Ghost King.

Silly and ignorant, but it makes her seem almost fearless. “What’s your name, little one?”

“Shi—!” She starts, then chokes, pretending to hack for a moment on her snack, turning around, curls bouncing all around her. “Shhhheeesh, this is good!” The child mutters, wiping at her mouth.

“It’s Mingxia!”

Liar, He Xuan thinks, watching her face. Such a terrible liar.

Still, he follows after them, watching what an odd pair that they make—a Ghost King (in disguise, but still fearsome) and a small child, skipping with a sweet treat in her hands, chattering off countless questions.

Why is this memory so important, he wonders. Why would she lie?

It isn’t until a face rounds the corner, that He Xuan begins to understand.

Like a weight settling in his gut, as his eyes settle on the visage of a man that he’s met before.

Young—younger than when He Xuan saw him. Rich and handsome.

The Water Master, Shi Wudu.

‘…You.’

That’s all that He Xuan can think, watching the Water Master snatch his younger sister up into his arms, his eyes narrowed.

“What’s going on here?”

‘It was you.’

He stands in the background, a footnote in his own demise as Shi Wudu explains the curse that haunts his family.

‘You took everything from me.’

A parasitic being, cast on them many centuries ago—one that won't unlatch from Shi Qingxuan until he's dead.

A jinx monster.

Oh, how He Xuan knows such beings very well.

All his life, He Xuan has been repeating one question, over and over: Why?

Why was he born so special?

Why did fate seem to turn against him so suddenly?

Why did his sister and lover have to die?

Why were so many always standing in his way?

Why couldn't he Rest In Peace?

Why is he here now?

And here, in this one moment, the truth comes to light.

When He Xuan watches Shi Wudu ask Hua Cheng if he can trick the monster again— make it latch onto someone else. If then, they could finally be free of it.

"That wouldn't work."

He Xuan's future, his fate—it wasn't lost, or broken.

"You can run from a curse, or you can face it."

His hands ball into fists at his at sides, trembling.

"But you can't cast it off onto someone else."

He Xuan's future, his family, his life—they were stolen away from him.

"Not without bringing it back down on yourself in a far worse form."

That's what this is.

That's why He Xuan is here.

He watches Shi Wudu's ascension through Hua Cheng's eyes, the rise of his younger brother along with him—

And with his own, He Xuan watches himself fall.

Now, with old questions finally answered, he begins to find himself asking a new one: Why?

Why was Shi Wudu's younger sibling more important than his own?

Why would he look upon a life, an entire family, and think that he had the right to push them off the cliff in order to save himself? Simply because he had the power to do so?

And why would the heavens accept that? He Xuan stops, looking towards the sky.

The cruel, blank, unfeeling sky—always looking down on the suffering of the world, never offering any kindness in response.

After watching the rise and fall of the Crown Prince of Wuyong—He Xuan thinks he knows why.

Jun Wu isn't a fool.

He saw two young men—He Xuan and Shi Wudu, and saw that both had the power to ascend.

That both would be powerful, fearsome gods in their own right.

Jun Wu is always clever. Generous, when he wants to be. Self aggrandizing—

And an excellent liar.

But he's also a coward.

Someone must have told Shi Wudu how to switch fates at one point or another. A mortal wouldn't have known. And if a ghost had done so, Hua Cheng would have learned of it.

Meaning it must have been a god.

A god that would have then had the new Water Master under his thumb.

And in doing so, it would have stopped He Xuan from ascending.

He Xuan, who has always been too clever for his own good. Always the first to reach the answer—

And set in his ways.

He Xuan was a good man, once. In the days when he still had a heart beating in his chest.

He would have learned the truth eventually, if he had been allowed to rise to the heavens. And he wouldn't have been susceptible to bribery or blackmail.

Jun Wu has allowed very few gods to approach his level of power, in the last millennia.

Xie Lian was cast down for it.

They make excuses now. Speak of the heavens interference, how cruel and malevolent the backlash of fate can be—

But now, looking through Zhao Beitong's memories—that was all a lie. A cruel, insidious lie.

The universe didn't unleash Bai Wuxiang on the people of Xianle.

Jun Wu did.

The universe didn't place a cursed shackle in the god's eyes. Jun Wu did.

The universe didn't write the rules of the heavens.

Jun Wu did.

And when a young, compassionate god threatened those rules—and in doing so, Jun Wu's power—

Jun Wu attempted to break him.

The only martial god in the heavenly court that comes close to Jun Wu in strength while retaining any level of independence is General Ming Guang.

But he's so wholemindedly focused on his own desires, Pei Ming is hardly a threat to political structures of the heavens.

It's almost reminiscent of Hua Cheng, in a way.

Two immensely powerful beings with very different callings—and yet, both of them seem to be protected from the Heavenly Emperor's wrath that way.

"...I understand," He Xuan mutters, watching a little boy play in a courtyard.

Giggling without a care in the world—not knowing the cruelty of his own fate, or the suffering that would be incurred to spare him from it.

Oh, how He Xuan hates him in this moment.

Hates his joy, his silly little smiles and laughs.

Hates him because he wants A-Zhong back.

Because he wants Qin Meirong in his arms once more.

But even then, there was a seed in He Xuan's chest.

Some small, nearly forgotten part of him that knows the truth.

That ignorance and guilt are not the same.

That you can't damn someone who never had a choice.

But that decision doesn't lay before him now—and it won't. Not for centuries to come.

For now, the Ghost King stirs upon hearing his voice, his head whipping to the side, finally looking away from Xie Lian's face.

"...What?" He questions, rising to his feet. The memory warps.

He Xuan watches as the courtyard begins to fade and collapse around him, taking Shi Qingxuan's laughter with it.

The water demon almost mourns the sound, but...

They'll see each other again.

He'll see to that.

"...I understand!" He Xuan calls out, charging towards the barrier.

The vision before him shatters like glass—and once again, he's standing in the cavern of the kiln, between a clash of two titans.

Blood drips down Hua Cheng's cheek, a deep cut underneath his eye—while Zhao Beitong spits blood onto the ground, clutching her ribs.

"When we walk out of here—I'll forget about Jun Wu," the water demon explains, rubbing his temple. "I'll forget about what he did to both of you, but—!" He holds up a trembling finger, pointing at his chest. "I won't forget that the Heavens are my enemy."

Zhao Beitong pauses.

Because He Xuan won't forget what Shi Wudu did to him.

Or that, in spite of his crimes, Jun Wu allowed him to ascend anyway.

"I know myself," the water demon continues, pounding his fist against his chest for emphasis. "I'll get close to them—I'll get revenge."

He takes a staggering step closer to both of them, his gaze fierce.

Now, finally, this half baked whelp of a Ghost King is beginning to remind Zhao Beitong of her San Lang. An echo of him.

Potential.

"The Water Master is the closest to Jun Wu of all of the gods."

He Xuan looks to Hua Cheng for confirmation—and even now, despite his irritation with having his memories scoured, the Ghost King nods.

Not in scales of power, no.

But the Heavenly Emperor trusts the Water Master, and favors him heavily.

Humans take this as a sign of fortune.

Pray to the Water Master, among the most powerful of the Gods. He can bring you wealth, good luck—even fertility, according to some.

Within the heavenly court, however—there are rumors. As there always are, when a god is favored in such an obvious way.

That the two share a relationship in private that might be very different than what is shown to the public.

Such rumors might have flown around about Xie Lian, if he had remained in the heavens long enough—but Hua Cheng can attest—

He rose through skill and power alone.

Shi Wudu, however, is no Crown Prince of Xianle. Talented and illustrious as he might be—he should not have risen so far so quickly.

In his case, there's a chance there might be truth to such rumors.

Particularly when you consider the secrets the two already share.

"It will put me close to him," He Xuan mutters. "I might learn the truth on my own that way, or—" He glances between Hua Cheng and Zhao Beitong, "—put me in the position to help carry out a plan in the future."

"...A plan," Hua Cheng repeats, crossing his arms.

Zhao Beitong presses her palm against the side of her head, thinking, and...

After a moment, He Xuan stares at the two ghosts, his jaw hanging open in abject shock.

"...You two really don't have a plan for dealing with him?"

"I do," Hua Cheng starts, only to be interrupted.

"Does that plan extend further than finding Xie Lian?"

The Ghost King shuts his mouth, and the answer is right there:

Any and all of his plans: absolutely none of them extend further than finding and pleasing his god.

Zhao Beitong shrugs, rubbing the back of her neck.

"I made many plans in the beginning," she mutters. "None of them ever seemed to work."

"...Well," He Xuan heaves out a sigh, crossing his arms. "I can help you fix that."

He's always been good at fixing things, after all.

"We're not lacking in intelligence," Hua Cheng glares.

"It's impossible to plan for something that you forget the moment you leave this place."

His method of counteracting that has always been assuming that in the end, finding and supporting Xie Lian, working to free him of his shackles—those actions would place him in Jun Wu's path

Not so different from what He Xuan himself just described in his trek towards revenge. How is that any better?

"Yes—but in this moment—we all remember." He Xuan points towards the walls of the Kiln. "Within this space—his curses hold no power."

He looks to Hua Cheng. "Hong-er."

The Ghost King freezes, his pupils dilating, and He Xuan shrugs, looking back up at the cavern ceiling.

"I can say that name here, but when I leave, I'll probably forget."

The truth of it hits heavily, but Hua Cheng has been living with the weight of it for a while.

"But—that also means that if Jun Wu is going to die—it'll be here." He Xuan continues. "So, if we already have a plan in place by the time we converge here again, we'll remember—and already know what to do."

"That requires information that we don't have," Zhao Beitong frowns.

"We don't know if Jun Wu would ever be foolish enough to come here, knowing that —and we don't know what the circumstances would be. That's why the curse has worked for this long."

And it's horribly, cruelly effective.

He Xuan already knows this.

"Right," He agrees.

"But your memories proved something," he murmurs, glancing around at the walls of the Kiln before pointing to Zhao Beitong. "He isn't invincible."

Her eyes widen slightly, and the scholar repeats— "How many times did you cut him with Zhu Xin?" A hundred. She counted them all.

"He wasn't as powerful then as he is now," He Xuan concedes. "But neither were you."

Both of them are creatures that have built up immeasurable stores of power over so many years on earth.

“Why were you able to cut him, back then?”

“...I surprised him,” Zhao Beitong admits.

Zhao Beitong is a builder. A long tested blade master. She builds things. Creates. Maybe if she had questioned life more—she wouldn’t have ended up on this path.

Hua Cheng is a survivor. Sharpened instincts, bare desires—lingering on despite all else, with incomparable strength.

But instinct isn’t the same as analyzing.

He Xuan is also a builder. And a survivor. But he’s more than that.

He’s a scholar.

“What if,” he mutters, still looking at the ceiling. “We knew something that he didn’t?”

The other two ghosts stare at him.

“...How?” Hua Cheng murmurs, watching him intently. Zhao Beitong wasn’t as eager to believe in the young ghost’s capability before, but after watching his memories...

Even she seems willing to listen.

“...You said this place was your home,” He Xuan glances over at her.

“But you aren’t the Kiln itself.” He points towards the exit, which now lies open, and the other three mountains that frame the hills of Mount Tonglu. “The other Guoshi, their spirits form those hills—but this mountain, it was here before you were even born.”

“...That’s right.”

Zhao Beitong agrees.

“...There was something that you didn’t see,” He Xuan murmurs, glancing around. “The Volcano exploding—it was never a natural disaster.”

Her expression falters.

“In all of recorded history, has there ever been another eruption like it?”

There hasn’t.

“...You think it was...resentment?” Zhao Beitong mutters, her eyes wide, trying to take that in.

In the end, that’s still another form of natural disaster—and even less preventable.

“A release of pressure, sure—but it also did something else, didn’t it?” He Xuan points out.

Zhao Beitong grows pale—but Hua Cheng is beginning to understand where this is going.

“...A calamity,” Hua Cheng mutters. “It led to the birth of the first Calamity.” Bai Wuxiang.

“Does that really change anything?” Zhao Beitong’s fists hang by her sides, tightly clenched.

He Xuan smiles back at her. He looks so young in that moment, his eyes bright as he tackles a problem. “It changes everything, Guoshi Tonglu,” he replies, pressing his palm against the wall of the Kiln. “Because this place existed before you—but you’ve been able to control it.”

He stops in the middle of the cavern. “I’m willing to bet that this place—it’s actually just a nexus point for positive and negative energy. When it falls out of balance— pressure builds, and the Kiln releases it. But it doesn’t have a consciousness, so...” He Xuan trails off.

“Whichever spirit has the most resentful energy—they control the path of the Kiln. There was likely a time when that was Bai Wuxiang, but I doubt he realized it then.”

Oh.

Zhao Beitong smiles, her expression filled with bitterness. How that must haunt him now, huh?

Knowing that he could have stopped his own downfall, if he hadn’t been so blinded by arrogance and greed to see what was going on around him.

She's glad to know that.

"Then, it was you. And now…" He glances toward Hua Cheng. "You." After all—the Kiln was open until he came.

"…How does that help us?" The Ghost King sighs. "Bai Wuxiang was a calamity himself. Jun Wu likely already knows that I'm in control of the Kiln now, if that's the case."

"Because," He Xuan taps his foot against the cave floor, "this place has more than one function."

After all—it's a natural geographic point where spiritual energy—negative spiritual energy, resentment, pools.

"We're able to look inside each other's memories." He continues. "But not before we commit the act of consumption. You saw Zhao Beitong's life *before* you defeated her."

"…And what difference does that make?" Hua Cheng frowns.

"You know what I'm talking about," He Xuan murmurs, watching Zhao Beitong.

After all—they both have a history of consuming other Ghosts.

And accessing consciousness and memories—that comes after, not before.

"This place," He Xuan glances around, "I'm willing to bet it's connected to the chamber where you found your friends. The room with the two doors?"

Hua Cheng's face suddenly pales with understanding.

The Kiln itself—it's a connection between the human realm, and something else.

"You can lie about your memories, bury them, forget things—but not here." He Xuan taps his foot again, clearly closing in on his point. "You both assumed that what you were experiencing was a connection between your minds, but it wasn't. It was the Kiln."

"How does that help?!"

Zhao Beitong snaps. "So, so what if it's just some weird cosmic quirk that's allowing us to see one another's memories—what does that have to do with Jun Wu?!”

“Because—the Kiln lets you look back,” He Xuan whips around to look at her “Theoretically—you could look forward, too.”

He kneels down, looking at the Kiln floor.

“…Well,” the goddess scoffs, turning away—arms crossed. “Divining my future didn’t exactly work out well for me.”

He Xuan’s palm presses flat against the marble. “This isn’t fortune telling,” he murmurs. “It won’t be like that.”

Hua Cheng watches him closely, taking a step closer to his figure. “…If that was possible, wouldn’t Jun Wu have already done it?”

“I doubt he’s put much thought into what this place actually is,” He Xuan replies. “He just uses it for his needs, then forgets about it.”

Zhao Beitong snorts derisively, half under her breath.

Sounds like him.

“And whatever we do see—the Kiln’s magic is tied to its geography. We’ll forget when we leave.” He Xuan mutters. “But when we return—we’ll know something he doesn’t, and we’ll have a plan.”

“…What future is it going to show us, exactly?” Hua Cheng kneels down beside him, watching him intently.

They almost look like brothers, huddled together like that.

In any other situation, it might have made Zhao Beitong smile.

“Our futures. The Kiln’s future. Who knows.”

He Xuan shrugs. “You’re the one in control of it. I’m just going to agitate it into action.”

Hua Cheng takes a moment to process that, watching as He Xuan pulls back his fist. “…You’re going to what?” He asks flatly.

Just in time to watch He Xuan’s fist slam down.

It plummets into the floor of the Kiln with all of his strength—which isn’t negligible, in this situation—and the marble—

A crack runs through it.

"...What is he doing?" Zhao Beitong questions, her eyes widening.

"Agitating..." Hua Cheng starts, then stops.

BOOM!

He Xuan's fist slams down again—and Hua Cheng watches the crack grow and fracture.

Hua Cheng glances up at the goddess, and—

For a moment, he looks so young, offering her an apologetic smile, tipping his head to the side.

"...I didn't think this through," he admits.

Zhao Beitong's eyes widen, vexed as she takes a step back, gripping the wall of the Kiln.

Which is for the best—her spirit is severely weakened, and whatever this is—

Hua Cheng suspects he and He Xuan are the only ones meant to move forward. Her story is already written.

But theirs is far from over.

"...Relax," Hua Cheng drawls, trying to sound confident—even as He Xuan slams his fist down again.

BOOM!

"Whatever it is—I'll deal with it."

He always does, after all.

The Kiln begins to groan, walls roaring and vibrating in protest. Waiting.

"..." Hua Cheng grits his teeth, pressing his hand against the crack, feeling it thrum beneath his fingertips.

A living, breathing thing.

Waiting for him, to tell it what to do.

The Ghost King squeezes his eyes shut.

“…SHOW ME!” He roars, his voice filling the chamber.

Just like that—the floor beneath them shatters, sending both ghosts tumbling into the abyss below.

The Future of this World

Chapter Summary

This is the Kiln.

He recognizes the white walls. The vast, almost endless height to the ceilings. But Zhao Beitong isn’t there—and the floor that He Xuan just shattered—it’s completely intact beneath them.

“...Great.” He mutters, sitting up and crossing his arms. “You broke it.”

He Xuan rolls his eyes, sitting up beside him, brushing off his arms. “I didn’t break anything.”

“Well, this isn’t how it’s supposed to work,” Hua Cheng mutters, shaking his head. “You broke it.”

“I didn’t!”

Chapter Notes

You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

See the end of the chapter for more notes

And for a moment, there is nothing.

No Zhao Beitong. No planning. No Kiln. Just darkness.

But when Hua Cheng opens his eyes again, he sits up, confused.

Because this is the Kiln.

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"Well, this isn't how it's supposed to work," Hua Cheng mutters, shaking his head. "You broke it."

"I didn't!"

"You—"

BOOM!

They both fall silent, watching.

Then, there's a voice—one that Hua Cheng knows far too well.

He's been following it all his life.

"SAN LANG?!"

He Xuan watches the Ghost King go completely still, his eyes widening. How...does he know that name—?

A figure crashes down onto the floor of the Kiln.

Dressed in white cultivator's robes. Long, heart wrenchingly perfect waves of dark brown hair pooling around him.

For a moment, Hua Cheng can't move—can't breathe as he watches his god rise to his feet, brushing himself off—glancing around blindly.

"...San Lang?" He calls again.

Somehow, in his heart—Hua Cheng knows.

Xie Lian is calling him.

The ghost staggers to his feet without thinking—not an ounce of hesitation as he rushes to the god's side.

"I'm here," he answers, clinging to Xie Lian's hand—as he has so many times before. "I'm right here!"

But Xie Lian doesn't look at him—doesn't answer him.

His fingers don't even move in response to Hua Cheng's grip.

"Dianxia," he tries, squeezing tighter, reaching up to cup Xie Lian's cheek, stroking his thumb over his chin, nearly frantic. "Please, love—

just look at me."

But he never does.

"He can't answer you," He Xuan mutters, rising to his feet. "We can't touch this, we can only watch."

Because this—

Hua Cheng looks around, finally understanding.

This is the Kiln's future.

Suddenly, Xie Lian jerks away from him.

"WHO IS IT?!"

Hua Cheng almost (stupidly) answers that it's him again, but before he can—there's another voice.

Coming from another white clad silhouette, facing away from him. Quietly, it replies—

"You know who I am."

"..." Hua Cheng's lips tear into a snarl, at the sight of that mask. Xie Lian doesn't need to see it to know what it is.

Half laughing, half crying.

"...SAN LANG!" He blurts out again, scrambling backwards, and Hua Cheng's heart aches.

Does this mean he'll fail again, even after he finds him?

Is that his future?

"There's no need to shout."

Bai Wuxiang's voice is as calm as ever as he walks through the kiln, gripping a staff in his hand. "It's just you and me here. No one else will come—the Kiln is sealed."

Hua Cheng watches Xie Lian's grip on Fangxin tighten, lifting the sword up, pointing it directly at him.

"Where is he?" The god snarls, his voice unafraid—not for himself.

"Where is he right now?"

"He's gone," the calamity replies simply.

Hua Cheng's stomach drops as Xie Lian's face falls.

'I'm not,' he thinks desperately, watching the prince's lips tremble. *'I'm right here!'*

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

"He doesn't believe in you anymore. Dead. He left. What do you think?"

Hua Cheng watches Xie Lian's face briefly contort with fear, and his heart aches.

Never.

He reaches for the chain around Xie Lian's neck, feeling the ring there.

I would never—

Then, the god's expression contorts with rage.

"STOP YOUR NONSENSE!" He shouts, lunging, thrusting the sword towards Bai Wuxiang's chest. "SAN LANG WOULD NEVER LEAVE ME!"

Hua Cheng freezes, watching with wide eyes.

'Hong-er would NEVER leave me!'

Does he...?

Bai Wuxiang laughs, parrying the blow with ease. "Alright, alright—I've sent him outside the Kiln. But even if he does arrive—it'll be too late."

Hua Cheng's eyes never leave Xie Lian's face, caught on those words.

'San Lang would never leave me.'

...Does he know?

Hua Cheng's heart makes a home in his throat as he watches Xie Lian's every move, pounding needlessly.

"It's better that he doesn't see this," the white clothed calamity continues, stalking towards him. "Even if he doesn't realize it now—he won't want to see the state of you."

Hua Cheng's lips peel back into a snarl as he tries to step in front of Xie Lian protectively, unable to defy his instincts, even if he knows it's useless.

"Who knows if he'll still want to be with you."

In the background, He Xuan rolls his eyes.

"Something tells me he will."

Hua Cheng whips his head around to glare at him, his eye narrowed with annoyance —and it does take a toll on the seriousness of the moment, when he snarls—

"Shut the fuck UP!"

Before the water demon can respond, Xie Lian shouts—well—

The same thing.

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!"

The god flies towards Bai Wuxiang, attacking him in a fury. "WHAT DO YOU WANT?! WHY DO YOU KEEP CLINGING TO ME?!"

Bai Wuxiang dodges every single attack—and it only seems to infuriate the god even more.

"WHY HAVEN'T YOU DIED?! WHY DID YOU COME HERE?!" And then…

"Because you're here."

That's the answer, Hua Cheng realizes, watching as the two clash. "…What do you mean?"

"Because you've come," Bai Wuxiang replies. "So, I've come too."

Why, if Jun Wu knew just how dangerous this place was, would he return? It's really that simple.

Hua Cheng stares with disbelief. He's really that obsessed? He—

He would come to the most dangerous place on earth for him, just to torment Xie Lian?

He truly loathes the god that much?

Hua Cheng looks to He Xuan, opening his mouth, but—

Then the air is pierced with a shriek

“AAAAAAAIIEEEEEEEEEE!”

Both ghosts stop, clutching their ears, and—

Just like that, the scene shatters, and Hua Cheng and He Xuan are left tumbling through darkness.

“WE DIDN’T—!” Hua Cheng shouts, his arms flailing, “WE DIDN’T SEE ENOUGH!”

“No SHIT!” He Xuan cries. “You’re the one that’s supposed to be CONTROLLING IT!”

Right.

Hua Cheng squeezes his eyes shut, holding his hands out.

The energy pulsing around him is so immense, so vast, it’s nearly impossible to fathom.

It feels like the first time he made the sky rain blood—but stronger.

Still, he tries. Stretches out with his hands, fighting with everything he has. “…Show me,” he whispers, opening his eyes.

The void isn’t empty, like it always has been before.

Lighting the way…are butterflies. Silvery light casting his face in a gentle glow.

One of them lands on his fingers, wings flapping gently.

Tonglu Hudie used to have a recurring thought, over and over again. Hua Cheng has heard it many times over.

That a soul is a butterfly.

But really—

A soul is a wish.

“...Show me,” Hua Cheng says again—firmly now. Finally, the scene changes.

Hua Cheng and He Xuan watch, standing over a fiery pit of lava and inferno.

Watch as a small group take on the greatest threat the world has likely known until now—Jun Wu.

Among them being Xie Lian, his two idiotic former friends, Hua Cheng, and...

To his shock, Mei Nianqing.

“...I can’t believe you destroyed my lair,” He Xuan grumbles, his arms crossed.

“I didn’t destroy it,” Hua Cheng corrects him, his eyes never leaving the scene. “And apparently, you owe me money.”

He Xuan grimaces. “A lot of money.” “I get it!”

The two of them watch the battle unfold—and Hua Cheng waits, to see if there’s some special trick or weakness, something that betrays the truth behind Jun Wu’s downfall, but—

The answer, once again—is simple.

He Xuan watches as Hua Cheng’s future self embraces the god.

His jaw hangs open as he takes in the sight of the cursed shackles shattering, feels the overwhelming surge of spiritual power crashing through the place.

More than Zhao Beitong’s. More than Hua Cheng’s. More— More than *Jun Wu’s.*

Thud .

The very earth seems to rattle.

When Xie Lian’s eyes open—there are no shackles.

They burn a pure shade of gold, from pupil to the edge of his cornea, like the sunrise itself has been swallowed up by them.

And with each step he takes, the earth shakes.

He Xuan watches with mild terror, Hua Cheng with awe.

“...Well,” the water demon mutters, watching as the God and the Heavenly emperor clash again—and this time—

With Jun Wu clearly losing.

“We know how to surprise him, now.”

After all—there’s no reason Jun Wu would think that Hua Cheng would know how to shatter a cursed shackle.

But as they watch—it becomes clear that such an action comes with a heavy price. As the crown prince clings to Hua Cheng’s fading form, weeping.

“...Even knowing it would end this way,” He Xuan mutters, his gaze slightly narrowed. “Would you still do it?”

The Ghost King smiles.

“Without hesitation,” he answers easily.

He Xuan stares at him like he’s lost his mind, but Hua Cheng doesn’t seem particularly worried, his eyes fixed on the chain around Xie Lian’s neck.

The ring still intact.

“I’ll definitely come back,” the Ghost King murmurs.

No matter what. He’ll always come back.

He Xuan almost seems jealous in that moment—of the faith that Hua Cheng has. Not only in his god, but—

In himself.

The scene begins to crumble away again, and He Xuan glances back toward the Ghost King, raising an eyebrow.

“Taking us out?”

After all—this is what they came here to see. There’s no reason to remain any longer.

"…" Hua Cheng shakes his head, watching as the images collapse around them. "This isn't me."

He reaches out with his hand, and he's about to call them back—or try to, when—

Everything shatters, and they both plummet into darkness.

And they fall for a *long* time, far into the future.

Too far, Hua Cheng thinks, his arms flailing out, trying to find something to grasp onto, hair whipping around his face.

"PULL US OUT!"

"I'M—TRYING!"

Finally, they land on the ground—hard.

Hua Cheng's head aches and pounds as he rolls onto his side coughing out smoke.

He doesn't know how this happened—or what brought them here, but it wasn't him.

"Where…" He Xuan sits up first, rubbing his temple. "Where is this place?"

The air around them is completely dark, but it's difficult to tell if it's actually nighttime or not—

Not when the smoke overhead is so thick that it blocks out the entire sky. The earth around them is dry, crumbling, and barren.

When Hua Cheng sits up, he can make out the shape of trees, their limbs stripped and lifeless.

There's nothing here. Only resentment and death.

Hua Cheng can hear as much, the moans of hateful spirits groaning in the distance. "…I think…this is still Wuyong," he mutters.

He Xuan staggers to his feet, looking around, trying to see the shape of the kiln, but… There's nothing like that.

Black stone spires rise into the air, almost reminiscent of volcanic rock, but…

No Mount Tonglu.

“...If that’s true, where’s the Kiln?” He Xuan whispers.

Hua Cheng brushes the ash off of the front of his robes, looking around, “...Nothing lasts forever,” he admits. “Maybe this is a time when the Kiln as we know it no longer exists.”

Disturbing to imagine, as the resentment remains.

Now, He Xuan Realizes—

This isn’t smoke.

The black fog that hangs around them, that blocks out the very sky itself— It’s pure resentful energy.

“...If you didn’t bring us here,” He Xuan mutters, his chin tilted back, “...what did?”

Hua Cheng doesn’t have an actual answer, but before he can reply—notes pierce the air.

Not screaming, thundering, or shaking, but music.

A shrill, petrifying song—and yet, somehow—it’s beautiful.

And familiar.

The sound—

He Xuan stiffens beside him, and Hua Cheng feels himself go tense.

It’s the sound of a flute.

A vague memory tugs at his mind sharply.

Something Zhao Beitong saw once, when she looked into the future, trying to save the lives of her people—and her son.

That one day, the doors of hell would open, and when they did...

He Xuan sways, his eyes sliding out of focus.

...It would be to the call of a flute.

“...Don’t listen,” Hua Cheng mutters, whipping around, clapping his hands over the water demon’s ears. “Look at me!” He snarls.

He Xuan's eyes snap back to him, wary in their confusion, filled with a slight haze. "Don't listen!" Hua Cheng repeats, and, out of desperation—

He slaps He Xuan across the face—hard. So hard, the younger man's head whips out the side sharply, bones cracking.

But it does seem to do the trick.

"W...what the FUCK is that?!"

"..." Hua Cheng turns his head, glancing back towards the sound, his eyes narrowed. "Something you aren't strong enough to deal with," he mutters.

But whatever it is—it isn't powerful enough to effect a Ghost King.

Not yet, anyway.

Hua Cheng reaches out, wrapping his fingers around the clouds of smoke, gripping the resentful energy between his hands.

And he tries, in that moment, to drag them backwards. To some extent, it does work.

The scene shifts—and this time, they aren't plummeting downwards, but floating up— almost like pages of a book, being flicked a few chapters back.

But not all the way back.

THUD!

Hua Cheng lands first, on a hard, rock surface—only for He Xuan to come plunging down on top of him as he tries to raise him onto his hands and knees, sending him sprawling again.

"You are *shit* at this..." He Xuan groans in pain, and Hua Cheng snarls in response.

"Get off. Now."

"Fine," the water demon grumbles, rolling off of him. "It's not like you haven't already broken every bone in my body."

Finally, Hua Cheng sits up, rubbing the back of his neck. "I didn't," he huffs. "And apparently, you owe me money," he reminds He Xuan.

“Lots of money.”

“In the future!” He Xuan whines, flicking his hair back over his shoulder as he glances around, “You can’t give me grief about it yet.”

Hua Cheng grumbles, resting his head between his knees for a moment. Is this what it’s supposed to be like, having younger siblings?

They do nothing but smart off, complain, borrow money, then whine when you remind them of it?

In that case, he’s grateful to have always been an only child.

“...I was right,” He Xuan finally comments, crossing his arms—sounding pleased with himself.

“Good for you.”

Hua Cheng mutters, not even bothering to ask what he means, until—“I knew the two were connected.”

“...” Finally, the Ghost King actually forces himself to look around, and when he does...

He sees a familiar chamber, one made of all black marble.

Vast. Daunting in its size.

On either end of the chamber stand two doors, one black, one red.

And all around them...

The familiar light of green ghost fires.

Hua Cheng has been here many times before.

But now...

He couldn’t tell you where they stand in the timeline. They still have to go further back—

Both fall silent, however, when something different happens.

This is a place of diverging paths. Where souls move from one point in the cycle to the next. Hua Cheng has seen it all.

He’s seen people move on. He’s seen them plunge down into hell—

even when they didn't deserve it.

He couldn't tell you how many children he's helped pass through the red door over the years, guiding them into reincarnation. Before it was their time, but it was the only merciful path left to them.

And it was always horribly unfair.

He was the first one to forge a new path.

To roll a set of dice, opening a new door.

To look the hall of death in the face, and say no—it wasn't his time yet.

And now, he watches as a new path forms.

SCREEEEEACH!

Hua Cheng watches, his breath caught, as the black door opens.

For the first time, from the inside.

And of all of the things he was expecting—

He wasn't expecting a teenager to come stumbling out.

Clothes torn, covered with soot and blood, long, dark hair falling half loose from a ponytail, pouring over his shoulders.

He lands on his hands and knees, coughing up dark matter.

And this time, when he looks up—he looks directly at the two Ghosts, his eyes wide and petrified.

The irises are a light shade of gray, slightly tinged with purple. Bloodshot now.

And it takes Hua Cheng a moment to realize, but—

Clearly, the child can see them.

His first reaction is to flinch back from the sight of the two ghosts, scrambling backwards, his frame trembling like a leaf, but...

Eventually, his back hits the cavern wall, his eyes never leaving Hua Cheng's, and... There's understanding that there's no malice between them.

Once that becomes clear—after a moment, his voice broken and hoarse—

(But that doesn't seem to be the true reason for why it's so difficult for the youth to say the words)

—he croaks,

"...Help."

Hua Cheng and He Xuan remain frozen at first, unsure, and the boy's lips quiver.

"...Please," he mumbles, deeply ashamed of asking at all, "h-help!"

He Xuan meets Hua Cheng's gaze, unsure if there's anything they can do, given the circumstances, but...

The Ghost King rises to his feet, crossing the chamber in slow, non-threatening steps —bells chiming.

It takes the boy a moment to realize where the noise is coming from, eyes flickering around in a startled panic—and that's when he notices the silver bells attached to Hua Cheng's boots, rattling gently as he walks.

For some reason, the sight makes the young cultivator smile.

Hua Cheng kneels before the boy, reaching for the outer robe he was wearing before.

Silk fading from black to gray, with red designs trailing from the ends of the sleeves.

He throws it around the young man's shoulders, shielding his shredded clothes and bare skin from the air.

The boy clutches it around his shoulders, shivering, curled up into a ball against the wall.

"...Thank you," he whispers—clearly unaccustomed to such kindness —and Hua Cheng realizes something.

This kid—

He has a heartbeat.

Pounding in the air, the sound filling his ears.

“...You’re alive?” The ghost King mutters, his expression aghast, and—

The boy seems just as shocked as he is, clutching the robe even tighter around him, knuckles white.

“...I am?” He croaks.

From behind him, He Xuan seems just as baffled. “How is that possible?”

The young man flinches at the sound of another voice, glaring in He Xuan’s direction with uncertainty—and Hua Cheng shrugs.

“I don’t know. But you hear it, don’t you?”

The heartbeat. The breathing. Sounds of life that are far too organic to be faked.

Finally, Hua Cheng looks back to the teenager—who sits back against the wall, his knees pulled back against his chest.

Eyes wide and crazed, clearly pulling deep into himself as a response to trauma.

And, given where he just came from, the Ghost King can’t blame him.

“How old are you?”

“...Seventeen,” the boy mutters, wiping at his face with his forearm, clearly trying to clean himself—but his entire body is so filthy, it’s of no use.

“And your name?”

Now, he seems reluctant to answer, and Hua Cheng sighs.

“...You’re a cultivator, right?”

The boy nods, and Hua Cheng continues, “Which clan do you cultivate under?”

Those eyes stare up at him, wide and distrustful.

Hua Cheng knows that look.

It comes from a lifetime of foul treatment.

The look of a child that is acutely aware of the fact that they are unloved.

"...Lan," he mutters, hugging himself a little tighter before looking away.

"..." Hua Cheng sits back on his heels, folding his arms around his knees. "You're a pretty good liar."

The teenager makes the mistake of looking flattered, and the ghost smirks. "But not that good."

"..." He huffs, blowing his bangs out of his face. "...I did live with them for a long time. My—" He starts, then stops, his eyebrows furrowed. "My..."

He notices Hua Cheng watching him closely, and the tips of his ears flush sheepishly.

"...There are people who are important to me, in the Lan Clan." He finally mutters, looking pointedly in the opposite direction.

"I've never heard of them," Hua Cheng admits, leaving the teenager gawking at him.

"Do you live under a rock?!"

"As far as you're concerned?"

He Xuan shrugs, covering his mouth as he yawns. It's been a long few weeks, after all. "We might as well."

The teenager casts him a distrustful look, shrinking slightly behind Hua Cheng's figure—but the other Ghost is still rather patient.

"But you don't cultivate under them."

"...I cultivated under the Jiangs," the boy finally admits, hugging himself a little tighter. "...But most of them are gone now."

Hua Cheng's lips slowly turn into a frown.

"...I'm sorry to hear that," he murmurs. "I was friends with a former

Jiang sect leader, once."

That seems to put the boy slightly more at ease with him, his eyes slightly less combative. "...Really?"

"Centuries ago," Hua Cheng shrugs, "but yes."

"..." The young man sniffs, looking back towards the black door—the one he just came from. "...What is that place?"

Without thinking, Hua Cheng blurts out—

"The shit hole."

The cultivator's eyes widen slightly, "...What?"

"..." Hua Cheng snorts, shaking his head. "Sorry—someone called it that once. The... closest thing to a mortal term for it would be Hell."

The boy doesn't seem surprised.

"How did you manage to open the door, anyway?" He Xuan questions, watching the human with a slightly suspicious gaze.

Slowly, the boy lifts seeming that's been clutched between his fingers all this time— but somehow, in all of the chaos, the Ghosts didn't notice until now:

A flute.

Made from sleek black wood, gleaming under the lights—and there's a wickedness to it that even seems to make E-Ming tremble in it's scabbard.

He Xuan scrambles backwards, clearly put off by the sight of it, after what they heard before.

Finally, the boy stands up.

His hair hangs loose around his shoulders now, slipping completely free of the red ribbon that once kept it up and away from his face.

He looks unkempt now—like a man facing his own execution.

Hua Cheng catches it before it reaches the ground, offering it to the young man.

"..." The teenager drops his chin, staring down at the hair ribbon—before eventually reaching back, using it to pull some of his hair back from his face, still leaving most of it loose and low. "...Thank you," he murmurs, looking Hua Cheng in the eye. "For this, and the robe."

He looks back toward the black door, and He Xuan finally seems to understand what the child means to do.

"...Are you actually going back?" He mutters, eyes widening with shock.

The cultivator doesn't look back, his flute clutched in one hand—the other balled into a fist.

"I'd rather die than be useless," He mutters, his spine straight.

The fear Hua Cheng saw before—it's still there. Along with a fragile sense of vulnerability, hanging heavily in the air around him.

But the teenager willingly puts that aside, for now.

"...And if I go back like this," his fingers tighten around the flute. "I won't be able to return the favor to the ones who brought me here."

He Xuan's eyes flash with understanding.

He knows a vengeful tone, when he hears it. Can recognize the wrath, the hate in his voice.

Hua Cheng says little else, watching as the young man raises the flute to his lips. This is a dangerous way, he can see it. A cursed way.

Something a ghost could manage, but a human?

The damage that would do to a soul...

"By the way, my name—it's Wei Wuxian." The teenager murmurs, lips brushing against the wood of the flute as he speaks. "And you two should leave if you don't want to get caught up in this."

Far from the trembling, terrified child that he was moments ago, but—

He still is.

Hua Cheng can see the way his shoulders tremble, even now, as his voice speaks with such confidence.

The boy is still terrified—he's just resolved.

He Xuan, still remembering what it felt like to be caught under that spell from before, grips Hua Cheng's arm tightly.

"Let's go."

The Ghost King hesitates, and He Xuan grips him tighter, his voice sharp. "This isn't our fight. We have another purpose, remember?"

How could he not?

The first notes of the flute pipe out, but before they can hear anymore—the scene cracks and fractures.

No realm in the land between life and death. No red and black doors. No music. No dark robed cultivator with heartbroken eyes.

When they land again, it's in darkness, the path before them stretching long and wide, forking ahead.

"...Control it," He Xuan presses him.

Hua Cheng doesn't seem very receptive to advice at the moment.

"I'm *trying* ," he snarls, clutching at his head. "Do you think anyone has ever done this before?! That it's an exact science?!"

Of course, it isn't.

From what Hua Cheng can surmise, the two paths are their own.

Meaning that they can just turn back, and...

"Papa?"

Both men freeze, but it's He Xuan who whips around, his eyes flickering until they find a figure standing in the dark walkway, just to the right of the fork.

A little boy.

Dressed in fine silk robes. Dark hair, and...

Green eyes, just like the leaves on the trees, twinkling up at him brightly.

The child grins impishly, spinning around on his heel.

“Bet you can’t catch me this time!”

He goes running off down the tunnel, disappearing into the dark, and Hua Cheng…

He tries to stop him.

“Don’t follow,” the Ghost King starts, reaching for He Xuan’s hand. “I don’t know if it’s real, but don’t—!”

He Xuan is already gone, moving like a man possessed, chasing the child down the tunnel.

Hua Cheng hasn’t seen anything like it—not from him.

Such an immediate abandonment of rationality.

“…” Hua Cheng rises to his feet, rubbing a hand down his face with a groan, making ready to follow the two of them, so he can drag He Xuan back, but…

“San Lang.”

He goes still at the sound of that voice.

Echoing faintly.

When Hua Cheng turns his head, he hears it again.

Echoing through the tunnel, down the left hand side.

“San Lang.”

And in that moment, really—

He’s no better than He Xuan.

Because he chases that voice.

He runs down the tunnel as fast as his legs will take him.

Runs so far, so fast—

He couldn’t tell you how far forward he’s gone, or if he’s too lost to make his way back again.

He runs so far, that eventually—the tunnel collapses beneath his feet, spitting him back out again.

THUD!

"...This is getting old," The Ghost King groans.

He pushes himself up, body aching from so many falls in such a short period of time —and when he looks around, he goes still.

Knowing that he must have gone... Far.

He eyes the lights on the ceiling, burning not from a flame, but some other source, covered with glass.

Like lanterns holding small lightning bolts inside of them.

But when Hua Cheng glances around, the room seems very much like a Taoist temple.

Places for offerings, incense burning. Just as he starts to look for a name plate or divine statue, the doors swing open.

Hua Cheng turns around, and his breath halts.

Standing in the doorway, his hair pulled up into a messy bun, wearing clothes that seem utterly foreign, is Hua Cheng's god.

Holding a small metal rectangle against his cheek, speaking as though it can somehow hear him.

"We'll both be there," Xie Lian confirms, setting his bag down. "He's just about finished for the day, anyway."

Hua Cheng can't discern what sort of device it must be—maybe a way to enter the communication array without spiritual power? But...

"Alright—see you then."

Xie Lian taps his thumb against the device—and Hua Cheng watches as it lights up before going dark again, baffled, but...

He's far more focused on the fact that, even now—so far into the future—

Xie Lian has the same silver chain hanging around his neck.

And even now, when he walks before the altar—the god doesn't kneel or prostrate.

He bows his head politely, clasping his hands in front of him, and Hua Cheng notices something else. Something that makes his heart ache.

Xie Lian looks happy.

Not like he's fronting happiness.

Or like he's experiencing a moment of passing contentment. No.

In his moment, peace seems to radiate from the god. A sort of fulfillment that emanates from a soul like sunlight.

This is not a man who is living with loneliness or pain.

It's a man who is truly, honestly happy.

And the sight of that—

It's the most beautiful thing in the entire world. At any point, future or past. Enough so that it leaves Hua Cheng spellbound, just watching him.

He understands now, how willing Zhao Beitong was to live for so long inside such pleasant dreams.

Hua Cheng feels like he could live inside this moment forever, and be just as happy as she was.

The doors slide open behind them, and Xie Lian whips around, his expression rising like the sun, beaming.

“San Lang!”

Just as Hua Cheng's gaze starts to follow, however...

The scene shatters, splitting apart.

Dreams never last forever, after all—even if they're your own future.

But that's alright.

Hua Cheng closes his eyes, allowing himself to be dragged back, hair whipping around him in the darkness.

He'll get back there, eventually.

It's only a matter of time.

A long time—but still.

THUD!

When he opens his eyes again—it's to the familiar sight of the Kiln ceiling overhead, and the sound of He Xuan coughing and sputtering beside him.

"...Did it work?" Zhao Beitong calls out, cautious. "What did you see?" Hua Cheng sits up, glancing over at his companion, and...

He Xuan doesn't seem inclined to speak. Whatever it was that he saw...it seems to have left the ghost utterly...

Haunted.

For now, Hua Cheng settles for telling her the truth—and what she wants to hear.

"We get him."

Her eyes widen sharply, and Hua Cheng offers her a tired, haphazard smile. "It takes some time—but we get him."

"...How?" The former Queen of Wuyong whispers, hands clutched tightly against her chest.

Carefully, Hua Cheng tells her. As much of it as he can, anyway.

There's still so much of it that he doesn't understand.

But in the end—He Xuan's original idea was sound.

They have a distinct advantage now. And, they know that Hua Cheng and He Xuan's paths leave them on a collision path with what needs to transpire.

He Xuan knows himself. Knows that he'll seek revenge, which will place him close to Jun Wu.

He doesn't seem as comfortable with that now. Not like he was before.

Hua Cheng will pursue his god—and when Xie Lian comes to the Kiln, Bai Wuxiang will follow him.

In doing so, he'll seal his own fate, not knowing that, for once, he's about to be taken by surprise.

"..." Zhao Beitong sinks down to her knees between the two young men, her palms resting against the kiln floor. "...I never allowed myself to believe it was possible," she admits.

Learned helplessness is a powerful thing, after all.

Over time, part of her thought that this game they were locked in was endless. That true rest—that would never come.

But now, looking back and forth between the ghosts who sit before her... She smiles.

The gates of the Kiln remain open—and with that, comes a signal—sent far and wide throughout the ghost realm.

That a new Ghost King has been born.

The last Calamity, incidentally, that she will ever forge by her own hand.

Finally, she turns to look at Hua Cheng, holding her hand out.

"...I can trust you two to handle the rest until the time comes, can't I?"

"..." Hua Cheng smiles tiredly, reaching out to grip her hand in return. "You know that you can."

And until then, she can rest.

He Xuan watches as Guoshi Tonglu's form fades and flickers.

Eventually, she disappears all together, her form fading unti...

Only the butterflies remain.

They hover in the air for a moment, floating sluggishly—then disappear into the night.

Just as their master did before them.

"...Do you think it'll take too long?" He finally mutters.

Hua Cheng doesn't answer at first—nor does he ask for clarification.

He Xuan could mean anything, after all. And yet, in either case, Hua Cheng's answer remains the same:

"It might feel long," Crimson Rain murmurs, rising to his feet. "But it's only a matter of time."

He offers the new Ghost King his hand, and, eventually...

Black Water reaches up to take it, allowing the older man to help him stand up.

"...You're not going to charge me interest, are you?"

Hua Cheng barks out a laugh, walking towards the gates.

"I absolutely am."

"Not even a small exception for a co-conspirator?"

"I'm not running a charity."

He feels the memories start to fade away, as he passes through the gates of the Kiln.

Hua Cheng forgets Xie Lian falling into the Kiln. Forgets the young cultivator and his flute.

He forgets the young boy that He Xuan went chasing after—and he forgets the almost foreign, yet so familiar version of his god that he saw towards the end.

How happy he was, still wearing Hua Cheng's ring, and...

Still calling out to him.

But some things do remain.

He remembers the way Xie Lian looked in the market that day, smiling as he watched He Sheng repairing his loom.

Remembers his own whispered apologies, and his promise.

'This world is his future.'

Hua Cheng forgot that, for a time.

He won't make that mistake again.

No matter how long it takes. Because he knows now, even if he can't exactly remember how or why—

The path he walks now is the one that will bring him home.

He just has to keep moving forward.

The Ghost Kings walk separate paths, from the gates of Mount Tonglu.

One returns to his gambler's throne, ruling his city of ghosts—and continues his search.

The other slinks off into the dark, cold waters that he once called his grave. To find and hide his own remains.

Once there, he lurks, and he plans. Watches the prosperity of his enemies.

He doesn't make the name for himself that his elder calamities did, no. He Xuan allows his name to fade into mystery, only known for occasionally terrorizing and sinking the ships that the Water Master has gone out of his way to bless.

And, eventually, he hatches his scheme.

A long game—but one he knows that he can win.

But it's the memories that He Xuan lost that will be his undoing.

The consequences that he won't understand, not until a horrible choice is left before him, and he's forced to remember what he forgot by choice:

That a heart never really dies.

It can break down, fade, and waste away—but like a ghost, something will remain inside of you.

Waiting for the moment that a spark can resurrect it. And, the last words his first love ever gave him. *'You're a good man, He Xuan.'*

He Xuan will spend the following centuries of his life trying to tell himself that he isn't. That he was a silly, naive child before. But he isn't a good man now, and he never was.

Oh, the things Black Water would do, the crimes he would commit, when he believed that he didn't have a heart.

And the pain he would feel. The deep, aching remorse that would consume him, when love would find him again.

No matter how hard he would try to resent it—to deny it. It would still find him.

Even as he tried to seal himself off and hide—it would seep through the cracks of his armor like the wind itself.

And until the last possible moment, he would fight it.

But, among everything else that he's forgotten—one memory isn't quite so damning. Because He Xuan's story, while long and often painful—does not end in tragedy.

It's just a long, winding path to get there.

But, like most things in this world—

It's only a matter of time.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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[image]

CREDIT: Envy, support the piece HERE

And here is some incredible art of Jun Wu and Zhao Beitong!

@currant_bliss 2021
@junkyartist

CREDIT: KAT, support the piece HERE

Chapter End Notes

> Sorry for the break in posting—I got my wisdom teeth out last week, so I took some time away from the computer!
>
> Thank you so much to Kat and Envy for their beautiful artwork, and allowing me to share it! I am so grateful!
>
> xoxo, Evie

The Guoshi of Yong'an

Chapter Summary

> The boy smiles—just a little. "...Mister?"
>
> "Hmm?"
>
> "What's your name?"
>
> After a moment, he replies— "Fangxin."

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

YEAR FOUR HUNDRED AND EIGHTY FIVE

Xie Lian has never been prone to remembering his dreams.

Not the good ones, anyway—his nightmares he remembers quite well.

Which is a shame, because this is something he thinks he would like to remember: Being held in someone's arms.

He turns his face into someone's chest, his eyes half-lidded.

The smell is familiar.

Fresh, like the forest. Clean, but with a wildness to it.

The God's lips turn up at the corners as he reaches up, looping his arms around his companion's neck, pulling himself closer.

"Hong-er," he mumbles, feeling someone's face press against his hair, shivering in response.

"Dianxia."

His voice sounds different now. Deeper, more self assured. Xie Lian supposes this is what it would have been like, if he'd had the chance to...

His stomach twists with grief.

It's been four centuries since he lost him. And Xie Lian—he's never forgotten. Never tried to. But...

There are moments like this, when he remembers how strong that the ache can be. "...I should probably wake up now," he mumbles, a little mournful.

"Probably," the dream agrees. "But if you want to sleep a little longer, why shouldn't you? You have time."

Too much time.

Xie Lian presses his palms against Hong-er's chest, rising up until he's straddling his waist, "If you had it your way, I'd never lift a finger."

There's the soft rumble of a chuckle under his hands. "Is that such a bad thing?"

The prince finally opens his eyes—something he can only do in his dreams.

And just like every other time, he wishes he could remember.

Because if this is what he would have looked like...

Xie Lian's hands slide up from his chest, cupping the younger man's cheeks—and he smiles so softly, thumbs stroking over his jaw.

His Hong-er was always so handsome.

But then he notices the dark leather covering the right side of his face, and the prince frowns.

"Hong-er," he murmurs, rubbing the skin underneath the eyepatch, "What happened to your eye?"

The younger man's face briefly twists into a scowl, then turns sheepish, glancing away like he's about to be scolded.

"...I lost it," he mumbles.

"How on earth did you do that?"

"Doing something stupid," the dark haired man mutters, shaking his head. "It doesn't matter."

"...Of course it does," Xie Lian's frown only manages to deepen. "There's only one Hong-er out there, and he's very important to me. Take better care of him, won't you?"

The young man underneath him arches one slim, elegant eyebrow—and in an instant, his weight shifts as he sits up. Xie Lian almost goes tumbling backwards with an undignified yelp, caught off guard—but he's caught by an arm wrapping around the small of his back.

"I—um—!" Xie Lian starts, then stops.

He's always been more than a little ashamed of his thoughts sometimes turning in his direction. It feels disrespectful to think of the dead in such a way. After all, there's no reason to think Hong-er would have even wanted—

But when long, cool fingers dip into the front of his robes, he lets out a violent shiver, his cheeks growing hot. "That's—!"

"—a little hypocritical, don't you think?"

Xie Lian opens his eyes, slightly half lidded, only to find...

Hong-er smirking up at him, holding up a ring.

Dangling from a silver chain around Xie Lian's neck, now delicately looped around Hong-er's pinky, allowing him to hold it up for the god's inspection.

"You're the one always taking such good care of me," Hong-er murmurs. Xie Lian's first reaction is to feel mortified.

Even in his dreams, he's the one thinking about such unnecessarily inappropriate things, when all Hong-er is trying to do is pay him a compliment.

But then...his throat is thick with emotion, too.

"But who is taking care of you, dianxia?"

"...I'm trying," Xie Lian mumbles. "I'm doing my best, really," he glances up at Hong-er through his lashes, arms still wrapped around the younger man's neck. "I'm just not as good at it as you."

"And you get lonely," the dark haired young man murmurs, his eyebrows knitting with sadness.

“…Yes,” Xie Lian admits. “But…there are moments that aren’t so bad,” he mutters, trying to justify it. “I’ve learned how to do my own hair, too—not as nice as you or Mu Qing, but not so bad either. And my cooking…”

He cringes.

“Well, I make enough to eat out most days, so I—mmmph!”

The mouth on his is slightly cold, but soft, and always so loving.

And in these quiet, gentle moments that Xie Lian is always doomed to forget, he’s happy.

Sighing, sinking deeper into the kiss as Hong-er’s fingers thread through his hair, his arms tightening around his neck.

“I miss you,” the younger man breathes against his lips, arms clutching Xie Lian closer. “I miss you so much.”

The God’s chest aches, because he knows.

It’s not forever. He tries to tell himself that, but…

Immortality is a long, lonely path to walk.

“…I love you,” Xie Lian mumbles in return, his fingers digging into the back of Hong-er’s robes.

Hearing that always makes the young man tremble in his arms, kissing him more frantically—until the god feels his thoughts start to become slow and heated, like warm caramel.

“I love you,” he whispers again, his breaths becoming ragged, wishing —

Wishing he could just stay here a little longer. Maybe until the end of the world, if that was possible.

“I’ll find you,” Hong-er rasps, hands sliding down the prince’s back, gripping his waist firmly.

“I promise, I’ll find you.”

Xie Lian sinks back into the sheets with him, his head a little fuzzy—but filled with confusion.

Find him?

What does he—?

THUD!

Noise cracks through the dream, and now—Xie Lian isn't gasping with want.

He's groaning with annoyance.

"...Dianxia?"

That's the last thing Xie Lian sees, hears, or feels before the world goes black again. And he wakes up...

Sleeping in a ditch.

The god sits up, rubbing his forehead, all memories of the dream rapidly fading, but... He knows it was a good one, and that he's annoyed to be awake.

But that's not the pressing matter at the moment.

That would be the thing that woke him up.

The sound of shouting in the distance. Screaming and arguing—the clash of blades. And somewhere, not so far from him, Xie Lian hears someone scream—

"PROTECT THE CROWN PRINCE!"

'Yes,' Xie Lian agrees silently, glaring blankly at the darkness ahead, his arms still spread out on either side of him. *'Protect the crown prince. He's been woken up too early, has a crick in his neck, and would like some mantou. Chop chop!'*

Obviously, they aren't talking about him.

After laying on the ground and feeling sorry for himself for approximately ten seconds, like he does every other morning, the god sighs, fumbling for the chain around his neck, bringing the ring hanging from the end of it to his lips.

"Morning, Hong-er," he mumbles.

(He has said this one hundred and seventy seven thousand, two hundred and thirteen times.)

“Today is going to be a good day.”

You have to put positive energy out into the universe in order to get it back. His mother always used to say that.

His luck might not be fantastic, but maybe a good attitude can manifest a lack of complete and utter disaster.

Xie Lian tells himself that, listening to the utter chaos of the battle that is currently going on up on the main road.

But first, he goes about combing his hair.

If there’s still a ruckus going on by the time he’s done, he’ll deal with it then.

Normally he would be a little more immediate when it comes to offering his aid, but, well…

Whatever that dream was, Xie Lian was enjoying it, and it’s early, and his head hurts.

Oh, and he’s been out of mantou for three days now.

That might have something to do with the stabbing headache.

Once his hair is neatly pulled back into a low ponytail, he listens closely, expecting the imperial guards to have handled it by now, but…

“FORM UP, MEN!”

Annnnd they are still struggling.

Xie Lian sighs, scratching one of his ears—which have become unbelievably sensitive, over time—and when he listens closely, he can get a pretty good idea of what’s going on.

Two groups clashing. Expensive steel against cheap pig iron.

The rebels seem to outnumber the guards from the sound of it—and they’ve outflanked them.

Cheap. Sloppy.

Xie Lian managed his own security as the crown prince, hand-selected every single guard who worked under him.

Feng Xin handled their training, but Xie Lian tested each one.

The idea was that, while the Crown Prince certainly could handle any ruffian he came across, the purpose of the palace guards was to ensure that he never needed to expend his energy or sully his blade with such trivial matters.

Now, however—nothing is too trivial to avoid warranting his attention, and…

He can hear the terrified cries of the prince they're protecting, and Xie Lian realizes— he's just a child.

"…" The god lets out a heavy sigh, rising to his feet. "Ruoye."

The spiritual tool wiggles to attention, eager to be of use, and Xie Lian sighs, waving at the bandage with a gentle sort of annoyance.

"No fighting for you."

The tool sags, almost sulkily.

It took time for the two of them to get used to one another.

The problem was almost entirely on Xie Lian's part.

In those early years, it…took time for the prince to completely come back to himself. It was good that he was alone, because he was prone to…

Moments of madness.

He even lashed out at Ruoye when the tool tried to help him.

There was one afternoon, when he tripped on the way down to the river, and Ruoye caught him by the wrist, like always, but that one time…

The other end brushed against his throat.

And at that moment, Xie Lian remembered exactly what the tool was. How it was made.

Those were the moments when he would lash out.

Grabbing the bandage between his hands, like he wanted to rip it apart or throttle it, sobbing—

'You killed my parents.'

'Why are you helping me?!'

'Oh god, you killed my parents!'

For a time, Ruoye was frightened of him.

It would tremble with nerves, every time it got close.

But it never stopped trying to catch Xie Lian when he was falling.

And slowly, over the centuries—they built up trust, even if it took a long time. "Just cover me up, okay?" Xie Lian murmurs.

He pulls his hood up, covering his eyes and the top of his head, while Ruoye wraps itself snuggly around the lower half of his face, still covering the cursed shackle around his throat.

Xie Lian can't show his face right now, not since the incident with the Circus in Banyue.

He's fairly sure there's still more than a few arrest warrants out for that, even though Xie Lian is quite sure that he never broke any laws...

Well.

There's something to be said for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

He makes his way up the hill, contemplating.

Given the fact that he looks like a beggar right now—using Fangxin would make him stand out, so...

He reaches out, feeling for a nice, sturdy tree limb—and, upon finding one, twists it free with a flick of his wrist.

Not much worse than their weapons, honestly.

At the top of the hill, a young boy cowers beneath his guards, his arms thrown up and over his head, breathing hard. "W-Why are they trying to get me?!" He whimpers, scrambling backwards until his back slams against the side of his carriage.

“Probably to get leverage over your parents,” one of the guards in front of him grunts. “Listen, just stay behind me, and it’ll be—!”

He cuts off with a pained cry, blood spurting from his chest, splattering across the prince’s face when a blade springs through.

A boy of just eleven years old, one who has never seen such horror—

The child can’t do anything but scream, cringing away, waiting for his inevitable demise, but—

But no blade ever reaches him.

As a matter of fact, even though most of his guards are dead…

The fighting seems to intensify.

Actually—

The rebels seem to be…losing, somehow?

“Where did he COME FROM?!”

“Look pal, if you chill out, we’ll give you a cut of the—!”

“OH GOD, MY LEG!”

Trembling, the prince slowly peeks his head out from behind one of his guard’s arms.

That’s the first time that he sees him.

White robes swirling around, his face entirely covered, dark hair peeking out from underneath his hood. And the way he moves—

It’s like nothing else the young prince has ever seen. Like water, or something inhumanly graceful.

With nothing more than a tree branch, every single bandit is strategically disarmed and knocked out, left groaning and unconscious on the road.

All thirty of them, by just—

By just one man, who doesn’t even wield a proper weapon. The last one drops—and with him, the branch.

“Are you alright, little one?”

The prince looks up, his face pale, and…

The figure kneeling before him isn’t so scary.

Maybe a little dirty and bedraggled, but not frightening at all.

“Y…Yes, I am!” The child whispers.

“You aren’t hurt?”

“N-No…”

The prince shakes his head, his voice just a little unsteady, but then—

“Mister!” He sits up quickly, eyeing the stranger’s arms. “You’re hurt!”

Xie Lian blinks, glancing down at his limbs stupidly, constantly forgetting that he can’t actually SEE them, but when he checks…

And when he rubs his palms over his forearms, he realizes. Oh dear, he really did get sliced up, didn’t he?

It’s probably to be expected, given that he couldn’t actually guard properly without a proper sword, and he was groggy from waking up, but…

That’s still embarrassing. Really, what would his Guoshi think, if they could see him now…

“Oh, it’s fine,” he smiles, trying to wave it off—

(He’s bleeding so much that the action actually makes more blood splatter on the ground, leaving the prince and his guards horrified.)

For some reason, they’re downright insistent on taking him back to the palace with them, all in the name of him receiving treatment in exchange for saving the prince’s life.

Over and over, Xie Lian tries to insist that it isn’t necessary, but… They don’t take no for an answer.

Which is fine, he supposes. Even if it feels odd, accepting Yong’an’s charity. Or gratitude, he supposes. After all—he did save the heir to the throne’s life. A few days laying in an infirmary isn’t so bad. Better than a ditch, at least. And it gives him more time to sleep.

Even if he doesn't remember his dreams when he wakes up in the morning—he's always happy, curled up on his side underneath soft sheets for once, listening to the birds singing through the window.

And even with his back turned, he can always hear it. The taps of little feet.

"..." A small smile tugs at Xie Lian's lips, even if he doesn't turn over just yet. "It's rude, you know."

There's a pause near the doorway, breath halting, a heart skipping a beat. His smile widens.

"Spying isn't very nice," he muses.

"I'm not spying!" A voice protests.

That of a little boy.

Probably just eleven years old.

Xie Lian curls up in the hospital bed, hugging his knees closer against his chest, fiddling with the chain around his neck.

"Is that a little bird then, flapping around in the rafters?" "Maybe," the boy replies, pouting.

"Birds don't talk," Xie Lian chides, but with no real scolding in his voice. "Were you worried?"

"...You got hurt trying to protect me," the little boy mumbles, standing in the doorway of the infirmary. "I want to make sure you get better."

The god's expression softens.

He pushes himself to sit up, patting the edge of his bed. "Well, why don't you come on over here and see for yourself, then?"

The boy seems a little hesitant at first—but he slowly creeps forward, cautiously climbing up onto the cot.

Xie Lian offers one bandaged arm.

The boy stares down at it, wary, and the god bumps him gently with his shoulder. "Why don't you give it a little smack? It doesn't hurt at all."

"...You want me to hit you?" The prince frowns, shaking his head. "I can't!"

"Sure you can," Xie Lian assures him. "I'm all better."

"..." He seems hesitant, so Xie Lian goes first, giving his forearm a hard slap.

THWAP!

The sound nearly makes the boy jump out of his skin, but...Xie Lian doesn't even flinch.

"See?" The god wiggles his fingers. "I'm just fine."

The boy smiles—just a little. "...Mister?"

"Hmm?"

"What's your name?"

After a moment, he replies— "Fangxin."

An odd one, but he can't use Hua Xie right now. Not after the goat thing—even if it was a decade ago.

"What about you?"

The boy hums. "...You don't already know?"

Fangxin shakes his head with a sigh, "I'm a traveler," he explains. "I've been to so many places, I don't always know the names of every royal in the area."

Well, that makes sense.

"Lang Qiangqiu," the boy mumbles, and finally—he gives the stranger a gentle smack on the arm.

It's hard to tell, but it looks like Fangxin might be smiling underneath the bandages.

"See?" He holds his arm up again, before reaching up to ruffle the boy's hair. "You can't hurt me, Lang Qiangqiu."

The boy seems a little surprised. "...Most people don't ever call me that."

Xie Lian figured as much.

No one ever called him by his actual name, when he was a boy.

It was always dianxia, your highness, his excellency, and so on.

But his mother always called him ‘son,’ and— Gege.

Someone used to call him that, once.

But never his actual name.

“...Apologies, taizi dianxia,” the god murmurs, ruffling the young prince’s hair once more. “I’m not used to being around nobility anymore.”

“...” Lang Qiangqiu offers him a lopsided grin, unaware of the fact that Fangxin can’t see it. “That’s okay! I kinda like it!”

From then on, the prince makes a point of coming to the infirmary every chance he gets. Between breaks in his lessons, after meals. When he wakes up in the morning, and just before he goes to bed at night.

Even the King and Queen take notice.

“...He’s besotted, isn’t he?”

His mother comments, leaning against the king as she takes in the sight.

The King of Yong’an nods, watching as the young prince eagerly trails behind the hospital patient—whom they now know is a young, gifted cultivator, Fangxin.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen him listen to someone so easily. Not without having to be strong armed into it.” The King sighs, rubbing the side of his neck.

Their son is talented in martial arts. Maybe naive, yes—but still, he’s gifted. If he would only apply himself, he...

Out in the courtyard, the prince stops in the middle of chattering on and on about his lessons, looking up at Fangxin with a curious eye. “Fangxin-Laoshi, can I ask you a question?”

“I’m not a teacher,” the god reminds him with a sigh, “but sure.”

“Why do you hide your face?”

“...” Underneath the bandages, Xie Lian smiles. “Oh, I’m not like you, dianxia.” He murmurs.

Playing pretend. Impersonating someone.

“What do you mean?” Lang Qiangqiu questions, tilting his head. “I’m not beautiful.”

‘Liar,’ Xie Lian thinks to himself. *‘He was such a liar.’*

The prince doesn’t seem to believe him, not for a single second. “No way!” He shakes his head, reaching over to pluck at the longer strands down the cultivator’s back. “You’ve got pretty hair! So, your face can’t be that bad!”

Xie Lian fights the urge to flinch.

He isn’t used to being touched anymore.

Beaten, stabbed, throttled—he’s accustomed to all of those feelings. But casual touching—no, he’s forgotten all about that.

And after the torture he endured under Bai Wuxiang—

He still fears gentle touches.

Thinks they’re tricks.

“...Hair really doesn’t have anything to do with it,” Xie Lian mumbles.

“Your voice is nice too,” Lang Qiangqiu points out, spinning around on his heels, walking backwards with his hands clasped behind his back, watching the cultivator cheerfully. “And I can kinda see your nose.”

He leans his head back, looking closely. “It’s a nice one!”

Unfortunately, Xie Lian is more than aware of the fact that he’s beautiful.

And oh, how he came to loathe the fact that anyone ever called him that.

“...Maybe I’m ugly on the inside,” he whispers.

The prince pauses.

The way Fangxin says that—

It isn't teasing.

It sounds like he believes it—with his whole heart.

"...Why would that make you hide your face?"

"Does a horrible person deserve to be praised for his good looks?"

"Mmmm..." The child frowns. "You're not horrible! You saved me."

"I heard them calling you the prince," Xie Lian points out. "Maybe I just wanted a nice stay in the palace, hmm?"

"..." The boy pauses, thinking that over, and the cultivator sighs.

"You need to stop being so naive, dianxia. It'll be the end of you."

"I'm not naive, I just..."

Lang Qiangqiu shrugs, offering him a happy smile. "I just trust you, that's all!" He turns around, rummaging with something. "Fangxin!"

The cultivator turns his head, raising an eyebrow. "Bend down here for a minute? I can't reach!" Xie Lian is somewhat exasperated.

But he still complies.

And when he does, Lang Qiangqiu tucks something behind his ear, leaning back with a smile.

"There!" He beams. "Even with the bandages, you look good now." Xie Lian reaches up, slightly confused—then he stops.

It's a flower, tucked into his hair.

Oh.

The prince can't see it, but for the first time in centuries, Xie Lian's eyes sting.

Someone else did that once. When he had nothing. When he was so horribly, horribly alone.

Xie Lian didn't appreciate it then. Didn't thank him for it.

And then Wu Ming was gone.

God, Xie Lian forgot how much he missed him, too.

He kept that white flower that was left behind until it wilted, crumbling into dust.

He doesn't have anything left to remember the ghost by. The last creature that was so kind to him.

The first and only kiss he ever chose.

"...Thank you," he mumbles, squeezing the flower petal between his fingertips. The prince pauses, surprised by the emotion in Fangxin's voice.

"For the flower," the cultivator explains. "It's beautiful."

Silently, he wishes that he could have just mustered those words before.

But he's always been such a slow learner, hasn't he?

In the days that follow, he finishes healing the rest of the way—even though he insisted, he really was ready to leave by the second day—and when he makes ready to leave, he's offered a proposition.

By a King, no less.

The King of Yong'an, offering Xie Lian the opportunity to take on the Crown Prince as his student.

To become their state preceptor in one fell swoop.

After all, it has missed no one's notice, how exceptionally knowledgeable he is. And his sword skills are beyond comparison.

Who better, to teach a crown prince? To mold the future of a nation?

To Xie Lian, the whole thing feels like some sort of cruel joke.

And yet.

When he remembers the cruelty he once wanted to unleash upon Yong'an, and it's people...

It feels like a fair penance to pay.

After all, that was why he lost Wu Ming.

And that—

That's why he took on these shackles again, isn't it? To pay for that?

So, it seems fair.

He agrees to take the crown prince as his student, and in doing so, takes on a new name.

Fangxin Guoshi, the Imperial Preceptor.

Known across the land for his skills, his knowledge—always trailing through the palace of Yong'an, a prince flocking to his side with adoration.

Dressed in fine, black and gold silks—and always wearing a golden mask over the top half of his face, hiding his eyes.

He's a patient teacher. Always fair, when handing out discipline.

Xie Lian has never had a student, until now—but to his surprise, he actually takes to the challenge rather well.

His only regret is his inability to get close to the boy. It's clearly what Lang Qiangqiu wants.

In a way, Xie Lian's heart goes out to the boy—because he can understand.

His childhood was so lonely.

No equals. Not really.

The closest thing he had to a friend was a boy who was trained to die for him. And when Xie Lian tried to make another? Well.

He didn't do a good job.

And yet, Xie Lian keeps him at a careful distance.

With one glaring exception.

There is one great equalizer among rich and poor—particularly among women.

Childbirth.

The Queen of Yong'an was older, to be carrying a child—everyone knew that.

There was fear on the king's part, that she might not be able to carry the child to term. Even the doctors showed some concern.

But no one expected to lose them both.

He sat by the Queen's deathbed, holding the king's hand as he wept, explaining there was nothing to be done.

That with how much blood had been lost, there was no way to make her healthy again.

Lang Qiangqiu was just fourteen, when he lost her.

And oh, how the boy wept.

Alone, because his father was too lost in his own grief to come to his aid. And Xie Lian, he...

He knows all too well what it feels like to mourn alone.

It was the only time that Fangxin Guoshi ever opened his arms to the teenager like that, and his student came running to him.

Clinging to him as he sobbed, crying out for the one thing that he couldn't have: His mother.

"Does it ever hurt less?" He whispers.

It's late in the afternoon, in the palace gardens. They're sitting on a marble bench. The Guoshi's posture is straight and proper, but the prince has been weeping for so long, his head rests against his teacher's leg.

"...No, it doesn't."

Xie Lian tilts his head, listening to the boy sniffle, his fingers stroking through Lang Qiangqiu's hair. So softly.

His Guoshi has always been so cold with him, so far away—

The prince never realized how soft his hands could be. How much comfort they could bring.

“But you know, there was something that my own mother used to tell me.” His Guoshi murmurs, catching Lang Qiangqiu’s attention.

It’s rare that Fangxin ever talks about himself, after all.

“...What?” He croaks.

“I used to love building golden palaces, remember that game?”

The prince nods shallowly. It’s been around forever, after all.

“Well,” Xie Lian smiles faintly. “I used to work so hard, building them—and I’d throw the worst tantrums when they fell down.”

Lang Qiangqiu snorts. “It’s hard to imagine you doing that, Guoshi.”

The god hangs his head for a moment, not speaking—and when he does, he sounds almost remorseful. “I was a rather spoiled child, actually. It took me a long time to learn my lesson.”

And it was always at the expense of so many others. “But...” Xie Lian sighs.

“She taught me—that was always the point. Part of building them is that they fall down.”

Lang Qiangqiu doesn’t speak at first, turning his cheek into the Guoshi’s leg. “How does that help me?”

Gentle fingers stroke through his hair.

“Part of loving people is losing them.”

Xie Lian explains, tilting his chin back.

He knows that the sun hasn’t come down yet, and now—he misses the sight of it, slipping underneath the horizon.

“But that doesn’t mean that it isn’t worth it. And you can keep them with you as you move forward.”

“...How do you do that?”

Lang Qiangqiu glances up—just in time to see the corners of his Guoshi’s lips curve into a smile.

Soft, yet bittersweet.

"My mother—she used to name every single dish that she cooked. Even if it was something as simple as plain rice."

"Like the royal chefs do?"

The Guoshi hums, pleased to hear that the prince isn't weeping anymore, just quietly sniffling.

"She said that it could make any meal special. Worthy of a palace—even though she was horrible at cooking, to be honest with you."

Still, Xie Lian regrets every plate he turned away.

"Now, I name every meal I make too," he explains. "And I think of her." It's even more reminiscent, given that he's just as bad of a cook as she was. "...What happened to her?"

Lang Qiangqiu watches as the smile on Fangxin's face freezes.

It takes him a long time to answer.

"...I let her down," Is the only explanation that the Guoshi gives.

His student remains quiet for some time after that, but eventually—he asks another question.

"Fangxin Guoshi?"

"Hmm?"

"Why do you wear that ring around your neck, instead of your finger?"

Xie Lian stiffens.

Of course, the child has seen the ring before. They spar every single day, and have for the last three years.

"...It's too precious," Xie Lian mutters. "I wouldn't want to damage it."

"You wear other jewelry, though." The prince frowns. "You never seem worried about it."

"Yes," Finery given to him as the royal preceptor, expected to maintain a certain look, "but this came from someone important to me."

Lang Qiangqiu doesn't try to touch it. He knows—Fangxin Guoshi is very fussy about that. But he does look closely.

"Like…family?"

Xie Lian takes a moment.

He's used the ring to pass himself off as married many, many times—ever since his days with Jiang Kuo.

But now, he tries to be just a little more honest.

"…Someone I was in love with," he mutters. "But he isn't here anymore."

For some reason—hearing that doesn't seem to bring Lang Qiangqiu much comfort at all. Not like when Xie Lian spoke of his mother.

"What happened to him?"

Xie Lian reaches for the ring around his neck, slowly turning it over between his fingers, stroking it lovingly.

Eventually, he gives the same answer that he did before, when the prince asked him about his mother:

"…I really let him down," Xie Lian admits, his voice a little hoarse.

So many times. In so many ways that the prince has lost count of them all.

Lang Qiangqiu doesn't ask him much more, clinging to his leg even more tightly, and Xie Lian is patient with him. Allows the boy to cry his heart out, carrying the prince on his back when he falls asleep, tucking him into his bed.

That night, Xie Lian sits in the garden.

Until sunrise, he keeps his head tilted back, staring at the stars that he can no longer see.

And yet, he still feels the warmth of the moonlight against his cheeks. The breeze through his hair. Smells the flowers, scent drifting all around him.

Xie Lian doesn't understand it.

When he took on these shackles, over four centuries ago—he thought that he was simply waiting to fade away.

Wu Ming was his last believer. Without him, in time, Xie Lian would surely fade to nothing. And then—he might move on. Might see Hong-er again. But…

His soul carries on.

And on, and on.

Xie Lian fiddles with the ring around his neck, laying back against the soft grasses.

Who still believes in him now? There can't possibly be anyone praying to him anymore. Those who haven't forgotten him only curse his name.

"…Why am I here?" He whispers.

There was a time when Xie Lian's life had such purpose. Such unending faith in himself. In the righteousness of the path that he walked.

But what has all this time been, if not a wandering path of penance? And when will it end?

His mask lays on the ground next to him, a rare moment of nakedness outside of the confines of his chambers.

Eyes wide open, the cursed shackle pattern burning in the dark as he stares up at the stars.

He used to do this when he was a child, on the palace grounds in Xianle.

Lay back on the grass and count the stars, always falling asleep before he got that high.

Back then, Feng Xin and Mu Qing would be laying down on either side of him.

Feng Xin was always quiet and stiff, jumping each time he accidentally bumped elbows with his prince.

And Mu Qing…It was the only time he never seemed inclined to grumble, reaching up and gripping the grass on either side of him, dark hair splayed out as he looked up at the stars.

When Xie Lian asked what he was doing, he explained it was something that his father used to say.

Mu Qing spoke about him very little. Xie Lian only knew that he used to be a woodworker in Mu Qing's village near Mount Taicang.

'Me and my sister would lay out on the grass with him when he came back from work sometimes,' his friend murmured, eyes lit with starlight.

'Just like this.'

Xie Lian never saw the way that Feng Xin would prop himself up on his elbow, turning on his side to watch Mu Qing talk, his expression unreadable.

Mu Qing never looked away from the sky, so he didn't know it either.

'And he used to tell us, if we didn't hang onto the grass tight—we'd float away.'

It was the sort of thing that Xie Lian's friend normally would have sneered about with his typical cynicism, but—he didn't.

He sounded…

Longing, in a way Xie Lian didn't understand back then.

He remembers the way he leaned back against the grass, hands folded over his stomach, wiggling his toes to keep them warm as he asked—

'Where is your father, Mu Qing? I don't think I've ever met him.'

Xie Lian's friend was quiet for such a long time after that.

And when he finally did answer, his voice was so small.

Not arrogant or condescending. No hostility at all.

'…He let go of the grass, your highness.'

Just so achingly filled with sadness.

A pain Xie Lian would come to understand so well, later on.

Back then, the prince didn't say a word. Just reached out with one hand in the dark, fumbling until he found Mu Qing's.

Instead of swatting him away or mumbling something about it being inappropriate— Xie Lian's friend gripped his fingers tightly.

With his other, the prince reached down, twisting blades of grass between his fingertips.

'I won't let go, then,' he whispered—not complaining when Mu Qing gripped his fingers even tighter. *'I promise.'*

He fell asleep like that back then. Holding Mu Qing's hand.

Dozed, when Feng Xin carefully lifted the prince up into his arms, carrying him back towards the palace.

Xie Lian never said anything about being awake, content to be held—and he listened, as Feng Xin turned his face towards Mu Qing, his voice gruff, but...sympathetic.

'You never said anything.'

Mu Qing always stayed a couple of steps away from him, hands tightly clasped behind his back as he walked, head hung low.

" *You never asked.'*

And there were so many things that Xie Lian should have asked him back then. He knows that now.

There was a time when he desperately wanted to take that back. To change it. To throw himself down in Mu Qing and Feng Xin's temples and pray. Apologize for...for everything.

Now, he knows that it's better for them if they don't hear from him.

All of this is for the best.

Now, laying in the imperial gardens of Yong'an, Xie Lian lets go of the grass.

Reaches up blindly, silk sleeves slipping down his arms, pooling at his shoulders as his fingertips reach for the sky.

Like he could scoop up the stars in his hands, if he reached far enough. He doesn't float away.

There's something keeping the god firmly tethered to the earth, but he couldn't tell you what.

He stares through the shackles blankly, mouth turning down at the corners.

Try as he might, he's never quite able to see anything through them.

Just darkness.

As his time in Yong'an stretches on, the prince grows older. Into less of an uncertain little boy, and far more a cocksure, overeager young man.

He never gets the upper hand on his Guoshi during sparring, but he certainly tries. Hunts, drinks to his heart's content.

And just like Xie Lian, he has a few friends—maybe not as close or as genuine as he would like, but friends—to keep him company along the way.

Present more often than not is a wealthy young man by the name of An Le. Always lingering in Lang Qiangqiu's shadow.

The Guoshi never spares him any time or attention. Only ever offers him a gold glance from underneath that golden mask of his—but An Le never really seems to mind.

He's content to whisper to Lang Qiangqiu when Fangxin Guoshi is across the feasting hall.

Planting seeds.

"Your Guoshi," An Le muses, teasing a strawberry over his lips before taking a bite, "He's always rather lonesome, isn't he?"

The Prince glances over to his teacher, watching as Fangxin politely rebuffs the advances of several noblewomen with a smile.

"He's shy, I think!"

The teenager tilts his head to the side, watching as Xie Lian agrees to dance with a younger, far less attractive girl than the rest, one who had been struggling to find a partner all evening.

To her, he's perfectly charming, even going so far as to kiss her hand when they part.

Then, there are more young men showing interest in her—and the Guoshi seems all the more pleased for it.

"...But he doesn't have a wife, does he?" An Le points out, kicking his feet up on the table.

"His cultivation method doesn't allow that sort of thing," the prince explains.

And even if it did—the way Fangxin has spoken about his former lover, the one that he lost—

Lang Qiangqiu suspects that his Guoshi has no such interests in women. Which is his own business, and the crown prince knows it is not his place to share it.

"Does he have any friends?"

"Me," he answers quickly, offering An Le an impish smile. "I'm his friend."

"..." The young man smiles at the prince sympathetically, patting his shoulder. "You're his student, your highness. Not his friend."

He watches, as Lang Qiangqiu's face falls.

In part, out of sadness.

And then...mild defiance.

"If he doesn't have me as a friend—that would just mean that he didn't have friends or family at all," the prince mutters, shaking his head. "That would be too horrible."

An Le lifts his drink, watching the Guoshi closely.

"Sometimes the truth is horrific, your highness." He shrugs. "That's the way life is." But not the way that Lang Qiangqiu wishes for it to be.

And when you're a prince, raised to think that the world is yours to command—you often get it in your head that you can change it.

Simply by willing it to be so.

One afternoon, the prince stops in the middle of his calligraphy, setting down his brush.

“Fangxin Guoshi?”

His teacher sits on the open window sill, one leg thrown over the side, his back leaning against the frame.

His hair is low, today—held behind his head with a black jade comb, inlaid with gold. It leaves several loose locks hanging in front of his face, swaying gently in the breeze.

“What is it?”

“Are you sad, again?”

For a time, his teacher doesn’t answer.

Xie Lian has phrases.

He uses them often, to deflect such attention.

HIs lips quirk into a small smile, and he offers his most common excuse, “This old man is just tired, dianxia. Continue with the lesson.”

“...You aren’t that old, you know,” the prince grumbles. “It’s weird when you say that.”

Xie Lian doesn’t say anything more, looking out the window once more.

The Prince has no idea that he can’t see the sights below—and the old enjoys feeling the breeze.

He has phases, too.

When there’s no energy. No motivation. When all he wants is to sleep, and hide.

Everything frightens him, even if he doesn’t say it. He feels fragile and pried open, like the slightest invasion could shatter him.

Those times—they come and go, and Xie Lian doesn’t know why. Doesn’t have a word for what they mean, other than just...

Being depressed.

It passes. If he gives it time, it always passes.

He’s been in one of those phases for nearly two years now. And he’s just ready for it to be done with.

"...FangXin Guoshi?"

His shoulders slump slightly as he sighs. "Yes?"

"Why do you still wear that mask?"

His teacher doesn't answer him immediately.

He's wearing deep blue robes today, with golden threads stitched in the shapes of flowers along the sleeves, trailing into black at the ends.

The color is beautiful—contrasting against his skin and hair like he's been painted that way

"I told you a very long time ago, your highness. Back when we first met."

Xie Lian doesn't move, when he hears the sound of Lang Qiangqiu's stool scraping across the floor, or the sound of his approach.

"But you're not ugly, Guoshi," the prince presses him. "We both know that."

He's standing just beside Xie Lian now, the god can hear his nervous little heartbeat. What must he be, sixteen, now? When the years get so long, boys grow up quite fast. "And you remember my answer to that?" The god murmurs.

"You aren't ugly on the inside either, Guoshi."

A hand reaches out. Xie Lian can feel the movement of it.

And when he feels gentle fingertips brushing underneath the curve of the mask, something inside him snaps.

"Stop." He offers one warning, but the prince seems too lost in his own curiosity to heed it.

Xie Lian once embraced being touched in such a kind and gentle way. Would lean into someone's hand gratefully, for the reassurance that he wasn't alone in the dark.

Now, he only remembers one thing:

'You've always had such beautiful eyes.'

CRACK!

For a moment, there's only shock.

Xie Lian pressed back against the window sill, trembling, his hand clutched against his chest.

Lang Qiangqiu, with his head turned to the side—a red handprint forming on his cheek.

A gentle blow, considering the god's actual strength.

But it still stings quite a bit.

And when Xie Lian speaks, it's with a voice he hasn't used in quite some time.

Not the voice of a beggar, or a teacher—but that of something much higher.

"You forget your place, boy." He hisses, like a snake that's been threatened.

Slowly, the prince reaches up to touch the growing mark on his cheek, too startled to be angry. When he finally speaks, he simply asks—

"...My place?"

Xie Lian clutches both hands against his chest, trying to stop them from trembling so violently.

"Don't touch me," he whispers.

'Oh god, just—please, don't touch me.'

There's a long silence, filled only with his own ragged, frightened heartbeat.

"...I'm sorry," the prince mumbles, his voice small. Genuinely contrite, and—

So, so lonely.

"Please don't be angry, Guoshi—I was only...I was only trying to..."

Xie Lian doesn't speak at first, his lower lip wobbling.

Because he knows.

Knows that the boy didn't mean any harm. That he was only trying to feel close with someone.

Xie Lian knows how lonely that feeling can be.

He lets out a long, heavy sigh—catching the prince by the wrist before he can retreat. "I'm sorry," he mutters, dipping his head. "I shouldn't have struck you."

Xie Lian told himself long ago that he would not strike out in anger anymore.

"I was frightened."

Lang Qiangqiu's eyes widen apologetically. "I-I'm sorry, Guoshi, I wasn't trying to—"

"I know," Xie Lian mutters. "Close your eyes."

"I…what?"

"If you want to look," his teacher explains flatly, "You'll do as I say."

Hesitantly, the prince complies, eyes sliding shut.

When he does, Xie Lian reaches up, checking his lids with a delicate touch of his fingertips—making the prince shiver—before covering them completely with his palm.

"…" Lang Qiangqiu's eyebrow's furrow under Xie Lian's touch. "Guoshi," he mutters, "I don't understand—?"

The hand that's gripping his wrist lifts the prince's palm up, and then —

His palm is pressed against his Guoshi's cheek, and he can feel the lack of a mask there.

This—

This must have been what he meant by looking, then.

It takes a moment for the prince to actually move.

And when he does, his fingertips find a face that…

Isn't ugly at all.

The skin is perfectly smooth, unblemished. Not a wrinkle in sight. (So much for being old, huh?)

Symmetrical features. Surprisingly delicate actually—

Soft. Young.

Not what the prince expected at all.

"…" He frowns, his hands cupping the Guoshi's cheeks. "Why did you ever try to say you are ugly?" He mutters, too far ahead of himself to be embarrassed. "You're beautiful, Fangxin Guoshi."

The god doesn't reply, but now—the prince notices.

His teacher is shaking.

Subtly, but he's trembling from head to toe.

"…Fangxin Guoshi," the prince mutters, his eyelashes brushing against Xie Lian's fingertips as he blinks underneath his palm. "Are you still scared?"

Still, he receives no reply.

"Someone hurt you before, didn't they?"

His thumbs stroke over Xie Lian's cheeks, worn with callouses after so many years of training with a blade.

The god's teeth clench, his nostrils flaring with the effort it takes not to panic, but… He manages, in a brief moment of honesty, to nod.

Those hands hold him tighter.

"…I won't let anyone do that, ever again—okay?" The prince mutters fiercely. "I'll be king one day—and I'll be even stronger than you. I won't let anyone hurt you ever again. I promise!"

The god almost smiles.

"That's kind of you to say."

"I'm not just saying it—I swear!"

It’s daunting, for the most powerful person you’ve ever met to seem so fragile, even if it’s only for a moment.

Lang Qiangqiu doesn’t care about any of that. Not right now.

He just doesn’t want his teacher to seem so frightened and sad anymore. So lonely.

“...I believe that you’ll try,” the older man concedes, making Lang Qiangqiu frown.

“Really—!”

Then, with a rush of air, his teacher isn’t in his arms anymore—and the prince is opening his eyes with a frantic gasp, looking around.

“GUOSHI?!”

Xie Lian lands on his feet beneath the window—two stories below, his mask back in place.

“Finish your calligraphy,” he folds his hands into his sleeves, his voice stern. “Or you can forget about sparring again this evening.”

With that, he walks through the courtyard.

As the prince watches him go, he realizes— His Guoshi is really, truly alone.

And all he wants, in the end—is just the chance to stand a little closer to him. Maybe even beside him, if Fangxin would allow it.

But time goes on, and his teacher remains at a distance. With one exception. The day of his seventeenth birthday.

The Gilded Banquet

Chapter Summary

> "Dianxia..." Xie Lian sighs, his voice tired. "I've little left to teach you."
>
> "That's not true!" The prince protests. "I still need more time! I need—!"
>
> I need you.
>
> That's what he tried to say.
>
> Before a servant walked into his chambers, interrupting him. Before his Guoshi gently patted his hand, reassuring him—
>
> "We can talk more, after the banquet." Fangxin reassures him gently, rising to his feet. "I don't want to spoil your birthday."
>
> "...Okay."
>
> That's right. Today is his Seventeenth Birthday—and tonight, is his Gilded Banquet.

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE
>
> CONTENT WARNING: depictions of sexual harassment, violence, and death

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When the prince awakes in the morning—his Guoshi is already there, sitting on the sedan on the other side of his bedchambers.

And, as usual—staring out the window.

The youth sits up, eyes groggy, hair askew.

"...Did I oversleep?" He mumbles. "Have the lessons already started?"

Fangxin shakes his head, never looking back at him.

“No,” the Guoshi murmurs. “I just wanted the chance to speak to you alone, before the preparations started.”

Right—for the feast being held in his honor.

After all, it’s his coming of age. When he’ll start performing the duties of a full fledged crown prince.

“Sure,” the prince mutters, adjusting his hair slightly as he tries to sit up properly. Even goes through the trouble of clearing his throat, trying to deepen his voice.

“What is it?”

“...” Slowly, the Guoshi rises to his feet—wearing black and gold today, sleeves trailing elegantly as he walks to the prince’s bedside.

The youth doesn’t speak as he watches his Guoshi sit on the edge of the bed, heart pounding, until—

A hand lands in his hair.

When his eyes trail up—

Fangxin’s mouth is turned up into a soft smile, his fingers ruffling the teenager’s hair.

“You’ve done well, Lang Qianqiu,” he murmurs, tilting his head.

The prince stares at him with eyes the size of dinner plates, lips parted.

“I’m proud of you.”

The Guoshi doesn’t get much more out before Lang Qianqiu surges forward, flinging his arms around Xie Lian in a tight embrace.

Then, he seems to remember just as soon that he’s crossed a boundary. “Sorry, sorry, I know, no touching—!”

“It’s alright,” the Guoshi mutters stiffly, adjusting his hair. “I just—you’ve done so well, that there’s a very strong chance that you are going to ascend.”

The prince reacts with blind joy. “You really think so?!”

“Yes, but—listen,” Fangxin stops him from cheering.

"There are some things that you'll need to know when you do."

Now Lang Qiangqiu stops, watching him very seriously. "Like what?"

"You can't just do exactly as you like if you ascend, understand?" His Guoshi explains firmly. "Even if it means going against what you believe in."

"..." The prince frowns, his brow furrowed. "But you told me I should always do what I think is right. Without exception."

"And I meant that," Xie Lian agrees. "Unless the Heavenly Emperor ever tells you to do otherwise. Understand?"

The young man hesitates.

"Lang Qianqiu," His teacher speaks again, his tone stern. "I need you to promise me." "Why is it so important?"

"Promise."

"...Alright," he agrees, glancing away, squirming a little. "I promise."

The sigh his Guoshi lets out almost sounds relieved.

"...It will be overwhelming, when you first arrive—especially if you ascend young," His teacher continues. "It's best to seek out older gods to help you. Nan Yang would be best."

"...You think so?"

"Yes," Fangxin nods emphatically. "Go to him as soon as you arrive."

"Tell him...the friend who offered a third cup sent you. He'll know what it means, and he'll look after you. Remember that. Understand?"

He has to impress these things upon the young prince, who is prone to forgetting minor details.

"You know General Nan Yang?"

"Remember it."

"Okay, okay—!"

"And spend as much time with your father as you can," The Guoshi mutters. "You won't get the chance to after you ascend. You don't want to regret that. Understand?"

"Yes," the prince agrees, startled.

Fangxin sounds so...urgent, right now.

So anxious.

"...Why are you being like this, anyway?" Lang Qianqiu mutters, "Couldn't this wait until later?"

Fangxin looks away, hair covering his face. "I was this age, when..." The teenager stares.

"...When what?!"

Finally, the Guoshi replies—

"I'll probably be leaving soon."

Lang Qianqiu stares up at him, his eyes widening with shock—and hurt. "What?!"

"Dianxia..." Xie Lian sighs, his voice tired. "I've little left to teach you."

"That's not true!" The prince protests. "I still need more time! I need—!"

I need you.

That's what he tried to say.

Before a servant walked into his chambers, interrupting him.

Before his Guoshi gently patted his hand, reassuring him—

"We can talk more, after the banquet." Fangxin reassures him gently, rising to his feet. "I don't want to spoil your birthday."

"...Okay."

That's right.

Today is his Seventeenth Birthday—and tonight, is his Gilded Banquet.

The servants usher him out, to prepare him for a day of activities—

and he doesn't get the chance to do more than spare one last look over his shoulder, and…

Fangxin Guoshi seems as lonesome as ever.

Xie Lian, as one might expect, isn't particularly fun at parties.

He used to be. There was a time when he could dazzle the room, swirling about in brightly colored robes, jewels glittering in his hair, charming generals and foreign dignitaries alike.

Now, he's a wallflower.

Watching as people in golden robes and masks—much like his own, but far more gaudy—dance and drink, making merry.

Ironically, it does seem to be an attempt to mimic the festivals they used to hold in Xianle.

Xie Lian tries not to feel bitter, but it's more of a cheap imitation.

But that's the point. Gilded.

The gold here isn't real. Not most of it, anyway.

But the irony—it lies in the fact that Xie Lian can hear it, right now—as one of the King's generals tries to goad him into another purge.

That's a delicate way of phrasing it.

What he really means is that the harvest this year was poor, and no one wants to be another Xianle. Best way to avoid that? Relocating descendants of the former Empire to the border with Banyue.

Border towns with little food, constantly wracked by violent raids.

So, when they say they're committing a 'purge,' or a 'relocation,' they really mean that they're enacting a death sentence.

Mostly against women and children, the elderly. Young men end up conscripted into the Yong'an army.

The current King, however, thinks it's barbaric.

"They're our citizens too, now." He chastises the general, shaking his head. "Anyone who would hold a grudge against them for wars that are four centuries past is out of their mind. Don't you agree, Guoshi?"

The masked man glances up, startled.

"…Yes, your highness," he agrees

The general makes a face, clearly annoyed as he stomps off, looking for more wine.

The King of Yong'an looks toward his royal preceptor with a smile. "It's nice at times, to know that someone thinks I'm not a fool."

"There is nothing foolish about mercy, your highness."

The King hums with agreement, looking out over the party. "…I'm grateful, you know." He sighs. "It seems as though you truly came into our lives at the right time. I…Since my wife, I…"

He starts when Fangxin rests a hand on his elbow, feather light. "You were grieving."

The Guoshi murmurs, "No one ever does that gracefully."

After a moment, the King smiles—and he covers the younger man's hand with his own. "Maybe so—but you were there for my son in ways I could not be. I'll always be grateful for that."

Fangxin offers him a small smile.

The night carries on—with no Lang Qianqiu. It's traditional for the person the banquet is being held for not to arrive until the peak of festivities, anyway.

Xie Lian, however, is thinking of excuses to leave.

See, most flirting—he can deal with. Particularly from women.

They never really cross a line—and the line of flirtation is never particularly aggressive. It's easy for Xie Lian to sidestep their inquiries, or gently let them down.

With men, however, it's far less comfortable. Particularly this one.

"Guoshi, Guoshi…" The noble smirks.

They're standing near the wall, with the noble's hands resting on the marble on either side of Xie Lian's head, caging him in, "Come now, there's no need to be such a tease. How long have we been doing this?"

“Too long,” Fangxin replies flatly.

“I couldn’t agree more...”

The man reaches for Xie Lian’s chin, and when the Guoshi pointedly pulls out of his reach, the noble settles for grabbing a longer lock of hair instead, twisting it between his fingers and lifting it to his lips, inhaling deeply.

“Has anyone ever told you that you smell divine?”

Underneath the mask, the god’s eyes are narrowed into a glare. “Has anyone ever told you that it’s dangerous to push a man’s boundaries?”

“Dangerous?” The noble purrs, waggling an eyebrow. “Maybe I like danger.” “You have three seconds to let go.”

“Or?”

“I’ll break your arm.”

The noble stiffens—then glares. “There’s no need for such violence in response to a proposition, Guoshi. Are you really so ashamed? We both know it’s not because my gender offends you.”

Xie Lian stiffens.

“...No,” he replies, even if that statement makes him feel deep shame.

He often tells himself that he’s come to terms with his own sexuality, and then he hears something like that—that his preference for men is obvious—and the shame and paranoia comes roaring back to life.

Now, he opts for a slightly less aggressive method of denial.

“I can’t.”

“Your cultivation—”

“Leave me physically incapable of what you’re asking for,” Xie Lian explains with an awkward smile. “I’m afraid you’ll have to find another partner.”

To his annoyance, even that doesn’t deter him.

“Ah, is that so? But you see, Guoshi...” He leans closer.

“For what I have in mind, you don’t necessarily need to…perform,” he murmurs. “And we can both enjoy ourselves nonetheless. How does that sound?”

Xie Lian’s brow furrows beneath his mask—

What on earth is he talking about?

After sleeping in so many alleyways, Xie Lian would consider himself somewhat knowledgeable on intercourse, despite having absolutely no experience himself.

He’s blind after all, not deaf—and he’s heard quite a bit. He’ll be honest, most of it didn’t sound very enjoyable.

And on the rare occasion that it was between two men, it was always with hands and mouths, and Xie Lian can’t exactly imagine a way he could enjoy that under such circumstances.

In truth, Xie Lian has come to the conclusion that he probably wouldn’t enjoy any of it at all.

While he’s been in love before—those circumstances never allowed him to feel…that sort of desire for the object of his affections. And since then…

Xie Lian hasn’t felt anything close to temptation. Maybe once, one flickering thought while he was kissing Wu Ming, but that…

Xie Lian’s not particularly proud of his motivations, back then. The context behind what he almost asked the savage ghost to do.

And it wouldn’t have been out of real desire—it would have only been out of a need to give something away willingly before Bai Wuxiang could take it.

“…I’d still rather not,” The Guoshi finally speaks again, his voice less firm than before —but not because of this man, no.

He’s simply distracted by his own memories, as he often is. “…Fangxin Guoshi, no need to be so—”

A hand lands heavily on his shoulder.

“How about this,” a voice speaks lowly, and Xie Lian is almost startled by the tone of it. “If you don’t let him go, he might break your arm—but I’m going to cut off your head. How does that sound?”

The noble—an arrogant man by the name of Tan Xiaodan—stiffens "D...Dianxia, I..."

Xie Lian doesn't think, in all of the years he's been teaching Lang Qianqiu, he's ever heard the boy speak like that.

"Get out of my sight, before I change my mind," the prince snarls.

The noble lets Xie Lian go in an instant, stumbling away with a few rapid apologies.

"...It's bad luck to be early for your own gilded banquet," the Guoshi murmurs, his head turned in Tan Xiaodan's direction, like he's watching him go. "You aren't due for another half an hour."

"...I know," the prince agrees, sheepish. "But I needed to speak with you." "About?"

"...Not here," Lang Qianqiu shakes his head. "Could we go somewhere quiet? The garden, maybe?"

Xie Lian can't imagine what the prince wants, but, given what he said during their last conversation—he can't imagine this will end well.

"I already said we could speak about it tomorrow," The Guoshi mutters, tilting his face down, golden mask flashing under the candle light. "I don't want to ruin—"

"You wont ruin my birthday," Lang Qianqiu shakes his head, "I promise! I just...this is really important."

"Your highness—"

"Please?" He pleads.

"..." Xie Lian lets out a heavy sigh.

"Alright."

He offers his wrist, allowing himself to be led through the crowd, out of the cheerful murmur of the ballroom, away from the music and the dancing.

Finally, they reach the garden.

There's something off about the prince this evening. Something fidgety and nervous. Xie Lian doesn't comment, only follows along.

“Here, ah—you sit here, alright Guoshi?” The hand on his wrist guides him to take a seat on a marble bench.

They’ve been here many times before.

Since Lang Qianqiu was barely more than a child. Now, he’s taller than Xie Lian—and broader too, awkwardly pacing while Xie Lian sits.

“What is it?”

“I—ah, well—” The prince swallows dryly, and Xie Lian arches an eyebrow. Why is his heart beating so fast?

“I think I know your secret,” Lang Qianqiu mutters, and the Guoshi goes very still. “Why you don’t get close to anyone—why you’re always pushing me away, why you’re so sad all the time, I get it now.”

“Your highness—”

“It’s because you’re a descendent of Xianle, right?”

His teacher doesn’t move, and he doesn’t speak.

Lang Qianqiu’s gaze softens. “So, it is true.”

“I—”

“That doesn’t make a difference to me,” the prince explains quickly, and Xie Lian—he feels it when the boy sets something in his lap, and when he reaches to see what it is...

Flowers.

The Guoshi’s eyes soften underneath his mask, fingertips stroking over the petals.

Lang Qianqiu brought him flowers.

Xie Lian almost feels guilty, because the prince doesn’t know it—but his Guoshi is incapable of seeing how beautiful they are. The array of colors.

“I don’t care who your family was,” the prince explains, “or where you come from. None of that makes any difference to me.”

“...” Xie Lian’s fingers tighten around the stems. “Your highness is very kind, but why are you telling me this now?”

Lang Qianqiu's heart beats faster.

"...Because I..." He clears his throat—and again, just like this morning, he's clearly trying to make his voice sound far deeper than it actually is. "Today is my birthday."

"...Right," his teacher agrees slowly.

"And I, well," the prince makes a point of rising to his full height

Not realizing that this is a futile effort, because his teacher cannot see the posturing that the young man is currently projecting.

"I'm a man now."

Xie Lian accidentally lets out a small chuckle, and the prince deflates. "Guoshi! It's true! I'm of age now. Don't laugh!"

"I—" Fangxin Guoshi cracks a small smile, shaking his head. "You're right, dianxia. I'm sorry. You're a man now."

The way he says it—it makes the prince feel like he's being placated, but he's too far gone to turn back now.

He sucks in a deep breath.

Then, he offers a gesture that is so meaningful, for royalty. One that Xie Lian is startled by, the moment Lang Qianqiu does it—because he understands the seriousness of it.

Lang Qianqiu drops to his knees before his Guoshi.

He reaches for Xie Lian's hands, gripping them firmly—but with a gentleness that actually makes something in the god's heart move.

It's been a long time since he didn't fear someone touching him gently.

But slowly—ever so gradually—something has been building between them:

Trust.

"...To me, Guoshi is the strongest, most capable—and most beautiful person in the entire world," The prince explains earnestly, and while Xie Lian isn't afraid—

His stomach begins to sink.

“And I—I’m getting stronger every day. You still think I can ascend, right?” ...Oh dear.

“I do,” Xie Lian agrees cautiously.

“When I do, I can appoint you as my deputy,” the prince explains. “And we can go to the heavens together. You could see General Nan Yang again, and keep teaching me —”

The God’s heart aches.

“...And I can protect you.”

Lang Qianqiu is so earnest in everything he does—and now is no different. “I meant it, when I made that promise. I won’t let anyone hurt you, Guoshi. Not ever again.”

Slowly, his lips trembling with nerves, he lifts their joined hands—and kisses the one of Xie Lian’s knuckles.

Xie Lian is silent, working through many different emotions—almost none of them pleasant, but...

This isn’t about him.

Actually—this moment is far more significant to the young man before him than it could ever be for Xie Lian, and so—he tries to take it seriously.

And gently.

“...Is there something that you want to ask me, Lang Qianqiu?” He murmurs, his voice so soft—and the prince nods, his hands shaking slightly with the nerves, but holding onto Xie Lian’s so tenderly.

“Would you just...let me?” The prince whispers. “Let me protect you?”

Fangxin squeezes his hands gently. “I’d be a sore excuse for a teacher, if I allowed my student to shield me from the world.”

The prince swallows dryly, filled with determination as he kisses Xie Lian’s hand again. “You were the one who said you didn’t have more to teach me.”

“I did...”

“So, don’t stay by my side as my teacher, then.” Lang Qianqiu murmurs. “Stay as the state preceptor, and...as...as my...”

He stops when Fangxin pulls one of his hands away—only to cup the prince’s cheek— so gently.

“...Guoshi?”

“You used to be so little,” he whispers.

Like a tiny little bird, flapping around in the rafters. Singing nonsensical little songs and following him around, flapping his half grown wings. “When did you grow up?”

The prince’s cheeks flush slightly, not sure as to whether or not he’s being rejected.

Xie Lian’s thumb strokes his cheek for a moment longer, looking for the right words to say—

And then he goes still, his head whipping in the opposite direction, posture suddenly stiff.

The prince stares up at him, confused. “...Guoshi—?” “Stay here.”

The Guoshi rises to his feet, carefully tucking the flowers into his robes, and his student watches him with confusion. “I don’t—?”

“Stay here,” Xie Lian repeats, his voice suddenly hard and stern. “And don’t move until I come and find you again.”

“But—!”

“Do as I say!”

He couldn’t hear what his Guoshi did, his ears were never quite so sensitive, so...

The Crown Prince of Yong’an never heard the screaming.

When Xie Lian left this place, only minutes before—it was a gleaming show of wealth and prestige.

Now, it’s a bloodbath.

Not so dissimilar from the day that Xie Lian and Lang Qianqiu met— the kidnapping attempt, but this...

This is a massacre.

By the time the Guoshi enters the room, the floors are already slick with blood, the stench of it filling the air. The clash of swords.

And the screaming.

From the sound of it—there are very few attendants from the original banquet that are actually left alive, but—

But still, Xie Lian tries.

His blade appears in his hand—dark, like black jade, gleaming with sharpness.

There are twenty five attackers remaining.

Before, Xie Lian faced the same number with nothing more than a tree branch and little motivation to speak of.

Now, with a blade in his hand and sadness in his heart—because, in the last five years, he had come to know these people well—

Xie Lian slaughters them.

He's quick about it, flashing from one enemy to the next, his blade moving so sharply, it's invisible to the human eye.

And internally, he curses himself for not listening more closely. For being distracted, if only for a brief moment.

How could this happen?

How could Xie Lian have allowed it to happen?

He dispatches the last one, wiping the blood from his blade as he listens closely, trying to find survivors—and the sound of one voice makes his heart sink.

"G-Guoshi..." He rasps.

It's the King of Yong'an.

The God is at his side in an instant, quickly checking his body for wounds, and...

When he feels the gash in the king's stomach, his heart plummets even further.

Maybe he could survive, if he was lucky. But he's losing so much blood...

"What happened here?" Xie Lian whispers.

The King clutches his wrist weakly, his breathing ragged.

This will be a long, painful death. Xie Lian can feel that. Can see how deeply the king is suffering already, each intake of air deeply labored. "X...Xianle..." The god's eyes widen sharply. "It was rebels...from Xianle..."

"...That can't be right," the Guoshi mutters, cradling his king in his arms. "Your highness, you said it yourself. It's been centuries. Holding onto such a grudge would be—"

"Madness?!" The King chokes, blood streaming down his chin. "They identified themselves when they came!"

Still, it doesn't make any...

"Guoshi..." The King clutches at the front of Xie Lian's robes, staining them with blood. "You must...we have to...protect...Lang Qianqiu..."

On that, the god immediately agrees. "I—"

The next words the King says, however, make his blood run cold.

"Tell...tell the guards to purge them all," the King whispers. "N...Not just a few cities. All of them. I—"

Xie Lian's hands begin to tremble.

"I want them all gone."

For a moment, the Guoshi doesn't react.

"My son...he...won't be safe...until they're all...gone..."

But that isn't exactly true. Xie Lian knows that much all too well.

What the King is asking him to do—

It would ruin Lang Qianqiu's future. Stain it with blood. Curse him to live with that guilt. That responsibility.

And even if that weren't true…

Xie Lian can't allow it.

Because it's genocide.

And he promised himself—no matter the personal cost— He wouldn't hurt people again.

But—in this case, the alternative is… An awful choice.

Reminiscent of the sort that Bai Wuxiang would have forced him to make, all those years ago.

"…Guoshi?" The King whispers, eyes unfocused. "D…Did you hear me?"

"…" Xie Lian leans his face close, his hair shielding them both from prying eyes.

He wanted to kill a King of Yong'an once.

A selfish, confusing man. Xie Lian used to think that he hated Lang Ying.

Maybe he needed to hate him, back then. Needed someone to blame.

But in the end, he was just weak.

A coward, who needed to live with his ghosts—so he dragged the entire world down with him.

But he was just a pawn of Bai Wuxiang in the end. Xie Lian wasn't any better.

He doesn't hate Lang Ying now. Just pities him. And maybe, to some extent—he understands him.

"…I'll make sure the prince is alright," Xie Lian whispers, making a solemn promise. "And I'll find and deal with the ones who are responsible for this. You have my word."

The King nods weakly, and for a moment, Xie Lian hopes he can avoid staining his hands once more, but…

"And…t…the order," he whispers. "Bring…one of the guards…so I can…" The Guoshi grits his teeth.

“F...Fangxin?”

Xie Lian doesn’t want to hurt anyone anymore.

But he can’t allow this.

The blow is quick. Xie Lian pinches a pressure point near the juncture of the King’s shoulder as he does it.

He doesn’t feel it. Doesn’t suffer when the dark steel of the blade pierces his heart. It’s a painless death, one without fear.

A mercy.

Until Xie Lian hears that awful scream. Not from him. Not from the king.

But from the door to the banquet hall. “FATHER!”

At first, the prince doesn’t understand what he’s seeing.

When he sees the Guoshi and the King on the ground together, he thinks they’re both gone.

That everyone in his life he has ever loved has been taken from him. Until Lang Qiangqiu watches Fangxin rise to his feet.

Until he sees the blade sticking out of his father’s chest.

It’s one that the prince knows quite well.

At first, he can’t bring himself to believe it.

“You...” Lang Qianqiu whispers, trying to see through the smoke and the blood. At some point, someone must have set a fire. “You didn’t...”

That golden mask stares back at him blankly, stained with blood.

His father’s blood.

“...You wouldn’t!” the prince chokes, tears falling.

Xie Lian stood in a palace once. Just like this one.

Standing over a dead king as his palace began to burn.

Listening as a crown prince cried out with horror.

"...Oh, Wu Ming," the god whispers, fingers trembling where they grip the hilt of his sword. "What did I do?"

No one answers him now, and after a moment—Xie Lian remembers that this isn't a memory. Or a nightmare.

This is really happening.

Wu Ming is gone. And Xie Lian—

His throat tightens with emotion.

"YOU WOULDN'T!" Lang Qianqiu sobs, fighting his guards as they restrain him.

He watches his teacher's form, still standing over his father's body, dripping with blood—gripping the handle of the blade that is still buried in the King's chest. "GUOSHI!"

Xie Lian's heart cracks.

He hurt someone again.

"WAIT!" The prince cries, fighting to get to him. "JUST EXPLAIN, I KNOW THAT YOU WOULDN'T—!"

But he did.

And that becomes clear when the blade is yanked from his father's chest, blood spattering across the floor.

The prince freezes, falling silent.

And Xie Lian is left with another awful choice.

To protect Lang Qianqiu's memory of this father, and his future—or to avoid breaking his heart.

One of those things can be healed from. The other cannot be undone.

He sheathes Fangxin without a word—

And he disappears into the smoke, the prince's sobs and screams following.

He didn't want to believe it.

He desperately didn't want to think that it was true.

But there was no alternative explanation left behind.

Only blood, massacre, and death.

With it, the young man's heart shattered.

And Xie Lian knew exactly where to go.

There was one person missing from the feast that night, his absence notable. After all, he was the crown prince's closest friend.

And he was also the one person in the Court of Yong'an that Xie Lian never trusted. An Le.

There's something almost reminiscent about this.

Arriving in a fine manor, decked out for a party—but no guests.

Just one man, sitting alone at his table.

Gleefully reading the reports of the deaths of the Yong'an nobility. Only one survivor —a naive, foolish little crown prince who won't make it far.

"Why?"

He looks up with a start—only to see the bloodstained mask standing across the table from him.

And An Le smiles, his expression vaguely bitter. "I should have known that it would have been you," he mutters, setting the reports aside. "You never did like me, Fangxin Guoshi."

The older man doesn't answer, his expression hidden. "Answer me."

"...Because it's my birthright," the human shrugs, throwing his hands up, watching the Guoshi's lips twitch with surprise, and he smirks. "My family name? It's Xie. Xie An Le. My parents weren't subtle, huh?"

He tilts his head back, watching the candlelight dance across the ceiling.

"Yong'an took everything from us. And for what? That's the thing that everyone forgets about the story."

He clicks his tongue woefully. “My ancestor—the one everyone loathes—he tried to help Yong’an.”

Fangxin doesn’t speak, just allows hm to go on.

“And look how they thanked my family for it. Are they any better now? No. They’re worse than Xianle ever was. They deserve to rot. If it wasn’t for what they did, I’d be the Crown Prince now. How is that fair?” He muses. “How is it fair that, that little idiot gets to be king, and I’m...what? His second fiddle? After what my family has endured? No. No—I wouldn’t allow that.”

An Le shakes his head, fully prepared to die now, expecting that’s why the Guoshi has come. “

So, go on.” He lifts his chin, resolved. “If you’ve come to kill me, go on and do it. I have no regrets.”

But the blow doesn’t come.

Instead, all he hears the sound of a mask falling to the floor with a clatter.

And when he looks up—For the first time, he sees the face of Fangxin Guoshi.

Young, handsome. No—handsome isn’t the right word. It doesn’t quite do it justice.

His face is too perfect, too delicate to be called handsome. There’s not a single flaw in his features to be found, no—

Beautiful is the word.

But his eyes are the most striking.

Burning under the candle light, glowing with a pattern that An Le knows to be inhuman, something of magic.

How, he wonders now, did no one ever notice that the Imperial Preceptor was a blind man?

“It was my birthright,” the figure finally replies, his voice low.

“...What?”

“The throne of Xianle,” he explains. “It was my birthright, not yours.”

An Le stares for a moment, struggling to put the pieces together, but—
Then, he understands what he's looking at.

A god. A blind one, no less. And—

A cursed shackle.

"...It's you?" He whispers, eyes wide.

No one has heard from the god of misfortune in many, many years. Some assumed that he had faded away long ago.

"You were there for the same reason as me, then," An Le breathes, his eyes widening with excitement. "For revenge, right? You can help me —!"

Then, he falls silent.

The sword in Xie Lian's hand has now been raised, leveled directly at the young man's chest.

"You know nothing."

Now, he can see it in the god's eyes.

Wrath.

A horrible, almost frightening level of wrath.

"None of those things happened to you," Xie Lian whispers. "I..."

"They happened to me."

Xie Lian was the one who was hated, cursed, and banished. His parents were the ones that were left to flounder and die and squalor. His friends were the ones who were forced to watch him suffer.

His Hong-er was the one who died to protect him.

"You speak as though you have been fighting in a war..." Xie Lian mutters, knuckles white where he grips his blade. "But you have only ever lived in a time of peace."

Peace that, in many ways, Xie Lian sacrificed everything to provide.

"I'm—"

“You’re a murderer.”

The Crown Prince of Xianle rises to his full height—which has never been the most imposing thing about him, but he seems to tower now.

“You sit here, speaking of birth rights—you aren’t even a direct descendent. Just some distant cousins, centuries after the fact.”

“I—!”

“I never fathered any children,” Xie Lian explains. Knowing that he had never planned to, given his own circumstances. A fact that saddened him, for a time. “And I never will. The Royal Bloodline ends with me.”

“The House of Xie—”

“Is my Clan.” Xie Lian glares. “Not yours.”

He doesn’t speak their language. Likely doesn’t even know any of their rituals, songs, or stories.

Was born in a time when Yong’an was all he knew. What could he possibly be mourning?

What right does he have, to feel robbed of anything? It’s just an excuse for murder.

“There were children,” Xie Lian mutters, eyes somehow managing to burn brighter. “Children died tonight.”

“I didn’t—”

He falls silent, when the tip of fangxin presses against his ribs. The wrath in those eyes burns like a small sun.

“You don’t get to do that,” the god snarls.

“You don’t get to use what happened to me as an excuse to hurt children.”

It might be something that An Le feels ownership over. His ancestry. His history.

But it’s Xie Lian’s life, his pain, and it’s his own.

“But we’re...” An Le stares up at him, his eyes lost “We’re family!”

No.

You choose your family. Xie Lian learned that long ago.

Casting one vile cousin aside. Accepting a boy with nothing, who came from nothing, into the deepest recesses of his heart.

“If this is what my family has become,” the god mutters, “then I would rather be the last.”

Fangxin vibrates in his hold.

It’s a rare technique, one that Xie Lian thought he would never need to use, but…

Vile as he is, if anyone ever learned the truth of An Le’s actions, it would still come back down on the descendants of Xianle.

And…it would hurt Lang Qianqiu.

An Le got so close to the boy, before the end. Learning the truth now, just like learning the truth of what happened to his father…

It would hurt the crown prince. Break his faith in people a little more. When they find An Le, it will look like a disease took him, not a blade. And the truth of his sins will be lost to time.

Maybe it’s more than he deserves, but…this isn’t about that.

This is about protecting someone else. The only innocent party in all of this sadness. But even still—

There’s one thing left that Fangxin Guoshi must do.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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CREDIT: Envy, support the artwork HERE

Guoshi Fangxin "comforting" the king of Yong'an after his wife's death, supposedly

[image]

CREDIT: SEONG, support the artwork HERE

CREDIT: EVE, support the artwork, HERE

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you so much to Eve, Envy, and Seong for your artwork, and allowing me to share it! It means the world!

xoxo, Evie

A Sinner's Burial

Chapter Summary

> "Why?" The prince presses. He left his personal guards at the foot of the hill, insisting on confronting his teacher alone. "I know you wouldn't have done something like that —so why?!"
>
> There is no good end to this. Xie Lian knows, no matter what choice he makes, he'll end up hurting Lang Qianqiu. The only thing he can do now is try to make the least painful decision available. And right now, that seems to be... Not answering at all.
>
> Instead, he rises to his feet, blade in hand. Shattering himself, instead of the rest of the prince's world, seems to be the best option.
>
> "Dianxia," he murmurs, slowly turning to face the teenager. "What do we do, when faced with the wicked?"
>
> The prince takes a step back, his lips trembling, eyes wide with fear.
>
> In the centuries that follow, this story will be told differently. A courageous prince, carrying out his revenge against an evil, jealous teacher. Not a frightened young man, facing down the man who taught him how to weird a bade, tears in his eyes.
>
> "You aren't wicked."

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE
>
> CONTENT WARNING: horror elements, violence, claustrophobia, suicidal thoughts
>
> There will be a link to catch up on twitter for those who want it included in the next chapter, which should go up in the next 24 hours!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It takes some time for the Prince to find him. Not because the Guoshi was hiding, no.

But because it takes time, to face the things that you're afraid of. Even as you boast and cry out to your people about taking revenge—

You're still afraid of what awaits you.

In all honesty, even when he did find Fangxin Guoshi—months after the Gilded Banquet, sitting at the top of a hill—the Crown Prince of Yong'an still didn't want to believe the truth.

He's alone, just as he's always been.

Sitting on a rock, facing away from the prince.

The wind blows gently through his hair.

Still, like always—he wears that mask. Hiding him away from the world—and, by extension, his student.

"...I wondered when you would come," he murmurs—and the prince trembles, gripping his blade tightly.

"Are you going to tell me now?"

The Guoshi doesn't reply, his gaze facing ever forward.

"Why?" The prince presses. He left his personal guards at the foot of the hill, insisting on confronting his teacher alone. "I know you wouldn't have done something like that —so why?!"

There is no good end to this.

Xie Lian knows, no matter what choice he makes, he'll end up hurting Lang Qianqiu. The only thing he can do now is try to make the least painful decision available.

And right now, that seems to be...

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Instead, he rises to his feet, blade in hand.

Shattering himself, instead of the rest of the prince's world, seems to be the best option.

"Dianxia," he murmurs, slowly turning to face the teenager. "What do we do, when faced with the wicked?”

The prince takes a step back, his lips trembling, eyes wide with fear.

In the centuries that follow, this story will be told differently.

A courageous prince, carrying out his revenge against an evil, jealous teacher.

Not a frightened young man, facing down the man who taught him how to weird a bade, tears in his eyes.

“You aren’t wicked.”

He whispers those words, taking a stumbling step back, but…

CLANG!

Lang Qianqiu barely manages to deflect the blow, sparks flying from the edge of his blade, eyes wide.

“What do we do,” Xie Lian repeats, their blades crossed as Lang Qianqiu struggles to hold him off. “When we are faced with the wicked?”

Through clenched teeth, arms trembling as he holds his own, the prince cries—

“Slay them in order to protect the innocent!”

One of the many lessons his Guoshi taught him over the years.

That mask stares back at him.

Blank. Cold. Unfeeling

“Then you already know what you must do.”

Xie Lian can see it in the prince’s eyes.

That fragile state of heartbreak. Of trust shattering.

It hurts to see, but he accepts it.

It’s a choice that he made.

The battle is fierce, blades clashing with increasing ferocity.

Not from Fangxin Guoshi, no. His movements are as calm and as measured as ever.

It's Lang Qianqiu who fights harder, with a fury, tears pouring down his face as he moves faster, more agile by the second, taking in every lesson that he's ever been taught, moving like a demon.

A far cry from the frightened child he once was, cowering behind his guards.

"How—" He sobs, even as he attacks, "How could you kill him, when you saw how I mourned my mother?!"

That mask never changes.

He's never given an answer.

"HOW COULD YOU TAKE HIM FROM ME?!"

They clash again, and this time, there's the distinctive edge of the younger man taking the upperhand.

He's never been able to beat Fangxin before. Never even came close during their sparring matches. Now, he assumes his passion is what drives him further.

Maybe so.

Xie Lian almost smiles, seeing how much the young man has improved. He has to use one sixth of his strength now, to parry. That's not bad.

It doesn't take so much effort to fake it, when his blade is knocked from his hand, landing in the grass a few yards away.

'You used to be so little.'

THUMP!

Under the mask, his eyes widen just a fraction.

'When did you grow up so fast?'

The blade runs him all the way through before being ripped out, blood pouring down. It doesn't hurt. Not exactly.

Not as much as what comes after.

Lang Qianqiu doesn't let him hit the ground.

He catches his teacher in his arms, sinking to his knees, casting his own weapon aside.

Weeping.

"I...I didn't want to do that!" The prince sobs, pressing his forehead against a gilded mask. "Why did you make me do that?!"

As far as he knows, the blow he dealt was fatal. And to be fair—Xie Lian does feel a little woozy from how quickly he's losing blood, his limbs trembling.

Lang Qianqiu clutches him tight against his chest, losing the last loved one he had in this world—this time by his own hand.

"I...I don't know how to do this," the prince whimpers, his face pressed into Xie Lian's hair, fingers trembling as they stroke blood stained locks from his face. "I...I still need..."

I still need you.

A hand lands in his hair, fingers trembling, and he falls silent.

"...You did well, Lang Qianqiu," his teacher rasps, blood dripping from the corners of his mouth.

Weakly—he ruffles the prince's hair. "I'm proud of you."

Wide, horrified eyes stare down at the Guoshi. Filled with endless pain, confusion, and hurt.

"Why?" He whimpers, shaking.

No matter how many times he asks, the prince never receives an answer—just silence. Maddening, heartbreaking silence.

Xie Lian's hand starts to fall, lacking the strength to hold itself up any longer. That really was a powerful blow—he even infused some spiritual power into it.

Xie Lian taught him that, but he's never managed to do it successfully—not until now.

He isn't faking the shakes that wrack his body now. It'll take time, recovering from this.

The prince rocks slowly, holding Xie Lian close, and he whispers—

“…I…I’m so sorry, Guoshi.”

Xie Lian stirs, shaking his head weakly. That—

That wasn’t what he wanted.

“I broke my promise,” the prince mumbles, choking on an endless wave of tears. ‘I won’t ever let anyone hurt you—not ever again.’

For the first time in so long, Xie Lian’s own eyes are wet.

‘Don’t cry for me, little one. I broke mine first.’

“…N…No,” Xie Lian whispers, choking slightly as blood gurgles in his throat. Blindly, he finds Lang Qianqiu’s hand—unable to see how the prince is watching him now— holding it tight.

“I…It’s alright, L…Lang Qianqiu, you…”

Now, he smiles, fingers trembling slightly in his student’s grip, remembering all those years ago, when the prince was so much smaller. How Xie Lian had to coax him into giving his arm the tiniest smack, just to show he was alright.

“You…you can’t hurt me,” he whispers.

That’s when everything starts to blur, his head spinning. Lang Qianqiu’s sobs sound so far away now, and…

He faints, going limp in the prince’s grip, his breaths slowing. Until eventually—it seems like they stop.

The Crown Prince of Yong’an doesn’t know how to let him go.

He sits there, in the grass—his screams piercing the air as he clutches his teacher in his arms, soaked in his blood.

His idol. His trusted advisor. His friend. His first love.

He doesn’t allow anyone else to handle the Guoshi’s body, even if his guards try to insist.

Lang Qianqiu cradles him in his arms as he carries him back down the hill.

His advisors warn him that a powerful being like Fangxin Guoshi might come back as a powerful ghost. That some with ill intentions might try to summon him back with ill intent.

He won't allow that.

He looks after the body with great care, combing his hair, changing him into clean robes, but...he leaves the mask in place.

Lang Qianqiu wants to see that face, if only once, but even now... He's still a good student, reluctant to disobey his master's wishes. But when he does, he discovers—

Flowers.

Petals dried, slightly stained with blood, but familiar.

Lang Qianqiu sinks to his knees, clutching them before his face, lips trembling. "Why did you keep these?" He whispers, his voice hoarse.

It—

He still struggles to understand.

How someone who looked after him for so long could take everything from him.

How someone who loathed him enough to take everything from him could smile just before his death, and tell Lang Qianqiu that he was proud.

How someone he murdered could die with the Lang Qianqiu's flowers tucked into his sleeves.

So many questions, leaving a young man feeling so utterly lost and alone in the world.

But his Guoshi gave him few answers in life—and he offers even fewer in death.

The coffin is specially made—to prevent any malicious attempts at resurrection. Partly at Lang Qianqiu's own request, desiring that his master be allowed to Rest In Peace.

And also, because the people now fear the menace who slaughtered the nobility of Yong'an in a single night.

The place he finds is quiet, on a hill—secluded, unlikely to be disturbed. His men dig the hole deep into the ground as Lang Qianqiu carefully lays Fangxin down, arranging his hair, hands folded over his stomach.

Flowers tucked between them. The Holly stake wasn't his idea.

That came from one of the priests, insisting it was the best way to keep him permanently sealed. And Lang Qianqiu—

He wanted to burst out crying all over again, plunging it into Fangxin's heart, staking him to the bottom of the coffin.

Later, he would lie to himself.

When his grief turned to anger, confusion, and regret—he would say that he did this out of cruelty. As punishment, for the havoc that this man wreaked on his life.

From the permanent scar that his loss would leave on the prince's heart. But at the time...he was only heartbroken.

The priest—the only one that was willing to assist him in giving the Guoshi funeral rites—stands by his side, leaning over to look inside the coffin, expression contemplative.

"Red robes were an interesting choice," he comments. "He looks...almost like a bridegroom."

The prince doesn't reply. Only offers up a small shrug.

A white and gold mask is replaced with a funeral veil that, in truth, almost looks bridal.

Even still, he never looks at the Guoshi's face.

For just a moment, they're left alone one last time.

The young man who kneels beside Xie Lian's coffin isn't a boy anymore. Or a student. He isn't even a prince.

He's a King now. The last Lang who will rule over the Kingdom of Yong'an.

But he will never marry, not in the years before his ascension. Will sire no children.

Carefully, he lifts one limp hand from the coffin, pressing a kiss against those knuckles one last time.

"...I'm sorry," he murmurs, carefully laying that hand back down, arranging it with the flowers once more.

He broke his promise, after all. But...

The coffin is sealed, all three layers—and buried deep into the ground, with mounds of earth poured over it, locking it in place.

No one will hurt his Guoshi again. Whatever his reasons were for doing what he did. For making Lang Qianqiu do what he had to do.

He'll protect him.

Eventually, he leaves the gravesite. Isolated, intentionally unmarked. And he tries to put this time behind him. To tell himself that it's over now, and leave that part of his life behind.

But in the end, part of him always remembers. And he's the one that is left haunted.

When Xie Lian wakes again, it's to a very different kind of darkness. Not the kind that he's used to.

This feels heavy, almost suffocating. But eventually he realizes—there just isn't any air.

Panicked, his fingers scramble, and—

The chain around his neck is still there.

The god lets out a shaky breath, stroking his fingertips over the ring, his other hand feeling around in the darkness, feeling only wood in every direction, and eventually, he realizes—

It's a coffin. He—

He's in a coffin. Buried alive.

At first, he doesn't panic. Not exactly.

His body is still healing from the blow, after all—and while it's hard to breathe, he...he just has to wait.

Xie Lian grips Hong-er's ring tighter between his fingers, lips trembling. He's never minded being a little cramped.

And he's relieved that, even though everything else was changed and his sword was taken, Lang Qianqiu left Hong-er with him.

He knew how precious the ring was to Xie Lian. It was kind of him not to take it.

So many centuries on earth have also taught the god patience.

It took him an entire week to notice the stake.

A week of laying there, fading in and out of unconsciousness from a lack of air, only to realize that he's not dreaming, and he's still—

He's still trapped.

Eventually, his legs started to kick out, feeling for the dimensions.

The coffin was a little wide and long for him, tall enough that he should have been able to roll over, but—

When he tried, he couldn't.

There was something locking him into place. A vague, dull sort of ache. One that he barely noticed until now, fingers fumbling in the dark.

It's not until then that they wrap around the stake sticking out of his chest—and Xie Lian realizes why his body has been so slow to heal.

Because his heart is slowly, constantly reconstructing around the stake running through it, burning his energy and healing capacity.

Trembling, he tries to yank it out, but—it's buried so deeply into the coffin underneath him, and his wounds are so serious, and he can't get any leverage—

Xie Lian can't pull it out.

He can't—

After three weeks, it really starts to dawn on him:

He can't get out.

And in this small, confined space—

Xie Lian already couldn't see, but he's robbed of the sense he's spent so long depending on, to fill in the gaps of his world.

Sound.

There's nothing down here but endless, oppressive silence. Finally, he lets out a strangled whimper.

"...Ruoye," he finally speaks—and after so long of being forced to hide around his neck, the silk band trembles. "H-help me..." He rasps, squirming—blood dripping down his chin whenever he agitates the stake.

The spiritual tool slithers out from around his neck.

THUD!

It tries to slam itself against the roof of the coffin—but it's not like a blade. It can't use nearly as much force without the ability to build momentum.

THUD!

THUD!

THUD!

Maybe, in a normal coffin—it would have been effective, but now...

It doesn't do much of anything, no matter how long or how hard the spiritual device tries.

Eventually, Xie Lian croaks, "J...Just stop," he mumbles, tears gathering at the corners of his eyes. "You should rest, it's no use."

Trembling, Ruoye returns, nuzzling under his chin.

"I...It's alright," Xie Lian tries to reassure it, stroking his fingers over the silk band weakly, staring into the dark. "You...did your best, it's...not...your fault."

The bandage quivers against him, miserable about it's own uselessness. His first breaking point is two months in

When he starts crying hysterically, clawing at the underside of the coffin lid, screaming until his throat goes raw, until there isn't enough oxygen left for him to make a sound, begging someone to save him.

Until his fingernails break and bleed, skin left raw to the bone.

But no matter how hard he fights, no matter how loudly he screams, no one ever comes. The coffin never breaks.

And he tries so hard not to, to be brave, to not cry out for his help, but — After eight months, he cries out for Jun Wu.

Prays fiercely, writing around the stake.

Help me.

Help me.

Help me, help me, help me.

Help me, help me, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help me!!!!

Why won't anyone help him?

Why does no one ever answer him?

He sobs hysterically, pounding his fists.

Does he...is it...

...Does Xie Lian deserve this?

That's what he starts to think after five years, palms pressed flat against the coffin lid.

How could anyone ever be so hated, so alone and abandoned, if they didn't deserve it?

And why is he alone?

Wasn't that his own doing?

He pushed everyone away. He got Hong-er and Wu Ming killed.

He asked for these shackles, the ones that keep him bound here now.

Wasn't this his own doing?

Wasn't he the one who left the feast unprotected? Was he not the one who broke a young man's heart so deftly?

Xie Lian stops praying, not long after that. He knows why no one will answer him. Knows why he's alone.

Because he does deserve this.

If he can't go to hell, then he can have the next best thing. Like the rest of his centuries of life, the god falls into phases.

He goes an entire year without moving. Laying limp against the wooden floor of the coffin, feeling the earth move around him.

His hearing sharpens to the point where he can hear rodents and insects burrowing into the earth.

Just that sound feels like company, after a decade.

But every now and again, that panic swells back up, and his mind breaks all over again, shattering to pieces in this small, dark space that he's trapped in.

Where he'll sob, and scream, and claw. There are deep gauges in the coffin lid now, stained with his blood.

He'll become too exhausted to move before long, choking on the vacuum inside the coffin, tears pouring down his cheeks.

Ruoye is the only thing that ever calms him down. Gently rubbing over his face, wrapping around his hands, trying to imitate a comforting embrace.

But even then, it doesn't stop the god from weeping.

In his less lucid moments, even now, well over five centuries old, he weeps for his mother.

Thrashing, head whipping around, lacking all sense or real consciousness.

"Mom? I—why is it dark?!" He cries, his legs flailing.

Why can't he see anything? Where's Feng Xin? Why has no one come to wake him up yet?

Why can't he move? Where's his father? He's screaming so loud, why is no one coming?

Is he dead?

He didn't think dying would last so long, or hurt so much.

It always looked so easy.

But his mind always comes back eventually, and he realizes—

His mother isn't answering him, because she's dead.

She hung herself, with the silk bandage that's comforting him now. That's why his father is gone too, for the very same reason.

Feng Xin is gone because Xie Lian broke his heart and sent him away.

Hong'er isn't here because Xie Lian was too careless. Not sending him away, like he should have. Not protecting him well enough.

Wu Ming is gone because Xie Lian was hateful, and he was selfish.

He's blind, because he chose to wear these shackles as penance.

He's alone, because he deserves to be.

He's here because of his own failures. And all he could do to comfort his student was allow Lang Qianqiu to murder and bury him.

So many years pass, and he has no idea.

There's no way of counting the days. No means of keeping track of time anymore. He's lost all sense of it.

His only comfort comes from his dreams—but even then, eventually those grow hollow.

Because even as he clings to Hong'er, he knows.

Knows he'll wake up to darkness.

"What's wrong?" He whispers, holding Xie Lian against his chest, stroking his hair.

The god can't manage to lift his head from Hong'er's shoulder, crying silently, shaking all over.

"Dianxia..." Lips press against his hair. "Just tell me what's wrong."

"I can't die," Xie Lian replies, his voice lacking any semblance of humanity, hope, or life.

It’s just an empty shell. A flat note being played without meaning. The younger man goes still against him.

“…Don’t say that,” he whispers, hugging his god fiercely.

“Don’t ever say that.”

Xie Lian is limp in his hold. Can’t do much more than just lean against him and cry. Not sob, or weep. He doesn’t have the energy for that anymore.

Tears just slip from his eyes like rain, gently drizzling down.

“It would be better than this.”

“Better than what?”

“…Being trapped,” the god mumbles, feeling Hong’er stiffen with worry, but… Before he can ask more, the dream dissolves again.

The good dreams are brief lately. Few and far between.

Most of the time, Xie Lian is left with nightmares.

And while he forgets his dreams, he always remembers his nightmares.

Sometimes, he’s running down a mountain, screaming Hong’er’s name, shivering from the cold, desperately wondering why the boy won’t answer him.

Or he’s chained down in a temple, blindly flinching from the next slice of a blade that’s always coming. And he knows, no matter how many times he begs for it to stop, it won’t.

There are nights when he’s back in his old house, and all he can hear is that… That creaking sound.

But eventually, after running through them so many times, he just…

Falls into it.

Walks blindly through the mountain path, following the exact trail to Hong’er’s body, one that he knows well from walking so many times.

He doesn’t flinch from the stabs of the blade anymore.

He just lays limp in Bai Wuxiang's arms. Sometimes, he even turns into it when the calamity strokes his cheek, allowing himself to find comfort in it.

Why shouldn't he? It doesn't matter. All he has to do is lay there and count. Just to one hundred.

There are worse things.

When he hears that creaking sound, he just reaches up, grasping the hands dangling in front of him.

"Hi, mom," he mumbles, his voice low and empty, squeezing her fingers. "Hi, dad."

And it's fine, that it hurts.

Fine, that he's alone.

Because he deserves this.

YEAR FIVE HUNDRED AND NINETY NINE

"Hey—did someone say you could take a break?!" The foreman snarls. "Move your asses, you aren't getting paid to sit around!"

One of the workers groans, rubbing his lower back, grabbing at his shovel once more. "Fucking bastard..."

They've been working on digging out the foundations for the new villa all month, round the clock. He could stand to give them a break, right?

"Hey, boss!" A voice cries out before the foreman can respond, "We found something!"

He leans back with a frown. "What is it?"

"Uh..." The worker stops, scratching the side of his head. "It kinda looks like a coffin? But I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“...A coffin?” The foreman frowns, shoving his paperwork aside as he follows his employee towards the center of the worksite. “There’s no graveyard.”

But when he approaches—it certainly looks like one, and all of his men... They look absolutely terrified.

“What’s gotten into—?”

Thud .

The foreman stops, staring down at the box.

Thud .

Well.

Thud .

That explains why...they’re...

“Is something...moving in there?!”

Everyone scrambles back, but...

Originally, hoping it was some sort of buried treasure horde, one of the men has already loosened the locks.

BOOM!

The lid swings open with a heavy creak, kicking aside countless layers of earth and dust.

Slowly, a figure sits up. Honestly, it looks like a monster.

Covered in dried blood, dust, and...and what looks like a bridal gown, dark, impossibly long hair tangled around it’s face, arms red to the elbow, skin impossibly pale, it...

The creature opens its mouth, and all they hear is a dull hiss.

No one dares to move, dares to breathe as they watch these hands reach for it’s chest, and—

They all watch as a wooden stake is pulled out, tossed to the ground with a quiet clatter.

One worker lifts a trembling finger, pointing.

“V…V…VAMPIRE!!!”

The screaming starts again.

Everyone flees the scene, running down the hill as fast as their legs will take them.

For one moment of madness, the foreman almost asks them what they’re doing, running off on the job. But…

He takes one more look at that thing, and he starts running too. For a moment, the god just sits there.

Taking in the sounds of the screams, the footsteps racing down the hill. The breeze on his face.

And warmth.

Xie Lian shivers, tilting his head back.

That’s—?

That’s sunlight.

He’d almost forgotten what it felt like.

Then, he feels something crawling up his arm, slow, tiny little legs.

E—

Eight little legs.

“…AIIIIIEEEEEEEEEEE!”

The men at the bottom of the mountain screech when they hear that scream, running even faster. One even pisses himself.

The coffin is in shambles around him.

Xie Lian trembles, examining the tiny little bite on his forearm with his fingertips, and then—

His shoulders start to shake, and a tiny little giggle slips out. Then a chuckle.

Finally, there's full blown, roaring laughter as he rolls onto his back in the dirt, howling.

"WHAT THE FUCK?!" He cackles, clutching his stomach, kicking his feet against the ground. He can't imagine what a grotesque sight he makes right now, but—

"HOW?!"

He laughs, laughs until he cries, his ribs aching.

How the fuck, after all of that, is he still afraid of spiders?!

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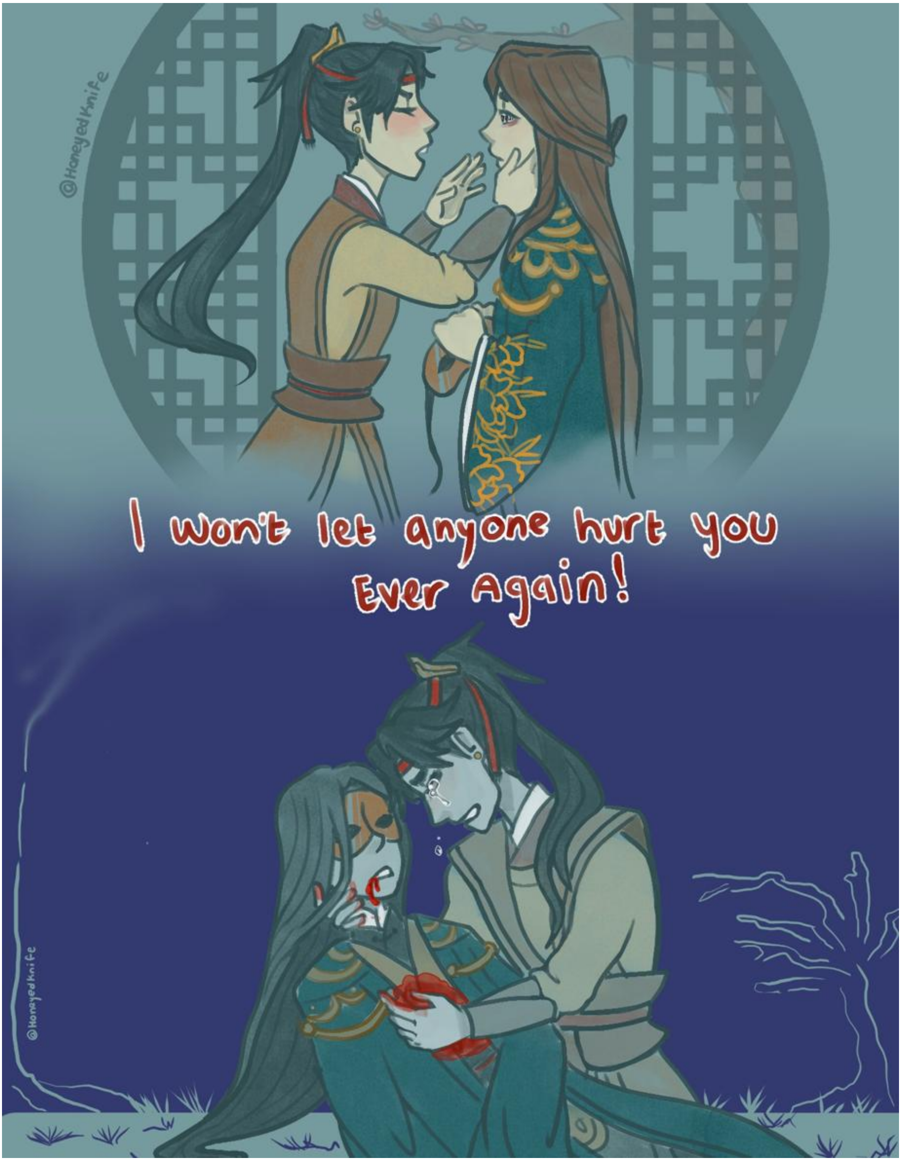
@HoneyedKnife
I won't let anyone hurt you Ever Again!
@HoneyedKnife

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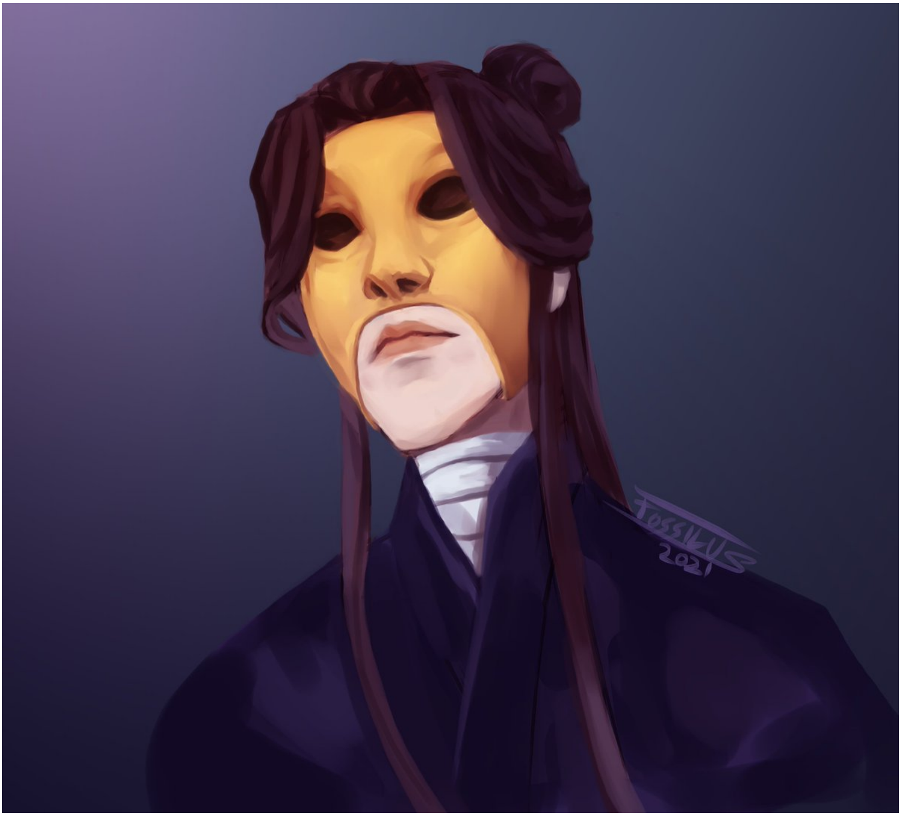
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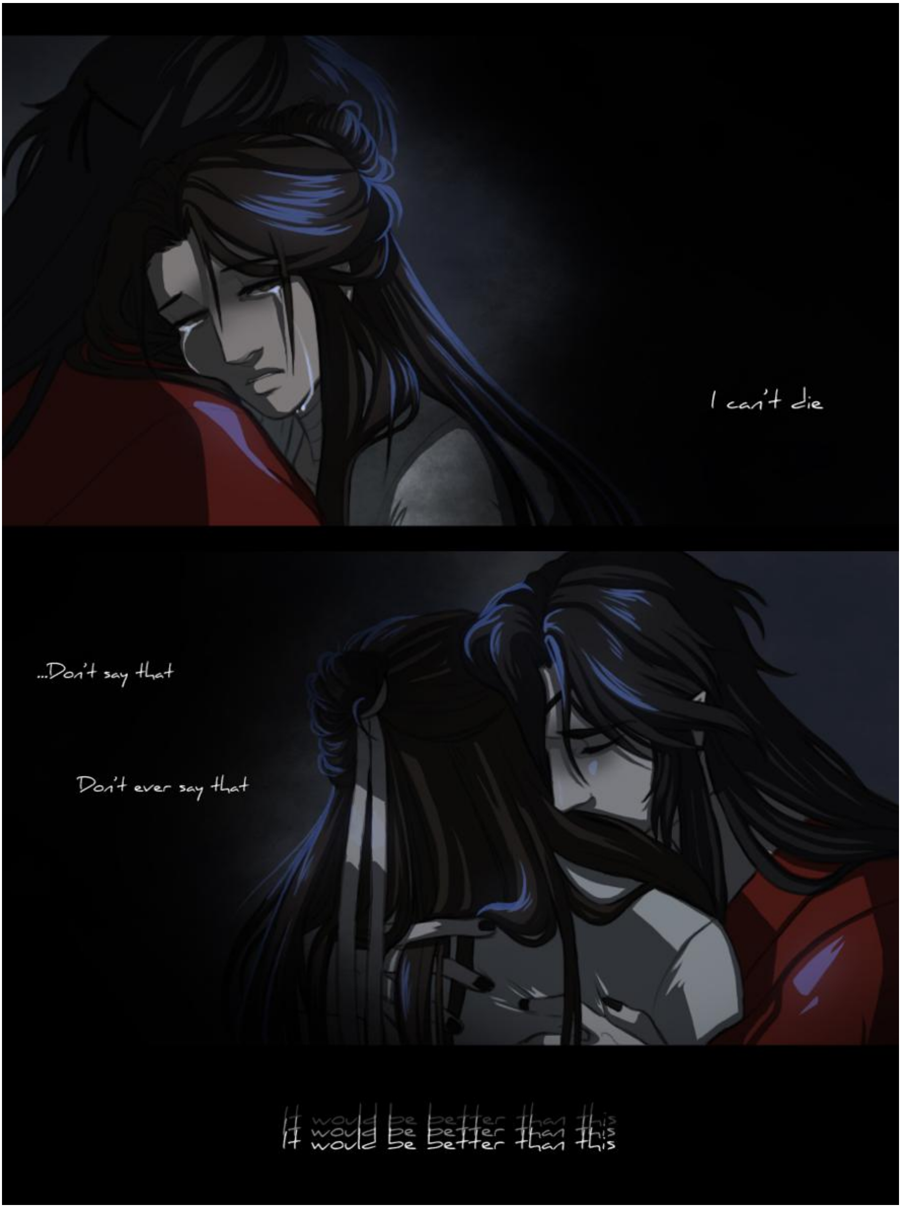
I can't die
...Don't say that
Don't ever say that
It would be better than this
It would be better than this
It would be better than this

CREDIT: HITHREN, support the artwork HERE

Chapter End Notes

thank you so much to Honey, Lace, Seong, Fossil, Pri, Hithren, Ren, and Lakitsune for their beautiful work, and allowing me to share it! It means so much, and I'm very grateful!

xoxo, Evie

Campfire Stories

Chapter Summary

> Xie Lian stops in the street, tilting his head back.
>
> It’s started to snow. Small flakes land on his face, melting against his cheeks.
>
> Grief is a learning process. It’s also—it’s different from a broken bone, something that you can heal from and forget about it.
>
> Xie Lian used to think it was something that he needed to keep on rebreaking, that if it didn’t hurt, remembering Hong’er, then he was forgetting him. Now, Xie Lian is starting to understand that grief is more like a torn tendon, or a bad knee.
>
> He has good days, and he has bad days. On the bad days, he nurses it. Holds himself close, and clings onto his dreams.
>
> But on the good days?
>
> Remembering Hong’er makes him happy.

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE
>
> For those who are interested in that sort of thing, this section is heavily inspired by the song "Stories" by Lilli Furfaro!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eventually, he finds a river. Has to sit in it for countless hours, letting the current rub over his skin before there’s any sign of progress, loosening decades worth of mud, dust, and blood.

His hair has grown so long, it actually trails behind him when he walks.

Most of it is so tangled and matted with blood, he ends up going at it with a sharpened rock. Sitting on the riverbank, soaked and shivering, rocking back and forth, trying to self soothe after so many years just…just…

Xie Lian doesn't have a word for what that was. He's suffered before, but never like that.

His body feels shaky and unsteady, like it's forgotten how to be anything more than a corpse.

And now he sits here, alone, sawing at his hair, trying to cut away what isn't salvageable, whimpering like a wounded animal.

It takes him time to remember how to just...be.

Eventually, he manages to bring himself to wash his robes. They aren't much anymore, but better than going naked.

Wanders into the nearest town, finding a corner to sit on, barely able to do more than beg.

Eventually, an elderly woman takes pity on him. She brings mantou every now and again, takes the time to help him comb out his hair fully, and eventually, when it's clear nothing more can be done, gives him a proper haircut.

It barely reaches his shoulders, now.

He's...surprisingly mournful about it, when he remembers the way that Hong'er used to fawn over his hair. Carefully combing it every night before bed, and when he mentioned the 'type of person' he liked...

Long, pretty hair. That was what he said. Not everyone has hair like that.

"...I'm sorry I couldn't save more of it," the old woman sighs, helping him pull it up and away from his face. "On the bright side—everyone can see how good looking you are now, yes?"

"..." Xie Lian offers a small smile, but it's awkward.

"It's...just hair," he mumbles.

He's careful, enunciating each syllable slowly.

He had to ask someone the date, and when he did, he realized—

It was a hundred years, give or take. Probably a little more than that. And in a hundred years, he forgot how to speak to other people.
"It...grows back."

It'll be fine, he'll—

He'll get better. He always does.

Eventually, he's able to exchange the bridal robes for a cheap set of cotton clothes. He has no idea what color.

He'll have to try and find a new loom soon, if he can start scrap collection again. Who knows...

Who knows where it is now. He left it somewhere in the palace of Yong'an. It might have burnt up that night, who can say.

One day, when he's passing by a temple, he hears people praying to a new martial god —warden of the East.

The Crown Prince of Yong'an, Lang Qianqiu.

Even now, after all of that—the god can't find it in himself to feel any bitterness. Really—

Can any teacher ever feel bitter, when they see a beloved student do so well?

In time, with his wandering, he turns to the one thing that no one ever allowed him to do, in the old days.

Busking.

Sword swallowing, fire eating, shattering boulders on his chest.

Despite Feng Xin making a scene over not allowing him to do it, he's not half bad. Even makes a bit of a reputation for himself, wandering the border towns, making children cheer and clap.

It's all the more impressive when you consider the fact that he's blind. People pay more.

It's enough for him to have enough to eat day in and day out. And after a century of no food and water, just having the sun on his skin, the wind on his face, and food in his stomach...

That's practically paradise. It's all that he can ask for.

He learns to enjoy the acrobatics shows the most, jumping as high as he can, twirling and flipping in the air as the children gasp with delight, adults breaking into applause.

It’s not much, no. But it’s living.

It’s enough for him to wake up in the morning with a small smile on his face, stretching his arms over his head, letting out a tired yawn as he reaches for the chain around his neck.

He missed this the most.

“Good morning Hong’er,” he murmurs, pressing a kiss against the metal.

He’s said that one hundred and eighty thousand, seven hundred, and sixty six times now.

“Today is going to be a good day.”

He would have said it more often, but he couldn’t keep track of the days before. Didn’t know if it was morning or night.

So this—this is so much better.

Even when the army shows up, making the elective decision that the local street performer is not, in fact, blind.

If he was, how could he be so good at so many different things? It made no sense. Xie Lian doesn’t wear Ruoye around his eyes anymore, he can’t.

Human’s cannot be allowed to see cursed shackles. That is part of heavenly law. Ruoye has to cover the shackle around his throat, and Xie Lian’s boots look after the manacle around his ankle.

And when the army demands he open his eyes, he’s forced to refuse to comply. Naturally, as a result, the presumption is that he’s a liar.

Xie Lian started his life as a prince, but in reality—he’s always been a soldier. Fighting one battle or another, but the lessons were always the same.

This isn’t new to him. And so, he goes along.

And, in a turn of events that shocks everyone else around him in his platoon—he does incredibly well.

Xie Lian, however, is not particularly surprised.

This isn’t his first war. It isn’t even his 5th.

He's a skilled fighter, a seasoned strategist. An inspiring leader at times.

He rises quick, obtaining the rank of general—younger than anyone else in the country's history.

And, in his own fashion—he falls just as fast.

"...People think you're insane, you know." One of his men comments, watching as the officer lays back in the grass.

Enjoying the sun.

Xie Lian smiles. It comes easier now, than it used to.

"Sometimes, you have to be," he sighs, stretching his arms over his head. "You got any extra mantou?"

Instead of immediately offering, the young soldier blurts out— "Is it true that you're blind, General Hua?"

"..." Xie Lian sits up. His hair is longer now, and when he doesn't have a mission, he lets it flow free, tumbling loosely around his shoulders. His armor gleams gently in the sun as he turns his head, offering his subordinate a cheerful smile. "Sure am— now, about that mantou—"

"Wasn't there a famous blind cultivator named Hua Xie?" Another soldier speaks up, rubbing his chin, and Xie Lian's smile fades slightly.

"Yeah, I remember something like that...wasn't he some wandering sage, the one who trained the founder of the Jiang Sect?"

"Yeah..." Whoops.

"That's actually an ancestor of mine," Xie Lian explains, and when he can sense the soldiers looking at one another with confusion, he adds —

"Most men in my family go blind fairly young."

He's gotten better at lying over time, especially to people who don't know him well.

They accept that, but Xie Lian is going to need to come up with a better alias, the next time he needs one. He's been underground for so long, he forgot what it was like to need to think about that sort of thing.

His time with the army sort of goes by in a bit of a blur.

It's so soon after he came out of that coffin—he still struggles with his memory. The passage of time—it gets hazy for him. He'll lose days, even weeks, in a daze.

But some things never change.

That advice that Xie Lian gave Lang Qianqiu? About following the rules of Heaven, even if that meant going against what he believed in?

Yeah, that was more of a 'do as I say, not as I do,' sort of order. Because Xie Lian, even after all these years, can't seem to cut it out.

He's still throwing himself in the middle of things, constantly intervening with humans and their battles. Never using an inappropriate amount of force—it's not like he could, anyway—but—

Xie Lian told himself that he wouldn't hurt people anymore.

He also won't stand by.

It makes him popular with the people, but not with his superiors.

It's not something that Xie Lian ever cared about to begin with—and his fall, it's in pace with everything else he's done so far.

He never complains—never feels sorry for himself.

Not even when he's back as a foot soldier, working to make some crude attempt at soup in his helmet.

"What the hell is that?!" One of his comrades groans, kicking it over. "Who said you could cook on your personal time? That shit looks lethal!"

Xie Lian frowns.

"It's called seven swans soup!" He huffs. "And it wasn't finished."

"...Does it have swans in it?"

The soldier opens his mouth, then shuts it. "Well, no."

"Then why did you call it that?"

"...Flair?" he offers with a helpless shrug. "And why seven?"

“...Alliteration?”

“Huh?”

Xie Lian is struggling to explain the finer points of literary devices to a man with hardly more than a primary education, when he hears the helmet rattling on the ground and—little hands pawing at the stew inside.

Oh. Oh no.

“...I wouldn’t do that!” He warns, turning around.

But before he can say more, he already hears the pathetic sounds of retching.

On one hand, he’s dismayed. It’s that bad? Sure, he didn’t expect it to taste good, he’s never had great results, but...

Instant puking? He’s *that* bad?

“Oh, hell...” One of the men grumbles.

“It’s that half breed that’s always in the market.”

Xie Lian pauses, his eyes narrowing.

“...Half breed?” He questions flatly.

“Father was Yong’an, but her mother? She was Banyue. Little piece of—!” He stops when the former General catches him by the wrist.

“Your watch is about to start,” the young man reminds him with a pleasant smile. “You don’t want to be late.”

His smile is pleasant, his words are pleasant. But the grip on the man’s wrist?

That’s downright unpleasant.

“...Right,” he mutters, shaking his head. “Suppose I do.”

When the others walk away, he turns back towards the sound of the retching—which has now been replaced by tired sniffling, and kneels down.

“...Here,” he murmurs, fumbling in his pocket for a moment—pulling out some mantou. “It’s cold, but…”

She doesn’t hesitate to snatch it.

Xie Lian smiles, listening to her eat voraciously, clearly half starved, but not lacking in spirit.

Good, she might end up alright, then.

From then on, he has a little shadow, trailing behind him at every turn.

And that—that makes him remember a time so long ago.

When he was stumbling around, so lost in the world.

And a little boy would come to the steps of an abandoned shrine to bring him food.

“…” Xie Lian stops in the street, tilting his head back.

It’s started to snow.

Small flakes land on his face, melting against his cheeks.

Grief is a learning process. It’s also—it’s different from a broken bone, something that you can heal from and forget about it.

Xie Lian used to think it was something that he needed to keep on rebreaking, that if it didn’t hurt, remembering Hong’er, then he was forgetting him.

Now, Xie Lian is starting to understand that grief is more like a torn tendon, or a bad knee.

He has good days, and he has bad days. On the bad days, he nurses it. Holds himself close, and clings onto his dreams.

But on the good days?

Remembering Hong’er makes him happy.

He’ll tilt his head back, holding Hong’er’s ashes, and feel the snow on his face, remembering the nights that they used to huddle close next to the fire.

And Xie Lian will smile, because even after every horrible thing that’s happened, this is still the world that gave him that.

It still snows, and the air is biting on his face, but it makes him feel alive.

People are still cruel to one another, but they're also good, in these brief moments of grace that break Xie Lian in the most beautiful ways, each and every time.

And every time, it reminds him.

When he hears the sound of children playing in the streets, or mothers scolding them to come inside.

Even when he's stopping different groups of soldiers from killing one another, or slaughtering civilians.

Xie Lian adores this world, in all of it's cracks and blemishes.

Humans are most beautiful at their points of fracture, because that's where healing begins.

Courage, his Guoshi used to tell him so many years ago, always grows from the wound.

He remembers that, on his bad days, when the pain is almost to difficult to brace against.

Xie Lian remembers what a spoiled child he used to be, building golden palaces, only to weep when he watched them fall back down. Even though that was the point.

Remembers the arrogant teenager he became, judging the world, foolish enough to think he could change it.

And now, he's a broken man.

But broken things aren't worthless. And pain isn't the same thing as taking a step backward.

Xie Lian—

He's just growing up. Slower than he has any right to, but he's getting there.

And sometimes, that hurts.

He takes a seat next to the campfire, his head tilted back so he can enjoy the snow, leaning back against the city walls.

And still, he hears the patter of tiny little feet—probably bare against the cold. Xie Lian used to be such a brat, he had little patience for children.

Now, he can smile gently, holding up a piece of mantou from the inside of his sleeve, not showing an ounce of displeasure when it's snatched away.

But now, instead of scurrying away, she sits with him, eating by the fire. And now, he opens his arms in offering.

It's cold, after all, and his military uniform is padded and warm, with a cape that can be pulled around them both.

The little one—Banyue, named for her mother's people—used to be so hesitant. Now, she clamors into his arms, grateful for the warmth.

In all of the time that she can remember—in a short, often unbearably cruel life, this is the place where she's felt the safest.

Cradled in a blind man's lap next to a campfire, watching it's flames crackle and spit sparks as she chews on bits of mantou.

General Hua tells the best stories, some of them unbelievable, others sad. But even when she points that out, he reassures her that the lessons are the point behind them.

Some stories might be sad, but if you learn something—that makes it all worth it. She tries hard to listen.

The one about the boy in the mountain always makes her cry, but—

The one about the circus, it always makes her laugh. And no matter how sheepish he seems when she asks, General Hua is always ready to tell it again, stroking her hair, his voice soft and calm as she falls asleep.

Some nights, he sings songs in a language that she doesn't recognize. It almost sounds like the language of Yong'an, but not quite. Like it's too ancient for her to understand.

When she asks about it, he explains that they're old lullabies, from his home. His voice is nice.

She doesn’t know why he’s so kind to her. No one else is, aside from the older boy occasionally lingering in the market place, but she’s the only person that he seems to like.

General Hua always makes sure she has something to eat, and a place to sleep. No one hurts her, or calls her names when he’s nearby.

He teaches her things. Sometimes silly little games, like building with little stone pebbles, or cat’s in the cradle.

But he also teaches her important things.

Like how to read. How to hold a knife, and hide one away.

One day, when he finds her weeping and beaten in the street, he carries her back to camp, taking the time to patch her up. When she tries to push him away, saying that it doesn’t matter—

The soldier rests both hands on her shoulders firmly, his expression stern.

“Of course it does,” he murmurs, dabbing at the bruises on her cheeks. “You matter, Banyue.”

It was the first time in the little girl’s entire life that anyone ever told her that she mattered.

And oh, how her eyes welled up with tears that day, her cheeks splotchy and red.

General Hua never complained. Even offered his sleeve for her to wipe her tears and snot away on.

And he’s the only one who ever speaks to her like she has a future. A real one. Something more than surviving from day to day.

One night, when she’s dozing in his lap, he asks:

“Banyue, what do you want to be when you grow up?”

Her answer honestly startles him. It takes her a while to come up with it, but when she does, she sounds completely resolved.

“A wife.”

General Hua sputters, and he tries not to be judgmental.

"Just a wife?"

"Yes."

She's so emphatic, that he has to ask—

"What makes you so sure about it? You're too young to be thinking about marriage. Or boys at all. They're not that great, you know."

"You're a boy, General Hua."

He lets out a noncommittal grunt, "They're more trouble than they're worth."

Banyue shrugs, cuddling closer underneath his cloak, until only her eyes and nose poke out, her voice slightly muffled. "Because wives have families. And when you have a family, you're never alone."

"..." The General holds her a little closer, his gaze unreadable.

"And they take care of everyone," Banyue mumbles, "Kind of like you." She yawns, and her next words—they draw a surprised snort out of the god.

"You'd make a really good wife, General Hua."

"..." He can't stop himself from smiling—just a little. "Well, thank you very much." She hums, pressing closer. "...What about you?"

"Hmm?"

"What did you want to be, when you grew up?"

When you're born a prince, that certainly is a complicated question to answer. He never exactly had to think about future career prospects. And then, he was focused on godhood.

Slowly, he tilts his head back into the sky, his breath fogging up in front of him. "... When I was a kid?" He sighs, the firelight illuminating the high points of his face in a warm glow. "...I wanted to save the world," he admits, knowing how silly that must sound now, but...

Banyue shakes her head, her eyes wide, watching him intently.

"It doesn't sound silly to me, General Hua." She mumbles. And—

Xie Lian can’t see her expression, but he can tell from her voice—

Banyue really does believe that he could.

Save the world, and all of that.

Children always tend to think that the people they look up to can do whatever they set their minds to. It’s that believe that makes them so precious, but Xie Lian…

He’s painfully aware of just how fallible he is. “General Hua?”

“Hmm?”

“Could you tell another story?”

He smiles faintly, settling down a little more comfortably, so she can sit easier in his lap. “Which one?”

“The Goat one!”

“Alright, well—once, there was a shepherd—”

“Wait, actually…” She thinks it over. “The Bridegroom, tell me that one?”

“Are you sure, this time?”

“Yes!”

His fingers twitch, and she swears—somehow, the fire manages to burn just a little brighter.

“Once, a long, long time ago, there was a young man from a small village, and he was good at everything he tried,” Xie Lian murmurs, biting back a small yawn.

“And nobody liked him?” Banyue prompts, more than familiar with the story by now.

Xie Lian smiles faintly, nodding in agreement. “And nobody liked him,” the prince murmurs. “Because they were really very jealous.”

“Not very nice…” She mumbles. “Not at all,” Xie Lian agrees.

“And it made the young man sad, because he was always alone. Eventually he got so lonely that he never tried to talk to anyone. And even on festival days, he would go all by himself…”

“Wearing red!” The child interjects, finishing her mantou. “Wearing red,” the god smiles.

“And one day, when he was watching a parade all by himself on a city wall, he fell down. It was very high, and everyone thought he was going to die, but—”

“The prince caught him!”

“He did,” the sparks from the fire drift lazily in the air before flickering out.

“He was leading the parade, but when he saw the boy falling, he jumped without looking back. And when the prince caught him, the boy in red was so grateful, he wanted to protect the prince in return.”

“So he followed him…”

Banyue never once questioned the fact that the story was about two men. Maybe because she was so young, and Xie Lian spoke about such things like they were normal. It’s difficult to say.

“…and he always thought he was a burden.”

“But he wasn’t!”

“No, he certainly wasn’t.”

“But he never realized—the prince was lonely too, and he was very happy for the company.”

Xie Lian doesn’t know why Banyue always liked this story best, the ending isn’t exactly sad—but it isn’t happy, either.

He explains how the two fell in love, looking after one another.

He closes over the details of the bridegroom’s death, explaining simply that he was buried in red.

And here—this part is where he always fudges the details. Just a little bit.

After all, Hong’er’s story ended that night, but with the way Xie Lian tells it…

He lies a little.

He says that the bridegroom came back as a ghost fire, following his love through the world. Keeping him company through every hardship.

It's wishful thinking, and maybe a little disrespectful, to combine those memories, but...it's just a story.

That's what he tells himself.

Explains that he managed to come back—for just one day, and give his prince a kiss, but then he disappeared again.

"...And why couldn't they just find each other again?" Banyue yawns, almost asleep.

"Well, you see—the prince had really awful luck," Xie Lian explains.

"But his love kept on looking for him, still wearing the red robes he was buried in..."

"...Because when they meet again, they'll get married," Banyue finishes, a contented smile on her face.

"Why do you like that story so much?" Xie Lian sighs. "'Cause it's really romantic."

Banyue mumbles, cuddling closer to Xie Lian's chest, her words slurring a little with her fatigue. "And it sounds like...that one ghost."

The prince raises an eyebrow, "Which ghost?"

"Y'know...the red...no...crimson...r..." Every pause is punctuated by a yawn, and then she's snoring.

Xie Lian sighs, pushing all thoughts of ghosts and bridegrooms aside, for now— enjoying the weight of the little girl in his arms.

Company never lasts long, not with him. And as much as he wants to say in the lives of the people he meets...he's learned by now.

He can't.

His luck can be dangerous—especially to humans. He's narrowed it down to around a four year time frame. That's about as long as he can stick around without causing immediate disaster.

They're creeping up on that cut off, now.

And he won't let Banyue end up like…like…

There are so many examples, it honestly depresses him.

And in the time that follows, when his bad luck does come for Banyue—Xie Lian has learned his lesson well enough to bodily throw himself in front of it.

Even if that means quite literally being crushed by it. It's worth it

At least he'll get lucky next time, and they'll just toss his body in a river instead of burying it underground.

But Xie Lian doesn't know that yet. Doesn't have to worry about what's to come, or anything other than the fact that, for now, he isn't alone.

He enjoys the warmth of the little girl in his arms, the sting of the cool breeze on his face—and he remembers what he said to An Le, that night.

The last real conversation he had, before he went into that coffin:

'I never fathered any children, and I never will.'

Of course, he knows that's true.

Even now, it's difficult to see himself as an actual parent—for more reasons than one.

First and foremost: that would require being with a woman. The thought of being with a man might make Xie Lian feel clueless, but…

The thought of being with a woman makes him feel queasy in an unpleasant sort of way, and even if he could manage it…that just doesn't sound very fair to his hypothetical partner, in that situation.

But beyond logistics…Children deserve parents who can give them what they need

Xie Lian can't even take care of himself very well. Much less a helpless little person.

He makes a good replacement parent, he thinks. He's not awful at looking after children who don't have anyone else, but…

He’s finally learned his lessons. He deserves to be alone.

He has a tendency to wreck things—and if he wants people to be happy, then it’s best to keep his distance.

What he doesn’t deserve, is a family.

He lets those desires go. Tells himself that the time in his life when those possibilities existed has passed.

And it’s not so bad.

Because on nights like this—when he’s holding Banyue, he knows that it won’t last. But in the moment, it feels like a glimpse of something he wouldn’t have gotten to have, otherwise.

And for that, he’s grateful.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY: XIE LIAN WITH EXTREMELY LONG / OR SHORT HAIR EDITION

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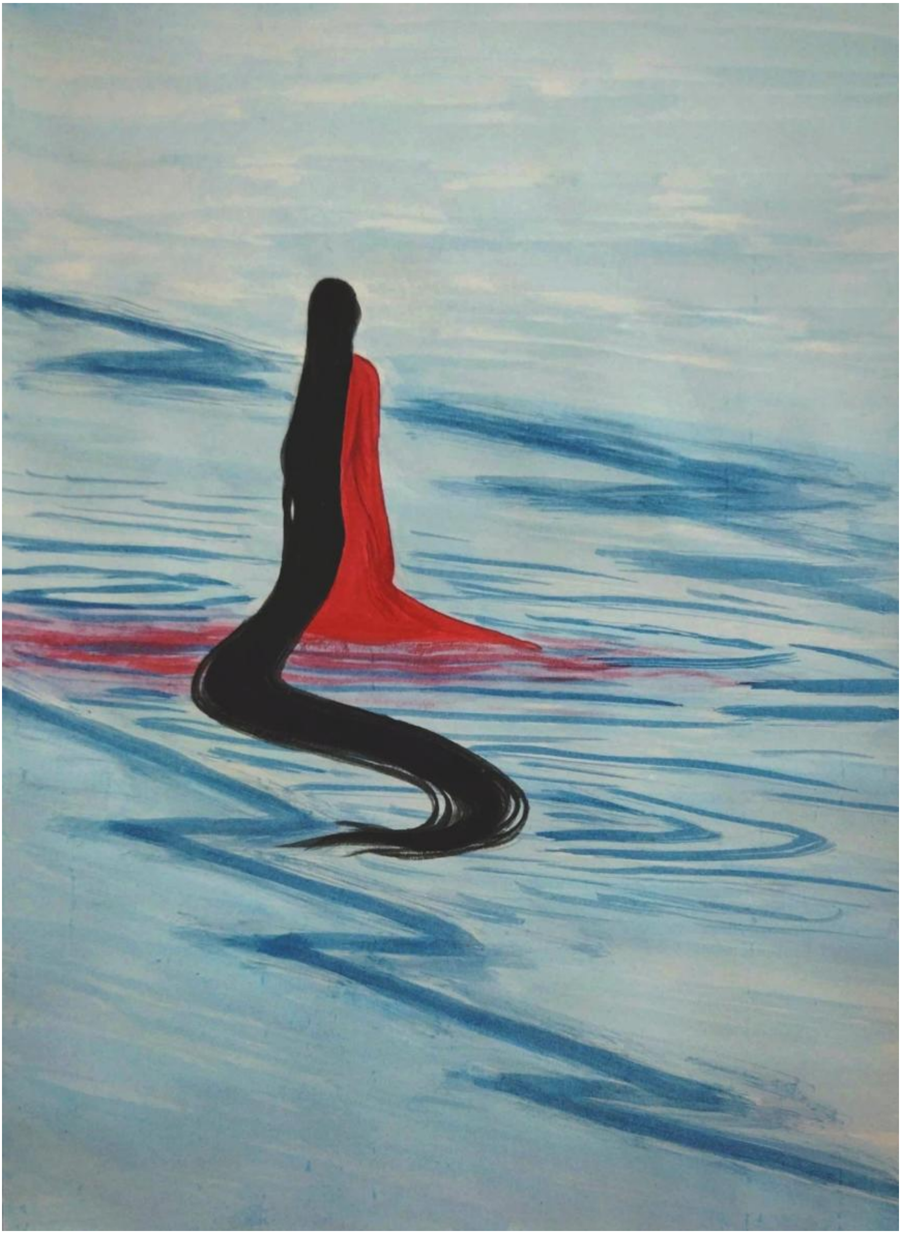

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to Envy, Pri, Seong, and Esme for your beautiful artwork, and for allowing me to share it! I'm so grateful!

xoxo, Evie

The Ghost Officer

Chapter Summary

> “I have recently come into an...interesting situation,” He Xuan shrugs, tossing his hair back over his shoulder. “In large part due to the funds you loaned me.” Hua Cheng stares at him, lifting his drink to his lips—clearly unimpressed. “...And I have an opportunity for you.”
>
> “An opportunity?” Hua Cheng repeats flatly, crossing his arms.
>
> “A hiring opportunity, to be more specific.”

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE
>
> This chapter starts off somewhat sad, but! It has some comedy towards the end!

YEAR SIX HUNDRED AND FIFTY

“You’re sure?”

Hua Cheng has been in this chamber many times. More than he can count—and one of those occasions is one that he can’t even remember, but—

It’s been centuries since it was for something like this.

“Don’t try to change my mind.”

He’s led countless children through this door before, and now, well...

The woman who stands before it is tall, heavy dark hair pulled up into two neat buns on either side of her head, wearing lavender robes.

They have silver rabbits stitched into the sleeves.

Shuo stands by his side, hands balled into fists. Yanlin doesn’t look back.

The three of them have known each other longer than most beings on earth. Though, to be fair—they know each other best.

Hua Cheng has watched over them—but from a distance.

For six entire centuries.

They lost Bao a century ago. His spirit was dispersed in a conflict with, well…

Qi Rong only escaped with his life because Hua Cheng was focused on making sure Shuo survived, and has been intelligent enough to hide himself well ever since.

Since then, it's been just them.

Shuo and Yanlin aren't children anymore.

In fact, in the time since Hua Cheng took the two under his wing, they've both aged to the point where they look older than him.

Both in their early thirties, while the Ghost King is eternally young.

"It's not like you have a reason to go," Shuo tries to reason, his eyebrows knitting together. "You—!"

"I don't have a reason to stay, either." She mutters, her head held high. "I was six when I died, Shuo."

"I was seven."

"It's not the same for you!" She snaps.

"You…"

Shuo has done well, as a ghost. Far better than any other under Hua Cheng's direct command, obtaining a savage rank.

Hua Cheng doesn't imagine he'll ever become a true calamity. The odds of another being born this millennia are rather low. But he rivals Qi Rong, now.

"You might be fine with all of this," Yanlin mutters. "But there were things I wanted from my human life that I'll never get to have."

"Like what?!" Shuo glares. As far as he's concerned, the afterlife beats his human life any day. "What can't you have now?"

"A family!"

She snaps, turning around and stomping her foot. "And don't you DARE treat me like I'm silly for wanting that!"

"You..." Shuo pauses, looking slightly uncomfortable. Hua Cheng doesn't say a word, his arms crossed as he watches the two bicker. "You could still...there are..."

"Ghosts that would have me?" Yanlin scoffs, and Hua Cheng sighs.

He's more than aware of the fact that the female ghost has had an interest in him for quite some time. He isn't a fool.

But he's also belonged to someone else for his entire life, and that will never change.

She's never forced those feelings on him. Never made it a problem. But her frustration has occasionally been palpable. Particularly when Hua Cheng would refuse to let them any closer than they already are.

But the one that he pities, in the end, is Shuo.

"...Yeah," he mumbles.

"There are."

Shuo, who has loved Yanlin since they were children. Only to constantly fall in the shadow of someone the girl wanted, but could never truly have.

"...Even if there were," she shakes her head. "I want children. A home. A life. What's wrong with that?"

In truth, there's nothing wrong with it. They're all normal things for a girl her age to want. Things that were taken from her, in the end. Cruelly and unfairly.

Shuo can't begrudge her that. But Hua Cheng can see the heartbreak in his gaze. "Couldn't you wait a little longer?

Shuo's voice is small now, almost pleading.

But Yanlin just shakes her head, her gaze firm, never leaving that door.

The red door.

“I stayed this long for Bao,” She mutters. “He needed to take care of someone—and you got too independent after a little while. But now...”

She wraps her arms around herself tightly. “I’m ready.”

Shuo’s hands ball up into fists by his sides. “You...don’t even know what kind of life you’ll have, next time around. What if it’s worse? What if you’re better off here?”

“Then I’ll die again, and I’ll try again.” She shrugs.

Hua Cheng’s gaze softens, becoming slightly fond.

That’s Yanlin.

Anger is her natural fear response. It’s not always the most endearing. Actually—it makes most people turn away from her.

But she’s strong. And to the people she loves? Utterly selfless. She’ll be a good mother.

“I’ll keep going until I have a rich husband, and a cute son!” She snaps, crossing her arms, “If I get that, then sure—I’ll stay as a ghost as long as I can. But that’s what I want.”

Shuo looks at Hua Cheng helplessly, desperate for the Ghost King to intervene. If he asked, Yanlin would stay. They both know it.

But the decision to stay or move on is precious. Hua Cheng appreciates it more than once.

Slowly, he walks to the female ghost’s side, surveying the door as he stands next to her.

“You’re ready?”

Her lips turn up weakly.

“...Yeah,” she mumbles, reaching over.

Hua Cheng doesn’t often allow others into his personal space, not outside of a fight. But now, he lets her grasp onto his hand, squeezing his fingers tightly.

“...Thank you, Hua Cheng.”

He arches an eyebrow. “What for?”

Yanlin bites her lip, so hard that it begins to throb.

“...When I died, I was so, so scared.” She whispers, eyes still staring straight ahead. “And—when the bandage man—”

“Lang Ying,” Hua Cheng reminds her gently.

Yanlin swallows dryly. “L-Lang Ying. When he took me, I...”

Her teeth clench, and her chin tilts down.

“I had a horrible life.” She whispers. “I loved my mom, and my little brother. But... horrible things happened to me.”

She’s never said what, not in six centuries. Even now, taking about it brings tears to her eyes, and her hand shakes.

Hua Cheng squeezes it silently, offering her reassurance. It’s not something he would do for most.

She sniffles, wiping at her eyes. “And—when Lang Ying took me, I thought the same thing was going to happen again. And I was so, so scared. I—I hate feeling scared.”

“I know,” Hua Cheng murmurs, never looking away from the door, knowing that she only feels comfortable talking like this when no one is looking at her.

“It makes me so mad...” She mutters, and the Ghost king almost smiles.

“I know.”

“But then...Shuo and Bao found me.” She smiles, and the tears flow just a little bit faster. “They gave me that string, and they told me...if I stayed with them, and I held on, I would be safe. And—” Her voice cracks. “So many people in my life promised to keep me safe, but...”

For once, Hua Cheng feels a little...

Moved.

“You were the only one who ever actually did,” the ghost admits. “And I...was never scared like that again. Not ever.”

Because Yanlin worshipped a man who always denied being a god, but he protected his believers like no other.

“I just wish I could have been...”

“You were useful,” Hua Cheng murmurs, eyes straight ahead.

Her lips tremble, and the Ghost King bends over.

He’s never been an affectionate person, she’s never seen him do more than shake someone’s hand, but...

Hua Cheng kisses the top of her head.

“They needed you.”

She was the youngest of the three, it’s true—

But Yanlin was always Shuo and Bao’s big sister. Looking after them. Anticipating their needs. Putting them first.

And if this is what she wants, moving on...

She deserves to have it.

Her hand clings to his so tightly, trembling.

Over half a millennia ago, when she was still so small, and he was barely a calamity at all, she held his hand just like this.

‘I’m not ready yet, but...when I am, will you bring me back here?’ He kept his promise, right up until the very end.

“...Thank you, Hua Chengzhu.”

Finally, Yanlin lets go of his hand, turning around, bowing low, hands clasped in front of her.

When she straightens, a tear stained smile is on her face. Not sad tears, or frightened, just...

Bittersweet.

“I wish you good fortune, and...happiness.”

She glances over her shoulder, giving Shuo one last look.

“...If you’re actually gonna stick around for a long time, you need to find connections," She warns him, her voice stern. "Being a ghost is about more than just being the strongest, you know."

Shuo nods, eyes glassy. "I know," he murmurs.

"If you aren't careful," She jerks her thumb at Hua Cheng, "You'll end up just like him."

There are worse things to be, but he nods once more.

The Ghost King waits to see if he'll say anything but...

The young man stays silent, fists clenched.

He watches as Yanlin turns back around, reaching for the door handle. He doesn't tell her.

Some might think of it as cowardice, but...

Hua Cheng disagrees.

It was the selfless thing to do, letting her go without any regrets. The door is thrown open wide, the light blinding.

And when she steps through—it's just the two of them.

Hua Cheng turns away without a word as the door slams shut, rattling the dice in his palm, opening their own way back.

"...You know something?" Shuo mutters as they climb the steps back to the mortal realm.

"What?"

"Ghost Stories are bullshit."

That draws an amused chuckle from the calamity.

"How do you figure?"

"It's always about scaring humans, but..." The muscles in the savage ghost's jaw work tightly. "I lost so much more after I died than I ever did before."

Hua Cheng falls silent.

"It's way scarier, being a ghost."

They part ways when they return to ghost city. Shuo walks off on his own path, shoulders hunched, and Hua Cheng doesn't chase him. He has his own work to do, and, well...

The boy needs space to mourn.

When Crimson Rain returns to the gambler's den, however, it's to an unwelcome sight.

The ghouls and ghosts are in a stir over something, and the moment he steps through the door, the reason for that becomes clear.

"...What do you want?" He mutters, his expression darkening.

Black Water glances up at him over his playing cards, his feet kicked up on top of the gambling table. "To make a proposition."

"You better not be betting with gold," the older calamity mutters, stalking past him. "You still owe me."

"Relax, I'm betting spiritual power."

He Xuan sets his cards down, and, sure enough, he has a royal flush, making the other ghosts groan with annoyance. He's quick to move to his feet, following Crimson Rain up the steps, toward his private viewing area.

Black Water is the only one who has ever dared to venture up.

Now, watching the two ascend side by side, one of the ghosts can't help but notice how the two share a similar posture.

When Hua Cheng isn't around, He Xuan often tends to slouch. But when they walk together, both have their shoulders thrown back, hands clasped behind them.

Once they're behind the red beaded curtains at the top of the steps, Hua Cheng immediately goes for the liquor cabinet.

A necessity, for when Black Water shows up unannounced.

"What do you want?"

"Well, on the subject of owing you..." The water demon takes a seat.

"Go on."

"I have recently come into an...interesting situation," He Xuan shrugs, tossing his hair back over his shoulder. "In large part due to the funds you loaned me." Hua Cheng stares at him, lifting his drink to his lips —clearly unimpressed. "...And I have an opportunity for you."

"An opportunity?" Hua Cheng repeats flatly, crossing his arms.

"A hiring opportunity, to be more specific."

The Ghost King could not be less amused, and He Xuan holds up a finger. "Have I ever come to you about something frivolous?"

Hua Cheng opens his mouth.

"...Besides the fish thing," He Xuan cuts him off quickly, before he can speak.

Hua Cheng closes his mouth.

"Just stop being vague and get on with it," he eventually mutters, already finishing off his glass. "I'm not in the mood."

"Fine," the water demon shrugs. "I happen to know of a former heavenly official that's looking for a job," he explains, and before Hua Cheng's hopes can lift (to be fair, they weren't high to begin with), he clarifies—

"Not the Crown Prince of Xianle, obviously. No one has been able to locate him."

Hua Cheng stares back at him frostily. "I didn't think you were talking about him, but thank you for that pleasant reminder."

"..." Black water glances down at his nails, examining his cuticles. "But he was an ascended martial god, he likely has useful intel."

That's...true.

Hua Cheng huffs, refilling his cup once more. Honestly, if he had lived long enough to be of an appropriate drinking age, he would have truly relished in the opportunity to get absolutely shitfaced.

Now, he just has whiskey and wishful thinking. "And what do you want for it?"

"Three million knocked off my tab?" Black Water offers, and Hua Cheng snorts derisively.

"One."

"That's stingy, for a man with your coffers."

"I'm not running a charity," Hua Cheng mutters, taking another sip. "And this official of yours might be useless. Most of them are."

"I wouldn't bring you someone useless," He Xuan sighs, kicking out his feet. "I know better."

That's generally true. Black Water is one of the few beings that *can* push his luck with Crimson Rain Sought Flower. He's the closest Hua Cheng has to a peer, and...

They share things.

Memories. The most intimate form of knowledge one can have of another person. Secrets. A common goal.

As such, there's an understanding that they won't destroy each other. And, if one is in dire straits, the other will come to their aid.

But lets be clear: while aid is rarely needed, it's always Hua Cheng aiding He Xuan, not the other way around.

By far, he's the muscle of the operation.

But Blackwater isn't useless. In fact, he's generally helpful in a fight—but his real strength lies in gathering information.

He's disturbingly good at lying, and an impeccable actor. Just as good as Hua Cheng, which is a first—and his obsession puts him close to the heavens.

That's useful, and—it makes it likely that he knows this official isn't worthless. "One million," Hua Cheng repeats.

"Pah..."

"You should be grateful I'm letting you barter at all," The Ghost King sighs, toying with the red string knotted around his finger. "Normally, when someone fails to pay up—I don't let them negotiate."

"This isn't really negotiating..." The water demon grumbles with a heavy sigh.

Hua Cheng's eyes flash. "Someday, you'll go long enough without paying that I'll decide on my own way to get my money's worth, and you aren't going to like it."

He Xuan shivers, casting him an annoyed look. "It's a wonder you aren't more popular. A real fucking head scratcher."

"You must be referring to the gods you've been chasing around," Hua Cheng retorts with a sharp smirk, "Ghosts and Mortals like me plenty."

In truth, he's developed quite a salacious reputation, in spite of having never taken a lover that anyone knows of.

Probably because of the hedonistic image that he projects to the world, but no matter. "...Would you like to meet him, or not?"

"I suppose," Hua Cheng rolls his eyes, setting his glass down. "Is he nearby?"

"I left him in Paradise Manor," He Xuan shrugs. "Here seemed too public. He's freshly banished, still reeks of Heavenly Aura."

"I'm surprised you didn't offer to rid him of that," Hua Cheng mutters, making his way for the curtains.

That's the irony of it all.

Hua Cheng projects indulgence, but possesses restraint.

Actually, his self control is extremely impressive.

He Xuan, however, struggles deeply with controlling his own desires. His hunger, his thirst—and, despite his calm, intellectual exterior, his lust.

Hua Cheng has never been known to take a lover, but He Xuan?

He indulges.

"Oh, no," the water demon shakes his head. "It would have felt..."

Hua Cheng glances over at him, arching an eyebrow, and Blackwater waves his hands, like it's difficult to explain.

"...like taking advantage, I suppose." The calamity mutters.

"Oh?"

"He's useful—but pitiful."

As Ghost Kings, they don't really have peers—that isn't possible. But He Xuan makes a point of not going after especially weak partners.

Still, Hua Cheng can't imagine how someone he deemed as too weak to take into his bed (a rare occurrence in itself) would still be "useful."

But he follows along, intrigued enough by the prospect of the former god's supposed utility, and...if nothing else, a break in the monotony.

It doesn't take him long to see what He Xuan meant by 'pitiful.'

The youth standing in his hall is slim, and not particularly tall.

His hair is long, smooth, and dark, hanging against his back in a low ponytail, his robes black and purple. They hang off of his frame, like he might have lost weight.

There's nothing signaling that he's especially weak, but... There is a pitiful air about him, it's true.

When he hears them coming, he turns his head, and at first—Hua Cheng is startled by how young he looks, but...

He's Baby faced. That's the word. The sort of person that never really loses the softness in their cheeks, always looking younger than they actually are.

Not particularly handsome, but boyish, Hua Cheng supposes.

In any case, the moment he sees the Ghost Kings approaching—the former official drops into a deep bow, waiting to be spoken to.

...Well, he seems more open to the idea of serving than Hua Cheng was expecting.

"...You must be the official He Xuan was telling me about," the Ghost King mutters, tilting his head. "What's your name?"

He's asking to be polite, of course—only one official has been cast out recently, and so he already knows before the young man murmurs a reply—

"...Yin Yu." Right.

The one that used to be the martial god of the west, sharing with…Quan Yizhen, if Hua Cheng remembers correctly.

And the two of them were involved in the brocade immortal fiasco.

Messy business—rather embarrassing for the Heavens.

Hua Cheng walks past him smoothly.

“I have been informed that you might be useful to me,” the ghost king sighs, dropping down on the chaise lounge in his sitting room. “Would you care to elaborate?”

“…” The former god swallows dryly, and he nods, taking a deep breath. “I’m a hard worker, very efficient. And I—”

“Want to work for the ghost realm.” Hua Cheng raises an eyebrow. “That won’t endear you to the heavens. Or make it easy for you to get back.”

Yin Yu hangs his head, bangs falling in front of his face. “…I don’t think I want to go back anytime soon, sir.”

Shame is evident on his face, and that much Hua Cheng can understand. The story of his fall is especially bruising. Rather unpleasant.

“But you don’t wish to return to the mortals, either.” The Ghost King presses—and Yin Yu shakes his head.

“It would be harder to hide.”

Hua Cheng raises an eyebrow. “You think your shidi will come looking for revenge, then?”

Yin Yu hesitates, squirming a little with discomfort. “Not…not exactly, no.”

“But you do think he’ll come looking?”

The former official nods, hanging his head even lower.

Well, since he was an ascended martial god, Hua Cheng thinks it’s only reasonable to test and see if he actually knows anything.

“What about Generals Nan Fang and Xuan Zhen?”

“What about them?’

"What have those two been doing, exactly?"

"Oh," Yin Yu mutters, thinking.

"...Xuan Zhen hasn't left the heavens much, recently," Yin Yu murmurs. "But in the last seventy years or so, Nan Yang hasn't really been around at all."

"Really?" Hua Cheng arches an eyebrow. "Know anything about that?"

"Uh..." Yin Yu rubs his chin, thinking it over. "He's pretty attentive to his worshippers in the mortal realm," the former official explains, and Hua Cheng fights the urge to roll his eyes.

Nan Yang is a strong martial god. Not as popular as the Water Master or as fearsome as Ming Guang, but respected and well regarded.

But not brave enough to face Hua Cheng's challenge. And, well...

Words cannot describe how frustrating it was, watching Feng Xin fail to protect Xie Lian all those years ago—when he had a body, when he could actually talk to him, and Hong'er could only...

Watch, helpless.

It's left him with little fondness for the Martial God, aside from, well...

"...Are you going to speak?" Blackwater drawls, "Or are you going to glare at the boy until he faints?"

Hua Cheng isn't exactly glaring AT Yin Yu, he's glaring *through* him, but point taken.

"And he's been away from the heavens for seventy years, just answering prayers?"

"Well, no." Yin Yu shakes his head. "He had some sort of argument with Xuan Zhen before he left—a bad one, even for them. And he's supposedly been searching for something ever since."

"For what?"

"No one knows," he shrugs, fiddling awkwardly with the end of his ponytail. "A lot of people think it might be some sort of heirloom of Xianle? Or maybe a weapon."

Hua Cheng arches an eyebrow. “Why?”

“Well—because he keeps on digging up ruins,” Yin Yu explains. “Rumor has it that a lot of valuable gifts from Jun Wu were pawned when the Prince of Xianle fell, so maybe he’s looking for…” The former official trails off, noticing the way the air in the room has suddenly changed.

From behind Hua Cheng’s back, Blackwater is dragging his hand over his neck in a sharp, ‘Cut it out’ gesture, and—

Yin Yu is left slightly confused.

Is the Crown Prince of Xianle a sensitive subject? That’s odd. No one has strong feelings about him one way or the other lately.

“…Well, you’ve made the introduction,” Hua Cheng turns his head to look back at He Xuan, who is suddenly once again examining his cuticles. “Get out.”

If anyone else spoke to the water demon that way, they would end up torn to shreds. But in this case, Blackwater shrugs.

“Fine,” he drawls, twirling a knife between his fingertips as he rises to his feet, “I’ll be away for a while, anyway.”

“That means your tab is just going to keep going up,” Hua Cheng reminds him flatly. “That’s why I brought him.” He Xuan replies, his tone rather dry.

The doors slam shut behind him, and Yin Yu does his best not to wither under Hua Cheng’s gaze as the Ghost King’s attention comes back to him, standing ramrod straight.

“And what are your thoughts on the matter?”

“I…” He swallows thickly. “What?”

“You were talking about the crown prince pawning Jun Wu’s gifts,” Hua Cheng explains calmly. “What are your thoughts on the matter?”

“Uh…” Yin Yu has no idea why it matters, but it feels…like his answer is quite important for some reason. “I’m not in a position to judge.”

He certainly isn’t.

“And if you were in a position?”

The former god stares at him for a long time, before eventually forming his reply.

“He was banished for trying to do the right thing. I was banished for...” He trails off, his expression slightly anguished.

“Being a jealous fool,” he finishes the thought, shaking his head. “And I’m pretty sure begging for employment from a ghost king is probably worse than pawning a few swords...” He stops his eyes widening when he realizes what he just said, throwing his hands up nervously.

“I didn’t mean—!”

Hua Cheng shakes his head, laughing under his breath. “I’m not that fucking sensitive, brat. Relax.”

The former god falls silent, pressing his lips together with a nod. “I’m not very good at relaxing, sir.”

“I can tell...” The Ghost King tilts his head. “Come over here.”

The young man looks a little hesitant.

“I’m not Blackwater, I don’t bite.”

Yin Yu doesn’t know what to make of that statement, but he creeps over cautiously, until he’s standing in front of Hua Cheng’s seat.

“Show me.”

“I—What?”

“The Shackle.”

At first, he gawks at the suggestion. “I-I can’t do that...” “Why?”

“It’s against Heavenly Law to show the shackles to any...”

Mortals, technically. Do ghosts count?

Hua Cheng watches him, and he can’t help but...agree with He Xuan’s statement.

It really is pitiful.

But he’s agreeing for very different reasons.

It's pitiful that even now, cast aside and abandoned, so many heavenly officials still find themselves so desperate to please Jun Wu.

If you ask Hua Cheng, the Heavenly Emperor's love is fleeting, cheap —and it's not worth chasing.

"We break many heavenly laws here," the Ghost King reminds him. "If that's already a problem..."

"..." Yin Yu gulps, knowing...he doesn't have much of a choice. So, he rolls up his sleeve, holding his wrist out.

The pattern is all too familiar.

Hua Cheng reaches out to grip his arm before he can pull it back, watching closely. His expression is completely unreadable as Yin Yu watches him with a tense, nervous gaze, unsure of what he's going to —

"Fine."

Hua Cheng lets him go.

Yin Yu stands there, arm hanging limply.

"I...What—?"

"You're hired."

The former official stands there awkwardly, tugging his sleeve down over his wrist once again, unsure...of how that just happened.

"I am?"

"Even with your spiritual powers sealed, you're still a martial god," Hua Cheng shrugs. "That's useful."

The mention of being useful makes Yin Yu's eyes flash with something other than shame for the first time that evening, even if he can only repeat the same words, gaping like a fish. "...I am?"

Yes. In more ways than one.

Ascending as a martial deity requires a certain skill set.

If Hua Cheng loans him spiritual power, the official would likely be more than capable of regulating Ghost City during his absences. His knowledge of the current politics of the Heavenly Court can update Hua Cheng's gathered information.

But there are other benefits.

First being: he has nowhere else to go.

Second being: he's terrified of double crossing Hua Cheng.

(Likely because the Ghost King did inform him that, if Yin Yu ever betrayed him, he would eat the former god's beating heart and use his ribs to pick his teeth.)

Third, and most important being:

"Uh...do I really need the blindfold?" The Waning Moon Officer mumbles, stumbling a little in the city street.

"Yes," Hua Cheng agrees flatly. "That's key."

"And...what am I supposed to do?"

Hua Cheng has been looking for another banished god.

"Wander around like you're trying to survive."

Who better to assist in that task, than someone in a near identical situation?

Of course, simply having him try to recreate the Crown Prince's path doesn't work out.

Yin Yu's luck isn't bad enough, it would seem.

In any case, when he isn't ordered to watch over Ghost City in Hua Chengzhu's absence, the officer's primary mission is to focus on the search.

And whatever task the Ghost King comes up with in the moment, but still.

It leads to awkward encounters for Yin Yu.

After all, he's still hiding from his past.

His determined to the point of insanity, bullheaded, annoying, clueless past.

So, he usually goes out in a mask. But sometimes, particularly when he's trying to retrace the Prince's steps, he'll try on the blindfold.

After all, Hua Chengzhu was very insistent when he brought him out that one time, saying it was key to help the former god, 'get into character.'

There must be something to that, right? He wasn't just messing with Yin Yu, was he?

It would be several decades before the god came to understand his employer's mischievous nature.

(But even now he's starting to wonder if he actually gets paid enough for this.)

But one day, when he's out searching, running into street signs and stumbling over curbs, he hears—

"Your highness?!" Uh-oh.

Does he have enemies? How could he have enemies? Hasn't everyone forgotten about him?

Yin Yu attempts to dart down a back alley, only to end up caught by the wrist. "What are you—?!"

"I—!"

Both fall silent when the blindfold slips down his nose.

Both Heavenly Officials (current and former) stare at one another.

"...You?!" The martial god huffs, holding the Waning Moon Officer against the alley wall.

"G...General Nan Yang," Yin Yu croaks in return.

"Why are you..." Feng Xin sputters, looking him over. "Wearing that?!"

"Uh...I...um..." The former god stammers, fumbling for a reason to be walking around with white cultivation robes and a blindfold that doesn't sound utterly ridiculous, but —

"G-Getting into character?"

(Feng Xin makes him nervous.)

"..." The god's brow creases. "...What?"

They stare at each other for a long moment, and Yin Yu quivers under the martial god's stormy gaze, growing more and more angry by the second.

(In reality, Feng Xin is the sort who simply looks angry when he's confused.)

"I'm...I'm an actor now!" He blurts out, voice cracking.

"An...actor..." Feng Xin repeats slowly, looking him over suspiciously. "...In what sort of production?"

"I..." Yin Yu swallows hard, clearing his throat. "Um...it's...like...one of those tragedies? They cast me because I'm...so...depressing?"

"Oh." The god blinks. "That makes sense."

"..." Maybe Yin Yu left himself open for that one, but he hadn't expected the martial god to agree...Honestly, no wonder Xuan Zhen is always calling him an insensitive—

Suddenly, the exiled god goes rigid, and Feng Xin pauses. "...Are you alright?" Oh.

CRASH!

Uh-oh.

BOOM!

Feng Xin whips his head around, trying to find the source of the commotion. "What the—?"

"...I'm really sorry about this, General Nan Yang," the former official mutters under his breath.

"You—?"

Suddenly, Yin Yu grabs Feng Xin by the wrist with surprising strength.

The Martial God gawks, "How—?!"

After all, he shouldn't be that strong, not with his powers sealed. So how is he—? But instead of hurting him, Yin Yu drags Feng Xin's hand forward, and...

Makes the god slap him across the face. Rather hard, actually.

"I'm sorry!"He repeats.

Now Feng Xin is so confused, he's starting to feel the beginnings of a migraine.

(Therefore, he looks absolutely furious.)

Why is Yin Yu apologizing to him? He just made Feng Xin slap him silly.

"What the fuck—?"

Suddenly, there's silence.

Dangerous silence.

Yin Yu groans.

Feng Xin slowly turns his head, and in the mouth of the alleyway, he sees a youth standing there.

One with wildly curly hair, pulled up into a high ponytail, golden earrings hanging from his ears.

And his eyes? They're red with rage, literally flashing with spiritual power.

At first, Feng Xin actually thinks he understands what's happening.

"Now, Quan Yizhen," he starts, his voice stern, "He's already been punished—!" From behind him, Yin Yu suddenly whimpers, spitting out blood, clutching his face. "G-General Nan Yang, please stop! It hurts!"

What the—? Did he really make Feng Xin hit him that hard? And why is he—?

Feng Xin doesn't get the chance to pull another conscious thought together before he's being hit with the sentient equivalent of a wrecking ball, toppling an entire building to the ground.

"...THE HELL?!"

Yin Yu runs as fast as his legs will physically take him, fumbling for the dice in his pocket.

“Asshole,” he mumbles under his breath, “What do you mean, ‘that makes sense?!’” He drops his voice down several octaves in an imitation of Feng Xin’s voice as several explosions echo.

He almost doesn’t feel bad for—

BOOM!

CRASH!

SCREEEEEEACH!

“OH GOD, NOT THE HOSPITAL!”

Okay, he feels a little bad, actually. But Quan Yizhen wouldn’t hurt any mortals, and Feng Xin will be fine.

That day, Yin Yu comes to the conclusion that he’ll use other methods to help his employer look for the crown prince. Somehow, just dressing up like him brings horrible, absolutely rotten luck.

(It explains why so many theaters that showed plays mocking the prince burned down.)

He’ll just have to use his wits. Or…something of the sort.

When he returns to Paradise Manor to finish his duties for the day, he already thinks his day has gotten about as rotten as it could get, but…

Then he hears the roaring, cackling laughter, and he deflates.

Of course, one of his boss’s wraith butterflies was monitoring. So…

He saw the entire thing.

You know, Yin Yu doesn’t even know why the Ghost King wants to find the Prince of Xianle so badly, but he feels sorry for the man.

It’s probably so he can torture and boss him around, embarrass him on purpose, laugh at him all the time and make jokes at his expense, but…Compared to the alternative, it isn’t so bad.

Unlike the heavens, Hua Chengzhu is fair. Still, Yin Yu doesn’t think he gets paid enough.

False Idols

Chapter Summary

Deep in the central plains, near the edges of the now fallen Empire of Yong’an, lies the city state of Daqing.

An ancient city, one of old blood.

In it’s earliest days, it was warred over in the conflicts between the clans of the central plains and the Kingdom of Wuyong.

Later, it would be the crown jewel of Xianle’s military might—and after that, Yong’an’s greatest fortress.

The walls of Daqing are world renowned, and they have only ever fallen once:

Over a thousand years ago, before the armies of General Ming Guang. His last great victory before the death of the Queen of Yushi.

Chapter Notes

You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

YEAR SEVEN HUNDRED AND NINETY NINE

“Liao Yong!” A mother calls sharply, “Get away from there!”

The little boy stops, hand outstretched.

Deep in the central plains, near the edges of the now fallen Empire of Yong’an, lies the city state of Daqing.

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The walls of Daqing are world renowned, and they have only ever fallen once:

Over a thousand years ago, before the armies of General Ming Guang. His last great victory before the death of the Queen of Yushi.

The place where he would return, following the failed military revolt.

He ascended here, shattering his own sword upon hearing of his own King's betrayal, before the eyes of thousands of onlookers.

A monument was erected in the central square to honor him, a statue cast in bronze, painted in gold.

Since then, the walls of Daqing have stood firm.

Even now, after the fall of Yong'an, they have not been breached. Not by swords.

A young child stands before them now, staring at his ball, which has rolled just outside of the city gates.

They stand wide open, just as they always do.

But he doesn't dare go any closer.

"Get back here this instant!"

"..." The child sighs, giving up on the toy, turning around to return to his mother, when...

"Excuse me," a voice behind him pipes up, and the boy's eyes widen sharply. "Is this yours?"

It's the first time that Liao Yong has ever met a stranger.

He didn't know that they could smile so kindly, or give back the toys you thought you lost forever.

For a city of such size, word travels quite fast in Daqing.

There's a new stall in the market square—for the first time in years. A modest one. They say there's a new weaver.

With patterns so delicate, so intricate, no one can fathom how the prices are so reasonable. Honestly, he's practically giving them away, barely making enough to feed himself.

But he never seems to mind, smiling and chatting pleasantly with anyone who stops by.

"…Mister?" One of the children asks one day, making the weaver tilt his head back, bamboo hat dangling over his shoulders.

"Hmm?"

"What's your name?"

The weaver smiles. "Oh, it's Hua…" He stops himself, trailing off, and the boy frowns.

"Hua…?"

He already said that he couldn't keep on using that alias. It's been nearly two centuries since the Banyue incident, but after the thing with that Poet…

"Lian," he murmurs, offering his hand, "My name is Hua Lian. And you?"

After a moment, the child shakes it.

"Liao Yong."

When he leans over to shake the weaver's hand, Xie Lian notices something that makes him frown.

This distinctive noise of clinking metal. He hears it all over this city.

Such a quiet place, for having so many people. No one ever seems to speak unless it's necessary.

Then, the boy whispers something that makes Xie Lian pause. "Mr. Hua, are you a god?"

His head whips to the side sharply, but before he can ask the boy what he means—he hears the sound of his feet smacking against cobblestones, running away.

Daqing is an ancient place.

It has been blessed as many times as it has been cursed, and the power of the land is great—for those who know how to use it well.

And yet, Xie Lian has not encountered a single cultivator in the city.

Merchants, yes. School teachers. Builders and bricklayers.

But no priests.

Xie Lian encounters the occasional soldier—the only people, from what he can tell, who don't seem to carry that unfamiliar clinking sound. With them, it's the rattle of blades in their scabbards—a tune the prince knows well.

But there's very little need for them.

Xie Lian has never been in a city with so little crime. Even after a month sitting in the market, he hasn't run into a single pickpocket. No sexual assaults.

(Which, in his experience, are horrifically common everywhere else.) Not even a drunken brawl.

Daqing is a quiet place.

People speak quietly on the doorsteps near their homes. There's rarely haggling over prices in the market stalls. Even the children seem to stop when they catch themselves laughing or playing too loudly.

The quietest of them all is the weaver in the market square.

He sits before his loom, working in easy silence, barely making a noise as he moves the bailing wires into place, pulling the reed back and forth as he works layer after layer of thread into his pieces.

And each day, he listens closely. Daqing is a strange place.

He's learned better by now, than to ask the boy what he meant that day, when he asked Xie Lian if he was a god. Each time he's started to inquire, Liao Yong has fled like a startled field mouse, wary of being caught by a wandering barn cat.

He learns to ask better questions.

Liao Yong is twelve years old. He was eleven, when they met—but his birthday was last week. His mother works as a server in a nearby tavern. He likes reading, but there aren't many books around.

(Xie Lian asks why, and the boy finds a reason to flee once more.)

Liao Yong had an older brother, once—he joined the army when the boy was small, and left on an expedition through the desert. They never came back. It's just him and his mother now, but he doesn't really mind. He keeps busy.

(Xie Lian asks why he isn't in school, and he bolts.)

At first he wondered if the child was being mistreated, to be so skittish. But after a week, he realizes that Liao Yong speaks more than any of the other children in the city. He's the only one brave enough to approach the weaver on a daily basis.

For Daqing, he's quite social.

One day, Xie Lian asks about that. Asks if there's something wrong with his face—if that's why the children stay away, and the boy beside him shakes his head, patiently holding threads for the weaver while he works.

"They've just never talked to a stranger before."

Xie Lian thinks about that, tilting his head to the side. "...Do you not get travelers often?"

It's strange.

He came to the city of Daqing when he was just a boy near Liao Yong's age. He was old enough to ride by himself, but he usually shared with Feng Xin, following the King.

Daqing was so lively back then. Merchants shouting as they peddled goods that had been ferried up from the sea by the river. People dancing and singing in the streets. Children playing with firecrackers and glass marbles.

Liao Yong shrugs. "Who would want to come here?"

That's when Xie Lian realizes a new, ever more strange thing about the city:

He hasn't heard any music since he arrived.

No singing. No flutes or drums. Not even clapping in a particular rhythm.

Even in the pubs, they drink in near silence.

Something is wrong here. Deeply wrong.

He can feel it in his gut. Can taste it in the air.

When he asks about the music Liao Yong simply says that it's been outlawed. When the god asks why, the boy replies that he doesn't know.

He's lying. Xie Lian can tell.

One day, he asks— "Liao Yong?"

"Yes?"

"Would you mind taking me to the Ming Guang temple?" The weaver murmurs, setting down his thread. "It's been a long time since I prayed, I'm worried it might bring ill fortune if I put it off much longer."

"Um…" The boy pauses.

"There isn't a Ming Guang temple in Daqing."

Xie Lian frowns, because he knows that can't be right.

"There used to be."

The prince might not keep up with heavenly politics of the modern era as well as he should, but Daqing is where Ming Guang ascended. He had a grand temple.

Xie Lian prayed there, when he visited as a child—as all visiting nobles did, to pay their respects. It was the only time in his life that he worshipped in a temple that wasn't Jun Wu's—and he remembers it well.

It was livelier than what he was used to.

People would dance and sing as they paid their respects to the martial god, laughing together.

It made Jun Wu's temples feel almost like tombs, upon his return to Xianle.

That was when he first got the idea that you didn't need to kneel, in order to pray.

"Well," Liao Yong shrugs. "There isn't one anymore."

That’s hard to believe. Even Xie Lian knows that Pei Ming is still quite popular.

“Well…” He tries to think of another possibility. “What about Nan Yang, does he have a temple here?”

“…No,” the boy shakes his head.

“Xuan Zhen?”

“Nope.”

“Lang Qianqiu?”

“Nuh-uh.”

“…Alright,” Xie Lian sighs, feeling a little frustrated. “Where is the temple for Jun Wu?”

“…We don’t have a temple for Jun Wu.”

The god sits in stunned silence.

A city of this size, with no temple for the Heavenly Emperor?

“…Do you not have any temples here?”

“Um…we have one,” Liao Yong mutters. “But that’s about it.”

Xie Lian’s eyebrows knit together. “For who?”

“Wen Jiao.”

The god wracks his mind—but he’s never heard of that name before. It’s possible it could be a newer deity, but…

“If he’s popular enough to be the only god with a temple in your city, why does he not have any cultivators?”

“…” Liao Yong squirms a little. “He doesn’t need any. We all pray to him. Besides… Cultivators were banished from Daqing a hundred years ago.”

Xie Lian pauses.

“…Banished?” He questions softly.

“…” The boy looks around carefully before scooting closer to Xie Lian on the ground. Not knowing that a set of eyes are already watching them intently.

“Wen Jiao banished them when he came to the city,” the boy whispers.

What sort of god would banish cultivators? It’s self-destructive.

“Most of them went to other cities, but one cultivation sect moved to the mountain, just to the North,” he speaks so quietly, like he’s frightened of being overheard. “They cultivate under the Rain Master.”

“...If they’ve been gone for a century, how do you know they’re still there?” Xie Lian murmurs, his fingers never slowing on his loom.

Nearby, a city guard pushes away from where he’s been leaning back against the wall, slowly walking towards them.

“They’re allowed in every now and then, to recruit disciples,” Liao Yong murmurs, dipping his head low. “Wen Jiao doesn’t want people who can cultivate to stick around, so...”

Xie Lian frowns, trying to put the pieces together. There’s something wrong with Daqing.

He sensed it before. Like a chill down his spine, but now, it’s becoming harder and harder to ignore. Something unnatural is going on here.

“That’s why I asked you that question, when you told me your name,” the boy mumbles.

Xie Lian turns his head in his direction, “Why?”

“...Because you aren’t from the monastery,” Liao Yong explains, and Xie Lian doesn’t know how he could have known that so early on, but he sounds absolutely certain. “But you aren’t wearing a...”

On instinct, Xie Lian reaches out with his hand—and he finds what he’s looking for.

The source of that sound—the metallic clinking.

There’s something wrong with the city of Daqing.

Xie Lian hisses, jerking his fingers back. It’s rare for him to feel pain, but now—the pads of his fingers are scalding.

There's an iron shackle around Liao Yong's neck.

And the cursed energy in the metal is so potent, it reacts violently with Xie Lian's spiritually fortified flesh.

That shackle, no—the entire city— It all reeks of evil.

The city guard makes his way closer, elbowing around merchants, "Hey!" He starts to call over. "You—!"

Liao Yong falls silent, trembling all over, the blood draining in his face as he turns around. Xie Lian tenses, tapping the side of his throat, silently indicating to Ruoye that it might be time to—

Then, another voice breaks out, and for the first time since he arrived here...

"As time draws near, my dearest dear, when you and I must part..."

Xie Lian hears singing.

A young man sits on a nearby open window sill, one leg dangling down, a book loosely clutched between his fingertips.

His voice is low, soft, and clear.

Eyes fixed on the city guard.

Xie Lian can't see how handsome he is, with long, dark hair pulled away from his face, shining under the sun like silk. Eyes that burn like liquid gold. But, from the sound of his voice—he must be in his later teenage years.

The guard rounds on the young man, glaring.

"Xiong Li!" He snaps, turning away from the weaver and the child sitting beside him. "You really can't help yourself, can you?!"

The young man smiles faintly, and the guard's wrath doesn't stop him from singing another line, snapping his book shut before he sets it down.

"How little you know of the grief and woe, in my poor aching heart..."

He drops down from the window sill, dark boots landing heavily against the ground, bangs settling around his face.

The guard's glare intensifies as he stomps over, "Enough!"

Xiong Li's smile widens.

"You don't like it?" He's smirking now, dodging around the guard as he lunges for him, book clasped behind his back. "That's so mean," the teenager pouts. "I wrote it for you!"

The guard, who is almost certainly a decade his senior, has turned purple. "You little —!"

Xiong Li steps close when he lunges, twisting on the ball of his foot until he ends up behind the guard, pressing a shove against the small of his back.

"Each night I suffer for your sake, you're the boy I love so dear..."

"I'm not kidding, brat—I'll have you whipped for this!"

Xie Lian's fingers have completely abandoned his loom now, his brow furrowed.

Whipped, for singing a song to a city guard?

From beside him, Liao Yong seems to understand what the older boy is trying to do for him—and he takes his chance to run back home as silently as he can.

Xiong Li keeps singing his song, dodging around the guard's attempts to catch him, fluttering around like a little song bird, watching the young boy's escape from the corner of his eye.

"I wish that I was going with you..." He hums, as Liao Yong disappears around the corner. "...Or you were staying here!"

With that, he offers a deep, dramatic bow, spinning on his heel before taking off himself in the opposite direction, egging the guard on to chase after him.

The shouting fades into the distance, and disturbed whispers echo through the town square.

"...They aren't going to let him off easy, this time..."

"It's his own fault for never minding his own business..."

Would his punishment truly be so severe? And if that's the case—how much danger was Liao Yong in, for the teenager to think it was worth distracting the guard?

The boy—Xiong Li—doesn't return to the market square for several weeks. And even though Xie Lian can't see him—he can hear the raggedness of his breathing. The pronounced limp.

He couldn't be more than seventeen, and he's clearly been beaten within an inch of his life.

For singing.

Presumably, to prevent Liao Ying from facing an even more violent punishment for speaking to Xie Lian about the shackle around his neck.

Shackles that nearly everyone in the city seems to be wearing.

And Xie Lian is left to wonder...

What is going on here?

Xie Lian knows enough to think it must have something to do with this 'Wen Jiao' that everyone in the city is worshiping. But...

He can't understand how any of this would benefit a god. Or why Jun Wu would allow an entire city of mortals to be placed in chains.

Part of him wonders if he should go. If his bad luck might only make their situation worse, but...

He listens to a group of children playing in the street, struggling to toss a ball around without making too much noise.

Xie Lian can hear the quiet rattle of their shackles. And that's when he knows that he cannot leave. No child belongs in chains.

So he stays, listens, and waits.

Not long after, in a city without laughter or song, there's a bit of a stir.

Liao Yong looks up from his seat beside the weaver, nearly dropping his threads.

Xie Lian tilts his head, turning his head in the direction of the commotion. "What is it?"

"The cultivators," Liao Yong whispers, untangling the threads in his hands, "from the mountain."

The god listens closely as the townsfolk flock to the small group of newcomers.

It takes him a moment to realize, but... Most of them are parents. Pleading.

"Please, my son—he's the brightest in his class! He would make an excellent cultivator!"

"My little Ma Lihue can run faster than any of the other children, take her, please sirs!"

And in a horrific way, it's logical.

Since he arrived, Xie Lian has not heard a single soul leave the city, and he's willing to bet the shackles the citizens wear bar any chance of exit.

Sending their children to the mountain is their only chance at freedom.

From the sound of it—there's six or so cultivators in the group. They're quiet, but not in the frightened, forced way of the other citizens of Daqing.

They're disciplined and orderly. Xie Lian imagines whatever cultivation methods they use, they're well trained.

One breaks off from the group—and from the lighter sound of his footsteps, the god surmises it must be a younger disciple.

The children in the square sound delighted to see him.

"An-Xiong!" Liao Yong cries, beaming with excitement. He almost gets up, but his threads...

Xie Lian offers him a gentle smile, bumping his arm. "Go ahead," he murmurs, pulling the threads from his fingers. "I've got it, go on and say hello."

"..." The boy nods eagerly, leaping to his feet and running over. "An-Xiong!"

"An-Xiong, you're so tall now!"

"An-Xiong, did you really learn magic?!"

The small crowd of children jump around the teenager's knees, clinging to his robes. He pats their heads in polite acknowledgement, but he isn't looking at them, not really.

He's watching a young man, sitting in a nearby windowsill.

Long strands of raven hair falling into his face, the rest pulled back with a white ribbon.

The cultivator's eyes settle on the welt on his cheekbone, and they narrow as he marches over.

When he's right in front of him, Xiong Li pretends he's only just now noticed his arrival.

"Ah, An-Xiong," he murmurs, looking up from his book. On him, the honorific sounds slightly sarcastic, but he smiles up at the cultivator slyly. "You grace us with your presence."

At first, the other young man doesn't speak, eyeing the bruises on Xiong Li's face. "Have you been fighting again?"

Xiong Li huffs, snapping his book shut. "No! I was actually being pretty cool, I'll have you know. Very heroic."

"Right."

"I was…" he grumbles, looking over An's shoulder, at all of the children who are eagerly awaiting his attention.

Xiong Li's lips turn down into a slight frown, and he sighs. "You should give them attention, you know," he mutters. "One of them might be able to go back with you."

An's eyes remain fixed on him. He's always been prone to staring. Xiong Li really hates that.

"So could you."

"I swear, if you ask me that one more time—"

"Come back with me, Xiong Li."

Thud!

Xiong Li punches the other teenager in the shoulder, slipping down from the window sill so he can make him turn around. “Go do your job and stop bothering me!”

Xie Lian listens to the exchange

He can’t help but smile at first.

Xiong Li makes a point of sounding so blasé and uncaring, but his heart is beating a little faster than it was before.

But the more they talk, the more the god wonders.

“You won’t last much longer here,” An mutters, his gaze pinched with worry

On that note, Xie Lian agrees. Not only has Xiong Li been beaten and whipped to the point of near death three times since he arrived (which hasn’t been that long at all), but in a city without cultivators, where the children with potential are sent away...

It doesn’t make sense that Xiong Li is still here.

He’s far more intelligent and talented than any of the other boys his age. And while Xie Lian may be blind, he can feel the warmth from Xiong Li’s golden core.

He would be a strong cultivator indeed. Still, he acts blasé.

“Then I guess I won't make it...” He sighs dramatically, shoving An back towards the groom of children. “Ah...poor, poor me!”

“Xiong Li...” An mutters, his voice filled with worry and annoyance. “You don’t even know what it’s like outside.”

“Probably just as shitty as it is here.”

To anyone else, it sounds like silly bickering, but Xie Lian is listening intently.

“Do you have any idea how much they made us forget?” An questions. He’s always had a handsome face. Sharp eyebrows, a thin nose, and a strong jaw. Now, it’s twisted with concern.

Forget?

“Even the name of this place—”

The name.

Xie Lian stops weaving, his fingers paused on the edge of the loom.

That's right.

This place wasn't always called Daqing. It had a different name, when he came here as a boy.

What was it?

It's—

It's so odd, because Xie Lian can't...

He can't seem to remember the name that Daqing used to be called either. His memory isn't as sharp as it used to be. He's learned how to prioritize what he wants to remember, casting useless information aside. After all, he has centuries to keep track of.

But still.

Xie Lian never even realized that Daqing had been called something different to begin with—not until An pointed it out. And even now, no matter how hard he tries to remember, he can't.

It's more than just odd. Xie Lian recognizes that.

It's some sort of curse.

But...is that even possible? Xie Lian has never heard of anything like that before.

Is it even possible to steal a name? The name of an ancient, famous city for that matter?

And from the sound of what An is saying... If you leave the city walls, you remember.

So, up until Xie Lian stepped inside the gates, he probably knew exactly what this place was.

Did he come here for a reason, then? Was it more than just wandering?

And if that's so, how do An and the other cultivators from his sect keep their memories when they return?

Finally, Xiong Li coaxes him into paying attention to the other children, who all seem far too eager to display their knowledge and skills, hoping to get taken along to the mountain with him.

And, as the god listens, he learns more about this cultivator—An. He's seventeen, the same age as his friend.

He was born in the temple of Wen Jiao, and along with the other city orphans, was raised by the worshippers of Daqing's only god.

Which was how he came to know Xiong Li, another orphan raised within the temple walls.

The boys grew up together, both showing great promise from a young age.

But when the time came, An took the chance to go to the mountain and learn how to cultivate—and Xiong Li chose to remain within the city walls.

The visit doesn't last long.

Eventually, the older cultivators make ready to leave—and with a reluctant sigh, their disciple makes to go with them.

But not before sending Liao Yong a look from the corner of his eye.

"You can come, if you'd like."

The little boy stiffens, his jaw dropping. "...Me?"

Xie Lian isn't particularly surprised. Liao Yong is quick witted, brave—among the other children of Daqing, he stands out.

But after a moment of pondering, the child shakes his head, shrinking back. "...No thanks," he mumbles.

Xiong Li seems to be following Xie Lian's, *'Do as I say, not as I do,* ' method, gawking at the little boy.

"Are you stupid?" He mutters, giving Liao Yong a little shove. "Go with him!"

"...No," the boy shakes his head, moving to run and hide behind Xie Lian. "My Mom needs me!"

An stares at the child for a long moment, before letting out a low sigh, shaking his head. “As you wish.”

He begins making his way from the market, and Xiong Li sends the child one more annoyed glance before following him.

“I didn’t tell him to do that, An.”

“I know.”

Xiong Li glances back at the boy, still hiding behind the weaver’s back, rubbing his elbows sheepishly. “...It sounds like you blame me.”

“He idolizes you, Xiong Li,” An mutters, his tone flat. “All of them do.”

“Not as much as you,” the teenager retorts.

An rolls his eyes.

But...

He only gets to see his friend once a year, and he doesn’t want to spend the entire time arguing.

“What’s that book you were reading?”

“Hmm?” Xiong Li glances up, eyes wide. “Oh, you’d hate it, it’s silly, romantic. Very inappropriate.”

An’s face flushes slightly at the mention of the word *‘inappropriate* ,’ but he keeps his chin turned away, so his friend doesn’t see.

Xiong Li doesn’t pay any mind to that, walking close to his side. “Oh,” he muses, his eyes widening. “I forgot—we’re of age today, aren’t we?”

Another thing about the two young men—

They were born on the same day.

An nods, clasping his hands behind his back, fidgeting.

“Happy birthday, An.” Xiong Li smiles, mimicking his posture teasingly. Then, he bumps him with his shoulder. “Aren’t you gonna say it back?”

“...Happy birthday, Xiong Li,” he mutters, his face still turned away.

The teenager’s eyes sparkle with amusement, “Any luck finding your fated person?”

An keeps his gaze fixed on the opposite side of the square. “No.”

Xiong Li clicks his tongue. “That’s hard to believe.”

He tilts his head sideways, until his temple presses against An’s shoulder.

They were the same height, when he came last year.

When did his friend get so tall?

“You’re such a charmer…”

An’s jaw clenches. “Stop making fun of me.”

He can’t see the softness in Xiong Li’s eyes.

He’s not making fun of him. Not really.

“…C’mon,” he sighs, straightening, “Stop being a grouch. You got to pick a family name today, right? What’d you decide on?”

Xiong Li’s mother left a note with his name on it—but An, he was born with nothing.

He didn’t even have a name in the beginning. ‘An’ was just something that Xiong Li called him when they were little more than toddlers, chasing each other around. By the time he was old enough to understand what names were—the boy just took ‘An’ as an actual name.

Now that he’s officially ‘of age’ he gets to pick a surname of his own—something that Xiong Li knew he looked forward to.

“…Lan,” the cultivator replies quietly.

“Lan,” Xiong Li repeats, tilting his chin, testing the name on his lips, “…Lan An?”

“Is it no good?”

“No, no…I like it,” Xiong Li assures him. It’s a little awkward on the tongue at first, but it’s simple. It suits his friend’s minimalistic tastes. “Did you think it over carefully?”

"Yes..."

"Good," the teenager huffs, crossing his arms. "It's very important."

"I know."

"It's the name you'll give your wife and children one day," Xiong Li sniffs, rubbing his nose. "Family names, and all that."

Lan An's eyes cut over to look at him sharply, burning silver under the setting sun. "I know," he murmurs, looking Xiong Li over. "I kept that in mind."

The city gates stand only a few dozen meters away, and Xiong Li's smile fades slightly, no matter how hard he tries to keep it bright.

Still watching him, Lan An's eyes sadden. "...Have you written any more songs?"

Xiong Li snorts, finally meeting his gaze. "How do you think I got this?"

He means the welt on his face, of course. And from the slight limp in his gait, Lan An knows—he's been whipped again.

"...You're not about to ask me to sing, are you?"

Xiong Li's smile turns sly, trying to deflect Lan An's concern.

"Sorry, but I only sing for boys I like," he shrugs. "Don't cry about it, okay? I'm no good at dealing with people who get sad over being rejected—"

"Xiong Li."

He stops, when the cultivator places a hand on his shoulder. "...What?"

The weight of Lan An's gaze is suffocating.

When he looks at you, it feels like you're the only person in the entire universe. Really, it's—

Xiong Li swallows dryly, and in spite of his teasing, he takes a shallow step to the side, heart beating fast.

It's so annoying.

"Come back with me."

And just like that, the moment is broken.

Xiong Li rolls his eyes, giving his shoulder a shove. "Would you shut up about that already? I'm not going! Persistent guys like you are creepy, you know that?"

Lan An's gaze drifts down to Xiong Li's throat.

To the iron shackle.

"If you stay here..." It's hard for him to even say it. "You'll die."

Xiong Li's face freezes for a moment, his smile slightly more fragile than it was before —but it remains.

"Everyone dies, Lan An."

He's adopted that new name so easily. It almost makes the cultivator smile. Almost.

"Not everyone," he murmurs.

"..." Xiong Li purses his lips, glancing back towards the market. All of the people. The merchants, the teachers, the children playing. Even the weaver, whom he's barely spoken to. "I'm staying."

"Xiong Li—"

"I'd rather die."

Lan An's eyes widen sharply, and he falls silent.

"I'd rather die trying to help people," Xiong Li explains, "than live out there. It would feel like running away."

And that isn't who he is.

His eyes slide up to Lan An's face. "...Besides," he murmurs, "you have a shackle of your own, don't you?"

Lan An's fingertips drift towards his forehead, self conscious.

Xiong Li's smile isn't bright at all now—but still, he can't seem to stop trying to pass it off as genuine.

“Take care of yourself, Lan An.”

But before he can completely turn away from him, his friend catches him by the wrist.

“…You’re going to get in trouble with your teachers if you don’t hurry,” he starts— until he feels his friend press something into his hand.

A book.

“What’s—?”

“It’s our birthday,” Lan An mutters, and Xiong Li understands.

It’s a gift.

“Don’t show it to anyone else.”

“…” The raven haired man waggles his eyebrows. “It’s like that, huh?”

Lan An doesn’t even acknowledge the teasing. “Promise me, Xiong Li.”

After a moment, the boy nods, watching Lan An’s face carefully. “…I promise,” he agrees.

The cultivator nods, seeming relieved. And with that, he lets him go.

He follows his cultivation masters—and they walk right through the open gates once more.

Xie Lian ponders.

A Temple in the Clouds

Chapter Summary

> This is a proud place. An ancient place. One of old, powerful blood.
>
> A city of science and cultivation. Where the streets once rang out with music, so sharp and clear, it would ring through the mountains and the valleys on the northern edge of the central plains.
>
> Two gods have ascended on this soil, and it's magic is strong, pulsing with a force. This city is not a prison. The lords of Daqing were not arrogant oppressors.
>
> These walls were built to protect the people. Xie Lian's people. And the people trapped within them now are their descendants.
>
> The God will not allow them to live as slaves any longer.

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

A few hours later, Xiong Li sits on the same window sill as always, this time with a new book held in front of him.

And this time, his eyes are impossibly wide, his expression frightened and pale. Could that...could it all really be tr—?

"Excuse me, young man?"

Xiong Li jumps, quickly stuffing the book into his sleeve as he looks up, "Huh?" But as soon as he sees who it is, he relaxes.

It's just the weaver—the blind one, no less.

"Could you help me with something?"

For once—he's a little reluctant, he was sort of in the middle of...

"..." Xiong Li sighs, slipping down from the windowsill. "Sure," he sighs, "What do you need?"

After all, he's not going to refuse to help a blind man. He's not that much of a brat. Xie Lian smiles gratefully. "It's been too long since I prayed," he explains.

"Could you bring me to the temple of Wen Jiao?"

Xiong Li is a little baffled by the request, but...

"Sure," he sighs, offering his arm. "It's not too far."

He's not the most experienced guide, but he's kind. Walking at a considerate pace, helping the god when he stumbles.

But when they reach the temple gates, Xie Lian begins to understand.

Before they even walk in the front doors, he knows exactly what is going on. What has been done.

"...You alright, Mr. Hua?" Xiong Li questions, eyeing the weaver's sudden change in expression.

"Oh," the weaver smiles, patting Xiong Li's arm. "Yes, yes...thank you."

He steps inside the gates, pressing one hand against a pillar as he walks by.

He's been here before—and this is no temple of Wen Jiao.

This is the Grand Temple of General Ming Guang, warden of the North.

Xie Lian recognizes the location. The size and shape of it, from when he came here as a boy.

He walks through the hall, listening—and hearing nothing but the sounds of chains clinking together.

"...Wen Jiao must be quite powerful, to have a temple of such size."

"I guess," Xiong Li mutters.

For someone who grew up in the temple, he doesn't sound particularly fond of him.

Xie Lian's footsteps echo as he walks, his fingertips reaching out to trail along the walls. Slowly, he arches an eyebrow.

"What are the suns for?"

They weren't here before, and Pei Ming has no association with them. Those must have been an addition.

"He's a sun god," the teenager explains.

Xie Lian tilts his chin back.

That's a lie.

There is only one god that has dared to lay claim to the sun, and that is the Emperor.

"...Tell me more about him," Xie Lian murmurs, running his fingertips over the engravings.

"Ah..." Xiong Li sighs, leaning back against one of the pillars. "He came to Daqing over one century ago, and freed us from the oppression of the cultivators of Xianle."

The god coughs.

"X...Xianle?" He mutters, thinking back on the sect that was here this morning. "I thought the cultivators here were under the Rain Master."

No one cultivates in Xie Lian's name, he's sure of that.

"What?" Xiong Li blinks. "I mean—the cultivators were descendants of Xianle."

That—that makes more sense.

"Most of the old families in the city could trace their roots all the way back to the old nobility," Xiong Li explains. "Daqing closed it's gates during the outbreak of Human Face disease, and the wars that followed."

Xie Lian remembers that.

It wasn't called Daqing back then, but he remembers that the great walled city of the North closed its gates, surviving the storms that followed.

There was thought of bringing his parents there for shelter, in the end, but...he never got the chance.

“The lords of Daqing were proud of their ancestors, their history—but to the rest of the world, they were oppressors.”

Xiong Li walks beside him now, head tilted back. Xie Lian can’t see it, but the teenager is glancing over the murals on the walls, depicting the story he tells.

“Wen Jiao arrived in the city, shining like a star in the central square—and he gave the lords of Daqing and their cultivators one chance,” Xiong Li stops in front of one mural, tilting his head back.

“They had three days to burn their temples to all other gods. To sing and feast in Wen Jiao’s name. If they did, he would give them wealth and power. If they did not, he would punish them.”

Burning temples?

That doesn’t sound like a god at all.

“But the Lords of Daqing were proud, and loyal to their gods—so they refused.” Xiong Li reaches out to touch the fading paints, worn from the decades.

You can almost see what was once underneath.

“Wen Jiao returned on the third day, and he shattered their Golden Cores.”

The mural depicts as much. A god, casting down the rulers of a once proud city.

“He cast them out, and the descendants of Xianle that remain…” Xiong Li presses a hand to his throat, wincing. “We all pay penance for the disrespect. And the crimes of our ancestors.”

“Xiong Li.”

The teenager starts at how different the Weaver sounds now, how serious his voice is. “…Yes?”

The white robed young man stands before the divine statue of Wen Jiao, his arms crossed. “Thank you for your help—you should go now.”

Xiong Li stares, baffled.

“Don’t you need—?”

“I can make it home just fine,” Xie Lian reassures him, “but it’s late. You should go.”

“...Alright,” the boy agrees cautiously, making to leave, when the weaver adds—

“And Xiong Li?”

He looks back once more.

“Don’t come back here. Not if you can help it.”

The teenager sends him an odd look, but shrugs, mumbling an acknowledgement before he disappears through the temple doors.

Humans don’t belong in this place.

Xie Lian glances around.

Even under the shackle, it feels darker than normal. This place is full of resentful energy.

Toxic death chi, so rotten, it’s difficult for the Crown Prince of Xianle to breathe.

The incense does little to cover it. Like planting flowers to cover the stench of a rotting corpse.

This is no longer a functioning temple.

And Wen Jiao is no god.

Xie Lian knows what he is.

If he had his spiritual powers, he could sweep the issue away in an instant. Maybe if he even had two cursed shackles, instead of three—he could do more. Now, Xie Lian knows that he cannot deal with this matter single-handedly, but... He knows someone who might.

He figured out very quickly that no one is allowed to leave through the gates of Daqing. The shackles on the citizens stop them. The soldiers remain for the pay.

Xie Lian was turned away gently each time he approached the gates, because no one saw a blind tradesman as a threat.

No one knows he’s of Xianle blood. And no one has seen reason to place a shackle on him before.

Now, in the dark, stillness of the night, he darts across rooftops, changed into midnight blue robes for the purposes of stealth.

Approaching the great walls of Daqing.

They're a wonder of the modern world. The tallest walls of their kind, reaching over one hundred meters at their highest point.

The task of building them was so daunting, the engineer behind it ascended as a civil god among the completion of their construction.

Xie Lian can't see them, but he remembers how imposing they looked, when he was just a boy. The white marble and sandstone blocks rising so high into the sky.

He even remembers the sign over the city gate, as tall as three men standing on one another's shoulders.

And he can feel the shadow of those walls now, upon his approach. "Ruoye!" He whispers, leaping from the spire of a nearby tower.

Upon his call, the silk band stretches out, shooting up to the very top of the walls, latching on, pulling it's master up.

Xie Lian stands at the apex for a moment, looking around. "...Take me to the nearest temple," he murmurs.

Immediately, the spiritual device obeys, helping him down to the ground on the other side.

The minute Xie Lian's feet touch the earth, it comes rushing back. Daqing isn't the name of this place.

He turns around, knowing, even if he can't see it, that the sign above the city gates is only a few hundred yards to the east.

He knows now what that sign says.

This is a proud place. An ancient place. One of old, powerful blood.

A city of science and cultivation. Where the streets once rang out with music, so sharp and clear, it would ring through the mountains and the valleys on the northern edge of the central plains.

Two gods have ascended on this soil, and it's magic is strong, pulsing with a force. This city is not a prison. The lords of Daqing were not arrogant oppressors.

These walls were built to protect the people. Xie Lian's people. And the people trapped within them now are their descendants.

The God will not allow them to live as slaves any longer.

Ruoye leads him north, up the side of a large, steep mountain, rising high into the clouds. He stumbles several times, scraping his hands and knees on the rocks, but his spiritual tool always stops him before he falls too far.

The air is slightly bitter from the cold—but clean.

The higher he climbs, the more it feels like he's rising through a layer of mist—Xie Lian feels grass underneath his feet once more as he reaches the plateaus near the summit.

Hears the sound of wind passing through the leaves, and nearby waterfalls. This is a peaceful place.

The spiritual energy here is powerful as well—and clear. Likely more than enough to support a sect of strong cultivators. Xie Lian suspects it could last for millennia to come.

Finally, he approaches a gate, where he is stopped by a guard. "Do you have an entrance permit?"

Xie Lian tilts his head, looking around. "...A what?"

"To enter the Cloud Recesses, you must either be a disciple in the local sect, or you must have an entrance permit." The Guard explains. "Do you meet one of those requirements?"

Xie Lian rubs his chin. "...I suppose not."

The guard stands at a stiff posture. "Then you may not enter."

Xie Lian thinks that over. "...Can I appeal that decision with someone?"

"The sect leader," the guard replies. "But he will not rise for another few hours."

"Ah, I understand..." Xie Lian sighs.

After a moment, he drops to the ground, folding his arms around himself in a meditation stance. “I’ll wait.”

The guard watches him sit like that for some time, impressed by his discipline. “...Are you a cultivator, Mr...?”

“Hua Lian,” the blind Taoist replies. “And I used to be.”

“...Have you come here to study?”

Xie Lian smiles faintly. “Oh, no—just to pray.”

The guard seems to approve of that answer.

After quite some time, the prince dozes.

When he awakens again, there’s something soft in his lap. Fluffy, even.

A...rabbit.

And with it, a permit.

Xie Lian smiles faintly, scratching the creature behind the air.

Such a precious little thing.

The temple to the Rain Master is not particularly large or ostentatious, as per the Rain Master’s own wishes. Xie Lian remembers that much.

But when he stands before the altar... There’s nothing.

Xie Lian frowns, trying to find some sort of spiritual connection. He knows that the shackle around his neck, the one sealing his spiritual power—it stops him from being able to collect spiritual energy effectively. He can’t use a communication array anymore.

Not without help, anyway—of which he has none. But that’s never stoped him from praying before.

Seven Centuries ago, he prayed to Mu Qing. Briefly, but he felt the connection there. Even when he’s prayed to Jun Wu—he knew the Emperor could likely hear him.

But now? Nothing.

Xie Lian tries calling out to Jun Wu, next—and still, he receives no reply. The fact that he doesn't answer isn't surprising, it's the fact that Xie Lian feels no spiritual connection at all.

Hesitantly, he tries praying to Feng Xin next. It's…awkward, but it's not about him.

Still, he hears nothing.

With even more hesitation now, he tries Mu Qing. The only one who he knows for a fact could hear him, back then…

Silence.

Slowly, the god rises to his feet, watching his incense stick burn to ash, turning to one of the sect disciples.

"Is your sect leader nearby?" Xie Lian questions softly, rubbing at his eyes. They ache, now—but he couldn't tell you why.

"Ah…" The two disciples look at one another. "He's meeting with the other sect elders right now—"

"Perfect," Xie Lian murmurs, walking past them.

"Sir!" One of them cries, following after him. "Wait—!"

"No need to show me the way," Xie Lian smiles pleasantly. "I can hear them."

They're over a hundred meters away in one of the main buildings, but he can hear a meeting going on.

The disciples find it ludicrous that their fellow Taoist could possibly hear the elders from that far away, but they follow after him.

For a blind man, he walks…surprisingly fast. "You can't just barge in unannounced!"

"It's forbidden!"

"And I am deeply sorry for that."

Xie Lian bows his head respectfully. "But this is a crisis."

The two young disciples look to one another again, baffled.

A…crisis?

For the first time in months, Xie Lian hears music. Actual music. The notes drift out over the air, soft, soothing…

It sounds like a guqin.

The player must be quite skilled. Xie Lian doesn't think he's ever heard someone play so elegantly.

In a matter of moments, he's bursting through the doors to the meeting hall, and the music stops—punctuated by the gasps of several elders.

"This is a private meeting—!"

The man who stands before them, his hair unadorned, pulled into a simple bun on top of his head, wearing deep blue robes, bows sharply—clasping his hands in front of him.

"Apologies, esteemed masters, but you are all in grave danger." Silence falls across the room.

From the head of the table—a silver haired Cultivator speaks, and from the way people hush at the sound of his voice, Xie Lian can assume he's their leader. "What are you talking about, young man?"

"…I'm sure you're all aware of the curse that is laid upon the city."

When no one denies it, Xie Lian nods, taking that as a point to continue, "How long has it been since you received any communication from the heavens?"

The elders look at one another, baffled.

"…Yushi Huang is not known for being communicative," The Sect Leader murmurs.

"Not hearing from the Rain Master for a stretch of time is not something to be concerned with."

"But have you heard from ANY of the other gods?" Xie Lian presses urgently. When none of the cultivators reply, the prince shakes his head. "This entire region has been blocked."

Which would explain why General Ming Guang hasn't realized what's become of one of his temples. Nothing here is getting in or out, spiritually speaking.

“We are well aware of the curse you’re referring to,” the Sect Leader rises to his feat. “But it’s limited to the city walls.”

“No,” Xie Lian shakes his head vehemently. “That might have been the case in the beginning, but it’s grown with power, and it will continue to swell until it’s something you’re incapable of stopping.”

It’s bizarre, listening to a young man speak with an air of such authority.

“Young sir,” one of the other elders speaks up, not unkindly. “Your intentions are clearly good, but if the curse is meant to grow beyond the city walls, there is little we can do.”

The prince turns his head in the direction of the old man’s voice, frowning. “What do you mean?”

Now, the sect leader speaks again, stroking his beard as he looks Xie Lian over, “Because the curse that has been leveled on the city was cast by a God. We are sympathetic neighbors, but we cannot disobey an edict of heaven.”

“An...” Xie Lian’s jaw goes slack. “An edict?!”

“I understand it must be upsetting, if you have witnessed the suffering that goes on there—but we are mortals. It’s not our place to interfere with the will of Heaven.” The leader of the Cloud Recesses frowns, examining Xie Lian’s aura. “A fellow cultivator should know that.”

Xie Lian clenches his teeth, frustrated by the madness of it all.

Gods, being told it’s not their place to intervene among mortals. Mortals, being told it is not their place to intercede the will of heaven.

And each time, the people suffer more for their inaction.

For the first time in so long—Xie Lian really can’t remember the last time he spoke so loudly, with such firmness—

“Wen Jiao is no God!”

Shock falls over the room, and Xie Lian squeezes his fists tightly.

“Have you been inside the temple?”

“...No,” one of the cultivators admits. “Part of the conditions of us being allowed inside the city is that we may not enter the Grand

Temple."

"It's Ming Guang's, not Wen Jiao's."

That seems to give the men pause.

"And it's not being used as a temple at all!"

Xie Lian shivers slightly, disgusted by the grotesque nature of the truth. "It's being used as an array to feed off of the people of the city. It's been running for over a century now, and it's gotten strong enough to even cut communication between the Cloud Recesses and Heaven!"

"An array?" The Sect Leader sputters, shaking his head in disbelief. "I've never heard of an array being used to such ends—"

"It's ancient, high level magic," Xie Lian explains desperately, "beyond anything people of your generation have ever seen."

"People of our generation?!"

One of the elders sputters. "Lad—there isn't a man here who isn't old enough to be your father!"

There isn't a man in this room that is old enough to be Xie Lian's great great great great grandson, but no matter.

"What you're dealing with isn't a god—it's a demon."

Xie Lian slams his fist on the table before him for emphasis, making the men gathered jump with surprise at his passion. "A powerful, intelligent demon. It's probably capable of overpowering heavenly officials at this point—"

"A demon could not take an entire city hostage."

The Sect Leader shakes his head. "And if it did, that would be a matter for the heavens to intercede with."

Xie Lian bites back the urge to lash out in his frustration. "The Heavens don't know this is happening!"

"If you're correct, and it's capable of overpowering gods..."

Another elder speaks up with a frown, "What would we be able to do about it?"

After all, what are they, compared to gods?

Xie Lian doesn't have an immediate answer to that, and the Sect Leader opts for a compromise.

"We already have several disciples that will be traveling to Lotus Pier next month to study under the Jiangs for the summer. While they're there, they can pray in the local temple of Ming Guang for assistance."

That...won't work.

"You don't understand," Xie Lian shakes his head. "This is going to require a massive response from the heavens. Multiple martial gods might be required. That requires a lot more than the prayers of a few disciples, and it could take years to even get a response—!"

"The curse has been on the city for over a century now," another elder frowns. "A few years or so would hardly make a difference. And how do you know so much about the logistical decisions of the heavens, hmm?"

"The city doesn't have years!" Xie Lian finally snaps.

"They might have one more year, but after that—everyone inside those walls is going to die!"

He hears one person stir. Not seated at the table, with the others—but on a cushion near the corner.

The one who was playing the Guqin before. "What would you suggest?"

"...Send all of your disciples to Lotus Cove, now. Have them pray day and night until they receive a response. Or go back to the city with me now, and we can—"

"All of our disciples?" The Sect Leader shakes his head. "Even if I believed you—that isn't possible."

"Do you have any idea what it means, for a city like that to be cut off from the entire region?"

Xie Lian falls silent, because... He can imagine.

"Our sect is responsible for the education, public safety, and law enforcement of every village from here to Yunmeng."

The sect leader shakes his head. “If I send all of my disciples to Lotus Cove, there’s no one to enforce law and order in the region, and it falls into chaos. If we go to the city now, and it turns out you’re right —just how many of us would die, you think?”

In truth? Many.

“I am sorry for the plight of the people who live there,” the old man mutters—and Xie Lian—he believes them.

He sounds truly agonized.

“But we have already stretched ourselves thin trying to help them, and we cannot dispense any more resources than we already have.”

The Sect Leader sits back down. “Maybe I would take that risk if I knew for sure that you were correct—but I cannot risk the wellbeing of the North on the hunch of a man who…heavens, you can’t be that much older than Lan An.”

Xie Lian pauses, realizing— That’s the guqin player.

For a moment—he almost falls back into what he might have done, when he was a younger god.

Feeling frustrated and sorry for himself. Focusing on how helpless he was. Sightless, without his spiritual powers, or even a little bit of luck…

But that wasn’t why he asked Jun Wu to give him these shackles.

Xie Lian did it to punish himself, yes. Because he deserves to be alone, and he deserves to feel this pain that he’s been living with.

But Xie Lian also did it because he didn’t want to make the same mistakes again

He didn’t want there to be another fall of Xianle. He didn’t want to fail someone again the way he did Hong-er. Didn’t want to take someone like Wu Ming for granted ever again.

Xie Lian took these shackles, because he wanted to learn.

And he did learn something, in all of this.

He learned that he is human. That he is flawed, and he can fail.

Those are lessons that you don't get to learn, when you're raised as a prince.

But he also learned something else:

That you can have all of the power in the world, and still be helpless.

You can also be powerless, and change people's lives in ways that you never imagined. But Xie Lian knows now, in this moment—he isn't helpless.

Even without sight, spiritual power, or luck.

He's still resourceful. Intelligent. And, if nothing else, brave.

That's very little compared to the self esteem that he once had. It's more of a practical evaluation of what little strengths he has left, but still.

'I'd rather die trying to help people, than live out there. It would feel like running away.'

Xiong Li is a boy who was born into chains. He's never known life without a shackle around his neck—and he can still say something that brave.

Xie Lian can't guarantee that he can save anyone.

But he can guarantee that he'll try.

And…he remembers something, from long ago.

"…Alright, fine." Xie Lian mutters. "Can one of you tell me how you've been evading the curse inside the city walls then? Tell me that, and I'll go."

The elders seem hesitant, and a quiet, familiar voice speaks up. "…It's me."

Lan An.

"I have a way of dealing with it."

Xie Lian whips his head in the boy's direction, "How?"

He plucks out a few notes on his guqin, in a calming melody—but one that feels rather purposeful.

And, to Xie Lian's fascination—there's spiritual power in the sound itself. It has great potential.

Cultivation has been rather stagnant, in the last thousand years or so. The methods practiced today are the same as what was being taught when Xie Lian's Guoshi was a student himself.

This crude attempt at using Spiritual Power through an instrument... It's highly advanced.

As a matter of fact—Xie Lian has never witnessed a mortal attempt something like that, even on this crude level.

"It's called the song of Clarity," Lan An explains. "It can ward curses off from the mind. I've been using it to treat patients with Qi Deviation, but...

It works on the curse in the city, clearly.

Xie Lian nods. Having heard it once—he can repeat it later, if he needs to. He'll just need to find a way to get his hands on a little spiritual energy, but...

He has a plan forming in his mind. He knows what to do.

He bows once more, this time to Lan An, "Thank you," he murmurs—straightening up once more, walking towards the exit.

"..." The Sect Leader watches him with growing concern. "What do you mean to do?" Xie Lian stops with one hand on the door, turning his chin back towards them.

It startles the men, to witness the calm determination on the young man's face.

Like someone who has weathered a thousand storms.

"I'm going back to Gusu," he explains firmly. "And I'm going to do something for those people."

Because even if he fails, it's more than nothing.

He strides out of the room, knowing that the elders won't follow him.

But one person does, and that's just fine.

Xie Lian smiles, bowing his head, thinking on what he remembered earlier:

He only needs one person to believe him. Just one.

When he's far enough away, he stops.

When he does, he hears Lan An's voice, quiet—but burning with worry.

"...Do you really think everyone in the city is going to die?"

Xie Lian nods, not turning around. "If nothing is done, that's a certainty."

"...How can you be sure?" Lan An questions. "How do you know so much?"

He watches the back of the blind man's head, contemplating many possible answers, but...

The last thing he's expecting is for the Blind Weaver of Gusu to turn around, opening his eyes—and when he does, Lan An gasps at the sight of the glowing pattern in his irises, stumbling back.

Xie Lian doesn't seem offended by the response. If anything, he seems to have expected it.

"Do you know what this is?"

The young cultivator shakes his head, heart pounding in his chest.

"...No," he admits. "I don't."

But he can see that it's not of mortal make.

"It's called a cursed shackle," Xie Lian explains, "Do you know what those are for?"

Lan An swallows dryly, gripping the trunk of a nearby tree for support. "...Yes," he whispers.

To seal the powers of a God.

Which means—he really does know what he's talking about, but also...

"...I'm mortal," he murmurs. "I'm not allowed to see..."

Xie Lian closes his eyes once more. "There are always exceptions," he murmurs. "I couldn't show the elders or your sect leader. Do you know why I showed you?"

Lan An shakes his head.

"Your cultivation level is high enough."

That's what most people don't understand, when it comes to ascensions.

There are many cultivators who are far more powerful than Heavenly Officials who never ascend themselves.

Ascension is a matter of fate and circumstance.

For potential Martial Deities, once they reach that level—they could ascend at any time. After that, it's all about fate, and facing a heavenly calamity.

At that point, the only difference between the Cultivator and Godhood is immortality itself.

In nearly eight centuries, Xie Lian has never encountered a mortal that was powerful enough to reveal himself to willingly.

Not even Jiang Chi, who simply put the pieces together on his own—just like Hong-er did.

And Lan An is a youth of only seventeen years old.

A genius. Probably only surpassed as a cultivator by Xie Lian himself. "...You followed me because you want to save Xiong Li," The god murmurs.

Lan An turns slightly pink, but he doesn't need to reply. It's not a question, it's a statement of fact.

He simply nods.

"I have a plan," Xie Lian admits. "But it won't work without a cultivator helping me."

Lan An doesn't hesitate.

"What do I need to do?"

“...Train.” The god replies, turning back around. “For the next three hundred and sixty four days, do nothing but cultivate. Every moment.”

He continues making his way towards the edges of the Cloud Recesses, and Lan An follows, confused. “That’s...what do you want me to do after that? Where will you go?”

“I’m going back to the city. In one year—come back to Gusu.” Xie Lian replies, hair swaying in the breeze.

“When you arrive, you’ll know what to do.”

The cultivator watches him go, his jaw slightly slack—and it’s only after Xie Lian leaves the cloud recesses that he realizes—

Lan An never asked the god his name.

Xie Lian left Gusu under the cover of night—and that’s how he returns.

For a moment, he stands on top of the city walls, wishing he could see the sight once more.

His eyes ache once more underneath the shackle, and he presses his palm to the marble under his feet.

Gusu is an ancient, powerful city.

Many have called it the forge of the Gods.

Two immortals have ascended on this soil, defying the old myth that lightning never strikes the same spot twice.

The most powerful cultivators in the last millennia have all paid homage to the spiritual lands of Gusu at least once.

Even Xie Lian is no exception.

The people of Gusu are strong, proud, filled with the strength of their shared history.

And they deserve to be free.

Xie Lian reaches into his robes, pulling on the silver chain that dangles there, lifting a ring made from diamond and ruby to his lips.

The sun cracks over the horizon, and the first rays of light begin to shine over Gusu. "...Good morning, Hong'er," the god whispers, taking in the breeze on his face.

He's said that two hundred and fifty five thousand, six hundred and thirty five times now.

"Today is going to be a good day."

With that, he jumps from the edge of the city walls, Ruoye aiding him in his descent towards the ground.

When the market opens that day, he's back in his stall, working on his loom once more. As if nothing happened.

But something is different now.

Now, the children of Daqing flood to the cultivator's stall each and every morning, huddling around, listening to him as he speaks.

From a windowsill on the far side of the market square, lounging like an intrigued cat, Xiong Li observes.

The Weaver works at his loom, and the children watches as he tells stories—not only with his words, but with the threads he works between his fingers.

Stories of gods, princes, and monsters. Bridegrooms, demons, and golden palaces.

Xie Lian wasn't the best at weaving when he started. Honestly, his first attempts were pretty pathetic. But now?

The tapestries he builds beneath his fingertips look like they belong in the halls of royalty, not some street stall.

Impossibly intricate, telling stories that turn back through the decades. Most tapestries like this tell myths or legends, but in this case—

The stories that the Blind Weaver of Gusu tells are of humans.

Of orphans who fall from the sky. Servants who dream of more. Guards that are loyal to the very end—and beyond.

Of rogue cultivators with flirtatious smiles and kind hearts. Of beauty pageants gone...more than a little awry.

Circus disasters and pastoral debacles.

Of Princes who slay their masters, and little girls who dream of family.

And with each story, his little audience grows. Until every child in Daqing sits before his stall, eagerly watching the weaver, Hua Lian, work his craft.

Even the boy in the windowsill abandons any pretense of reading, drifting to the edges of the crowd, his eyes...

Suspicious.

And then, when the white robed youth has so many eyes on him, he does something that makes Xiong Li's eyes widen with shock.

He begins to sing.

His voice is gentle, but strong—maneuvering between higher and lower octaves with ease, and...

It's beautiful, ringing far and wide.

In a language that no one speaks—but still feels vaguely familiar.

The children crowd in closer, eyes enraptured, but Xiong Li—

He sees the city guards turn their heads, and his heart drops.

"Stop..." He mutters, trying to push through the crowd. "Someone make him stop!"

He's been beaten countless times for singing in the streets, almost always in order to save someone else, but...

Xiong Li has been through worse. He can take it. His body might not be as big as Lan An's, but he's durable. He—He isn't a blind man, and —

They might kill Mr. Hua.

The children don't even look at him, too caught up in the weaver's song, and Xiong Li knows—he won't have time to stop him.

His only option now seems to be to charge one of the guards to distract them, but... When he glances back at the weaver, Hua Lian pauses to take a breath.

And when he does, right in Xiong Li's direction, he mouths the words:

Trust me.

That makes the young man stop, his brow creased with confusion.

...What?

Trust—?

One of the guards shoves several children over, pushing his way to the front of the crowd. "What's going on here?!"

The weaver stops in his song, dropping his hands from his loom as he turns back to the guards, raising an eyebrow. "I was just telling the children here some stories," he offers pleasantly. "Would you care to listen?"

"...The god Wen Jiao has forbidden music," The guard hisses.

Xie Lian smiles, tilting his head. "Really? That sounds a little silly. Like something out of a children's story."

He's not exactly good at provoking people. Rudeness doesn't come naturally to him. But whenever he needs to—he just tries to imagine what Hong'er would say.

"You—!" Another guard sputters, balling his hands up into fists, but—
No one is eager to beat a blind man. Not in the middle of the square.

Xie Lian's smile turns a little biting. "Is he going to kidnap a princess next? Or plunge the land into an eternal winter?"

The guards glance at one another, stunned. Even the children don't know how to react.

In the back of the crowd, Xiong Li sulks, irritated that he didn't come up with that first.

"Oh, don't tell me," The weaver leans forward, "you break his spells with true love's first kiss?"

CRACK!

That earns a slap across Xie Lian's face, making his head whip to the side.

“Disrespect to his eminence will not be tolerated! And—” The guard glares, “What was that language, anyway?”

Xie Lian smiles, palm pressed against his cheek. “Xianle.”

The guards stop, looking at one another with confusion. “What?”

Xie Lian lifts his chin, “It’s the language of the Kingdom of Xianle. Don’t you know it?” There’s silence, and his smile turns into a smirk. “I thought your god was an expert.”

Someone hoists him up by the collar.

Xiong Li watches with confusion, realizing—He’s…getting arrested on purpose? Why?

“How would you know the language of Xianle?!”

Xie Lian’s smirk doesn’t fade, even as his feet dangle off the ground. He’s never been a very good liar.

That’s why he sticks close to the truth.

“I’m the last living descendant of the Royal House of Xie.”

Several gasps echo around him, their hands covering their mouths with shock. “Starting with the founder, Xie Bolin,” he explains, “and ending with me.”

Xie Lian.

“…Well then,” the guard sneers, dragging him away. “Allow us to give you the royal welcome!”

Xie Lian doesn’t bother with putting up a fight, knowing exactly where he’s being taken.

The temple of ‘Wen Jiao.’

The ‘Sun God,’ and ‘Guardian Spirit of Daqing.’

Even now, the aura of this place is still suffocating.

Xie Lian doesn’t cry out when they cast him down on the temple steps with a rough shove.

“Your eminence!” One of the guards cries out, “We have another heretic!" "One who says he's a descendant of Xianle! From the Royal House of Xie!" At first, there's silence.

Xie Lian pushes himself to sit up, waiting.

After all—now that he's given them that information, he doubts that the demon will be able to resist.

"...Get on your knees," one of the guards snaps, "you're sitting before the altar of the sun god."

Xie Lian sits back, thinking.

"Hmm...no," he shakes his head. "I won't be doing that."

The guards stop, glaring at him with annoyance.

One even goes as far as to punch the weaver in the back of the head—hard enough to make him bleed from the temple.

"You dare disrespect him in his own temple?!"

The young man might be bleeding—but he shows no signs of feeling any pain. "This isn't his temple."

The aura of the room suddenly thickens, and Xie Lian wrinkles his nose as one guard levels a kick at his ribs.

"If you want to live, you'll pray for forgiveness!"

The prince sits up once more—and still, if he feels the pain, he does not show it. But when he smiles, there's blood on the whites of his teeth.

Somehow, even sightless—he knows to turn his head toward the altar.

"I only pray to gods." He replies dryly, "So, I cannot."

Another god cries out with outrage, going to kick him again, but...

Now, a voice calls out—hissing from behind the altar.

"Leave us."

The guards stumble backwards at the sound of their deity's voice, their faces suddenly going pale.

Xie Lian, however, seems unbothered.

“That’s probably for the best,” the weaver agrees, “it would be a little awkward otherwise.”

One guard looks like he wants to kick him again, just for that, but…

After a pointed hiss from the altar, the group flees out of the temple gates. Xie Lian sits back and waits.

After a moment, he hears heavy footsteps walking towards him, and the stench of Death Chi grows stronger in the air—so thick, Xie Lian has to fight back the urge to gag.

“That was an awfully big scene you made, just to die,” the creature hisses. Xie Lian smiles.

“I won’t die.”

He’s pretty familiar with just how much his body can withstand, by now. There’s no demon that can kill him.

“Brave little mortal.” the creature hisses, stalking closer.

Xie Lian can’t see how pale his skin is, or the pointed tips of his ears. Eyes blood red, fangs razor sharp.

Even so, he doesn’t seem particularly impressed.

Still. The only other person in this room is a demon—and as such, Xie Lian has no qualms about opening his eyes, making the creature scramble back with surprise upon seeing the shackle.

“There are no mortals here.”

Wen Jiao falls silent, but Xie Lian can hear his heavy, shocked breathing.

“Did they tell you about the stories I was telling, out in the square? I’m sure they must have,” the god muses, twirling a lock of hair around his finger. “There was one I didn’t tell them.”

See—when he was in the Cloud Recesses, he did take a quick peek inside their libraries.

The sect wasn’t good for much, really—but they’re excellent record keepers. And Xie Lian’s fingertips are sensitive enough to read characters just from feeling the ink on a page.

The prince can hear it, the way the demon slowly paces around him—like it hasn't quite decided what to do with him yet—and he smiles.

"Once upon a time, in the City of Gusu, there was a young cultivator by the name of Wen Jiao."

His pacing stops, and Xie Lian smiles.

"He had one dream—to become a god. He went to every single sect in the center of the Cultivation world, but no one would take him…" the prince trails off, leaning his elbow against one of the temple steps. "Because he was cruel, and prone to violence."

There's an angry hiss.

"In his desperation, he climbed to the top of the city walls during the mid autumn festival, hoping to release his Lanterns from the greatest height—but in his eagerness, he fell to his death."

Xie Lian shakes his head, clicking his nails against the marbles. "Very sad."

"It's a shame you'll never get the chance to tell the story to anyone else," The Demon snarls, eyeing the cursed shackle in the crown prince's eyes, his own gaze narrowed. "Even if I can't kill you—I can still imprison you here."

"True," Xie Lian agrees. "But that's fine."

The demon stares at him with uncertainty, and he explains—

"I've been in your city for a little while now. Have I interfered with you until now?"

Xie Lian has never been the best liar.

"…You haven't."

But to a creature like this? He can do it without remorse.

"Why should I care if you want to impersonate a god?" Xie Lian shrugs, "Look what the heavens did to me."

After all—compared to what he used to be, he knows he must make a miserable sight.

Wen Jiao looks him over, and…he doesn't seem to disagree. "Then why did you come here?"

He sits up, stretching his arms over his head. "Because—I know why you're doing this," he muses, glancing around at the heavy state of dark energy all around him. "At first—I thought it was an array built to inflict a curse, but then I realized…"

The god raises his chin.

"You're cultivating, aren't you?"

Well, he's trying to. In a sick, barbaric way. That much is obvious.

"Still trying to ascend."

Wen Jiao glares, a forked tongue flicking out between his lips, tasting the air with annoyance.

"But it's not a matter of spiritual power, is it?"

That lock of hair is still twirling around his finger, just as nimbly as the threads he pulls all day long.

"If it was, you would have ascended many times over," Xie Lian shrugs. "But you haven't."

"What's it to you?!" The demon snarls, eyes flaring.

"I was cast out, remember?" The prince points out, stretching his legs. "Nothing would please me more than to spit in their eyes by helping a fellow reject ascend. I've done it twice, you know." Xie Lian adds airily. "I'm a bit of an expert."

Wen Jiao pauses, and…

He's listening.

"What can you do that I haven't already tried?"

"You just need a Heavenly Calamity," Xie Lian murmurs.

He sounds especially believable now, because he's sticking close to the truth, only occasionally diverging.

"And I know how to trigger one."

“...How?”

The god snorts, standing up. “I’m not telling you. Then you wouldn’t need me anymore.”

Wen Jiao slithers around him, wrapping himself around a nearby pillar with a sulking sigh.

They do have aligned interests, and...

He doesn’t have anything to lose by agreeing. “...What would it require?”

“Timing is key,” Xie Lian explains. “The next auspicious moment will come in eleven months. And when it does, I will help you call the calamity. Until then—I’ll work on your tapestry.”

Wen Jiao pauses, nails digging into the side of the pillar. “Tapestry?”

“Oh, yes.” The god nods, blinking owlishly. “All of the gods in Heaven—my tapestries hang in their palaces, telling the stories of their lives and ascensions. Imagine how jealous they’ll be, when you arrive with yours already made.”

Wen Jiao likes the sound of that.

“I’ll need a new loom, and proper threads,” Xie Lian stops in the middle of the hall, tapping his chin. “Oh—and an assistant.” He tilts his head back over his shoulder, looking in the demon’s direction—as if he could see him. “Think you can manage that?”

Wen Jiao huffs.

“Obviously.”

He doesn’t see the smile on Xie Lian’s face, when he turns around.

“Perfect. We’re in business, then.”

It feels a little dirty, playing tricks—but...

When Xie Lian feels the evil all around him, so sharp, it makes his eyes sting—he doesn’t feel so guilty.

He’s transported to the palace of Gusu—still a fine, elegant building. Walls of white jade, floors tiled with hues of green and blue.

Meant to mimic the pattern of the mighty river that flows outside the city walls.

As a city state, Daqing technically has a king, not a lord.

In this case, that would be Wen Sicong, Wen Jiao's son and living heir.

A greedy, selfish man who acts as little more than a figurehead—drinking himself into a stupor, locking himself away with his swords and his courtesans.

The prince of Daqing is his grandson.

Wen Mao is a boy of just seven years old—and shy by nature.

He watches Xie Lian from a distance—curious, but clearly too nervous to ever actually approach.

And it saddens the god—because clearly, the boy has very little to do with the sins of his father and grandfather.

But the crimes of Wen Jiao are so severe, so profound—without a doubt, disaster will come to their bloodline, sooner or later.

Maybe Wen Mao will be lucky and escape karma's wrath—but somewhere down the line, his descendants will suffer.

The god sets up his work space in a set of chambers on the eastern end of the palace, with so many unoccupied rooms, he ends up with an entire wing to himself.

Which suits his plans just fine.

But in one regard, his accommodations fall short. "Amateur! UNACCEPTABLE!"

A bronze chalice smacks against the wall, making the assistant flinch and tremble. "I- I'm sorry sir, I'll get it right next time!"

"You think I'll give you another chance?!" The weaver snarls.

(He feels horrible. Absolutely awful. He's probably going to cry about this later.)

He rounds on one of the guards, crossing his arms. "I've had enough of this—just go and fetch my old assistant for me. Everyone you've brought so far has been an absolute disgrace!"

The young man hesitates, looking back and forth between Mr. Hua, and the newest assistant.

But before he can say much more—the weaver grabs him by the front of his shirt, yanking him in with surprising strength.

“Did I stutter?”

(Forget crying a little later, he’s going to cry himself to sleep.)

“...What’s the name of your assistant, Mr. Hua?”

The hostile act drops a little too quickly—but Xie Lian was already overstretching his negligible acting skills, trying to pull that one off.

“You’re actually already familiar with him.”

After sundown, a platoon of guards returns with Xie Lian’s official “assistant.”

And the teenager is thrashing and howling like a cat that’s about to be given a bath.

“I said let GO of me! I didn’t even DO anything this time!” The teenager has one soldier gripping him under each arm, practically carrying him along as his feet flail and kick. “HEY!”

He might be thin—nearly everyone in the city is—but he’s strong enough so that both of the soldiers dragging him seem slightly belabored.

“You know what, Captain Chen?!” The teenager cries, glaring at the leader of the squad. “I always KNEW you were a creepy old PERVERT!”

The leader of the squadron stops ahead of them, turning his head back to glare at the young man.

“Hah?!”

“You always enjoyed whipping me a LITTLE too much, I’m just saying!” The teenager glares, dark hair whipping around his face as he struggles. “And look at you now!”

“You aren’t even trying to make up a reason to drag me down here anymore! Well, I’ll have you know—I’m saving myself for marriage! Or the first man that asks—but definitely not you!”

"You know, we really didn't bring you here for a whipping, but you make it tempting." "See what I mean?! You—!"

The door to their destination opens, and Xiong Li is thrown inside without much preamble, tumbling across the floor until he lands at Xie Lian's feet.

"Mr. Hua, your assistant has arrived."

The young man lifts his head up, slightly disoriented.

On one hand—he's relieved to see that the Weaver isn't dead. But on the other—he's never been quite so confused in his young life.

Xie Lian smiles politely at the guards, bowing his head. "Thank you, Captain Chen. That will be all for today."

When the doors shut, Xiong Li sits up, rubbing the back of his head, glancing around the room.

By far, this is the fanciest place he's ever been in—in his entire life.

There's an actual door, for starters. And multiple bedrooms. Art hanging on the walls.

In the center of the room sits a massive loom, with threads of every color hanging in spools along the walls, waiting to be selected.

"So I'm...your weaving assistant now?" Xiong Li questions

Xie Lian scratches the side of his head, having the sense to look a little sheepish.

"I'm sorry about the way they treated you," he mutters. "But I needed an excuse to have you brought here, and that made the most sense."

At first, Xiong Li waves him off, not particularly upset. "They always treat me like that, it's not your fault."

But then, he pauses.

"But...why did you need me? And why are you in the Wen's palace? And where have you been—?"

Xie Lian holds up a finger to stop him, and the boy falls silent, watching him intently.

"I wish I could make this easier," the god sighs. "But I'm about to put a lot on your shoulders."

Xiong Li's brow furrows. "...Like what?"

He hasn't bothered to stand up—not quite yet. Besides—he didn't take that fall quite as gracefully as he's pretending he did, and his shoulder is screaming with pain.

After a moment, Xie Lian kneels beside him.

In general, he's never been the most conventional person—but even for him, the idea of liberating an entire city from the grip of a powerful demon with no spiritual powers, and only the help of two teenagers...

It's requires a stretch of the imagination. Still, he has to try.

"I am going to give you a lot of information at once," Xie Lian explains slowly, flexing his fingertips. "And I'm not going to be able to explain how I know most of it."

Xiong Li frowns, because that isn't exactly comforting. Still—Xie Lian knows exactly what to say.

"But the next time you see Lan An," he murmurs, feeling the way Xiong Li immediately stiffens upon hearing that name, "He'll verify that everything I am about to tell you is true."

There are few things in this world that the boy has faith in—and Lan An is one of them.

He's the only person that has Xiong Li's unconditional trust. So, if he'll verify it, then...

"Why me?" He mumbles, still not understanding why Xie Lian sent for him, of all people.

In truth? Because he's the strongest mortal left within the gates of Gusu. But also...

"The day that those cultivators came," Xie Lian explains, "I heard you tell your friend that you would rather die helping people than run away. Did you mean that?"

The teenager stiffens, surprised that the weaver actually heard that, but...he nods. The god smiles, and he braces himself.

Xiong Li nearly jumps out of his skin when the weaver reaches for his throat, instinctively distrusting of being touched by a stranger, but—

Then, Xie Lian's fingers wrap around the iron shackle there, gripping tightly. "...what are you—?"

CRACK!

Xiong Li goes completely still, his eyes widening.

In Daqing, your first shackle is placed around your throat in infancy, before you ever leave your mother's arms.

They're replaced as you outgrow them, but—

His entire life, he's felt the weight of chains on his skin.

Now, for the first time—he watches as the iron of the shackle that once sat at the base of his throat fragment and crumble, falling to the floor in several different pieces.

At first, all he can do is sit there, staring blankly.

Xie Lian rarely reacts to pain anymore.

But this—this is more than just damage to his body.

To shatter cursed iron with no spiritual energy requires incredible strength—and it also leaves your own body vulnerable

Xie Lian's fingers are scorched to the bone—but it's his spirit that stings with agony.

He lets out a pained nose, clutching his limbs to his chest, biting back any other sound, and Xiong Li...

Just sits there, eyes impossibly wide, fingers wrapped around his throat—now, for the first time in his life, bare.

"You...how...how did you—?"

It takes Xie Lian a moment to speak, lips trembling. He isn't accustomed to actually feeing his pain anymore—so when something is severe enough for hm to feel it like this—

He really doesn't know whether to laugh or cry. "I...already told you," he rasps. "I can't explain."

Xiong Li still has his fingers clutched around his neck, trying to wrap his mind around what just happened, because—

In a century, no one in Daqing has ever had their shackle removed without Wen Jiao releasing it himself. Never.

And now…

He swallows dryly, shaking himself out of it.

“Are—are you alright?” He mutters, dropping his hands as he leans closer to Xie Lian, who is still clutching his hands to his chest like he’s been burned. “Your hands—”

“It’s fine,” Xie Lian mutters, shaking his head. “I’ll heal.”

He always does, after all—and while this isn’t pleasant, Xie Lian doubts recovering will take more than waiting overnight. He knew after touching Liao Yong’s shackle, when he first came to Gusu, that his body would protest touching it again.

He planned for this.

Xiong Li sits back, shivering. He feels—

He feels everything more sharply now. The cold against his skin, the aches in his body. How hungry and tired he is.

But his sight also feels sharpened, like the world is brought into greater focus. Even scents and sounds are heightened.

It’s like he’s spent his entire life living with something shrouding over him, muffling his senses—and now, for the first time—

Xiong Li’s hand drifts down pressing over his chest, his eyes welling up with tears. He’s free.

There’s warmth under his palm.

This unfamiliar sense of heat building in his chest, like a small crackling flame—and when he looks up at Xie Lian, his eyes wide, he whispers—

“Mr. Hua, what’s happening?”

“That…” Xie Lian closes his eyes, fingers still trembling, “That’s your golden core.”

Xiong Li tries to process that, eyebrows knitting together. “But…I don’t have…”

Xie Lian has to lean against the wall for the moment—sitting up without assistance is too difficult.

“Wen Jiao was an average cultivator at best when he died,” the gods mutters. “He doesn’t have the means to shatter a golden core.”

It’s something that the children who are spirited away to the Cloud Recesses already know, but—Xiong Li never had the chance to learn.

He takes deep, unsteady breaths, and it’s almost like…feeling alive for the first time.

It’s like there’s a fire in his chest, sparking brighter and faster with every breath he takes.

“Why…” He swallows dryly. “Why did you do that for me? And what…what do you mean about Wen Jiao being an average cultivator—?”

And this is where they get to the part with Xie Lian dumping information on the young man—all at once.

That Wen Jiao is not a god, but a demon.

That this city is known by the name of Gusu, not Daqing.

That the chains the citizens wear are not out of punishment at all.

The chains exist to allow Wen Jiao to feed off of their golden cores like a parasite— until, eventually, they die.

“Gusu…” Xiong Li repeats slowly, his expression pinched with thought. “That’s why…”

Xie Lian wipes a bead of sweat from his brow, brought on by the exhaustion of his body fighting to purge the cursed energy from the shackle. “Why what?”

The teenager reaches for the book that he has tucked into the waist of his pants, “Lan An…the last time he was here…”

The book he gave Xiong Li—it was another romance.

Lan An has always been aware of it being Xiong Li’s favorite genre, and while he typically doesn't enjoy stories like that—he'll bring one for Xiong Li once a year, and the boy will read it until the spine breaks from wear.

But this year was different.

Lan An never gave Xiong Li a book that he wasn't allow to show anyone else before.

And when Xiong Li read it, he didn't understand why it had to be a secret. It was just some fantasy, not even that romantic, written about a general and a princess.

It was interesting enough, but it ended with her slitting her own throat, and him ascending as a god—so he wasn't really that fond of the ending.

Still, he listened to Lan An's request—and he showed it to no one. Except now, he's realizing…that general…He ascended in Gusu.

Which means…not only is the weaver likely telling him the truth— It means that story likely isn't a fantasy at all.

"Gusu…is a real place," he repeats slowly. "We're in Gusu?"

Xie Lian nods, pulling his knees up against his chest. "One of the oldest cities in the world."

Xiong Li presses his hands to his temples, his eyes wide. "And…" he glances back up at Xie Lian, one question still unanswered, "Why did you choose me?"

The God sighs, focusing on taking even breaths to steady himself. "Two reasons: first, I needed someone capable."

Xie Lian can't collect Spiritual Power on his own—but now, without his shackle, Xiong Li can. And from what he's watching now, he can tell that even with no training, Xiong Li's golden core is strong. Rapidly sparking with power, like a star that has just sparked to life.

He's also clever, perceptive—with a durable body. The perfect combination for a cultivator.

"And…" Xie Lian sighs. "Most arrays—like the one Wen Jiao has in the grand temple —are sealed with blood. But Wen Jiao was already dead when he built it."

Xiong Li's brow furrows. Most of this is high level magic—going way above his head in terms of understanding, but he tries to keep up.

"Why does that matter?"

"His own blood couldn't have sealed that array," Xie Lian explains. "How much do you know about cultivation?"

"Pretty much nothing," the teenager admits.

"Most of the time, cultivators are born equal in terms of capability. There are those with natural talent, but golden cores are almost always the same at birth. It's how you train and develop your core that determines your strength."

It has nothing to do with who your family is, or what position you're born into.

For example—Mu Qing was the son of a woodworker and a house maid. and yet, his cultivation level will always be higher than that of someone like Lang Qianqiu, who was born in a royal bloodline.

Both are powerful, to be sure—but Mu Qing has a natural intelligence and skill, allowing him to reach a higher level.

While class divides matter in terms of social perceptions—they don't when it comes to the bare science of what cultivation actually is.

"But..." Xie Lian takes a deep breath, flexing his fingers—they hurt less now, which means his body is finally starting to recover. "The exception to that is blood magic."

"Like...the kind of magic sealing the array?"

"Yes," Xie Lian nods. "I don't think that Wen Jiao targeted the descendants of Xianle blood out of some sort of grudge."

In his conversations with the demon, he seemed apathetic on the subject of politics— and he's too young to have genuine reason to hate the people of Xianle.

"I think it's because it's Xianle blood that created the array in the first place."

And for an array this powerful—that would require old blood. Ancient blood, even by the standards of Gusu.

“...And...what does that have to do with me?” Xiong Li frowns.

“I mean—I’m a descendant of Xianle, but so is almost everyone else in Daq—Gusu.”

Xie Lian takes a deep breath. “They don’t teach you much about Xianle, I’m assuming?”

The teenager shakes his head, eyes wide.

“The founder—his name was Xie Bolin,” the god explains.

“Not much is known about the family before that—just that it was already ancient. He founded the city of Xianle, and his eldest son, Xie Feng, carried on the family name and royal bloodline. But—” Xie Lian holds up a finger, “The Central Plains are a vast territory.”

There’s a misconception among many, that the rapid turnover of empires in the center of the continent is because their predecessors were weak—but this isn’t true.

It’s because the territory is immense, surrounded by enemies—and as such, it’s difficult to defend.

Xianle lasted far longer than any of its predecessors—and certainly longer than the kingdom of Yong’an did, afterwards.

Because Bolin had been raised through a war, and he had learned his lessons well.

“At the time, Xianle was vulnerable to invasions from the north, so...”

Xie Lian feels odd now, repeating lessons he learned as a boy, barely able to focus on the page in front of him, whining and trying to take naps in Mei Nianqing’s lap—but his teacher was stern, insistent even —

Saying it was important to know one’s history.

“He sent his second son, Xie Cheng, to help defend and fortify the great walled city of the north, Gusu.”

As such, all of the invasions that Xianle would face, up until the end—came from south, east, or west—never the North.

“After the fall of Xianle, Gusu became an independent city, and the Xie Branch that ruled over the walls took on a new name—Xiong.”

Xiong Li stops, his breath halting. "But…I…"

He never knew his mother, or any other relatives. Never knew…anything about where he came from.

"They would have been the oldest bloodline in Gusu when Wen Jiao arrived," Xie Lian explains carefully. "The last King of Gusu, his name was Xiong Zhan. When I looked into the records of the evacuees from Gusu after Wen Jiao's arrival—there's no indication that he escaped."

Meaning—Wen Jiao most likely slaughtered the King of Gusu, and it's his blood that binds the curse to the city now. That curses the iron in the shackles his subjects wear around their necks.

And, from what Xie Lian can tell, Xiong Li is his last living grandson.

At first, part of him hoped that, as an ancestor of the Xiong line, he might be able to use his own blood to break the array.

He already tried that in the temple, provoking the gods into beating him while he stood before 'Wen Jiao's' altar, but to no effect.

He's too far removed at this point—and while Xie Lian's blood is incredibly powerful in it's own right—it can't break the array.

Xiong Li's, however, stands the most likely chance of doing that.

"Um…" the teenager trails off, thinking. "Does that mean I'll have to…die?"

Xie Lian stops, then laughs—almost surprised by the morbidity of that idea. "No! It doesn't take that much blood—just a small cut, and you'll be fine."

Xiong Li nods, forming a plan in his head. "I guess…I could find a way to sneak in—"

"That won't be necessary." Xie Lian shakes his head. "Wen Jiao would kill you before you got that close. No— when the time is right, you'll be able to walk right in."

"And…what am I supposed to do until then?"

Xie Lian flexes his fingers again, testing them—and they hurt even less now.

"Train."

“Train…in what?”

“Well…” Xie Lian tilts his head back against the wall, turning his head towards the window. Facing away from Xiong Li, he opens his eyes. They ache more now, by the day—but he couldn’t tell you why. “I’m going to make a cultivator out of you.”

By day, Xie Lian works at his loom. It’s difficult at first, fingers aching with each move—but after one day, he’s fully recovered.

Xiong Li sits by his side, holding his threads—trying to look knowledgeable on the subject when the guards arrive.

But the nights are different.

Xie Lian shows the young man how to develop his core—new cultivation methods—

But not his own, which requires abstinence. Xiong Li flat out refused that idea, and when Xie Lian asked if he had a particular reason for that—

Well, the young man turned red all the way to his ears.

They practice sword forms with blades swiped from the palace armory, Xie Lian teaching him ancient methods, passed down for generations.

And Xiong Li absorbs every lesson like a flower reaching towards the sun. Bright, eager—and burning with talent.

He finds it surprising at times, that two young men with so much talent—more than Xie Lian has seen since he himself was a young cultivator—could be born on the same day, in the same city.

In many ways, it almost seems like fate.

Nearly eight centuries before, the cultivation world changed.

A young, impossibly talented prince—beloved by his people—defeated a heavenly calamity far beyond what had been faced in the past as a mere mortal.

It’s impossibly rare to rise so high.

And almost as if pulled by the inevitable nature of gravity, this crown prince fell like no other.

By his own choice. His refusal to turn his back on the world.

And now, centuries later, that same refusal will change the Cultivation World once more.

But this time, it marks the beginning not of a fall—but an ascension.

Not of a tragedy, like every other story that Xie Lian, the Flower Crowned Martial God, the Guoshi Fangxin, General of Yong'an, the famed Blind Weaver has told before.

This was the beginning of a new tale.

A tale of lies, death and betrayal.

But also hope, forgiveness, and grace.

It would mark a new age in the heavens, and, in turn, lead to a new era—sparking a revolution in the world of Cultivation.

Before any of that, there was only a fallen god, two young cultivators, and a city enslaved.

Before there was a war for the heavens, there was a battle for the great walled city of the North.

Before there was a tale of redemption—there was a love story.

And it began in Gusu.

The Battle of Gusu

Chapter Summary

> “This—doesn’t make me look anything like a god!” Wen Joao howls. “How is anyone going to be jealous if I show up with this?! You tricked me, you—!”
>
> “You aren’t a god,” Xie Lian replies calmly. “Why would you look like one?”
>
> “I—I’m about to face my calamity!”
>
> “Are you?” Xie Lian replies coldly, and Wen Jiao only now seems to notice— The bandage around his neck—
>
> It’s...moving?
>
> “You better hurry down here and face it then.”

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

YEAR EIGHT HUNDRED

Night lies quietly over the city of Daqing. Like a heavy, dark blanket—pulling her people into their homes, sleeping in their beds.

The streets are lit only by the light of the moon, shining down like a final witness. A weaver sits before his loom.

In the center of the city, a sword rests patiently in it’s scabbard.

Outside the walls of Gusu, a guqin’s strings remain silent.

Slowly, one last golden thread is pulled into place—and the tapestry, one that was a year in the making, has been finished.

The god rises to his feet, pulling and tying off the edges of the tapestry from the loom, carefully rolling it down, summoning the guards to help him lift it.

After all, Xie Lian started a countdown, three hundred and sixty four days before. A Heavenly Calamity is coming.

It takes three men to carry the tapestry, rolled up and propped on their shoulders like a carpet. Xie Lian trails beside them, hands folded in his sleeves, allowing himself to enjoy the breeze on his face.

His eyes pulse, like there's a new heartbeat beneath each lid.

Finally, they approach the steps of the grand temple, the moon rising high in the sky —as Xie Lian insisted.

After all, the events about to unfold are not for mortal eyes. Better to face them while the city sleeps.

The tapestry is dropped on the temple floor with a heavy thud.

Dust is kicked up in the air—and this time, the guards don't wait for Wen Jiao to descend down from the ceiling, hissing, before they take their leave.

When the temple doors shut, Xie Lian smiles, hands still calmly folded inside his sleeves. "Are you ready, Master Wen?"

There's the sound of scales sliding over tile as the demon descends down from the rafter. Sometimes, he has the capability of pretending to wear a somewhat more human skin, but...

Wen Jiao's true form is half man, half snake. "I've been ready for a hundred years..." He hisses.

"Good," Xie Lian turns his chin down, to where the tapestry lays at his feet. "It's almost time. Would you like to take a look?"

The demon slithers forward eagerly, tongue flicking out between his teeth as clawed hands grip the edge of the tapestry, giving it a heavy shake.

The cloth rolls out, tens of meters in length and diameter—and from the sheer scale of the thing—it's difficult for Wen Jiao to really see the story it tells from the ground level.

So, naturally, he coils around a nearby pillar, slithering back up to the rafters. Now, looking down upon the tapestry from a height of dozens of meters... Wen Jiao glares, his eyes narrowing into slits.

"What is this?!" He hisses, irises burning like brimstone in the dark.

Cursed shackles gleam up at him.

“It’s what I promised you,” Xie Lian explains.

“You—” The demon sputters, his voice ringing throughout the empty, desecrated temple. “You said you would make a tapestry for my heavenly palace!”

“Tapestries tell stories,” the edge of Xie Lian’s boot taps the bottom corner of the piece, “and this is yours.”

“It’s a disgrace!”

The scenes before him—they depict a monster.

Maybe not so much through his form, but through acts.

They show a city that looks like a hellscape. Hundreds of miserable humans, piled together, flailing for freedom, and…

Wen Jiao sitting on top of the heap, holding the chains.

“This—doesn’t make me look anything like a god!” Wen Joao howls. “How is anyone going to be jealous if I show up with this?! You tricked me, you—!”

“You aren’t a god,” Xie Lian replies calmly. “Why would you look like one?”

“I—I’m about to face my calamity!”

“Are you?” Xie Lian replies coldly, and Wen Jiao only now seems to notice— The bandage around his neck—

It’s…moving?

“You better hurry down here and face it then.”

Slowly, it begins to dawn on the demon.

“You…” He whispers, voice trembling with fury. “You TRICKED me!”

“Mmm…” Xie Lian shrugs, “Actually, I think I’m the only one in this situation that’s been honest.”

The demon plunges down, claws outstretched—and the god easily dodges out of his way, leaving him to punch a hole in the temple floor.

His next attack is so ferocious that when Xie Lian dodges it, his momentum carries him all the way down the temple hall, crashing through the front doors, sending demon tumbling down the steps.

He lands in the street below as Xie Lian makes a calm, orderly exit from the temple.

“You aren’t a god,” Xie Lian says those words again, but this time—he intentionally raises his voice, allowing it to carry across the square and into the home of the sleeping city dwellers. “And the name of this city isn’t Daqing!”

Wen Jiao sneers and hisses, rising up.

His tail whips and rattles behind him, eyes burning in the night. “Cities are reborn every year. They are named by the people who rule them! And I AM the God of Daqing!’

He lashes out now, talons bared, aiming straight for Xie Lian’s face, but—

He’s caught by the wrist.

A smaller, pale, almost delicate hand—gripping the limb of a powerful demon—

Seemingly without any strain.

When Wen Jiao looks down, the pattern of those shackles stares right back up at him.

Xie Lian believes in speaking softly—even if it might make him look weak.

He isn’t a young, arrogant prince anymore.

His blood is ancient, and his scars run deep.

But when the Crown Prince of Xianle finds the right moment, he reminds the world that he can roar.

“GODS DO NOT ENSLAVE THEIR BELIEVERS!”

BOOM!

Using that grip in on the demon’s wrist, Xie Lian flips the creature over his head, slamming him down so violently, the front steps of the grand temple turn into something much more similar to a crater, stones and timber collapsing under the force of the impact.

The sound is loud enough that it leaves several citizens stirring in their beds, drawing close to their windows to peek outside.

Where they see a foul, scaled beast, half human, half serpent, struggling to pull himself out of the wreckage.

Ruoye whips around Xie Lian in a fury.

Kicking up a wind that makes his hair stir around him, hands balled into fists by his sides.

“This city is called GUSU!” He cries, his voice ringing through the air like the strike of a bell, signaling a call to action. “AND HER PEOPLE ARE NOT YOUR SLAVES!”

Wen Jiao smiles.

“…You surprised me,” he admits, “I wasn’t expecting you to have a grip like that.”

He slithers out of the hole—and suddenly, his form begins to grow.

Xie Lian stands still, grimly aware of the fact that the demon is expanding to nearly five times it’s original size.

After absorbing countless lives over an entire century—Xie Lian would expect something like this.

Now, the serpent is large enough to fill the city square—and when he laughs, it feels like the sky itself rumbles.

“But you know…I think I’ve decided on a new plan!”

His tail whips around, taking out an entire terrace, sending rubble and debris raining down.

Xie Lian doesn’t react as Ruoye smacks the most threatening projectiles out of the way. A small shard of class slices his cheek—and he doesn’t even flinch.

“MAYBE THE BEST WAY TO BECOME A GOD…” The demon snarls, “IS IF I BRING JUN WU YOUR HEAD!”

An interesting thought. Xie Lian can't imagine the heavenly emperor would be pleased.

Despite everything, Jun Wu was always kind to him.

"You can try," the prince replies calmly.

"YOU THINK YOU STAND A CHANCE?" The demon howls. "You have NO spiritual powers—YOU DON'T EVEN HAVE A WEAPON!"

That reminds Xie Lian to push up his sleeves, binding them at the elbow.

"I tend to do too much damage with swords," he murmurs. "My bare hands are better suited."

That makes Wen Jiao snarl in annoyance—no, with offense that Xie Lian would think him so easily dealt with.

"Before you get so cocky, you should ask yourself—are you sure these people AREN'T MY SLAVES?!"

As he says those words, tens of thousands of iron shackles, all around the city—they begin to glow red hot, and Xie Lian's expression turns grim.

From several blocks away, a young cultivator leans back against an alley wall, whistling under his breath—listening to the commotion.

Technically, he's supposed to be waiting for some sort of signal—but Xiong Li isn't sure if the battle starting is much of a signal. After all, wouldn't Mr. Hua have worked something into the conversation? Like...

'I guess we should...START fighting!'

Or,

'It TIME to kill you!'

You know. Something subtle, like that. How else is Xiong Li supposed to know when the opportune moment arrives?

He kicks a rock with the tip of his boot, fidgeting eagerly.

It's not like he's a mind reader, y'know, but—

But then, the city takes on a reddish haze.

"..." Xiong Li tips his head back—and then he sees it, creeping over the sky. A red shadow, growing along the edges of the full moon.

A...Lunar eclipse? Right now?

"...Well," he mutters, pushing off of the wall. "That feels like a sign."

He darts into the street, knowing his path well—and as soon as his feet touch the cobble stones...

Doors begin opening all around him.

All in pace with each other, almost like...

Ants, moving in a hill.

Xiong Li pauses, glancing around—until he sees the first person.

A young girl, her hair in low pigtails, standing in the doorway of her home.

At first, Xiong Li sees no reason for worry, until he sees her eyes.

Glowing a violent shade of red in the dark—matching the cursed iron shackle around her neck.

There's no awareness in that gaze.

"Uh..." Xiong Li takes a step back, glancing around.

There's an awkward moment in any young man's life, where he sticks out in a crowd. Xiong Li is pretty used to that, he's a very unique person.

But you don't want to be the only conscious one in a crowd of violent zombies.

It's not fun. He definitely wouldn't recommend it.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god!"

You know, in the stories they'll tell about this later, he's always described as this brave, heroic figure.

And Xiong Li is brave, it's true—but he's never been great at keeping a straight face.

He also might be strong, for a human—but he isn't a god, and he's only been training as a cultivator for a year, so...

The teenager wheezes a little, throwing himself up onto the rooftop, scrambling to find purchase.

"This...is not as easy as they make it look in the books!"

And leaping between rooftops? Not easy. Not at all—but better than nearly getting clawed to death by his neighbors on the streets below.

He barely manages to catch himself when he leaps onto the temple roof, biceps trembling as he heaves himself up onto the ledge.

Honestly—he's seen Lan An do this a thousand times, and he can yank himself up with one hand, like nothing! And he weighs more than Xiong Li does, since disciples in the cloud recesses actually get regular meals.

For a moment Xiong Li sits there, wiping the sweat from his brow. "...Just how strong is that freak?!" He mutters under his breath.

Well, this would probably be easier if he was using spiritual power—but Mr. Hua told him that he should save it until he absolutely needed it, so...

Xiong Li sighs, glancing to the east.

The battle between Wen Jiao and the weaver is still raging and...

Xiong Li knows now, why Mr. Hua couldn't explain much to him in the beginning.

Because he's obviously not a ghost or a demon—but no human could fight light that either. Especially not blind.

In any case—he's got his own job to do.

The mortal finds an open window—slipping his feet inside, carefully scaling down one of the temple pillars.

"Just a little bit of blood..." He mutters under his breath, running towards the altar. "And then it's over."

It'll all be over.

He pulls a dagger from his hip, slipping it across his palm with ease, barely wincing when his skin splits open.

For a moment, he stands over the altar, watching as the blood drips down his fingers, wondering.

He bleeds just the same as anyone else. Is it actually special?

He's spent most of his life going to bed hungry. With shoes that didn't even fit him. Struggling to get by on scraps.

And now, staring at his blood, he can't help but wonder? Is it really the blood of kings?

Three drops land on the altar.

Thud!

Thud!

Thud!

Xiong Li waits, staring, but…nothing seems to happen.

He can still hear the screams of the citizens outside. The temple—it still feels like death in here.

Did he not use enough? Mr. Hua said it would only take a few drops, but…

Xiong Li squeezes the cut on his palm, gritting his teeth as more blood wells up, dripping down onto the altar until a small puddle forms.

Still, nothing.

Hell—part of him even wonders if the array isn't directly ON the altar, so he tries the floor, the walls.

He turns the back half of the temple into some twisted, macabre version of a child's art project, finger painting with his own blood, but…

Nothing.

Xiong Li glances down at the knife in his palm.

Maybe since he's the grandson and not the person that was used, it needs more? He almost goes to cut himself again, but—

Mr. Hua seemed certain, when he told Xiong Li that it wouldn't take much. He knows far more about cultivation than Xiong Li does—hell, Xiong Li has reason to suspect that he's a god now, so...

It can't be that.

The amount isn't the issue. It's something else.

Then, it occurs to him.

Mr. Hua has taught Xiong Li a lot about cultivation in the last year. And while the teenager might not have perfected his parkour skills—he did learn quite a bit about magic.

And, by extension, arrays.

"...It's not in the temple," he mutters under his breath, and then—it really starts to hit him hard, and he goes running towards the demolished front entrance. "Mr. Hua!" He calls, knowing he doesn't have to be that loud for the god to hear him, "The array isn't in the temple!"

It made sense originally, when you consider that the temple sits in the center of the city but...

This array is meant to keep people caged in—and it's aura extends all the way to Gusu.

Xie Lian, overhearing him—even a quarter of a mile a way—frowns, eyes widening.

"...It's in the walls," he mutters under his breath, head instinctively whipping in that direction, even if he can't see the white marble behemoths looming in the distance.

Wen Jiao smirks, spitting venom down at the little god. Xie Lian dodges,and the ground hisses on impact.

"I'll admit, using the Xiong boy against me was clever—but now, he's as far away from the target as he can get, isn't he?!" The demon cackles.

It was clever, Xie Lian admits—clearly choosing to set the Temple up as a decoy, by not allowing any cultivators inside.

By sending Xiong Li to the city center, technically Xie Lian allowed the boy to slip right into a trap—because now, he's in the middle of Wen Jiao's horde of mindless subjects.

Still, Xie Lian doesn't seem particularly worried.

"He'll make it," the god shrugs. "But you won't."

Wen Jiao hisses in offense, but before he can retort, the god wraps his fist around the demon's tail, and his eyes widen.

Xie Lian yanks, swinging his arms around until Wen Jiao, who is scrambling to try and find purchase, is yanked into the air, spinning around like a lasso.

See—Xie Lian doesn't have to be worried about whether or not Xiong Li makes it to the walls, because he already planned for that.

And, despite the exceptional strength he's displaying now—the real muscle of the operation hasn't arrived yet.

No, he's not worried.

Not even when he hears Xiong Li struggling through the crowds, his sword clashing as he attempts to get through the horde, a seemingly hopeless task.

After all, he's just one person, but...Xie Lian never planned on having Xiong Li work alone.

The teenager stumbles. There's just...

He lands in the market square, hard—barely catching himself with the hilt of his sword.

There's too many of them.

His neighbors. HIs school teachers. Kids he's known since they could barely walk, and—

Xiong Li doesn't want to hurt them.

His head turns to the side—and he can see a window there, the same one he used to sit in, every single day. The shopkeeper never minded, since Xiong Li never caused him any trouble.

He liked that spot. It was in the sun. Easy to watch the other kids play, and...

It had an easy view of the front gates.

That way, he'd always know first, if...

If Lan An came back home. Even if Xiong Li always desperately pretended not to care.

A set of hands close around his throat, and Xiong Li starts to think it might be time for—

BOOM!

The citizens in the square go still, their eyes flickering slightly, and... Xiong Li hears music.

Playing a soft, calming tune—sort of out of place, in the hellish atmosphere all around, but...beautiful.

The notes carry through the square, bringing...

The sound of a guqin.

His head whips to the side, and—

In spite of everything, Xiong Li smiles.

Standing in the gates of Gusu is a lone cultivator.

Robes flapping slightly in the breeze, the strands of his headband blowing behind him.

His eyes rest on the young woman holding Xiong Li by the neck, eyes narrowed with intent.

There's another flick of his fingers across the strings, and just like that—she's sent stumbling back.

"You don't get to touch him," the cultivator mutters flatly, his expression dark. That's when he notices Xiong Li's neck—

Stripped free of it's shackle.

His friend beams, leaping to his feet. "You know something!" He calls over "You're always the one trying to get me to go with you, but why should I? You always come back anyway!"

Lan An almost smiles.

Even in this situation, the idiot still tries to get a laugh out of him.

“Look, I—” Xiong Li pushes himself free, “I need to get on top of the wall, can you keep the path clear?”

Lan An surveys the crowd around them.

“…Yeah,” he replies, his gaze determined. “I can do that.”

Xiong Li smiles, running past him. “Guess we ended up cultivating together after all, huh?”

Lan An’s widen with surprise—and he wants to ask Xiong Li what he means, but…

There’s work to be done.

The song of Clarity has a thirty meter radius—but it isn’t a complete solution.

It soothes the citizens of Gusu, keeps them standing in place, or slows them down— but it doesn’t completely strip them of Wen Jiao’s spell.

Doing that—that requires shattering the shackles entirely.

Which is possible.

Lan An couldn’t have done that a year ago, but…

He was tasked to train non-stop for an entire year. And when a god makes such a request, exiled or not, you obey.

Even if it hadn’t been a god—he would have done it anyway.

If he hadn’t, the alternative was allowing everyone in Gusu to die.

And that would include…

TWANG!

He strums another chord from his guqin, slamming into another wave of the living zombies as they try to make their approach again.

Yes, he can shatter a cursed iron shackle.

If he concentrates enough energy into the guqin, and aims it at one target—he can inflict enough damage to make the metal crack.

But it requires an extensive amount of spiritual power to inflict that on just one target. Which wouldn't be a problem for Lan An—not normally.

Even for senior cultivators, the level of power he's collected is extremely high. There likely isn't a man alive currently that could compare.

Still, the population of Gusu is well over three hundred thousand. Half of what it was before the occupation, but still.

He can't shatter every single shackle in the crowd. Probably couldn't even shatter a tenth.

It would take a god to do something like that—multiple gods, just like Xie Lian said to the sect elders.

So really...Lan An can't imagine how this plan is supposed to work.

Still, there's no way out but further in—so he fights, finger moving furiously across the strings of his guqin as Xiong Li hurries up the stairwell leading to the top of the walls, his heart pounding.

His entire life, he's grown up leashed, in a cage.

Just once—even if it's only for a day, or even a minute—

Xiong Li wants to know what it's like to walk outside of the city walls, and know that he's free.

Lan An has to slowly move up the staircase behind him—using the narrowness of the pathway to pinch the onslaught in.

Only three men can ascend that way, shoulder to shoulder—and with the crowd reduced to that—

Lan An can target his spiritual power more narrowly, and as a result—he can start shattering shackles.

Each time someone wakes, they stop, disoriented, and they slow those behind them.

It's not perfect—most of the freshly awoken citizens end up injured and trampled in the end, but it's necessary.

He told Xiong Li he would keep the path clear, and so he will.

The teenager practically flies up the steps, boots thundering underneath him, lungs burning.

Finally, for the first time in his life, he reaches the top of the walls of Gusu.

For a moment—a brief one—he stops.

It's—

"Oh, wow…" he mutters. His hair is pulled up into a high ponytail, over his head— blown sharply from the winds at this altitude.

It's beautiful.

From here, you can see impossibly far, for miles and miles. The peaceful grasses of the central plains to the south, like an emerald sea, cast under the moon's blood red glow, and to the north…

A mountain, framed by the clouds.

That—that must be where Lan An cultivates.

It looks…peaceful.

Maybe, when all of this is over, he should—

"Xiong Li!" Lan An's voice barks from behind him, and the teen's eyes narrow with determination.

Right.

It's time to end this.

He pulls out his dagger again, slicing into his palm once more, reopening the wound.

Blood pours down his palm as he kneels down, pressing it to the marble surface of the wall, his eyes closed.

Part of him still thinks it won't work. Xiong Li—he's never been that special. Lan An is the only one who has ever thought differently—which is kind of ironic. Xiong Li is smart, yes. He's strong. He's talented.

But so are a lot of other people in the world.

Lan An, though? He's a genius. A literal miracle. Everyone is going to remember him. It would make more sense for him to be some long lost descendent of royalty...not Xiong Li.

And yet, the world works in mysterious ways—the ones you least expect. Because, as his blood streams over the marble...

The walls of Gusu begin to rumble.

All around them, the heat on the shackles around the necks of the citizens begins to fade, their eyes flickering.

Red light begins to billow up from the walls beneath them, the wind whipping around so violently, Xiong Li finds himself scrambling for purchase so he doesn't get blown off of the wall, but—

An arm wraps firmly around his waist, holding him in place.

When he glances up—Lan An is right there. One hand holding his sword, plunged deep into the wall's surface, the other holding Xiong Li tightly against him.

Overhead, a red cloud gathers and swirls, before exploding in a shower of sparks.

"Was..." Xiong Li has to turn his head and shout into Lan An's hear to be heard over the wind and the thunder, "Was that it? Did it break?"

Lan An nods, glancing down at the citizens around them.

All of them seem to be coming back to their senses, however slowly.

For once—Xiong Li doesn't say a word. Just smiles, leaning against Lan An's side contently.

The taller young man seems a little startled at first, the tips of his ears going a little pink—but then, his lips turn up at the corners, and his arm tightens around Xiong Li's waist.

He mumbles something under his breath, making his friend lift his chin, confused. "...What was that?"

"..." Lan An clears his throat, looking away. "I played a song for you, this time."

Now it’s Xiong Li’s turn to look startled, his eyes going wide—but then, he laughs.

“…Yeah, I guess you did,” he admits, reaching up to poke Lan An in the cheek. “But don’t expect me to start singing for you or anything, alright?” He grins, leaning a little closer—even though Lan An is pointedly looking away, leaning away in response.

“I only sing for boys I like!”

Lan An makes a slightly annoyed, disbelieving sound under his breath, but he’s basically holding Xiong Li’s waist in a vice grip now, and the raven haired teen couldn’t be happier, poking his cheek again for emphasis.

Until he hears it.

A quiet, terrified gasp—then a scream.

A little boy, only just now coming back from the effects of the spell, stumbled backwards—and when he did, it sent him plummeting off of the side of the wall.

Xiong Li doesn’t hesitate. Not even for a split second.

He wrenches himself from Lan An’s arms, charging right after him, plunging off the edge without a second thought, even as his friend tries to stop him.

“XIONG LI—!”

But after a moment, Lan An stops.

Xiong Li catches the boy about halfway down, coming to a halt.

It takes Lan An a moment to understand, until he sees the sword underneath Xiong Li’s feet, gently carrying them both to the ground.

Once he lands on his feet with the child in his arms, Xiong Li beams up at him. “DIDN’T I TELL YOU BEFORE?” He calls up from the ground. “WE’RE BOTH CULTIVATORS NOW!”

After a moment, Lan An manages a relieved smile.

And if the battle had ended there—the course of history would have gone rather differently.

Back in the city center, Xie Lian dodges another swipe of Wen Jiao's claws. "It's pointless, now!"

Xie Lian cries, "You saw it, the array is broken! You can't gather any more spiritual power!"

Wen Jiao shakes his head, barking out a laugh, swiping his tail out, forcing the god to leap high into the air to avoid it.

"You really think I never planned on someone breaking it?!"

That gives Xie Lian pause, his eyes narrowing. The demon cackles, shaking head.

"All of you gods are the same! Always looking down on people like me—thinking you're so much better! So much stronger! Of course I had a plan for someone breaking it—in case I got caught!"

Xie Lian pauses, trying to think of what his plan could be—and that one split second of hesitation is costly.

It allows the demon to surge forward before he can dodge—and in an instant, the prince feels something seal around his throat with a click.

The pain is instantaneous.

It feels like having a spiked rope wrapped around your neck after it's been set aflame —and it makes Xie Lian's entire spirit quiver with agony.

The god gasps, dropping down onto his knees for a moment, eyes blown wide.

The cursed shackle pattern in his eyes brightens sharply.

And—

It flickers, the black and gold squares within the pattern moving and coiling like snakes within his irises, bloody tears welling up before slipping down his cheeks.

Wen Jiao smirks, "You thought you had me outnumbered with those two cultivators, didn't you?"

The shackle around Xie Lian's throat burns bright red, and even he can't stop himself from crying out, barely catching himself before he hits the ground, breathing raggedly.

“Well, I’ve got back up of my own!”

Speak of the devil, and he will appear.

On the edge of Gusu, before the city gates, applause breaks out.

Slow, sarcastic—with only one person clapping.

Xiong Li glances up from where he’s helping the little boy in his arms sit down to rest, his eyes narrowing.

“Ah, how heroic!”

Heavy, expensive leather boots crunch against the gravel as the figure strides forward, clad in red and white.

“It’s to be expected from the last Prince of Gusu, is it not?”

Xiong Li sets the child aside, blade resting on the handle of his sword.

“I’m no prince,” he replies evenly. “Just a simple cultivator.”

The King of Daqing, son of the demon Jiao, Wen Sicong, smiles. “In that case, you should kneel before your leader, shouldn’t you?”

“...Hmm,” Xiong Li tilts his head. “I don’t see any leader nearby.” Wen Sicong glares. “If you could point him out to me, I’ll get on my knees and pay my respects right now,” the teenager smirks, clearly seeing that he’s gotten a rise out of the pretender to the throne.

“You think I won’t make you pay for that?” He hisses.

THUD!

Dust swirls for a moment, and when it settles, there’s another cultivator standing by Xiong Li’s side.

Wearing simple blue robes, chestnut colored hair swirling, a simple white headband around his forehead.

And eyes that glint like steel in the moonlight, staring him down.

“You think you’ll be fighting one on one?” Lan An questions coldly.

Wen Sicong glances back and forth between the two young men.

He remembers the day they were born—this day, eighteen years before. They were always watching Xiong Li closely—but Lan An—he was a surprise. Now, they make quite a pair.

Light and dark. Silver and gold.

Slowly, Wen Sicong smiles.

Oh, how he'll relish in seeing that bond severed.

"You think I'm the one that's outnumbered?" He raises his hands—and when he does...

Iron shackles begin to glow all around them.

He can't control an entire city without the array, even his father couldn't do that, but...

He can control enough.

The battle that breaks out is a thing of chaos.

With enemies coming from every single direction, leaving the two young men faced with an onslaught.

Lan An can slow them down in large groups, or target them one by one—and his method doesn't cause physical harm to the puppets.

Unfortunately, Xiong Li isn't left with the same options.

He has his blade, which he can knock people out with blunt side of, but other than that...

His options for dealing with them would end up killing them—and he doesn't want to do that.

None of them chose this, and they don't deserve to die for it.

So, he's essentially left fighting with one hand tied behind his back—and Lan An is forced to carry the brunt of the battle

He does so without complaint, but...

No matter how many shackles he breaks, there are always more puppets for Wen Sicong to call on, and...Lan An's spiritual power, while immense, won't last forever.

Xiong Li can see that much— And so can their opponent.

They're strategic about it, with Lan An focusing on the puppets while Xiong Li attacks their master with his blade, but…

CLANG!

Their blades cross, and when they do, Wen Sicong smirks down at the boy, eyes glinting vindictively, "You can hear it, can't you?"

Xiong Li glares, hooking his foot around Wen Sicong's ankle, yanking him out of his stance, but the king is able to dodge beneath their blades before breaking apart again.

"The battle between my father and your god is over now!"
That…seems to be true.

Xiong Li can't hear anything from the center of the city—all fighting seems to have stopped, but…

"…and he hasn't come to help you, has he?!"

CLANG!

It's true, he hasn't. Which means…

The realization dawns on him, slow and horrifying, that—

It means Mr. Hua lost.

With their blades caught together again, Wen Sicong takes advantage of the opportunity to reach out, clutching Xiong Li's chin between his fingers.

"Listen closely, little brat," he growls, "because I'm about to tell you your entire future."

Behind them, Lan An stiffens.

His first instinct is to protect his friend—but, if he does, they'll be overrun by the puppets.

Xiong Li struggles, trying to pull his chin back, but Wen Sicong's grip only tightens. "I'm going to shackle you again," the king explains. "Then, I'm going to kill Lan An."

He watches with satisfaction as the boy's eyes widen, color leaving his face.

"I'm going to make you watch, and you're going to know the entire time that it's your fault," he croons, his grip on Xiong Li tightening.

If he managed to shackle Xiong Li again, killing Lan An wouldn't be particularly difficult. He would have them both hostage at that point, because...Xiong Li knows.

Lan An would never leave him. Not ever. Even if it meant giving himself up. He's stupid like that.

It's—

Xiong Li fights back tears, refusing to allow this man to see his weakness.

It's really annoying.

"But I'll let you live, you know why?" Wen Sicong hisses.

Lan An seems to decide he's had enough, starting to round back on them—but then, another swarm attacks with a fury.

"For the same reason we've allowed you to live, over and over again," the king explains, watching with great satisfaction as the realization slowly starts to dawn over the teenager's face. "Because we're going to use your blood to rebuild the array."

It makes sense, in a horrifically simple kind of way.

Xiong Li's blood was strong enough to break it, therefore—it's more than enough to reforge it under the same circumstances.

"Then, you'll watch as we suck the rest of this city dry."

He gains more leverage now, and it's all Xiong Li can do to stop their crossed blades from getting too close to his face, gritting his teeth.

"You'll watch as every person you have ever known dies," Wen Sicong hisses, just as Xiong Li stumbles backwards. "But we still won't kill you, you know why?"

"Xiong Li," Lan An tries to warn, his tone tense. "Don't listen to him."

The worst part is—it's not like Wen Sicong is lying. He isn't. He really does plan on doing all of those things, he's just—

He's just taunting Xiong Li with it.

Torturing him with it.

“Because after that, we’ll take you to Yunmeng,” Wen Sicong sneers, pressing forward until Xiong Li stumbles back again, pushing him closer and closer to the horde. “We’ll build another array, and we’ll start all over again.”

That’s when the real horror starts to sink in, and Wen Sicong relishes in the sight of it.

“Don’t worry, you’ll live long enough to have an heir—whether you want to or not,” the king laughs cruelly when the boy flinches. “Oh, don’t be like that—fatherhood is one of the greatest joys in life! And your children, they’ll help the Wen sect spread it’s influence to every corner of this continent. You should be proud!”

“Xiong Li!” Lan An cries again, this time snarling with anger. “He’s a liar!”

But he isn’t. He means every word. And there’s a good chance it might come to fruition, because where things stand now?

They’re going to lose.

And if they do, Lan An will die. Everyone here will die, and—

Xiong Li knows why Lan An wants him to believe it’s a lie.

Because the truth is too horrible to live with.

That being, that the people of Gusu—the people of the continent—they’ll never be safe. Not while Xiong Li...

“...I won’t let you,” he mutters.

Suddenly, his feet stand firm, and Wen Sicong smiles.

“Oh, is that so?”

Xiong Li closes his eyes, his nostrils flaring as he pushes his golden core into overdrive, allowing it to crackle and swell in his chest, burning with a fury.

“I grew up in your cages,” the teenager mutters, shoving at Wen Sicong with so much force, it actually startles him.

Xiong Li was born a penniless orphan. He was raised on scraps. But right now, in this moment, he…

Certainly does look princely, in a way.

“You’ll never use my family’s blood to put people in chains,” Xiong Li snarls. “Not ever again!”

Then, he does something distinctly un-princely.

Before Wen Sicong can say another word, or try to stop him—the cultivator slams his knee into the older man’s crotch, making him shout with agony, stumbling back.

Xiong Li turns around, and—

He makes a break for the city gates.

He used to try that, when he was a kid. Run as close as he could get before his iron shackle would kick in. Lan An would grumble every time, telling Xiong Li how stupid he was, but…

He was there, every time.

And now, just as he darts past Lan An, dodging through the crowds as he moves, he mumbles—

“Thank you for everything.”

It’s a complete rarity, to get a statement like that from him, and once he hears it—

It dawns on Lan An.

In a slow, horrible realization.

“XIONG LI!”

For the first time in his life, Xiong Li leaves the city gates of Gusu, feels the grass underneath his feet.

It’s the first time in his life that he’s ever stood outside of this city, knowing that he was free.

It lasts for one moment.

One beautiful, peaceful moment.

But he has to cut it short, because his freedom—it would come at too high of a price.

The loss of everything he holds dear. Of other cities, of people who don’t deserve to suffer like this.

And when that moment passes, he lifts that dagger from his hip, turning it on himself once more.

Not in the hand, this time—no.

This time, he plunges the weapon into his chest, while his friend screams with horror.

“XIONG LI!”

His knees hit the ground with a heavy thud.

He’s learned a lot in the last year.

Blood magic—it only works if the subject is living.

That very blood drips down his chin now, as he looks up at the stars.

The Xiong family spent a thousand years protecting the people. First of Xianle, then of Gusu.

This makes sense.

All Xiong Li’s life, he wanted to be free.

But for the people of his city, the people he loved so dearly to be free—

That means he has to go. And—

And maybe that’s fine.

At least he got to see outside the walls. At least he got to see him again. At least—

At least he—

Arms catch him before he hits the ground, holding him close.

Xiong Li manages a faint smile.

Lan An has never let him fall before. That makes sense.

Ever calm, ever steady, but…

Now, he's trembling.

He rolls his friend over in his arms, one hand frantically trying to stop the bleeding, abandoning the battle behind them, his guqin cast aside on the ground.

His other hand forms a sign, burning with power as he starts to pour his spiritual energy into the wound, fighting—

Xiong Li pushes at his wrist weakly, shaking his head. "Lan An," he rasps, fingers trembling. "Stop."

The cultivator shakes his head vehemently, tears dripping silently from his chin, his golden core burning in an inferno, pouring everything he has into trying to save him, to—

"It's okay," Xiong Li's fingers wrap around his, pulling until the hand sign breaks, and the golden light fades.

Lan An looks down at him blearily, unable to see clearly through the tears, but… Xiong Li is smiling up at him, and even the blurriest sight of that—

It shatters him, just like a shackle.

A choked sob wrenches from his chest as he clutches Xiong Li close.

"Why…" His shoulders tremble, fingertips digging into the raven haired boy's shoulder blades, "Why didn't you come with me?!"

He tried so hard.

Everything he did, it was all for…always for…

Always for him.

Lan An can't remember a moment of his life, when Xiong Li's smile wasn't at the center of it.

"I already said," Xiong Li murmurs, "remember?" That he would rather die, trying—

Trying to help people.

Xiong Li has never seen Lan An cry before.

But like everything else, he does it well.

Even his tears are beautiful, falling down his cheeks like diamonds, something precious.

And maybe they are, because they're all for him.

"Hey, hey..." He mumbles, squeezing his hand. "...Aren't you...gonna tell me happy birthday?"

Lan An shudders, pressing their foreheads together.

The funny thing is—Xiong Li was the taller one, when they were younger. Up until they were teenagers, and Lan An hit his growth spurt.

Now, he feels so small in Lan An's arms.

Like, if the cultivator hugs his friend too tightly—he might just disappear into stardust.

And still, Lan An can't stop himself from holding him as tightly as he can. Like that could somehow stop him from leaving.

He's wracked with another sob, but he forces out the words.

"H...Happy birthday, Xiong Li."

His breaths are a little hitched now, growing weaker.

"I...I'm giving you something this year, okay?" He mumbles. "D-Don't bother with the book this time, I...I'm not gonna get around to reading it, anyway."

That isn't funny.

Lan An clings harder.

Xiong Li is always making scenes and telling stupid jokes, and they're never that funny.

It's—

Lan An rocks, his tears falling onto Xiong Li's cheeks as he weeps silently.

It's annoying.

It’s so annoying, he—

Suddenly, the cultivator freezes.

“As t-time draws near, my dearest dear...when you and I...must part...”

His voice is weaker than usual, breaking and catching on the lyrics, but—

Still, it’s perfect.

“H-How little you know...of the grief and woe...in my poor a-aching heart...”

Lan An struggles to breathe, to see through the tears—but he listens as closely as he can.

He hasn’t been given many gifts in his life. All of them have come from Xiong Li. And this—

This is the sweetest one his friend has ever given him.

“E-Each night I suffer for y-your sake, you’re the boy I love so dear...” Xiong Li is singing for him.

Not very loudly, but he doesn’t have to—not when their foreheads are still pressed together, breathing close.

“I-I wish that I was going with you, or you were staying here.”

He trails off, breathing raggedly.

“T...The second verse is too embarrassing, so...that’s all you g...get...” Lan An strokes his hair, leaning back to look at his face.

To look down into those eyes, the only stars he ever wanted to see.

“You kept writing songs,” Lan An murmurs, pushing Xiong Li’s bangs from his forehead so tenderly, tucking them behind his ear—and his friend nods.

“I-I told you...”

Lan An’s thumb wipes the blood from his lips, and he whispers—

“I thought you only sang for the boys you liked.”

Xiong Li smiles up at him, his eyes shining.

And in that one moment, the entire universe is there, tucked inside Lan An's arms.

"That's right," he whispers.

They stare at one another, on the brink of so many words, so many things to say. And at the same time, just one.

But by the time Lan An musters the nerve to open his mouth, he...Xiong Li...

His eyes have slipped shut.

There isn't any singing anymore.

No smiling. No dramatic scenes. No stupid jokes.

Lan An presses their foreheads together one more time.

Behind him, he can hear shouting.

Angry, frustrated shouting.

Because the last living descendent of the Xiong family is d—d—

Because Wen Jiao's sick plan has been thwarted.

"..."

Carefully, with a heartbreaking level of gentleness, Lan An lays his friend down in the grass, rising to his feet.

"Didn't you say you were going to kill me?"

Wen Sicong pauses in the middle of his angry screaming, in the middle of beating one of his puppets to death out of frustration.

The cultivator stands in the gates once more, expressionless. His voice is like a cold wind.

"...Is that your way of asking?" The king sneers, his knuckles stained with blood as he allows the young woman to drop to the ground, limp. "Eager to join your little friend?"

Lan An stares him down for a moment—with a stare so piercing, so heavy— Even Wen Sicong shrinks.

“No,” he murmurs, “it ends here.”

At first, the king doesn’t know what the cultivator means.

In truth, no one could have predicted what the young man was about to do—not until it happened.

See, there are consequences to having people pray under false pretense.

After all—even as they were being fed off of, for an entire century, the people of Gusu prayed in the temple of ‘Wen Jiao,’ not knowing that they were kneeling before a false idol.

Those merits, those prayers—they didn’t go to the demon.

But, cut off from the heavens—the prayers in the city of Gusu couldn’t be sent to General Ming Guang either.

Thus, they were left trapped—a century’s worth of prayers, the hopes and dreams of tens of thousands of people, all trapped in the soil beneath Gusu.

The land was already ancient, pulsing with power—and now, it’s almost seismic. Overflowing.

Lan An didn’t notice it before, the buzzing.

But now—now that the entire world has gone suddenly quiet, without song, he can hear it there.

He kneels, pressing his palm to the earth.

When he looks into the distance, he sees a flash of light, and his will turns to steel.

It will end here.

It—It won’t be for nothing.

Wen Sicong takes a stumbling step backwards, “What...are you...?”

He stops, when Lan An’s eyes begin to burn a brilliant shade of white.

Like Xiong Li, Lan An was born into chains.

He thought, for the longest time, that he only had one path by which he could follow in order to shatter them.

He lived his youth away from the boy he loved, in a monastery—because he thought that was the best way to free him.

That was the only path he thought there was, and—

And Lan An wasted so much time.

Now, for the first time in millennia, a new form of cultivation is born.

It began with the song of Clarity, but now it becomes something fully formed.

The teenager rises to his feet once more.

His body pulses with so much spiritual power, it feels like it might rip apart down to the cellular level, but—

That's alright.

Lan An lifts his guqin.

He doesn't plan on holding it for long.

The first chord he plays rings so loudly, every window in Gusu shatters.

It's a song that will be passed down for a hundred generations, played on the fields of battle for millennia to come.

A song that will haunt the nightmares of demons and mortal foes alike;

The Song of Vanquish.

With the second chord, every iron shackle in Gusu breaks in two.

Wen Sicong watches, his head whipping around as the wind blows through the city with a fury, the people stumbling and clutching their necks—

None of them familiar with the nakedness that comes without the weight of iron on their throats.

"Are you INSANE?!" The king shouts. "OR ARE YOU JUST TRYING

TO KILL YOURSELF—?”

On the third and final chord, the earth rattles and shakes so violently, only one man is left standing.

So forcefully that, after countless centuries looming over the landscape, acting both as a shield and a cage…

The Great Walls of Gusu come crashing down.

Not immediately. First there are cracks, then rattles, and suddenly, all at once—

This impossibly loud, impossibly vast crash, the air becoming a sea of dust and smoke.

Lan An’s fingers bleed against the Guqin strings.

The magnitude of the act doesn’t dawn on him. Not in that moment. Not even as the people of Gusu stop, coughing and peering at him through the fog, like he’s some sort of unearthly being.

No.

All Lan An thinks of, in that moment, is getting to the other side of the rubble.

Back to where—

Back to where he left his friend.

He’s slightly numb, covered in soot, headband askew as he picks his way through the carnage, dropping down lightly on the other side, casting his guqin aside without a thought, but…

Xiong Li isn’t there.

Not where Lan An left him.

The cultivator freezes, his eyes widening with confusion, hurt, and worry.

How—? How could it have—?

BOOM!

For a moment, there’s absolutely nothing.

Just golden light and this impossible warmth, filling him from head to toe, and a rush of wind.

Gusu is an ancient city. One of powerful magic and old blood.

Famed as the place where lightning struck twice. Where two gods ascended across the centuries.

When the sun rises, it will become known as the city where three gods ascended—all in one night.

When Lan An opens his eyes, he isn't standing among the rubble, looking over the grasses of the central plains.

He's standing in front of a city of golden palaces and jewel lined streets.

A city where no one wants for anything—

And no one is born into chains.

But he doesn't look at the palaces. Or the fountains of gold. Or even the Grand Martial Palace.

All Lan An looks at now, is the only thing that he's ever had eyes for. A young man with hair as dark as ink, and eyes like stars.

The world has taken so many things from him.

Without a word spoken, they rush into each other's arms.

Now, for the first time—it gives something back.

Lan An clutches onto him tightly, and—ascension or not, dead or alive—

Here, in the space between his arms, is heaven.

The City of Three Ascensions

Chapter Summary

> "I told you before," Xie Lian murmurs.
>
> The blade twists slightly, and Wen Jiao's eyes widen.
>
> "There are no mortals here."

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wen Jiao watches now, as the walls of Gusu come crashing back down. As, one after another, the shackles of the people slip from their necks.

Watches the flash of golden light as a new god ascends to the heavens—

But not him.

Before him kneels a fallen god, hands clutching at his throat.

Of course, with his luck—his shackle would be the only one in Gusu that doesn't break.

"...You took everything from me..." The demon whispers, his eyes flaring. "I'll...I'LL KILL YOU FOR THIS!"

Xie Lian tilts his head, taking shaky breaths. "Is it possible to steal from a thief?" Wen Jiao's form trembles.

"Have you ever, once in your life, earned something honestly?"

CRASH!

The demon's tail slams into Xie Lian while he's too weakened to move, sending him flying.

He slams into the side of the grand temple, the walls shuddering and groaning, paint facades that were placed years before cracking—

revealing the name, ‘Ming Guang,’ underneath.

“You think I need to ascend to kill you?!” Wen Jiao snarls, slithering toward him.

“I don’t need old man Jun Wu to make me a god. That mountain is opening soon—”

Mountain?

“And when it does, I’ll become more powerful than you can POSSIBLY imagine! I’ll seal you here, and when it’s finished, my brothers and I will come to SLAUGHTER you, AND GUSU!”

Brothers?

Wen Jiao stands above the rubble on the side of the temple, ready to deal another blow, when—

A hand shoots out.

Smaller, elegant—almost delicate.

“No,” the god replies, his voice suddenly steady. “You won’t.”

He’s gripping Wen Jiao by his hair, fingers knotted tight.

Xie Lian lifts his face out of the rubble, dust and gravel falling from his hair.

Part of losing your wealth, power, and status, is learning what you’re good at naturally.

Xie Lian is clever. He’s strong. He’s determined.

But one of his strengths rises above the rest.

There is no pain that he can’t learn to live with. Nothing that he can’t endure. Even when he thought it was impossible, that his mind or his body would break down, he carries on.

And now, as his free hand wraps around the cursed shackle around his throat, he realizes:

It’s not dark anymore. Not completely.

He can’t see Wen Jiao’s face, the city streets around them—or even his own hand in front of his face.

But he can see clouds of light and dark, in varying shapes and colors.

And before him is a dark, hateful abyss—

Shaped like a serpent.

The cursed shackles on Xie Lian's body are ancient and powerful, yes—but they're also of heavenly make.

The cursed iron around Xie Lian's throat now is so vile, so filled with toxic death energy, that...

It must have damaged the shackle in Xie Lian's eyes.

That's probably why his eyes have been hurting with increasing frequency in the last year. The curse of Gusu has been breaking the shackle down. Not shattering it—that would take more power than Xie Lian can currently conceive of—

But there's a crack.

Just enough to allow a little bit of light through.

Enough to allow the god to see one thing, after eight centuries in the dark:

Spiritual Power.

"...Why are you smiling?!" Wen Jiao glares, thrashing in Xie Lian's hold, baring his fangs, snarling.

"DON'T YOU REALIZE WHAT SITUATION YOU'RE IN?!"

But his expression falters when he watches Xie Lian's fingers tighten around the cursed iron, twisting, until—

Until it crumbles.

A year ago, that caused him so much pain—he couldn't move. But Xie Lian can bear with itnow.

He balls his good hand up into a fist, cocking it back.

I'm going to hit you," the god explains calmly. "As hard as I can."

Wen Jiao's brow knits together, not understanding what a threat that truly is. After all, he's received quite a few blows from the god in the last hour—

BOOM!

The impact that Xie Lian's fist makes when it crashes into the demon's chest—for the first time now, with accuracy—

It sounds like thunder.

Wen Jiao is sent flying back, hundreds of feet—until he crashes into a structure.

A hundred foot tall divine statue.

One that he covered with an exterior shell, a century ago—to make it shine with his own likeness.

Now, that glamor shatters, and there are no masks left to cover what he truly is.

The Grand Temple stands free of guise now, it's name bright and clear across the entrance.

The statue behind him is not that of a red robed cultivator, but of a general, a broken sword in his hands.

And all around Gusu, the citizens rise to their feet, watching him with hateful eyes, realizing.

That the god they have prayed to for over a century has been a fraud.

That he is a liar, and a monster, and his words are hollow.

Now, a century later, Wen Jiao is back where he started.

Looked down on, detested—by the people of the great city of Gusu.

Not walled anymore, he supposes—it seems that insane little brat did away with that.

From the ground, Xie Lian kneels down next to a fallen soldier, and for the first time in nearly two centuries—

He rises with a blade in his hand.

"Ruoye," he murmurs, his shackle scorching as he takes in Wen Jiao's shape, tracking it's movements.

The bandage rushes to his side, nuzzling against his chin.

For the first time in eight centuries, Xie Lian isn't fighting blind. Not completely.

And now, he gives the spiritual tool a new order—one that he's never uttered, until now:

"Kill."

The spiritual tool goes still.

Most of the time, Ruoye has a gentle, relatively non-threatening aura. Much like it's master.

But there are moments—brief, terrifying moments—when it's true origins peak through.

Like it does now, shooting through the air, forming a noose as he wraps around Wen Jiao's neck.

Almost like a cruel imitation of the shackles he forced the people of Gusu to live with for generations.

The demon howls, forced down onto the ground, eyes bulging as he claws at the spiritual tool, but—

Suddenly, his hands can't move at all. Or—no, it isn't that.

It's that he doesn't have hands.

He has bloody stumps.

A boot presses down against his chest, forcing him back down as the noose around his neck tightens—and cursed shackles burn down upon him.

"You..." The demon stammers. "You...!" For the first time, Wen Jiao sounds afraid.

"You really don't know what to do in a fair fight," Xie Lian muses, the demon's blood dripping from the tip of his blade, "Do you?"

"...It...doesn't matter!" He snarls, thrashing under Xie Lian's boot, trying to throw him off, but Ruoye keeps him in place. “I-I WON’T DIE!”

His tail whips around, knocking an entire building down to rubble. “NO MORTAL CAN KILL ME—!”

He’s cut off with a bloody gurgle as the sword pierces his throat, helpless to do anything else but stare up into haunting, burning shackles.

“I told you before,” Xie Lian murmurs.

The blade twists slightly, and Wen Jiao’s eyes widen.

“There are no mortals here.”

With one last swipe of the sword, not even a magical one, just a normal, slightly dull piece of steel—

Xie Lian takes the demon Wen Jiao’s head, sending it tumbling down the street.

The god plunges the blade into Wen Jiao’s body, right through his heart, for good measure.

A great shriek rises through the streets of Gusu, dark energy swirling like toxic clouds in the air, swirling higher and higher, like a maelstrom, until…

They disperse.

Xie Lian takes a step back from the demon’s crumbling, fading body, catching his hand on a nearby structure—

And he smiles at the irony.

He can see spiritual and cursed energy now, yes. But he didn’t realize…

They were fighting on a bridge, this entire time.

Life is cyclical sometimes, in the ways that you never expect.

Xie Lian presses one bloodstained palm against his face as the people of Gusu begin to roar and cheer, their screams of joy and gratitude filling the sky.

And he whispers—

“Body in the abyss, heart in paradise.”

The earth almost seems to rumble in response, and he can’t stop himself from smiling.

How long has it been, since he said those words, not understanding the weight of them?

How far removed is the arrogant child he was then, from the broken man he is now?

For the first time in a century, the stars shine clearly on the city of Gusu, the moon turns clear.

After all—eclipses, no matter how powerful they might seem, always pass. A little boy sits by the city gates, and while the rest of the city is cheering— Liao Yong weeps.

Because he might be free, but...His friends are—

“Hey, hey...” A voice calls over, walking through the smoke. “You’re really gonna be the only one crying at a celebration?”

Liao Yong’s eyes widen, tear stricken.

“Girls don’t like that, y’know. You won’t be popular...”

His head whips around, voice trembling.

“X-Xiong Li?!”

The young man steps into the market square, hands clasped behind his back.

He wears clean, dark robes now—not a speck of blood on them.

And the sight of him makes all the children in the square cry out with joy.

“Gege!” They scream, running to him—but Liao Yong makes it there first, leaping into the young cultivator’s arms, clinging to his neck. “Gege! We thought you were gone!”

“Nah...” Xiong Li grins, holding Liao Yong close while the other kids cling to his legs. “Who wants to be a stuffy old god, anyways?” He huffs, pressing his cheek against Liao Yong's. "Not my style."

After all—in watching Xie Lian in the last year—Xiong Li learned one thing about being a god:

You're forced to watch people suffer more often than you can help them.

And Xiong Li—even if it means giving up something like Immortality —

That's okay.

He'd rather die, trying to help people, than live a thousand years up in the heavens.

That would feel like running away.

Besides—he grew up without a family. Without a past.

But this city, Gusu—it's his heritage.

His ancestors guarded the gates for a thousand years.

And these people—

Xiong Li wants to protect them, as best as he can—for as long as he can.

Liao Yong hugs him tight, still recovering from his tears.

"What about An-Xiong?!"

Xiong Li's smile dims slightly as he glances up at the stars, but it doesn't fade completely.

"...He's gonna make an amazing god," the cultivator mutters, shaking his head. That was his dream, to ascend. It would be a waste for Lan An to live a mortal life.

He's always been so special, and Xiong Li—he's never once, not in all his life, wanted to hold him back.

He just—

Sometimes, he wishes that they could go together, that's all.

"But we can pray to him every day, okay?"

Xiong Li for his part, plans on getting on his knees and saying the most embarrassing things he can think of.

"Even if he doesn't answer, that'll be just like normal, right?" That draws a reluctant, tearful laugh from Liao Yong.

Xie Lian returns to the square, quietly acknowledging the tears and gratitude of the city dwellers.

And, near the front gates of Gusu, he sees a small, bright pocket of Spiritual Power— that of Xiong Li.

But no other cultivator in sight.

He isn't surprised that the two of them would ascend.

Lan An is the most powerful cultivator of his generation—likely of the last five hundred years. And Xiong Li is greatly talented himself, but also...

His heart is a rare, special thing—that of a hero, and it's aura is strong.

He is surprised, however, by the fact that' Xiong Li willingly cast himself back down —and deeply impressed.

He's never encountered someone selfless enough to do something like that before. Or to see the shortcomings of godhood so quickly and so clearly.

Part of Xie Lian can't help but wonder how different his life might have been, if he had done that. If he still would have met...

BOOM!

There's another flash over Gusu, and a resounding crash as...

Xie Lian watches a light fall down from the sky, crashing back to earth.

So many times in his life, he's seen tragedy. To the point where he's learned to expect sad endings for the mortals he's come across.

His own story has so often been like a twisted fairy tale, filled with lessons he never wanted to learn.

Xiong Li turns his head, trembling.

Standing among the rubble, robes swirling around him, is a familiar face—one with eyes that have always felt like home.

The people of Gusu watch, stunned, and one of the children starts to speak, “An—?”

Xiong Li drops Liao Yong to the ground, heart pounding, and he runs.

As fast as his legs will take him, and it almost feels like flying, as he leaps into his arms.

And, like always, his friend catches him—pulling him close.

“LAN AN!” He cries.

No longer the boy lingering behind in the square, seated in a windowsill, pretending not to care.

They meet underneath the gates of Gusu, just as they have so many times before—this time, holding each other close, tears stinging at the corners of Xiong Li’s eyes.

“You...” He whispers, looking up into the cultivator’s eyes, “You came back.”

Lan An’s arms hold him tight, and his gaze is so warm, so heavy, it’s—It’s suffocating. A set of tears rolling down Xiong Li’s cheeks.

It’s annoying. It’s really, really so annoying.

“But...” He blinks the rest of his tears back, clearing his throat. “What about…?”

“About what?”

“Your...you...” Xiong Li sputters, trying to understand. “Your cultivation? You worked...so hard—how could you just give that all up?” He glances at the headband on Lan An’s forehead, “Your masters are going to—”

Lan An reaches up, pulling the white ribbon off without a word.

Xiong Li watches, his jaw slack as Lan An...

He places the headband in Xiong Li’s palm, folding his fingers around

it.

“I don’t care how long I live,” he explains softly.

Xiong Li’s eyes snap up to his, stricken.

Lan An has rarely been one for smiling—but he smiles at him now, so softly, like a man who already has everything in the world.

“As long as I live with you.”

Xiong Li makes a small choking sound, his fingers clutching the headband a little tighter, tears pouring down.

Xie Lian has seen so many stories in his life, none of them with happy endings. But now, for the first time…

Lan An’s brow creases slightly when he sees how hard Xiong Li is crying, “Did I say something—?”

He’s cut off when the raven haired teenager lunges up on his toes.

Kissing him with everyone he has, for the entire town square to see, arms flung around Lan An’s neck.

The taller youth barely has a chance to breathe, and when he does, Xiong Li is blubbering, fingers in his hair.

“I love you,” he mumbles, making Lan An’s eyes widen sharply.

“I love you so much!”

For the first time in Xie Lian’s long, often painful life, he witnesses a love story.

Lan An doesn’t say it back, not exactly—but he doesn’t need to, not when he groans under his breath, letting out the word—

“Finally.”

Xiong Li’s brow furrows.

“Hey!” He whines, “Don’t complain, I’m the one that kissed you first—!”

But before he can say another word, he’s being kissed. Kissed so fiercely, his eyes slip shut, and his toes curl inside his shoots as he melts into it, hugging Lan An close.

Liao Yong gags. “Get a room!”

Lan An pulls back, giving the child an annoyed glare, but Xiong Li just laughs, hugging him tight, his face pressed into Lan An’s neck. Radiating a happiness so sincere, Xie Lan almost feels the warmth of it.

Gusu is an ancient place, one of powerful magic and old blood.

A place of curses, perseverance, and miracles.

And now, not a single citizen within the city gates wears chains.

Well—just one.

Wen Sicong, who is sentenced to banishment, along with his young son, Wen Mao.

For the first time in a century, the Grand Palace of Ming Guang stands tall, it’s doors open to believers once more.

And the hope Xie Lian feels in the air when the people of Gusu rush forward to offer their prayers…

It almost brings tears to his eyes.

On the steps of the temple—the ones that aren’t demolished—sits a young cultivator, wearing simple blue robes, his hair flowing loose in the breeze.

And in his lap, arms hugging his neck, silk headband knotted between his fingers, is the Prince of Gusu, smiling up at him.

“Hey, Lan An…” He leans forward, their noses bumping together, “I’ve been thinking.”

“Oh, joy.”

He gets a swat on the head for that one.

“Wanna be cultivation partners?”

Lan An’s eyes widen, then soften as Xiong Li smirks at him.

“Or are you still waiting for your fated—?”

He's silenced with another kiss. His mouth is almost sore, from how much he's kissed the teenager in one night.

Xiong Li's had his first, second, third, add a few dozen more kisses—in just a few hours.

"Yes, I would."

Xiong Li smiles against him. "I've got some ideas."

"Like?"

"Well…We're probably gonna be pretty busy in the city during the day, so," he leans back, "why don't we cultivate at night? That's when the demons come out anyway."

Honestly—it's not a terrible idea.

"Oh—We could even call them night hunts!"

"Alright," Lan An agrees—finding the name a little silly, but…

It seems to make Xiong Li happy.

"You both did well out there." The teenagers glance up, only to see a white robed cultivator standing a few steps below them.

One they both recognize, now, as a God.

"…Well, we definitely would've died if you weren't handling the giant terrifying demon the entire time," Xiong Li shrugs, "So, thank you."

Xie Lian opens his mouth to say he's dealt with worse, but…opts not to, because that probably isn't the best thing to say.

"And I wouldn't have been able to free all of these people." Xie Lian shrugs, looking back and forth between the two young men. "Both of you did that."

It's interesting.

He's starting to get a grip on it, seeing spiritual energy, but…

Lan An's and Xiong Li's looks the same.

So much so, that with them sitting together like this—they look like one person instead of two.

“...What are the two of you going to do now?” He murmurs. They look at each other, and Xiong Li smiles.

“Rebuild the city. Maybe teach some disciples here and there.” He pushes some of Lan An’s hair behind his ears, grinning when he sees how red they are. “We’ll figure out the rest as we go.”

Xie Lian nods, and...he can’t walk away in good conscience without pointing it out, so..

“If you stay like this, without worshippers...you’ll fade away.”

They’ll likely live longer than most mortals, having ascended, but...eventually, they’ll pass on.

The cultivators look at one another—neither one seeming bothered by the aspect.

And then Xiong Li says something—words that will stick with Xie Lian for centuries to come.

“It’s not about how long your life is,” Xiong Li murmurs, never looking away from Lan An’s face. “It’s about how you live it.”

Xie Lian pauses a little startled by the sentiment, and...Moved.

He bows his head, clasping his hands in front of him.

“I wish you both the best.”

He turns to leave, and Xiong Li frowns, raising an eyebrow. “...You’re leaving already? You can stay, we—”

He stops when the god looks back at him with a gentle smile.

“I finished what I came here to do—and it’s best if I don’t stay in one place for too long.”

Xiong Li nods, watching him go, sitting contentedly in Lan An’s arms, and resolving to himself...

That he’s going to say a prayer to the Flower Crowned Martial God. Everyone says he’s a god of misfortune, but the teenager knows the truth.

That the Blind Weaver of Gusu is a god of human kindness.

Of justice.

And suffering, yes—but part of suffering is overcoming it.

The sun begins to rise over Gusu, and for the first time in a century, it looks down upon a free city.

Lan An's lips press against his hair.

Xiong Li relaxes against him, closing his eyes, not knowing what path they'll take from here. But he knows that it will be theirs.

And there is no one else he would rather walk beside.

Xie Lian steps back out onto the central plains, the wind in his hair. Sunlight on his face.

He's tired, but...

He reaches into the front of his robes, tugging on a silver chain—lifting the ashes to his lips.

"Good morning, Hong-er," he whispers.

He's said this two hundred and fifty five thousand, six hundred and fifty two times.

"Today is going to be a good day."

He's said that all those times, not always believing it, but always repeating the words anyway.

And now...

In the space of one moment, the entire sky flashes with light.

CRASH!

Gusu is a city of magic, miracles, and tragedy. Known for so many different tales, but now...

Now, it will be known for one tale of all others.

That on the night that the Great Walls of Gusu came crashing down, three gods were born again.

No longer the Great Walled City of the North—but the City of Three

Ascensions.

When Xie Lian lands…it’s quiet.

Warm, even.

Only the gentlest breeze. And the road beneath his feet—it feels like marble, inlaid with gold.

For a moment, there’s only disbelief, his eyes wide, staring at the golden, blinding light all around him. Formless, but…

He knows where he is.

“Wait,” a voice calls out. “Is that him AGAIN?!”

Oh.

Xie Lian cracks a sheepish smile, rubbing the back of his head with an awkward laugh as the officials in the streets of the Heavenly Capital groan.

Oh boy.

“Um…Hello everyone!”

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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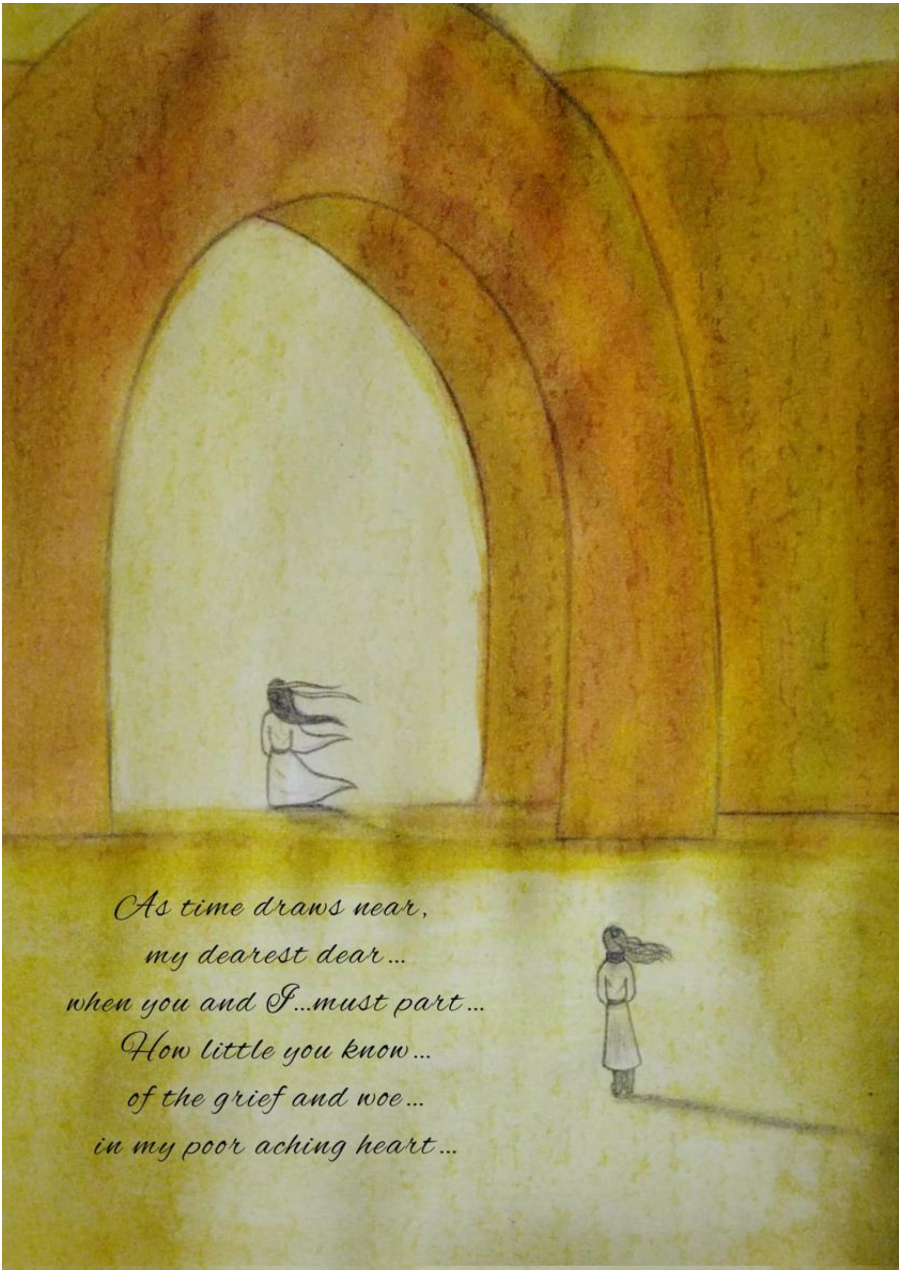
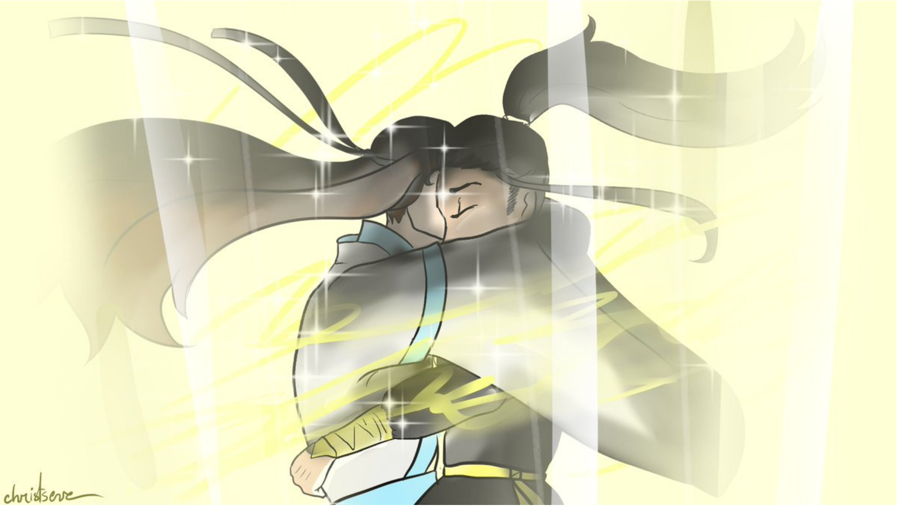

As time draws near,
my dearest dear...
when you and I...must part...
How little you know...
of the grief and woe...
in my poor aching heart...

CREDIT: ESME

Lan An and Xiong Li after their Ascension



CREDIT: EVE

Mei Nianqing and Tonglu Hudie: "I know you are not mine, but I have always been yours."

[image]

CREDIT: SEONG

FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO CONTINUE ON TWITTER, YOU CAN DO SO HERE

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you to Seong, Eve, and Esme for their beautiful work, and allowing me to sharer it! I appreciate it so much!

And CONGRATULATIONS! 270k words and 39 chapters later, and...We've made it to Book One! ha. haha. Thank you so much to everyone who has been along for the ride, leaving kudos, comments, and supporting the story in so many ways! i'm really proud of it, and I couldn't do it without the encouragement I've gotten from all of you!

xoxo, Evie

Old Friends, Familiar Problems

Chapter Summary

> “Good luck, your highness—I wish you all of heaven's blessings.”
>
> Xie Lian stops in the middle of walking down the steps. It’s been a while since someone used that phrase with him. It takes him back to...Such a different time in his life.
>
> But still, there’s a nostalgia to giving her the traditional response.
>
> “And by Heaven Official’s Blessing...” He murmurs, glancing back at Ling Wen over his shoulder—and there’s such a warmth in his smile, lacking any guile—it leaves Ling Wen a little shell shocked by its honesty.
>
> “No Paths Are Bound.”

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

Yin Yu isn’t the type to move quickly. See—

His boss is sort of like a cat. Or, well—a jaguar that lives in a house, so everyone just pretends he’s a house cat, when in reality, he’s a terrifying creature that could rip you limb from limb on a whim.

The point is...

If you run too fast, he’s going to think you’re running from him, and he’s going to chase you down and play with you like you’re a small rodent.

It’s just—

Best not to show any sign of distress or weakness. Not in Paradise Manor. But today? Yin Yu is sprinting down the hall.

So fast, he nearly skids into a higher ranking ghost when he rounds the corner, only to get set on his feet by a firm grip on his shoulders.

“Where are you going in such a hurry, grunt?”

“...” The Ghost Officer sends Shuo an annoyed look. “Is he in his office?”

“Did you fuck up?”

“No?” Yin Yu glares, his white mask hanging off of the side of his head, slightly askew in his distress. “Actually, today is a pretty big deal for me—”

Shuo bumps his shoulder against Yin Yu’s as he walks past. “If it doesn’t involve you getting your ass kicked, it’s boring.”

“...” The former official glares after him, unmoved by the slightly flirtatious wink that the Savage Ghost throws back at him.

Normally, he puts up with Shuo’s constant teasing, but today?

Today is the biggest day in Yin Yu’s career.

Well. His post-heavenly career, anyway.

When he bursts in through the doors of the Ghost King’s office, the first words he hears are—

“Have you suffered a head injury?”

Yin Yu stops in the doorway, a little awkward. “...No, sir.” Hua Cheng is facing away from him, leaning against his desk.

There’s some scribblings on the blackboard propped against the wall. Illegible, but something that he and Blackwater were fussing over, the last time the water demon was in Ghost City.

The one benefit of having Crimson Rain’s handwriting? No need to classify your notes.

“I’m trying to find out if there’s some reason that you’ve forgotten how to knock.”

Yin Yu stops, clearing his throat. “Apologies sir, but I have an urgent update.”

“That being?”

“Well,” he takes a deep breath, “first, I’d like to remind you that the holidays are coming.”

Hua Cheng turns his head to look back at him over his shoulder, raising one slender eyebrow.

“And?”

Yin Yu swallows dryly. “And...you said we could discuss my pay after the mid-autumn festival, which isn’t that far away.”

“But it isn’t today.”

“No,” the Ghost Officer agrees. “I just—hope you’ll keep this in mind, when we discuss it.”

“Keep what in mind?”

Yin Yu takes a deep breath, setting a scroll down on Hua Cheng’s desk:

“I found the Crown Prince of Xianle.”

In the hundred and fifty years that he’s been working for Hua Cheng, Yin Yu has never seen his focus sharpen with such swiftness or such intensity.

“Are you sure?”

He’s cautious about getting his hope up after so many missed calls, but Yin Yu nods vehemently.

“I know where he was as of—” He glances at the hourglass on Hua Cheng’s desk, “Four hours ago. Even if he left, assuming he’s traveling on foot, the search radius would only be three hundred miles.”

It’s closer than they’ve ever gotten. “How?”

“Well...”

It’s been an operation eighty five years in the making. But that’s fine—Yin Yu thrives on small details. Working in the trenches is his specialty.

He opens the scroll he carried in with him, unrolling it across Hua Cheng’s desk.

Inside, four different swatches of fabric are pinned against the paper. “See—each of these are attempted knock offs of one pattern.”

Hua Cheng examines them closely.

Each one has an interlocking gold chain pattern, overlaid with pink lotus blossoms.

“But look at this one?” Yin Yu rolls the scroll open a little further, and Hua Cheng takes in the fifth swatch.

All of the options were lovely, but this one—it’s much more detailed, to the point where it almost looks like the flowers in the pattern are living.

“Human hands can’t achieve that level of detail,” Yin Yu explains, “I’ve had four different masters try, and they can’t. This pattern—it’s used in Bridal Brocades for royalty all over, but it’s impossibly rare.”

“And the prince made it?”

Yin Yu nods quickly.

“So I stopped tracking him, and I started tracking the silk.”

It’s clever, Hua Cheng won’t lie. After all—the silk itself isn’t impacted by Xie Lian’s luck once it leaves his possession.

“The last known sale was in a village in the North, a little over a century ago.”

“That’s not particularly helpful.”

“No, but then, there was word that someone was making perfect replicas—in Gusu.”

The mention of that makes Hua Cheng stiffen.

He and He Xuan have both been monitoring the situation with Wen Jiao for the last sixty years, debating.

Mount Tonglu has been overdue, and the thought that he might be a potential candidate is somewhat concerning.

Zhao Beitong would never accept him, that isn’t the concern. It’s more that he might get in the way of other candidates Hua Cheng or He Xuan might have in mind.

The ghost realm might be independent and disorganized compared to the heavens— but it isn’t free from politics.

And Wen Jiao is especially distasteful in Hua Cheng's eyes.

"And just last night, during the Lunar Eclipse—the walls of Gusu came down. It's highly unlikely that it was a coincidence—and one of the scouts said they saw a blind Taoist fighting Wen Jiao in the city center."

Hua Cheng already has E-Ming at his belt. "Is he in danger?"

"No, Wen Jiao is dead—but it's a confirmed sighting of him, and it was only a few hours ago, so the odds are..."

Yin Yu trails off, finally feeling satisfaction in the knowledge that, after eighty long, hard years of investigation, his hard work has finally come to fruition.

Finally, he'll get a raise. Maybe some respect around here. His long term goal is for Hua Cheng to put him over Shuo, just so Yin Yu can see the look on that smug bastard's face when—

While Yin Yu is lost in thought, a voice pipes up in Hua Cheng's head.

'You know, instead of making your password that fucking unpleasant, you could just only give it out to people you actually want to talk to.'

The Ghost King rolls his eyes.

'Too late, I already gave it to you.'

'Charming.'

'Fuck off, I'm busy—'

'He's here.'

Hua Cheng holds up a hand, making Yin Yu fall silent as he turns around, pressing his fingertips to his temples.

'He's what?'

'The Crown Prince of Xianle,'

Hua Cheng's eyes widen sharply.

'He's ascended again. Keep the array open, and I'll tell you where he goes next.'

Unfortunately for Yin Yu, he was four hours too late for his tip to be useful. And therefore—

Eighty years of hard work were essentially wasted, in one fell swoop.

He'll have to find another way to get that raise, and Hua Cheng…

Well, he's already disappeared.

The Grand Martial Hall is a common meeting place in the upper court of the heavens, but the Heavenly Imperial Residence?

It's a rather exclusive location, one that few ever have the honor of visiting on purpose, and even fewer are allowed to frequent regularly.

The Water Master doesn't seem particularly honored, draped across the back of a chaise lounge, rolling over when the Heavenly Emperor's gaze drifts in his direction.

Jun Wu sets down his report with a raised eyebrow. "Have I offended you?"

"I should be asking you that."

Shi Wudu is proud. Like a pet that knows it's expensive, from a good breeder. He won't actually say what's bothering him, he'll just suffer in silence.

Loud silence.

But Jun Wu has some idea of what the issue is.

"You never told me to stop."

It isn't fair.

Jun Wu is the one that's in a mood, not him. He was fine, when the Emperor summoned him this morning. Now, he aches. And he feels…

Shi Wudu doesn't want to examine what he's feeling, so he labels it as annoyance, and nothing more.

Annoyance isn't painful.

"You never asked me if I was alright."

That statement is a little more pointed than what he might usually make in protest— but when Jun Wu tries to examine the young god's expression, Shi Wudu snaps his fan open in front of his face, obscuring himself from view.

"Forget it."

Before the Emperor can ask more, the doors to the residence open.

Only one person can enter without being summoned, you see—and that would be the head Civil God, Ling Wen.

Her shoes click softly against the tile, scrolls clutched in her arms. "Your majesty," she murmurs.

She politely keeps her gaze straight ahead, sparing her friend some dignity as he rises from his seat, adjusting his outer robes as he makes his way out of the room.

He never needs to be told to leave—actually, if Ling Wen was being honest...

He always seems eager to go.

Almost like he's escaping from something.

The doors shut behind him, and, without making much more of it, she continues.

"We've had a rather eventful morning. Three ascensions. Two cast themselves back down, and the third—"

"Was Xianle," Jun Wu mutters dryly. "I know."

"..." Ling Wen nods, slightly...surprised by his mood. He's always been fond of the Crown Prince. She thought he would be happy to hear of his return. "Unfortunately, his ascension was rather destructive. The palace of Nan Yang was severely damaged, and Xuan Zhen was nearly —"

"Get to the point."

Normally, he's a bit more...polite than this, but Ling Wen knows better to comment, dipping her chin.

“The total damage is close to eight hundred thousand merits. It’s unlikely he’ll have a means of paying back the debt, given his…”

Jun Wu arches an eyebrow

“You’re trying to clean up the mess for him?” He muses, leaning his chin on his hand. “That’s surprisingly kind of you, Ling Wen.”

The Civil Goddess doesn’t reply, simply waiting for him to offer up a response. That’s the best thing to do, when his mood is like this.

Jun Wu is quiet for a moment, watching the door through which Wudu just disappeared, thinking. And then the idea comes to him. Something that has the guise of being helpful—but really, it’s somewhat vindictive.

“…Let him handle the Mount Yu Jun case.”

Ling Wen’s eyes widen.

“Sir—you mean the Ghost Groom? That’s a high level case, and he’s only just faced a calamity. He might need more time to recover—”

“It’ll be up to him,” Jun Wu shrugs. “But I doubt he’ll decline if you make him the offer. He’s always been willing to face a challenge.”

“…” Ling Wen bows her head in agreement, “If that’s what you desire, your highness —then I’ll pass it on.”

“Good,” Jun Wu sighs. “And we’ll have to organize a meeting of the grand deities relatively soon. There’s been quite a bit of discord recently that we need to discuss.”

“Yes, your grace.”

“And make sure Ming Guang receives his assignments for his next deployment. That way he doesn’t have to bother returning to the Heavens unnecessarily. We don’t want to waste his time.”

“We do have other Martial Gods available who could take on the work.” It’s rare for her to make such a statement, but…

The workload that the emperor has placed on Ming Guang in the last few decades has been blatantly overbearing. Pei never complains, that isn’t in his nature, but…

It’s inefficient, when there are other options.

Xuan Zhen, Nan Yang, and Quan Yizhen are all powerful martial gods with the time and ability to take on the workload. And it—

"I believe I just deferred one of his cases to Xianle, didn't I?" Jun Wu reminds her. His tone is calm. She knows better than to push it.

"There are responsibilities that come with being the second most powerful Martial God. Pei Ming understands that."

Ling Wen bows her head once again in acknowledgement, but says little more on the matter.

She doesn't believe it's anything to do with that. Not for one moment.

Pei Ming has been in his position for a thousand years now. His relationship with Jun Wu is longer than even that of the Crown Prince of Xianle.

But only in the last century or so did his workload change so significantly, and Ling Wen, well—t's not her business, but...

Something about this feels distinctly personal.

In any case—she has work to do, and vocalizing sympathy for Pei Ming any further won't further the cause.

"Thank you for your time, your highness."

"Of course."

Ling Wen descends from the Imperial Residence—and she gets to work.

Xie Lian finds himself feeling...

Somewhat lost.

It's been so long since he was in the Heavenly Capital—he would be lying if he said that he knew what to do with himself.

How did he spend his time up here, before? Shouldn't he be...

"Your highness?"

He glances up, unaccustomed to being called by that title now, and he can't exactly see who it is—but he can see the calm, gray aura of a civil god.

“You might not remember me. I’m the head civil god, Ling Wen?”
“Oh,” Xie Lian blinks, then smiles politely.

“I remember—but back when I was here last, you were a deputy I believe…” He trails off, trying not to date himself too much—he already feels sharply out of place. “Congratulations on the promotion.”

“It was centuries ago, but thank you,” Ling Wen replies calmly.

“I came to congratulate you as well.”

Xie Lian smiles again, “Well, I certainly wasn’t expecting this to happen today, but—”

“You’ve won this year’s contest of ‘God most likely to be kicked out of heaven,” She explains, and Xie Lian’s smile freezes.

“I…did?”

“Yes,” Ling Wen murmurs, “And you won one hundred merit credits. Congratulations.”

Xie Lian knew that the Heavens weren’t exactly busy these days, but this contest does seem…admittedly silly. In any case, he forces himself to keep smiling.

“I suppose it’s my lucky day.”

“Do you know why you won?”

Xie Lian shakes his head, and Ling Wen points in the direction of the central heavenly avenue, “Take a look at that bell, over there.”

The god pauses with a somewhat awkward smile, “I…um…I can’t do that.”

Ling Wen pauses, her eyebrows raising.

“…You still have your shackles, your highness?”

Even Xie Lian is surprised—after all, the second time he ascended, his original shackles disappeared, but…

“I’m sure there’s a reason for it. In any case—no, I can’t see the bell.”

“…I suppose it’s all the same,” Ling Wen mutters, “Because there is no bell. It was toppled by your ascension, as well as several palaces."

"...Oh," the crown prince winces. "I'm sorry, property damage has been a consistent issue of mine."

Ling Wen doesn't seem particularly surprised to hear it. "The bell almost crushed an official passing underneath when it fell."

"...were they alright?!"

"Yes, he was a martial god—so he simply sliced it in half. But your entrance did not endear you to the Heavenly Court."

Xie Lian didn't expect they would be endeared to begin with, so! Good news! He isn't disappointed.

"Whatever the cost of repairs is—I can pay them back, I just need time—"

"To pull together 800,000 merit credits?"

The martial god pales, and Ling Wen sighs.

Jun Wu's mood, for whatever reason, is putting everyone in a bind today.

"Don't worry, your highness," she mutters. She didn't have much of an opinion of the martial god over the years, but Pei has always spoken of him highly.

And, in spite of his shortcomings...

Ling Wen trusts Pei's judgement of a man.

"I have a plan."

Which is what leads them directly to the Heavenly Communication Array. It's been a long time since Xie Lian used one and...

He finds the experience distinctly unpleasant.

Everyone is too loud—there's too much at once.

And most of them—pretty much all of them, actually—are complaining about him.

"What was the Emperor thinking, letting him ascend again?!"

"It's not up to him, if he had a choice, I'm sure he—"

"Are you kidding?! He practically lets that child get away with everything."

It's odd, to be eight centuries old, and still have people calling him a child.

Ling Wen clears her throat, stepping forward. "Everyone, could I have your attention? I have a request from the emperor."

That is enough to draw the yelling down to a hush, and Xie Lian is relieved.

"There's a disturbance on Mount Yu Jun that the Heavenly Emperor and General Ming Guang have been too preoccupied to deal with. Could anyone spare a pair of martial deities to assist?"

A voice cuts through the array, sharp and quick to see through her.

"The emperor has made no such request before regarding the Yu Jun case. Are you really just trying to cover for someone else?"

"..." Ling Wen remains silent for a moment, and the voice continues. "This is about the Crown Prince, isn't it?"

The one who answer's isn't Ling Wen.

"It is." Xie Lian's voice rings out through the communication array, and everyone grows even more silent, like you couldn't even hear a pin drop. "In any case, it's alright. The fault here is mine, I don't mind handling it by myself."

After all, he's always by himself. It really isn't such a big deal.

"...If you can," the voice replies flatly. "I think we're all a little skeptical after that entrance."

Ling Wen reaches over, tugging Xie Lian's sleeve in a gentle reminder. "Your highness—the bell."

Oh.

Xie Lian winces.

"...I'm sorry the bell almost hit you," he mutters. "I swear—it wasn't on purpose. Could I ask your name?"

There’s an awkward, immediate rumble through the communication array. Xie Lian pauses, unsure of what he said wrong, until…

“Your highness—that’s General Xuan Zhen.”

Well. That explains why the voice was a little familiar.

Oh boy.

Xie Lian winces again, knowing better than anyone just how personally Mu Qing is going to take Xie Lian not recognizing him, but also knowing that saying anything more would only make matters worse.

But before there’s an opportunity for him to dig an even deeper hole, he hears— “WHO DESTROYED MY PALACE?!”

Xie Lian bites back the urge to cover his face with his hands.

“WAS IT YOU?!”

Mu Qing’s voice is far more snide now, than it was before.

“Unlike your thoughts, the world doesn’t revolve around me. I had very little to do with it.”

Xie Lian’s eyebrows shoot up, and Feng Xin sputters.

“Watch your mouth before I—!”

“Before you what?!”

“It was me, actually.” Xie Lian speaks up. “Apologies, General Nan Yang.”

Nan Yang and Xuan Zhen stop arguing instantly—but Xie Lian can’t see the sharp look that the two share, before immediately looking away.

Rather than respond to his question directly—Feng Xin remains as gruff as ever. “…I have business to attend to. I’m going, now.”

Xie Lian’s smile turns a little sad.

Honestly, given the way that he and Feng Xin parted ways—the fact that he isn’t cursing the prince’s name is already more than Xie Lian deserves.

"...Thank you for trying, Ling Wen," the god murmurs, exiting the communication array. "I can handle this."

The Civil Goddess grimaces, thinking back on what Jun Wu said just before—and... she's a little shocked.

No one ever thanks her for her work. Not really. It's just expected. "I'm...only doing my job, your highness." She replies.

"Do you need any heavenly arms?"

Xie Lian thinks on it for a moment. In honesty—he's still recovering from the battle in Gusu.

He bears with pain now, but the bandages sound his throat now are more than usual —

The iron shackle did significant damage.

Even so...

The last true spiritual weapon he used was Fangxin, and...

Xie Lian can't remember, in the years from when Bai Wuxiang first gave him that weapon, or all the centuries after, if it did him any good.

Just the memory of it makes one of his hands start to tremble slightly. "No."

Ling Wen sends him a surprised look, and Xie Lian grips his hand silently in an effort to stop the shaking, then smiles.

"They don't do me much good, I'm afraid."

Ling Wen glances him over, then nods.

Right, the shackles.

"Very well, I suppose a scroll wouldn't be helpful—"

"I can still use those quite well, actually." Xie Lian murmurs, taking it from her. "This has all the information I need?"

Ling Wen nods, demurring when the crown prince tries to thank her again, bowing her head. "Good luck, your highness—I wish you all of heaven's blessings."

Xie Lian stops in the middle of walking down the steps. It's been a while since someone used that phrase with him. It takes him back to...

Such a different time in his life.

But still, there's a nostalgia to giving her the traditional response.

"And by Heaven Official's Blessing..." He murmurs, glancing back at Ling Wen over his shoulder—and there's such a warmth in his smile, lacking any guile—it leaves Ling Wen a little shell shocked by its honesty.

"No Paths Are Bound."

There was one thing Xie Lian underestimated about the difficulty of this matter, however.

He knows the path out of Heaven, he took it plenty of times in his youth, but...

He didn't remember how...nimble you had to be, on the path back down. That not having your sight...

It can actually be quite a hindrance when dropping that far through the air.

He smacks into not one, not two, but three clouds on the way down—leaving himself rather scraped and bruised by the time he lands, but...Xie Lian sighs, picking the leaves out of his hair as he sits up.

"You've had worse," he mutters, sitting up—rubbing his lower back slightly when he does. It doesn't hurt, but with his body's slowed rate of recovery—

(He's still healing from Gusu) —it'll be slightly inconvenient. But that doesn't slow him down.

He's quick to make his way to a local tea house, ordering himself a drink before he goes about trying to collect information from the locals. After all—his task is to hunt a ghost. The best way to find it is to do preliminary research, but...

Something makes him pause.

Clink!

It's this gentle chiming, almost like a bell, but not like any that Xie

Lian has ever head before.

There's something so gentle and clear about it—almost musical.

Clink!

The world went dark again, when he descended from the heavens—there isn't much spiritual energy around to light the way, but...

Now, from the corner of his eye, there's this gentle, silvery light.

Xie Lian turns his head to follow it, and his breath catches.

A...butterfly?

Xie Lian's first instinct is to reach out for it, curious—expecting the creature to flutter away, but...

It doesn't.

It lands delicately on his fingertips, crawling up and over his knuckles before sitting there—almost like it's looking up at him, wings flapping delicately.

All he can think of, in that moment—is that's beautiful.

Can't stop the small smile that crosses his lips, remembering how his mother used to scold him as a child—always chasing butterflies,

It's pleasantly against his skin, almost tingling, like a little... There's a sharp pang in Xie Lian's heart.

It's just a little cool to the touch, almost like a ghost fire.

'Your highness...'

Xie Lian bites his lip, closing his eyes as he forces those thoughts down.

And what kind of butterfly is made from pure spiritual energy, anyway? He—

But as soon as he opens his eyes, the butterfly is already gone, and he's just...

Alone, in the dark.

The god lets out a heavy sigh, closing his eyes once more. It's better not to have them open in a place anyway, in case a mortal sees—

'Your highness?'

The sound of Ling Wen's voice in his private array startles him—most people don't work their way out around the password—

(Poor Feng Xin really does say it a thousand times every time.)

(Xie Lian misses him.)

'Yes?'

'I have good news—two deputies have come to your aid.'

Xie Lian is a little surprised to hear it, since no one was particularly forthcoming during the meeting, but...

When he looks back across the table, two figures are already there.

One has a hard, firm aura—almost earthen in color, though not in an unpleasant way.

The other is spiky, a little inconsistent around the edges—and with an icy shade that looks frigid, but warmer shades of magenta towards the core.

Well. These must be the officials in question, then.

Xie Lian sips his tea a little awkwardly, then smiles. "Have we met before?"

There's a long beat of silence—and from the sounds of their movements, Xie Lian can only assume that they're shaking their heads. "Well, could I ask your—?"

"Nan Feng," the hard aura'd man on the right mutters, his voice deep and warm.

"...Fu Yao," says the other.

"And the generals you work for—?"

"Nan Yang."

"Xuan Zhen."

Xie Lian pales slightly, startled.

Neither of the martial gods seemed particularly happy to see him in the communication array before. And Xie Lian understood that, but…why help him now?

“They…sent you?”

Nan Feng is quiet, but Fu Yao replies rather quickly, “Neither of them know that we’re here, actually.”

That makes Xie Lian relax a little. “And you know who I am?”

“The Crown Prince of Xianle,” Nan Feng replies easily.

“The Heart of Humanity,” Fu Yao mutters, his tone flat.

“…It kinda sounds like you’re rolling your eyes right now,” Xie Lian admits, laughing a little awkwardly.

“That’s because he is,” Nan Feng glares. “Just go away if you’re gonna have a shit attitude, alright? We don’t need you.”

“Ha. Why don’t you go? You’re the useless one!”

“Now, now…” Xie Lian starts, finding this whole thing vaguely familiar, but…

In the Private Communication array between Feng Xin and Mu Qing, a very different conversation is unfolding.

‘Nan Feng?! How stupid are you?!’

‘Wh—?!’ He blanches, glancing at Xie Lian. *‘What?!’*

‘Oh,’ Fu Yao rolls his eyes, crossing his arms, *‘I’m gonna pose as my own Deputy God so the Crown Prince doesn’t know I’m helping him. I know the best Alias! I’m gonna pick my first name as a mortal, and my surname as a god, he’ll never put it together!’*

Nan Feng gets redder and redder, all the way up to his ears, *‘It could be a coincidence!’*

‘At best, it makes you look like some creepy fanboy that’s obsessed with Nan Yang.’

‘Then I’ll tell him that’s my god name and make up a mortal name!’

‘As much as I’d enjoy watching you try…you’re better off just sticking with it,’ Fu Yao shrugs, only to jump when Nan Feng pointedly (and silently) shoves a finger in his face.

‘And what’s with that skin?’

The ‘Deputy’ God smiles slyly, tilting his head, *‘What do you mean?’*

‘It looks a lot like me!’ Nan Feng snaps, looking him over. Well, a smaller, prettier version of him, but still—

Fu Yao’s smile widens as he twirls a lock of hair around his finger, crossing his legs under the table.

‘Hate to break it to you—but I just picked the ugliest skin I could think of.’

A vein pops in Nan Feng’s shoulder as he goes to launch himself at the other god, and Xie Lian—who has been listening to their mostly silent exchange, is absolutely baffled, but also concerned.

“Hey! Can you two work together to help me, or is this going to be a problem?” Nan Feng is already gripping Fu Yao by the throat, irritated.

Even in this form, he just has to wear a choker, doesn’t he?

They glare at one another before backing off with a huff.

“Of course!”

Xie Lian is quick to explain the terms of their case, offering the details he knows.

About the brides who have been stolen from the Mountain over the last century. Sixteen of them—until recently, when an officer’s daughter was taken.

All by the Ghost Groom of Mount Yu Jun.

“So,” Fu Yao sighs, walking out of the tea house with his arms crossed, lingering behind the Crown Prince and Nan Feng, watching them walk side by side, “How do we find hi—oh, you’ve got to be kidding me.”

Xie Lian blinks, confused. “…What?”

“Can’t you see it?” Nan Feng frowns

“...No,” Xie Lian shakes his head. “I still have the shackles.”

Nan Feng and Fu Yao glance at one another, visibly concerned—but neither says a word.

“It’s a bridal sedan,” Fu Yao mutters. “Someone’s really having a wedding now of all times.”

Xie Lian frowns.

That’s just too dangerous, they can’t possibly allow— “You can’t!” A voice, that of a young girl cries out.

Nan Feng and Fu Yao watches as the young woman rushes over to the bridal sedan, struggling with the escorts.

“Miss!” She cries. “They’re just using you!”

“Would you just shut up!” One of the young men near the front of the group grumbles. “Stop getting in the way, you stupid little brat!”

“Honestly, it’s a good thing an ugly dog like you refused to dress up for us anyway! We would’ve been screwed!”

Xie Lian’s frown deepens.

“She is kind of plain,” Fu Yao comments, looking her over—and Xie Lian sends him a disapproving look.

“You shouldn’t say that about a young lady, no matter what she looks like.” The god mutters.

Nan Feng watches the other deputy get scolded—infinitely satisfied.

Well—until the young woman struggling with the group stumbles forward, and there’s a distinctly wooden sound from inside the bridal sedan, and the clunk of something falling out.

From the sound of it they were using a mannequin instead of an actual bride. “...Look what you did!”

One of them snaps. “The ghost groom might have already seen it! Now we’ll have to come up with something completely different!”

“You shouldn’t go there anyway!” The girl—Xiao Ying, from the way the others are shouting their grievances—cries out. “It’s too dangerous!”

“Mind your own damn business!” The gang leader of the group snarls, giving her a shove.

Xie Lian stiffens when he hears a rip—likely the girl’s skirt—and the sound of her falling to the ground.

“I’ll teach you not to stick that ugly nose where it doesn’t belong!”

Xiao Ying stiffens, her eyes widening with fear as she throws her arms around her face, cringing when the man pulls his foot back to kick her, but…

It never lands.

There’s a grip on the gang leader’s wrist, his eyes widening slightly before that grip twists and shoves.

He’s sent stumbling back, flipping head over heels before landing on the ground with a violent—

THUD!

The group of criminals stops, looking at one another nervously as a white robed cultivator stands before them, tipping back his bamboo hat as he stands over the young woman.

Still, in spite of the violence, he smiles pleasantly. “I think that’s enough, don’t you?”

Their leader sits up, rubbing his wrist with annoyance. “What kind of witch are you?!” He hisses, rising to his feet. “And why don’t you mind your own business?!”

The cultivator’s smile never fades. “I could ask you why you lay your hands on defenseless young women, but life is full of mysteries, huh?”

“…” He glares, looking over to his men, “GET—!”

BOOM!

Nan Feng’s fist slams into the side of the tea house as a warning.

Which is very impressive, obviously—given the fact that the front entrance shatters along with a nearby tree.

But rather costly.

It only takes a moment before the group is sent scrambling away with terror, and Xie Lian can kneel down to offer the young lady a hand.

“Are you alright? Oh…” He trails off, remembering the sound of something ripping. That was her skirt, right?

She glances up shakily, just in time to see the handsome young man smiling down at her, and—

That he’s removing his outer robe. Quickly, her expression shifts.

CRACK!

Both Nan Feng and Fu Yao gawks as they watch the prince get slapped —quite hard, actually.

(Xie Lian couldn’t see the change in her expression, so he obviously didn’t know to try to dodge it.)

“P-PERVERT!” She shouts, leaping to her feet and scrambling away. “Ah…”

Xie Lian sighs, dropping his robes back around his shoulders. “I suppose I should have realized how that was going to come off…”

“I’m surprised she thinks anyone could be interested at all…”

“Fu Yao.” Xie Lian sends him a stern look. “Enough.”

He can’t see the tense shift in the deputy god’s expression. The way he crosses his arms over his chest and looks away, his gaze…conflicted.

“Well,” Xie Lian sighs, patting himself off. “We should probably find a place to stay…” He glances over at the Tea House Owner.

Nan Feng is in the middle of settling the terms of his property damage (which was extensive, Xie Lian can relate), but it doesn’t hurt to ask—

“Is there a temple of Ming Guang nearby?”

After all, they’re in the heart of his territory.

“Oh—no, not for many miles.”

“…” Xie Lian’s expression becomes a little troubled. “How odd.”

“There used to be,” the owner explains, finishing out Nan Feng’s tab.

“But they kept on burning down—so people stopped rebuilding them.”

And Pei Ming hasn’t interceded? That’s even more odd.

Between that and Gusu, it would have been a significant undermining of his strength. But—then again, he’s grown so significant as a martial god now, his renown is only beaten by Jun Wu. People worship him the entire continent over. Maybe he really didn’t notice…?

“But,” the merchant speaks up, dragging Xie Lian from his thoughts. “A Nan Yang temple is actually rather close.”

Nan Feng makes a face, opening his mouth to say something about getting an inn, but Fu Yao grins, taking the prince by the elbow and steering him off.

“Perfect!”

“Why are you so excited?” Nan Feng grumbles, trying to catch up with him, and Fu Yao shrugs, his steps light.

“Why aren’t you? It’s gonna feel like home sweet home for you.”

“You’re smirking about something—!”

They grumble back and forth, with Xie Lian in the middle, and…

Part of him can’t help but smile, leaning into Fu Yao’s hold on his arm a little bit, remembering different days.

He didn’t ever think he could feel nostalgic about that bickering, but… He tilts his hat down slightly in order to hide the way his eyes soften. It’s…nice.

His lips tighten slightly at the corners, trembling a little.

Life has taken a lot from Xie Lian, over the years. It’s rare that it ever gives something back—even if only briefly, in a moment like this.

He’s learned to be grateful for it.

And when they arrive in the temple…

The bickering intensifies.

“Stop giggling!”

“I didn’t giggle!”

“You did a little,” Xie Lian points out, eyebrows knitting together. “When we walked under the entrance sign.”

“Oh, well…” Fu Yao smirks, “Wanna know why?”

Nan Feng has turned absolutely purple. “Shut it—!”

“You see,” he carries on, leading Xie Lian through the temple by the arm, “back in the day—very, very far back, there was a king that was incredibly dedicated to Nan Yang, so dedicated, he built more temples than any other had for the god before!”

“Is that true?”

Xie Lian looks at Nan Feng, who squirms with discomfort, arms crossed. “Yes,” he replies stiffly. “The king was very generous, but—!”

“But,” Fu Yao cuts him off, “apparently not the best with clerical work, because there was a significant typo.”

“…Typo?”

“IT’S BEEN FIXED!”

“See, instead of the brave, honorable, fierce General Nan Yang, it was the huge, thick…pulsing, some might say—!”

“WOULD YOU SHUT UP?!” Nan Feng snarls, fists trembling, and Xie Lian hasn’t been quite this baffled in a long time.

Those are really odd adjectives for Feng Xin.

He’s a pretty big person, and as a result somewhat thick in the limbs and chest Xie Lian supposes, but pulsing? Who calls a man pulsing?

“—General DICK Yang.”

Xie Lian’s jaw drops slightly, and Nan Feng’s face falls in his hands.

“…Oh my…that’s…quite an error…”

“Yeah,” Fu Yao sighs, “He even blamed General Xuan Zhen for it, even though he had nothing to do with it. Almost bit his tongue off over the whole thing.”

Xie Lian rubs his chin.

Wasn't the phrase…biting someone's head off?

"It's been CORRECTED, and no one CARES!"

"It sounds like you care, actually." It takes a moment of horrified staring and squawking from Nan Feng for Xie Lian to realize he just said that out loud, and he blanches. "Oh, I'm sorry—"

"And most of the worshippers in Nan Yang's temples are women…" Fu Yao muses with a grin. "Most of them blush when they say their prayers, I hear…"

Nan Feng is trembling with rage at this point, and Xie Lian almost feels bad for him.

"Come on, it's not that funny…Feng Xin isn't like that when it comes to women—"

"Oh, don't worry Dianxia," Fu Yao crosses his arms. "He probably wouldn't mind. He's very experienced." He stares down Nan Feng, eyes slightly narrowed. "Different cultivation methods and all that."

Xie Lian looks like you could knock him over with a feather, and Nan Feng looks like he's in the middle of a stroke.

"YOU—!"

He cuts himself off, mouthing the words, *'WOULD YOU LET THAT GO?!'*

Fu Yao seems utterly fascinated with his cuticles. "He's not as flashy as Ming Guang, but he's actually a pretty terrible heartbreaker from what I hear."

"I swear, I'll—"

"Why so offended, Nan Feng?" Fu Yao's gaze cuts up to meet his. "Your general isn't around. Why does it matter?"

The Deputy God grits his teeth. "Because the prince doesn't need to hear this filth. Why don't you go sweep the floor or something?!"

There's a beat of silence, and Xie Lian sighs.

Oh dear.

"Excuse me?" Fu Yao questions flatly.

"Your general isn't around," Nan Feng counters snidely. "Why so offended, Fu Yao?"

"..." He takes a step closer, letting go of Xie Lian's arm. "Then I'd tell you to start guarding the prince, but you'd just end up ditching halfway through."

This is usually when it spirals out of control.

"I wouldn't tell you to do anything for the prince, because no one could trust you to stick around even for a second! If—you were like your general!"

Something about that statement seems to strike deeper than Nan Feng meant it to. Trust.

Because he mentioned trust.

Fu Yao opens his mouth, ready to snarl something even worse in response, when— He notices Xie Lian wiping at something in his hand, about to put it in his mouth.

"Don't EAT THAT!" He snaps, swatting it out of the god's hands. "It's dirty!"

Xie Lian stares down at the discarded mantou mournfully. "It looked fine..."

"Don't LIE, you can't even SEE IT!"

"Don't YELL AT HIM—!" Nan Feng snaps, taking a step forward, and finally—

"ENOUGH!"

Both young men fall completely silent. It's almost like hearing a ghost.

Because it's been so, so long since they've heard Xie Lian's voice, but...even longer since they've heard him speak like that.

It's a side of him that both men just...assumed was gone.

"You're both talking about who is more like you're general—well you're both just like them!" Xie Lian crosses his arms. "Yelling at each other over me, putting me in the middle— it's unfair!"

They both open their mouths, and before either can say another word, the prince holds up a finger, stopping them.

“And I don’t want *either* of you speaking badly about Nan Yang or Xuan Zhen in front of me.”

They look even more shocked now, but…especially Fu Yao, whose eyes are the size of dinner plates. “Both were good friends who served me well, and I won’t hear either one of them insulted.”

There’s quiet for a moment, before Nan Feng, a little childishly, mutters—

“He always starts it.”

Fu Yao doesn’t even have a response for that one, because it’s true—but Xie Lian…

“Then maybe you should think about why.”

The deputy god stares, eyes wide and stinging

Mu Qing knows that Xie Lian doesn’t know that he’s there to hear it, but…still.

No one’s ever…defended him before.

Ever.

He’s so busy watching the martial god with wide eyes, he doesn’t see the way that Feng Xin is watching him.

With a new, unreadable sort of expression.

(But, to be fair—Mu Qing never really does notice the way that Feng Xin looks at him. Especially not in moments like this.)

After a long moment, Xie Lian jumps when he feels fingertips brush against his chin. Normally, he doesn’t really like it when people touch his face, but…

He sits still, letting Fu Yao examine the small welt on his cheek from getting slapped. “…People bite the hands that feed them,” the deputy deity grumbles. “You should know that by now.”

Xie Lian offers a tired smile as Fu Yao rummages around for something to dress it. “It’s really fine. I should have thought about how it might startle her...”

Fu Yao pauses in the middle of examining his cheek, noticing Xie Lian’s neck. “...Your highness, you’re pretty scratched up. Did you get in a fight before we arrived? Who did it?”

“...No, no,” Xie Lian shakes his head with an awkward smile. “I just got a little scratched up on the way down, I...hit a few obstacles. And before that, I was wounded during my ascension—”

“Wounded?” Nan Feng frowns. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“The injuries are minor.”

Xie Lian shrugs, but...well...

It actually would be a good idea to re-dress the bandages anyway. He wears too much white to risk them bleeding through.

Both deputy gods move aside as Xie Lian strips down to his trousers, using the extra bandages in his bag to replace the old ones

“...Minor?” Fu Yao questions softly. He’s sitting back against the altar, watching Xie Lian with his knees pulled up to his chest, arms wrapped around them.

In Xie Lian’s defense, he can’t see how bad it looks.

“I forgot about them until you mentioned the bleeding—it’s fine!”

But without spiritual power—his body heals slower than that of a normal god, and it bruises far more easily.

His back...is a mess of cuts, scrapes, and bruises. There are several healing lacerations on his ribs, one on his upper arm. And his neck...

Even where the cursed shackle sits, there’s a deep burn mark beneath it, like someone wrapped a burning noose around him.

Nan Feng and Fu Yao look at one another.

It’s not as if the prince was a weakling before—he never was. But he also grew up in a life of luxury.

He would push through the pain if he needed to—but his pain tolerance was average. Not to the point where he could have walked around with wounds like that without saying anything.

And now, looking at one another—they're thinking of the same question:

What could have happened to make his tolerance change that drastically? Just... What happened to him, in all those years?

Xie Lian glances around, re-administering his bandages, assuming the silence is for an entirely different reason.

"...First time seeing a cursed shackle?"

Nan Feng and Fu Yao glance away from one another, with the former clearing his throat awkwardly, and the latter picking the dirt out from underneath his nails.

"Yes. Is it painful?" Nan Feng mutters, trying to sound casual, and... God, it's hard for Fu Yao not to punch him.

Xie Lian's smile doesn't change as he shakes his head, moving the new bandages back over his skin—leaving his neck bare, until Ruoye slides back into place.

"No, not at all."

The shackle in his eyes was paining him, yes—but that stopped after leaving Gusu.

Nan Feng seems slightly relieved to hear it, but Fu Yao just sighs, trying to change the subject to something that makes him feel a little less...

Responsible.

"What's our plan for tackling the Ghost Groom, anyway?" He mutters. "It's not like we're going to hear much more from the locals about it."

Xie Lian thinks it over. "I'm not sure. It's difficult when there aren't any living witnesses, so we don't even know anything about the ghost's appearance, strengths, or lair. It's risky."

Fu Yao huffs, trying not to look in Nan Feng's direction, because if he looks at that intent, worried expression on his face while he watches the crown prince one more time, he's going to throw up.

"We should just dress up a girl like those guys were going to, then."

"No," Xie Lian frowns, shaking his head. "If we used an actual girl for that, and something went wrong—she'd end up getting killed."

The entire point of this mission is to protect more young women from facing that fate. Xie Lian isn't willing to risk another.

"Yeah, I agree..." Nan Feng speaks up, rubbing the side of his neck. "But I also don't know of another way to draw out the ghost. Those creatures—they're motivated by desire, and focused. It could lay dormant for months until another bride comes across it's path."

Xie Lian pauses, tilting his head. "...Are ghosts really like that?"

He hasn't known very many. The Ghost Fire and Wu Ming—who in the end, turned out to be one in the same—he was the only Ghost Xie Lian really spent any time with in a meaningful way.

And he seemed so...selfless.

Nan Feng nods—and for once, Fu Yao doesn't argue or make any snide comments. Other than Ming Guang, General Nan Yang has dealt with more cases in the Mortal Realm than anyone—

And seen the damage that the undead can do to humans more than most.

"Many ghosts linger on for harmless reasons, but the powerful ones? Their desires... are what dominate their every thought, action, and motivation. That's all they are." Fu Yao shrugs. "Once you know that, you can handle most of them."

"...Not every powerful ghost," Xie Lian murmurs.

Nan Feng raises an eyebrow, and the prince explains—

"I met one once, many years ago—and all he wanted to do was protect someone he loved." Xie Lian's fingers twitch towards his chest, but if there was a reason for it, he can't remember why.

"...Then he'd be the one exception."

Nan Feng shrugs.

Xie Lian nods, his smile a little...glum, thinking back on that.

He hopes, when Wu Ming dispersed—

Xie Lian hopes that his precious person finally found their way back to him again.

“In any case—what this ghost wants—it’s to kill brides, and it’s intelligent.”

Nan Feng sighs. “It wouldn’t have come out for that mannequin those men were going to try to pass off, and it won’t risk exposure unless it has prey within it’s sights.”

Xie Lian sighs, rubbing his chin. “That’s...a conundrum. Since we can’t risk a mortal’s life—”

“Okay,” Fu Yao speaks up once more. “Then why don’t we use something that isn’t mortal?”

Xie Lian pauses, surprised. “...Is that an option?”

Nan Feng doesn’t get it at first—not until he looks over at Fu Yao, who is pointing in... the prince’s direction.

It’s rare, that the two of them are ever willingly on an inside joke together, but...

“You have the slightest frame of the three of us,” Fu Yao comments, “you’d be a little tall, for a bride, but...”

Xie Lian’s eyes widen slightly, shackle gleaming in the candlelight. “...Me?”

The Bridal Sedan

Chapter Summary

> "Are you alright?"
>
> "Does…" Xie Lian trails off, "Does anyone hear that?"
>
> "Hear what?!"
>
> Giggling. Soft, high pitched—like that of a small child. "Something is out there."
>
> "New Bride…" The sound of that voice, playful, almost impish, makes the hairs on the back of his neck stand straight up. "New Bride…"
>
> Nan Feng's voice echoes outside the sedan, "What is it?!"
>
> "New Bride in the Red Bridal Sedan…"
>
> Xie Lian swallows dryly. "Singing."

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

Xie Lian hasn't exactly seen his own frame in…nearly a millennia, but he's never thought of himself as 'slight,' before. His body has always done everything that he needed it to do, and no man has ever bested him in strength, but…

He squeezes his own forearm with a frown.

Then, he reaches over to squeeze F—Nan Feng's forearm with a frown, eyebrows pinching more and more as he checks Fu Yao's in turn, and he realizes…

Well, he is far more thin than either of them. He doesn't remember being that much smaller than they were when they were young.

But…well…

Xie Lian also hasn't been what one would consider 'well fed' in eight centuries, and a divine body only makes up for so much.

In a rare moment of perception, Nan Feng comments, “He didn’t mean that you were small, your highness. Just smaller than either of us.”

“I wasn’t offended,” Xie Lian mutters. And in truth, he isn’t. His size isn’t particularly relevant—

(Not when he can still throw a thirty meter tall demon by the tail like a stuffed animal, anyway.)

—it’s just unnerving sometimes, to realize...

He doesn’t actually know what his own body looks like. Not anymore.

“But could I really pass as someone’s beautiful bride to be?”

The other two look at one another yet again, this time—equally exasperated.

“It’ll be cutting it close,” Fu Yao replies dryly. “But we’ll manage.”

“...Well,” Xie Lian sighs, tapping his chin. “What time is it?”

“It’s too late for us to go tonight,” Fu Yao sighs. “We’ll have to hire some proper escorts—and find a dress somewhere, for you,” he mutters, waggling his eyebrows.

“There’s no need for that.”

“We can’t just have you wear what you have on now,” Fu Yao frowns. “No one would buy it!”

“I know,” Xie Lian rises back up to his feet, re-fastening his outer robe, his body covered once more. “But I can make one on my own.”

“...uh...” The Deputy Gods glance at one another again.

Certainly Xie Lian must have gained some worldly skills in the last eight hundred years, they both understand that—but...For someone who never even mended his own clothes as a child....

(Really, his clothes were never mended to begin with—just donated after a single tear.)

And when you consider how plain the clothes he’s wearing now are, it’s hard to believe that he’s...particularly skilled in that area.

“Really, money isn’t an object,” Nan Feng speaks up. “And for how quickly we’ll need it done—”

“I just need thread, the rest I can handle.” Xie Lian shrugs, “Fu Yao—why don’t you handle that, I’ll tell you what colors and lengths I need—and Nan Feng, you can arrange the escort.” He glances over at the two, “Does that sound like a plan?”

Both stare up at him, feeling surprisingly... Nostalgic.

It’s not so different from how he used to talk, back when they were teenagers, planning missions with far higher stakes.

“...Yeah,” Fu Yao mutters, looking away. “Fine.”

They both set out that morning with their tasks in mind—but Fu Yao tells Nan Feng to get an extra dress.

After all, who asks for just...thread?

Silk thread, to be specific—and for someone that’s been blind for eight centuries, he’s perfectly familiar with the shades he wants—he even asks for a specific type of dye.

It’s baffling, and when Fu Yao returns to the temple—he gawks.

“Is that a *loom?* ”

“Oh,” Xie Lian glances up with a smile, “I didn’t think I was going to need it before— but Ling Wen was kind enough to have someone bring it down for me. Did you bring the thread?”

“You’re...” Fu Yao sputters. “Going to weave your own silk?!”

Xie Lian nods, taking the box of thread from him—each spool has a label that he can tell them apart by feel, making it easy for him to pick out the proper colors. “I’m fast, time won’t be an issue.”

Fu Yao doubts that he—even with godly speed—could manage that in only a few hours.

Or that whatever result he could manage would be better than what they could get in a shop, for that matter.

“There’s no need to be so thrifty, money isn’t an object—”

“I’m not,” Xie Lian shakes his head. “I just really wanted to.”

Fu Yao watches him get started—and he wasn't exaggerating about one thing— He does move fast.

"Why would you want the extra work?"

The prince shrugs, fingers tiny blurs as they fly over the loom.

But when he looks at Fu Yao, his smile is genuine.

"They're my favorite."

"...Your favorite?" Fu Yao mutters, struggling to understand.

"Wedding gowns," Xie Lian explains, the smile never fading from his lips. "They're my favorite thing to make."

"...Have you made a lot of them?"

The prince hums in agreement. "I've lost count by now."

Fu Yao drops down to sit on the floor beside him, watching curiously. "...What's so special about them?"

"Most of the time, when I would make clothes for people—it was just selling it at a stall. But wedding robes—they're special, they have to be fitted."

Even his voice sounds a little bit more alive now, talking about it—like the topic genuinely does make him happy.

"So, I'd always get to talk to the brides—and they were usually so excited..."

And when they weren't, the weaver would help them make the match...fall through.

But they usually were happy.

So, so happy, the kind that you can hear in a person's voice, even if you can't see them smiling.

"Listening to them—it made me feel happy too."

Fu Yao picks at the laces on his boots. "I didn't know you were so passionate about weddings."

Finally, that smile on Xie Lian's face dims just a bit—then turns teasing. “I don’t see how you would—we met yesterday.”

“...” Fu Yao’s fingers go still over his boots, and his cheeks flush. “General Xuan Zhen never mentioned it.”

“Does he say much about me?”

The Deputy God doesn’t reply, his posture tense from where he’s curled up on the floor, knees against his chest—and Xie Lian shakes his head with a soft laugh, letting the after drop.

“I always knew that I was never going to get married,” He murmurs. “But I like marriage.”

The prince leans back from his work for a moment, his gaze a little far away. “It’s like...promising to keep one thing in your life with you—no matter what.”

Fu Yao makes a face, “That sounds awful.”

Xie Lian snorts, not surprised that he would feel that way.

“...I don’t know,” his fingers go still for a moment, and his eyes soften. “There’s nothing quite like being loved by someone that would never leave you.”

Everything else feels so cold, after that. So empty. Even if it’s not that kind of love, there’s...

There’s nothing like it. “...Your highness—?”

“Wedding dresses just bring up good memories for me, I guess.” He mutters, focusing once again on his work.

After all—the point of weddings is to make a partner feel loved. Wanted. Cherished. What could be more beautiful than that? He really can’t imagine.

Xie Lian’s been loved many times before. He’s been wanted by countless men and women. But rarely has he been cherished—and when he was, it was so brief.

But when he thinks of happiness—he remembers the brides he helped over the years. The excited laughter, and breathless smiles.

When he thinks back on the way Xiong Li sounded, rushing into Lan An’s arms, crying out, *‘I love you—I love you so much!’*

He can't help but wonder what kind of bridal robes they might wear, and how happy the two will be if and when that day comes.

And he thinks...

Xie Lian tries not to think about it often, but sometimes—he thinks about the fact that, the last night Hong-er was alive, they had an argument.

Over Xie Lian thinking that the teenager should go, and Hong-er refusing. Because he never would have left. Not ever.

He would have spent the rest of his life following Xie Lian. And it makes sense, that he...he was buried in...

"Do you have a favorite?"

He's started out of his thoughts by the sound of Fu Yao's voice. Begrudging. "Hmm?"

"A favorite wedding dress," the deputy god mumbles.

Xie Lian's heart aches slightly.

He's not so oblivious that he can't tell when someone is trying to distract him as a kindness.

"...I did one for the wife of a student," he explains.

"You had a student?"

"Once or twice, over the centuries." Xie Lian shrugs.

"He was my first. And he...wasn't so sure about settling down and getting married." (Not unless it was to him.)

"So, I worked extra hard to sell him on the idea."

Fu Yao scoffs, shaking his head, "The poor bride..."

"She never really minded, and..." The god smiles, remembering. "When he saw her in that dress for the first time, he gasped—and you just knew, that was the moment when he fell in love with her."

"I never knew you were such a romantic." Fu Yao's voice sounds so dry. They're alone in the temple, and Xie Lian can't see, but...

He's smiling.

Sitting there like that, watching the god work, his knees pulled up against his chest. They've never gotten to speak to one another like this before—not in ages.

Even if it's under a guise like this…it's nice. "What's with the pattern?"

"Hmm?" Xie Ian hums.

Ah, right.

Flowers are traditional for bridal gowns. And this one does have those—down where the spine is going to be, trailing over the shoulders, golden petals trailing down, but…

"You mean the butterflies?"

Those aren't quite as traditional.

"I just…had them on my mind, I guess."

He would have made them silver, if that wouldn't have looked so out of place in a wedding gown.

He doesn't get to see shapes or forms that clearly—not ever. And that…that butterfly…

It was beautiful.

The process of this dress is slightly different from what he's used to. Normally, he'd fit it exactly to the bride's measurements, but, well—

You can't just make a woman's dress, and expect it to look correct on someone with a man's shape. The waist has to be cut differently, along with the shoulders—all too create an illusion of curve. Soft edges.

He creates long, draping sleeves to hide any sign of muscle. Adds a little give in the neckline, to create the illusion of a swell in the chest.

Xie Lian has no way of knowing if his face could pass for that of a bride, but with this —his body certainly won't give him away.

For the veil, the silk is woven much finer, leaving it almost translucent—with the same matching butterfly detailing around the edges.

Maybe Xie Lian couldn't use silver—but the thread he used is a reflective shade—the sort that glows like liquid gold under the light.

When he's finished, he slips behind a changing screen to try it on, pleased to find that he got the proportions correct, and it seems to sit on his body the way it should.

Just then, Nan Feng enters the main hall. "I've got our escorts, do we need the extra —?"

He starts, then falls silent. They both do, as the crown prince comes out from behind the screen, robes swishing around him gently as he walks.

"...No," Fu Yao replies, his voice somewhat hoarse. "I don't think we need it."

"Right," Nan Feng agrees faintly, "You're right."

Xie Lian lifts up his veil, glancing back and forth between the two swirling shapes of spiritual energy, raising an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing," Fu Yao mutters. "I can handle his hair. We don't want it up anyway, that would make him look too tall."

After all—for a man, Xie Lian isn't particularly big, but for a woman, he's taller than most.

The one problem they do run into, however, is the makeup.

Xie Lian sits perfectly still, and he's assuming the process is going well, but...

Nan Feng frowns.

"I thought makeup was supposed to make him look better? He looks worse than he did when you started."

"Would you shut up?" Fu Yao glares. "It's not like I've done this before."

"You wear eyeliner every damn day."

That makes the deputy god raise an eyebrow sharply.

"And you notice?"

Nan Feng's cheeks darken immediately, and Xie Lian sits there awkwardly, clearing his throat.

"..." Fu Yao turns back to him with a huff. "His eyeliner's fine, it's just..." He looks Xie Lian over with a grimace.

The God smiles kindly. "I'm sure it's fine."

It's not. It really, really not. Honestly, he looked fine without it, but now? He looks clownish. And Fu Yao is too proud to admit that in front of Nan Feng, but if they send him to the Ghost Groom like this...

It'll take one look under the veil and disperse from the shock.

"...Okay, maybe we can just wipe it—"

"Excuse me, sir?"

All three of them fall silent at the sound of a young girl's voice, echoing from the front of the temple.

"I...came to say I was sorry about yesterday," Xiao Ying mutters. "I realized after that you were trying to help."

Xie Lian peeks out from around Fu Yao's arm with a smile, his eyes carefully pressed shut. "It's alright—most young ladies aren't so assertive about enforcing their boundaries. It's a good thing, really."

Fu Yao wipes a hand down his face. "Stop saying 'young ladies.'"

"Why?"

"It makes you sound so old." The Deputy God grumbles.

Well. Xie Lian is old. Maybe not physically—or even mentally, he's finding the mind matures slower when immortality comes into question—but literally.

"...You're going after the groom aren't you?" Xiao Ying questions.

At first, Xie Lian is about to ask how she knows that—and then, his cheeks are going slightly pink under whatever awful pasty material Fu Yao plastered over his cheeks. "I...um, this isn't for fun or anything," he agrees. "Definitely work related!"

Fu Yao rubs his temples.

"You made that sound so suspicious…" He mutters, but…

Xiao Ying doesn't seem to think so, smiling a little awkwardly. "Well—your dress is pretty much perfect, but…I'm good with make up. I could probably make you look a little more bride like—"

"Anything is better than Fu Yao's makeup," Nan Feng agrees, ushering her forward, receiving a nasty little glare from his partner, who crosses his arms over his chest with a huff.

And to be fair—the results must be better, because when she's finished—no one complains.

Actually, Nan Feng and Fu Yao are pretty quiet for the rest of the walk outside. It's Nan Feng who steps in to lead him this time, taking the prince by the elbow, gently helping him up into the bridal sedan.

"Ready?"

Xie Lian settles back in the chair, feeling a little…odd.

"Yes, thank you."

It's not as if he's never ridden in a sedan before—he did that often when he was a little boy, sitting beside his mother during royal processions.

But as an adult man? Never. And…

Xie Lian can't remember the last time he experienced anything remotely close to being 'pampered.'

Actually, that was probably the Beauty Pageant. But he's long since repressed that memory.

"Do we know anything about how the Ghost Groom fights?" Nan Feng mumbles.

He walks close to the bridal sedan, his eyes closely surveying the forest, and Xie Lian shakes his head.

"Ling Wen didn't say much on the matter. Heaven hasn't been able to do much besides survey it's ranking."

"Ranking?" Fu Yao pipes up sharply. "You failed to mention that."

"Well, I didn't think it mattered," Xie Lian frowns, almost rubbing his cheek—then remembering that it would mess up his makeup. “Ghosts are either powerful or they’re not, right? I assumed we were dealing with the former.”

“...No,” Nan Feng groans. “That’s not how it works.”

“What were you doing all this time in the mortal realm, not to know something as basic as that?!” Fu Yao grumbles, crossing his arms.

“...Making...wedding dresses?” Xie Lian supplies awkwardly—and to his surprise, it actually does draw a snort out of the deputy god.

Nan Feng, however, seems focused on delivering the relevant information. “There are four ranks of ghost. Malice, menace, savage, and Calamities. Do you remember which one Ling Wen said?”

“...Savage,” Xie Lian replies, sending it when the deputies wince. “...Is that bad?”

“...One step short of the worst case scenario,” Fu Yao mutters.

“True, but there’s also three of us,” Nan Feng shrugs, “It should be alright...”

“You say three, but one of us is blind and doesn’t have any spiritual power.”

“Okay, two and a half—!”

Xie Lian really doesn’t imagine that this creature could be more powerful than Wen Jiao, and he was able to handle that with just himself and two human cultivators.

“You know,” he cuts them both off to end the bickering. “This bridal procession is missing something.”

“...What?”

“Two maids for the bride,” Xie Lian comments wryly.

Nan Feng practically recoils, as he typically does from all mention of “womanly” things, activities, or individuals in relation to himself—

(It’s probably a phobia at this point.)

But Fu Yao seems unbothered by it.

"Your family is too poor for maids, what a pity."

"But I thought money was no object?"

Nan Feng seems a little surprised—and almost uneasy—by how easily the two are conversing, but...

When Fu Yao replies, his tone is...mysteriously, inexplicably bitter. "Unfortunately, I don't come cheap."

Nan Feng sends him a sharp look, irritated with what comes off as unnecessary, arrogant condescension, but...

To Xie Lian, he sounds sarcastic. Maybe even...pained. HIs lips turn down into a small frown. "M—!"

Then, he falls silent.

So suddenly, that it makes Nan Feng turn his head in the prince's direction with concern. "Are you alright?"

"Does..." Xie Lian trails off, "Does anyone hear that?"

"Hear what?!"

Giggling.

Soft, high pitched—like that of a small child. "Something is out there."

"New Bride..."

The sound of that voice, playful, almost impish, makes the hairs on the back of his neck stand straight up.

"New Bride..."

Nan Feng's voice echoes outside the sedan, "What is it?!"

"New Bride in the Red Bridal Sedan..."

Xie Lian swallows dryly. "Singing."

It drifts eerily through the night, casting an uneasy tone across the scene, but...

From the reactions of everyone else, it would seem like Xie Lian is the only one meant to hear it.

“Brimming tears…past the hills…”

“Singing what?!”

“Keep your voice down!” Fu Yao snaps. “Smile not…under the veil…”

Xie Lian’s eyes narrow slightly as the voice dissolves into maniacal giggling, “…It’s telling all passing brides to cry—and never smile.”

“It could be a trick,” Fu Yao huffs, looking around him as they walk further up the mountain.

“Just don’t do either.”

Xie Lian leans his chin on his hand, thinking. It really doesn’t matter if he laughs or cries, none have ever done him much good anyway, but…

“I’ve been smiling since I heard it,” He murmurs, to which Fu Yao squawks. “Why?!”

“…Isn’t that what bait is supposed to do?” Xie Lian questions, surprised by the god’s sudden horror. “Are you alright?”

“Not when I’m surrounded by you two idiots…” Fu Yao grumbles, not seeing the way Xie Lian grimaces inside the sedan.

“There’s something else.”

“…What?”

The surrounding area—which, for Xie Lian, should have remained a consistent void—

It just got darker.

A lot darker.

“We just entered some sort of demonic array,” the god mutters. “Powerful, too.”

In fact—Xie Lian is almost startled by its strength.

It covers a much smaller area than what he saw in Gusu—but likely with greater intensity, which means…

Something is probably coming.

Xie Lian is about to warn the others, but...by then, the howling has already started.

“Wolves?! All the way out here?!”

“Not ordinary ones!”

The sedan comes to a halt before being set down abruptly, forcing Xie Lian to grip the side to steady himself on the landing.

“Just stay inside your highness!” Nan Feng snaps, his sword drawn. “We’ve got it out here!”

Xie Lian’s smile isn’t quite so fake after hearing that.

He sounds just like he used to, back when...

There’s fighting outside now, the clash of blades against beasts, snarling as the escorts that F—

Nan Feng, hired to fight them off.

It’s almost reminiscent of a different time, one that’s long since passed.

“Alright out there?”

Fu Yao snaps something in the affirmative, only to cut himself off with a groan. “Oh, hell—this is why knowing we were dealing with a Savage would have been nice!”

Xie Lian blinks owlishly, the glow of his shackles eerily visible through the curtain of the sedan. “What?”

“There are Binu incoming,” Nan Feng explains with a grunt, and Xie Lian’s lips press into a firm frown.

Well, that is rather serious.

They aren’t particularly powerful, but they’re nearly impossible to kill. “How many?”

“A...close to a hundred, maybe more!”

Xie Lian’s frown turns into a grimace.

That could mean most of the men Nan Feng hired ending up slaughtered. After all— Binu don’t kill you, they just tire you out until whatever's hunting you dives in for it's meal.

Still, the two deputy gods fight fiercely, the battle raging.

And for a moment, listening to it—Xie Lian can pretend that things haven't changed.

That he's still the spoiled child that Feng Xin needed to protect. The arrogant teenager that thought Mu Qing's pride was silly.

And in that moment, it's achingly pleasant.

To feel looked after. Protected. If only for the space of a few minutes, but...

He can see the points of darker energy squirming around in the dark, watches one as it grows closer, closer—probably a sight that has terrified many brides before him, hand reaching—

But this time, the figure waiting within the bridal sedan isn't a helpless teenage girl.

Xie Lian catches the Binu with a firm grip by the wrist, shrinking back slightly as it shoves it's way forward, his arms aching under the strain.

He took that much of a hit in Gusu?

The prince grits his teeth for a moment, closing his eyes.

It's nice sometimes, when life gives you the chance to relive memories. But that's all they are—and it's time to stop playing pretend.

He's too old for that now.

"Ruoye," he whispers gently, feeling an attentive nuzzle.

"Strangle them."

He couldn't explain it to anyone if he tried, but...he felt reluctant before, about using the tool in front of Nan Feng and Fu Yao, particularly the former.

The silk band slips out of the bridal sedan, then attacks with the ferocity of a whip.

CRACK!

Xie Lian sits back on the cushion of the sedan, listening as the spiritual weapon beats the horde back—at least enough to allow the mortals traveling with them to regroup.

“I thought—I thought you couldn’t use heavenly arms!” Fu Yao sputters, and Xie Lian smiles half heartedly.

“There are always exceptions.”

After all, Ruoye isn’t a heavenly device at all—and Xie Lian doesn’t need spiritual power to use it, because...

He closes his eyes, the inside of the bridal sedan going dark once more. “You two should take the escorts and go.”

Nan Feng recoils.

“Are you kidding?! You think we’re just going to leave you alone out here?!”

“...They can’t hurt me,” Xie Lian mumbles under his breath, his tone far away. “What?” Fu Yao questions sharply, and the prince sighs.

“If you stay with the bridal sedan, they’ll just keep coming.”

Xie Lian mutters, listening as Ruoye continues to beat the creatures back. “If you take the others now, we can regroup.”

Fu Yao doesn’t seem willing to protest, but Nan Feng is silent, eyes wide as he watches Ruoye move through the dark, because it looks so much like...

The silk bandage the prince used to wear over his eyes, back when... “Xie Lian.”

The sound of his name being spoken—something he hasn’t heard in centuries—and with such familiarity, makes the God’s heart squeeze in response.

“What is that thing?” He doesn’t answer.

The silence is what worries the deputy god the most, his head whipping around to face the sedan as he raises his voice, “WHAT IS —?”

A palm presses against his chest. For once, not in an aggressive shove. Just resting there.

When he looks down, Fu Yao is staring up at him.

“Leave it.” No snide tone. Definitely not mocking him. “He has protection. It’ll be easier to help him if we take the mortals back first.”

Nan Feng grits his teeth, glancing back at the sedan, his eyes pained. “...He’ll be by himself.”

Oh.

Xie Lian’s chest aches with remorse.

Back then...he really had been so certain that sending his friend away was the best thing, but now...

How many years of guilt has he been forced to live with? “...It’s okay,” Xie Lian reassures him softly, “I’ll be fine.”

‘I’m always by myself.’

“I’ll just wait for the groom.”

Fu Yao doesn’t wait for much more encouragement than that, walking away without another word, and Nan Feng, after a long, reluctant moment...

He huffs out a groan, balling his hands up into fists, “Men—follow me!”

And then, Xie Lian really is alone again, sitting in the dark.

The clearing grows quiet, only the wind moving through the trees in a quiet hush, Ruoye slinking back to him now that the enemy has been dealt with, wrapping back around his throat.

Xie Lian winces, and the bandage trembles apologetically.

“Oh, no...” He shushes it. “It’s not you,” he murmurs, stroking the side of his neck until the bandage relaxes, snuggling up to him more comfortably. “Just sore.”

It’s understandable that Ruoye might think it was it’s own fault—after all, Xie Lian’s rarely ever in pain. Physically, anyway.

But right now...

Xie Lian’s been struggling today. And at first, he couldn’t have told you why.

Maybe it was because he wasn't expecting to ascend again, particularly not when he did. He hadn't been braced for it, and...

This time, standing in the streets of Heaven... Xie Lian felt so lost, exposed, and...alone.

He knows what to expect from humans now. Even at it's very worst, he knows he can handle the mortal realm.

But being in the Heavenly Capital—all it did was remind him of what he doesn't have anymore.

Being around Nan Feng and Fu Yao—it feels good, reminds him of what it's like, not being alone. Reminds him of how happy he was, back then.

Back when he thought he had it all, but that wasn't true.

Because it was before he met Hong-er, so he couldn't have had everything.

Being with them, feeling that friendship again, it made him happy—because sometimes life gives things back. Lets you relive things. Gives you second chances, but...

Xie Lian's fingers drift up to the chain around his neck, his lips trembling. Some things don't come back to you.

"..." He takes a deep breath. Now isn't the time to start feeling sorry for himself, he's just...tired. He—

There's a rush of wind through the clearing, ruffling the curtains of the bridal sedan— and with it, Xie Lian can hear the leaves and grass stirring in response.

Clink!

It's that sound from before, Xie Lian still remembers it so clearly, but...

He leans back slightly, curling his legs closer inside the sedan, trying to catch sight of it again, and—

When he does, his breath halts in his throat.

A silver butterfly, coming through the darkness.

Xie Lian follows it’s path with his eyes, watching as it’s wings flap in an easy, lazy pattern—but instead of landing on him, this time it drifts right past, the tips of it’s wings stirring the air next to his cheek.

But—

Clink!

That noise—

Clink!

It isn’t the butterfly.

It’s—

Footsteps.

Slow, easy footsteps, almost mimicking the butterfly’s pace, but…

Xie Lian swallows hard, fighting the urge to breathe too quickly, or indicate some sort of reaction.

There’s no other heartbeat in the clearing with him. No one else breathing at all.

His hands ball up into nervous fists in his lap, and he whispers into the dark—

“Who’s there?”

His tone is a little breathier than he meant for it to be, wavering slightly, and—

There’s a chuckle in response. Soft, low in a way that rumbles in the pit of the god’s stomach.

And…bittersweet somehow, even if Xie Lian has no idea why.

There’s a stir in front of him, like someone reaching underneath the curtain, but… unlike before, when Xie Lian looks up—he doesn’t see this ugly point of darkness in the night. No menacing cloud of resentment.

When Xie Lian looks in front of him, he sees—a sea of crimson aura, one that stretches as far as his eyes can see, drifting around him in a soft, ambient glow, and, for the first time in eight centuries…

Xie Lian doesn’t see any darkness at all. Just crimson.

And in the center of all of that, directly in front of him, is this shimmering silver light, not so different from the shade of the butterfly that came before it, but this…it’s…

Almost reminiscent of a ghost fire.

The Ghost Takes a Bride

Chapter Summary

Someone catches him.

Xie Lian finds himself clinging to that hand, his face...It's pressed into the front of someone's robe's against their chest—solid, but no heartbeat underneath his cheek to indicate some sign of life, but—

There's another hand, feather light as it cups the back of his head—stroking his hair. Xie Lian sucks in a shuddering breath, and when he does—he's hit with the smell of the forest.

Fresh, clean, but with a slight wildness to it that makes his heart age with memory, like a glass on the edge of shattering—

'You're in a forest,' the god scolds himself silently. 'Of course it smells like him.'

Chapter Notes

You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The prince's heart slams against his ribs uncertainly. This...

Something in Xie Lian's heart tells him with ringing certainty—this isn't the ghost groom. And that should frighten him, given the daunting amount of power swirling around him, but...

Xie Lian isn't afraid. The pounding of his heart—it isn't from fear.

He doesn't know what this feeling is, when he reaches out—jumping slightly when he feels a palm underneath his. Larger fingers gently enveloping his own, skin ice cold.

There's something wrapped around the stranger's ring finger, Xie Lian can feel that—

A silk string.

Reminiscent of the threads he's worked with countless times.

His palm is rougher than Xie Lian's—somewhat calloused around the thumb and the inside of his index finger—

A sword wielder then. Likely sabers.

Xie Lian couldn't tell you why he can barely breathe.

He couldn't explain the sudden rush of goosebumps, starting at the back of his neck, then rushing all the way down his arms, creeping over his scalp as he lets out a full body shiver.

But it isn't fear.

Even as that hand starts to gently pull him from the sedan…there's no fear

He doesn't even make an attempt to resist, allowing himself to be guided forward— until his foot catches against the lip of the step down, making him stumble forward, bracing himself, but—

Someone catches him.

Xie Lian finds himself clinging to that hand, his face…

It's pressed into the front of someone's robe's against their chest—solid, but no heartbeat underneath his cheek to indicate some sign of life, but—

There's another hand, feather light as it cups the back of his head—stroking his hair.

Xie Lian sucks in a shuddering breath, and when he does—

He's hit with the smell of the forest.

Fresh, clean, but with a slight wildness to it that makes his heart age with memory, like a glass on the edge of shattering—

'You're in a forest,' the god scolds himself silently. *'Of course it smells like him.'*

Finally, he has the sense to straighten to his feet once more, and…

Xie Lian can't remember the last time someone guided him with such care. One hand on his elbow, the other on the small of his back.

The grip on him is gentle—but there's never even a possibility of him falling. And even if there was—

The forest floor is surprisingly smooth, devoid of any rocks or tree roots to stumble upon.

(He doesn't see the way the very earth itself shrinks under a crimson tinted gaze.)

Whatever this figure might want, whatever it's intentions are—Xie Lian finds himself too shaken, almost spellbound at the moment to give the mater deeper thought—

He simply guides Xie Lian down the forest path, silver bells gently marking out their pace in the night.

Clink!

Something about the sound of silver bells makes his heart ache, like a muscle left pleasantly sore.

Reminds him of a parent ringing a chime near the front gate, calling a child home.

His pace is slow, but certain—and instinctively, Xie Lian knows this creature is ancient.

Maybe as old as him. But—

There's a boyish lilt to his gait, a lightness that makes him seem younger than that.

Xie Lian's fingers tighten almost imperceptibly, and he shivers when he feels that ice- like hand grip him closer in response.

'Who are you?'

Could he be the groom? Xie Lian doesn't think so.

If he was, he wouldn't need a horde of wolves or Binu to steal a bride away. His aura is so potent, he makes Wen Jiao look like a gnat. Even the light of the heavens seems dull now, compared to this sea of ruby-tinged light.

Butterflies occasionally slip past their ankles, lighting the way ahead.

Xie Lian's veil rustles slightly when he twists his head around to watch them, a soft smile on his lips.

He doesn't feel the gaze that's watching him. Too swept up to feel the overwhelming weight of it.

And even if he wasn't so powerful—Xie Lian has the sense that any bride would go with this young man willingly.

He may not be able to see his face, but....he doesn't need to, to know that whatever mask this figure wears must be rather attractive.

So no, this isn't the groom.

But then...why did he come for the bride?

Xie Lian jumps a little when he senses movement to his left, only to hear the soft rustling of something being opened up and lifted over his head, the quiet patter of drops falling down.

Is it...raining?

It doesn't smell like rain.

Near him, it does. When he turns his head into the arm of the stranger beside him, he smells forest and rain and the end of summer—

But ahead of him, in that crimson haze, he smells iron.

Still—not a single drop of it touches him. Doesn't even brush against his slippers.

The wolves from before seem to cringe away as they approach—and when Xie Lian feels the array intensify, as if they're reaching the center of it—

There's a sharp crunch underneath the young man's boot, and any darkness that remains dissipates.

Xie Lian's breath catches.

That array wasn't as powerful as the one in Gusu—but clearly made from some form of bone remains.

Old, powerful magic—not easily broken. And...

He could really do that with just the weight of his foot?

Xie Lian never thought of himself as someone that was drawn to power before.

He never needed to be. From the moment Xie Lian was born, he was strong. It wasn't until he was older that he learned what it felt like to be weak.

But he's always been attracted to strength. At first, because he craved an equal. And later, when he became weak…

There were quiet, shameful moments when Xie Lian would pray for someone to save him.

Never once did he ever receive an answer.

It feels like they're descending the mountainside now, and Xie Lian knows he should be thinking about where the ghost might be taking him, but…

All he can remember now, with an amused little smile, is something that he used to say, because when he was someone else.

The easiest way to segment memories is to put them behind you, and pretend they happened to someone else.

It isn't sad, remembering things that way.

There was a general once, who used to tell stories to a little girl in front of a campfire. Whispering tales and singing songs until she fell asleep, safe, if only for another night.

But one story was always her favorite—

That of the Bridegroom.

A tale of wishful thinking on Xie Lian's part. Desperately wishing to pretend that something wasn't lost forever. That something he loved so dearly wasn't truly lost. That it could come back, one day.

But that was just wishful pretending, and now…Xie Lian feels… Hope.

The most stubborn emotion there is. The one that has caused him the most pain, over such a long life.

He smells like him. He—the way he's guiding him. The way Xie Lian's heart is beating, in a way he never thought it would again—

There's a desperate, irrational spark of hope.

They come to a stop at the foot of the mountain, the umbrella being pulled just once more, and…

Xie Lian's fingers are trembling.

The hand holding them tightens reassuringly, and that hope only builds. Smoldering, like a long forgotten ember flickering back to life.

The young man turns, as if to face him—and when Xie Lian feels another hand lifting up his bridal veil, he makes no move to stop it.

Anyone else, in any other moment—and he may have. But not now.

Ice cold fingertips brush against his cheek, then his jaw. Xie Lian can't breathe. He's forgotten how.

The only thing he can do now, is the only thing that he's ever done.

Whisper that word, that question, that prayer—into the swirling unknown all around him. Just one word—and yet somehow, saying it feels like begging.

"…Hong-er?"

Fate is cruel.

Fairytales are often sadistic by nature.

Because if Xie Lian could have seen the young man's face, he would have known.

In a moment, without him having to say another word, the prince would have known. Because his expression is one of utter agony.

Fighting. Fighting so hard, that Xie Lian can see that aura around him tremble and twist, but he doesn't understand why. It's not a ghost fire. It has a body.

Xie Lian heard him laugh before.

He can speak, he just—

He just won't.

That's what he thinks, anyway.

He doesn't know that the ghost before him is straining until blood bubbles up in the back of his throat, nearly ripping his entire spirit apart, just trying to say one word. Just *one* .

‘Yes.’

And he’s forced to watch now, as the hope in Xie Lian’s eyes slowly dies.

Hong-er would answer him. Xie Lian knows that.

He’s gone through every method to contact him in this life and the next—and if Hong-er was here, if he was really, physically here—

He would answer. Xie Lian knows that he would.

And after going so long feeling hopeless—feeling it again, that rising rush of euphoria, only to come crashing back down—

Xie Lian has tears in his eyes.

He feels raw, open, and vulnerable.

So lost, and—and—

The hand that pushed up his veil drifts down now, reaching for…

The chain around Xie Lian’s neck.

The god’s eyes narrow sharply, and his reaction is instant.

First, he bats that hand out of the way, and without even needing to say a word, Ruoye lashes out.

But it never actually lands on anything solid.

In that moment, the sea of crimson around him explodes in a flash of light, making Xie Lian cringe with surprise, wrapping his arms around his head for cover, but—

There’s no pain. No violent force. Just a soft rush of wind, and the fluttering of… He peeks one eye open.

There isn’t just one or two butterflies now—

Xie Lian is surrounded by them.

Their wings gently brushing against his skin as they swoop up into the air, floating high up into the sky before disappearing in a rush.

Tears slip down his cheeks, his face illuminated in a silver glow as he tips his head back, the veil slipping the rest of the way off of his head.

His breaths are shaky and deep, gulping in the cool night air. It’s been eight centuries since Xie Lian saw the stars.

This is the closest that he’s come to seeing them again since. If only it didn’t feel so…so…

(It hurts.)

He clutches the ring around his neck, fighting to steady his breath, but then Xie Lian notices something:

The aching in his throat is gone.

Even when he reaches under the sleeves of his dress, probing at the bandages on his arms…

Those cuts have disappeared.

But how on earth…?

Clink!

He whips his head around, all too familiar with the sound now, and once again— A butterfly leads the way through the dark.

Whatever that person was—he wasn’t the ghost groom. And he—

Xie Lian gulps, forcing himself to calm down, clutching the chain around his neck even tighter.

He wasn’t Hong-er either.

But he led Xie Lian down the mountain safely, and now…

It’s like he’s trying to guide him.

Slowly, the prince starts to follow it down the path, and when he reaches the destination…

Xie Lian presses his hand against the temple door, making a face when he feels the name on the entrance plaque.

“If I ever see another Ming Guang temple after this…” He mutters. It’ll be too soon.

He probably should feel bad for the general at this point, but he can't seem to bring himself to.

The first thing that hits him is the heavy, dark aura—toxic to mortals, and...

Now this—this is the lair of a savage ghost.

Xie Lian finds the missing brides.

There's a private room in Ghost City, far within the depths of Paradise Manor, that only two ghosts are allowed to enter.

The first, being the Ghost King, Crimson Rain Sought Flower.

And the second being the one who, by now, has known him longer than almost anyone.

Autumn Twilight Shrouding Forests, the savage ghost Ren Song.

But that was a name mortals gave him only recently, after the death of his elder brother.

To Hua Cheng, he's still barely more than the child he found eight centuries ago, crying on the mountainside—

Shuo.

He stands outside of that door now, listening.

Ghost Kings don't weep. That comes before. Shuo knows.

They howl.

That's what he hears on the other side of that door now.

Anguished howling. The sounds of crashing and breaking. Rage, grief, and sadness.

A trapped animal.

Shuo has stood before this door many times. Often as a small child, a stuffed animal dangling from one hand, the other clutching his older brother’s hand.

Yanlin on the other side of them, staring at the lock resentfully.

Keeping them outside, rarely letting them in.

Now, Shuo is the only one left standing, a lonely figure at the end of a long hallway.

This was the room where Yanlin explained her little habit of spreading rumors, the one that led to Hua Cheng earning the title of Crimson Rain Sought Flower.

This was the place where the ghost king brought Shuo and his siblings, when Xiang and Fai died.

Bao never cried, only sat to the side and leaned against the Ghost King’s arm. Yanlin wept the loudest, and Shuo…

He cried silently, for the first time struck by…

Real loss.

Shuo and his brother died on the same day. Bao was beside him, when he woke up on the fields of Mount Tonglu.

Even when Lang Ying took them, and they were separated—when Shuo cried out for help—

A god brought his brother back to him.

It was only then, when that same god was saying that there was nothing that he could do to save the men who helped raise him, that Shuo realized what grief felt like.

He stayed awake the longest that night, longer than even Hua Cheng, watching the naked sadness on his face.

And it was that night, when Shuo heard something that he never told anyone. Not Yanlin, not Bao, not in the centuries that followed.

He never even asked Hua Cheng what it meant. Knew better than to do that. The ghost king never sleeps in front of anyone else for a reason.

Shuo heard him whisper a name with a softness that he had never heard from Hua Cheng before, and has never heard from him since.

An aching longing that ran so deep, it frightened the boy. He couldn't understand it.

"Xie Lian."

And now, the ghost knows why.

He thinks he does.

He stands there quietly, waiting until the crashing and the snarling reaches a more manageable volume.

Everyone else has fled paradise manor in a quiet hush. Even Yin Yu has taken to patrolling the city, rather than seeing this.

It takes time, but the roar dulls to a growl.

Shuo isn't afraid of Hua Cheng, and he never has been.

He owes the spirit his life, and if he ever decides to take it—Shuo will accept it.

He lifts his hand, and he knocks, hearing an angry, almost animalistic snarl in response.

The ghost sighs.

"Gege, it's me."

The menacing aura doesn't exactly lesson, but…

Shuo opens the door nonetheless, not surprised to find that the lock has been broken.

What waits inside is a swirling disaster of magic. So potent, it would stop the heart of any mortal that stepped inside.

Hua Cheng glances back over his shoulder, eyes burning red in the candlelight, looking Shuo over with barely coherent annoyance.

He's half-mad with grief, Shuo can see it.

Violent bursts of energy shatter the items and furniture in the room, only to bind them back together.

Angry red sparks fill the air as the space around him shatters then rebuilds, over and over, in a bitter, self-destructive cycle.

"Why are you wearing that form?"

Most ghosts can't change their appearances—not effectively.

Only Hua Cheng and He Xuan can do so flawlessly.

But Ren Song has been practicing, and while he isn't flawless, he's gotten rather good at it.

Now, he looks like a boy of only eight years old, with dark hair and grey eyes, watching Hua Cheng with a solemn expression.

Not so different from the child he found on Mount Tonglu.

"I thought it made you less likely to incinerate me," the boy replies easily, rocking on his heels.

He knows how to deal with Hua Cheng by now. Know that the ghost king won't allow comfort—will lash out with ferocity at any attempt.

"If you were that concerned, why knock?"

Shuo doesn't offer him kind words, he knows that they mean nothing to Hua Cheng. Instead, he gives him something else, something that he craves.

Knowledge, a sense of control over the situation.

That's how you comfort Hua Cheng.

"You were right—Qi Rong was behind the scheme." His eyes flash slightly in the dark, and Shuo continues, "It was his array. I'm sure you realized that when you saw the trees."

Of course he did, and the fact that Xie Lian almost saw that... Hua Cheng grits his teeth, turning away once more.

"Was he dealt with?"

"Mostly," Shuo murmurs. He speaks with such calm confidence, even in a child's form, clasping his hands behind his back—as he's seen Hua Cheng do many times before. "After you destroyed the array, I went to his location—I seriously damaged him, but he fled to escape capture."

That makes sense.

Aside from Hua Cheng, Qi Rong has little reason to fear the other ghosts of the underworld. He's ancient and powerful in his own right—and Blackwater is hardly involved enough in ghostly matters to be a threat.

But he does fear Ren Song, as he should.

After he dispersed Bao, Shuo's resentment increased suddenly, with a burning level of power—and when it did, it was with one intent—

Vengeance.

But Shuo has never killed Qi Rong, even though he's had the opportunity to do so many times, and Hua Cheng has given his permission.

Shuo plays with him. Like a cat that relishes in taunting it's meal, batting an angry rat between it's paws.

And his magic was developed with one thing in mind:

Torturing a ghost that desperately wants to escape his own inferiority.

Naturally, Qi Rong flees on sight.

Shuo bows his head in apology. "My array wasn't as effective as usual. It won't happen again."

Hua Cheng doesn't respond to that immediately, wrapping his arms around himself.

He knows it was his own fault. That he was too distracted by Xie Lian to focus on surprising his aura.

It was overpowering the entire area. The fact that Ren Song could even cast the spell was impressive, but it had no chance of working effectively, even when Hua Cheng crushed Qi Rong's magic on the way down the mountain.

"Do you know his level of involvement?"

"He increased the power level of the ghost in question," Shuo shrugs. "Apparently she's been relatively irrelevant up until now."

Hua Cheng's arms tighten around himself, and he still doesn't look back at the boy. "You don't sound like a fan."

"I'm not," the boy admits.

Instead of explaining any further, he simply asks, “Would you like me or Yin Yu to monitor the prince?”

“...No,” Hua Cheng mutters, fiddling with something in his hair. “That won’t be necessary.”

There’s a butterfly tailing him now, Hua Cheng knows exactly where he is.

“Focus on finding Qi Rong again,” the ghost king orders, “Yin Yu has his own assignments.”

Shuo bows his head quietly in agreement, and...there’s so much he wants to ask, so much that’s gnawing at him, but...

He knows his place. “Yes, Hua Chengzhu.”

He leaves the room, shutting the door without another word. There’s no more snarling and howling now—just the quiet out of Hua Cheng quietly self destructing then reconstructing, over and over again, in the confines of that room.

Now, Shuo switches into a new skin.

His body grows as he walks down the halls of Paradise Manor, stretching with each step until he’s the size of a teenager, hair pulled up in a high ponytail, with a slide curl to it’s texture.

His robes are black, trimmed with emerald thread. He carries no sword—he never has.

There are two leather holsters on each of his thighs, each holding a dagger, but no one has ever seen them drawn.

Only two ghosts in the underworld wear armor—their Kings, Hua Cheng and He Xuan. One with silver vambraces, the other with golden scaled mail.

Qi Rong pretends.

He has this ridiculous breastplate cobbled together from the finest mortal metals that he covers in paint, and calls it a spiritual device.

Shuo has taken great delight in breaking it several times over, watching the ghost have a new set made and insist, this time, that it’s real.

But very few things in the Ghost Realm ever are.

In all honesty—Shuo was raised by a Ghost King, but he couldn't tell you if he had ever actually seen Hua Cheng's face.

Even now, the mask Shuo wears isn't his own—it's that of Autumn Twilight Shrouding Forests.

The savage ghost Ren Song is known for many things. Androgyny, illusion, and fear— but two features always remain the same.

The first, being his eyes. One a deep, pine green—the other burning like a forest set aflame.

And the second, being the choker that sits around his neck.

The metal is black, with an emerald set in the face—made from hell-burned steel and gemstone, and...the ashes are his own.

He asked Hua Cheng that once. If his ashes were somewhere safe. His answer always baffled Shuo.

That if the place where he hid them was destroyed... He wouldn't need to exist anymore.

Ren Song can't imagine that. He's never felt safer than he does with his ashes against his own skin.

When he steps into the streets—he catches ghosts stopping and staring, like they want to ask.

Everyone heard the initial roar, after all.

But there's a distance between the protégé of Crimson Rain Sought Flower and the citizens of Ghost City. A barrier they know better than to cross.

"What are you staring at?" He questions coldly, raising one eyebrow.

No one can keep eye contact for long.

Shuo keeps walking.

Only Yin Yu stops him before he reaches the city gates, resting a hand against the ghost's arm. "Did he say much to you?"

Ren Song stares at him quietly, slightly less hostile—but he shakes his head. “I would leave him alone. Actually—I’d expect him to be gone again soon.”

Because now, he knows who Xie Lian is. And the reason for Hua Cheng searching for this long—it seems somewhat obvious now.

So, he won’t stay away for long.

Yin Yu seems exhausted by the prospect. “…With the ghost festival coming up?”

Ren Song is almost sympathetic.

“I’m off on assignment now, so you’ll be doing all of that by yourself.”

Yin Yu presses his face into his hands, and he probably won’t lift his head again until he finds a pillow to scream into, knowing him.

He definitely isn’t getting the raise this year, that’s obvious.

Shuo slips out of the gates to the city, making his way to the closest forest. Hua Cheng has his domain, Blackwater has his.

Ren Song’s is the smallest, not comparable to a calamity—but quite substantial, for a ghost of his rank.

He presses a palm against a nearby evergreen, eyes burning unnaturally bright in the dark.

The forest trembles, ancient wood groaning and creaking until, eventually, it forms a path.

Eventually, if Ren Song follows long enough, he’ll find his target.

The trees swallow the path behind him as he walks forward, and the track is set.

Back in Paradise Manor, Hua Cheng hasn’t moved since the boy left.

His eyes staring at one thing.

The mirror.

Constantly cracking and reforming, over and over again.

Each time it does, there’s a new face looking back at him.

His true form. The skin he wore for Qin Meirong. The face of Hua Bolin, the one that the Shi brothers knew.

The Bestial Form he took on while fighting in Mount Tonglu.

The middle aged face he once showed Jiang Chi.

He gave himself the name Zhang Wei, back then.

When he sees the white mask of Wu Ming, the mirror shatters a little more violently as the ghost curls in on himself, hands in his hair.

Eight hundred years.

After eight hundred years, Hua Cheng thought...

He had some delusional hope that, with how vast his strength had become, he could break through. That he'd be able to answer.

But he was a fool. An arrogant, hopeful fool. And he made his love cry again.

Hua Cheng trembles, tearing at his hair. Useless. He's so fucking—!

He screams again, rage erupting from him as he throws his head back, feeling as though he could breathe fire.

And he actually does, leaving a burning hole in the ceiling, one that quickly disappears under his glare, only small swirls of smoke remaining.

When he looks back to the mirror again, a familiar face stares back at him.

Small, filthy, and hateful.

Hong-er.

His arms tighten around his knees as he glares at the glass, spiritual power crackling angrily around him.

"I hate you," he growls, nails clawing at his shins.

He never realized that it was possible to be jealous of yourself. Of a past version of you, one that had the things you crave so badly now.

Because that's the face Xie Lian misses. That's the name he calls out to.

And Hua Cheng has been robbed of his name for so long…

It almost feels like someone else. Like the person Xie Lian is mourning for isn't him.

Hua Cheng knows his past, aches from it, but it's also been stripped away from him, leaving him incapable of taking it back.

What is he supposed to do, now?

Before, he always knew.

It was always about getting back to his god. Protecting him. Hua Cheng knows he's more than capable of doing that now, but…

He presses his face against his knees, and he hears Zhao Beitong's voice, from all those years ago:

'You're still mourning the life you could have had.'

Maybe that's true, because now, Hua Cheng is realizing—

He can return to Xie Lian's side now, but…at least for the time being, he can't do so as Hong-er.

He managed that before, as Wu Ming. But Xie Lian's needs were different then. The ghost fit into his revenge plans easily.

But how could he justify showing up as Hua Cheng?

He always assumed that, if Xie Lian knew who he was—he would accept him as he is now.

But he doesn't know, and—

And that means that he'll have to find another way to get close. To fit himself back into Xie Lian's life.

To make the prince care for him again, if that's even possible. Eventually, he'll find a way to break the curse, but until then…

The ghost clenches his teeth, forcing himself to sharpen his emotions—to stop feeling sorry for himself, making them into something useful.

His gaze drifts back to the mirror once more.

He picks a new face for himself. Flickering through countless options. Different ages, genders, varying degrees of beauty.

Not that Xie Lian can see them for now, but—he will, one day.

Hua Cheng presses his palm against the glass.

His breathing steadies, and his gaze slowly becomes determined.

He knows what he's going to do next. The goal hasn't changed, just the method.

He's going to make his way back to Xie Lian's side. Even if the prince doesn't know that Hua Cheng is protecting him.

When did he become so weak?

He settles on a new face, his eyes narrowed as he stares at himself, palms pressed against the mirror.

Hua Cheng has never expected anything from his god. Has never prayed with the expectation or need that someone would answer.

That was never why he worshipped before. And that hasn't changed now.

Even if he can't have everything he wants from his god, even if he only manages to find a way to stand beside him, or even just close to him—

That's enough of a reason to linger on in this world. Always.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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Autumn Twilight Shrouding Forests / Ren Song / Shuo (Spotify

Playlist **HERE**)

[image]

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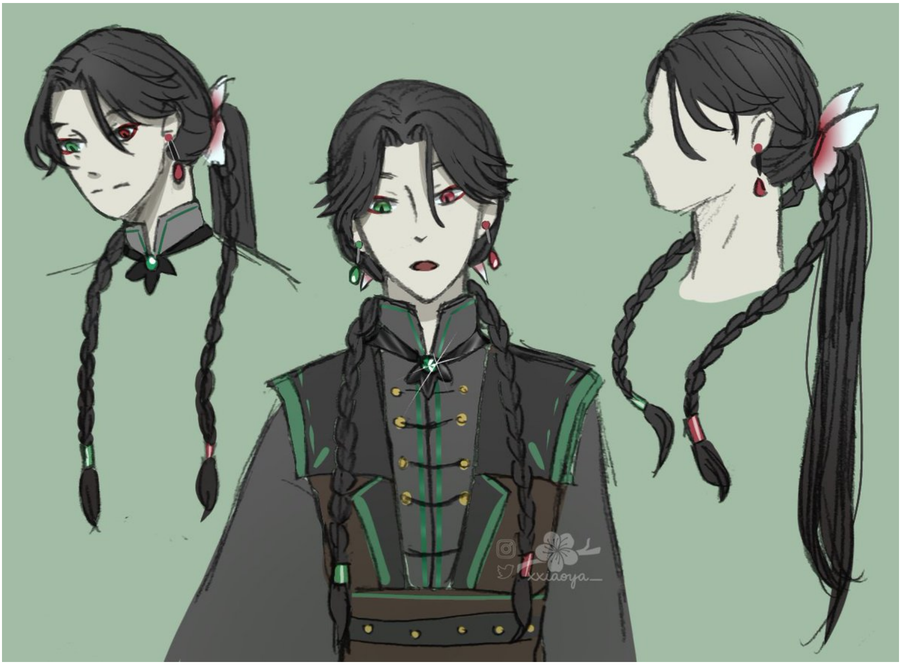

CREDIT: PRI

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to Lace and Pri for their amazing artwork, and allowing me to share it! I'm so grateful!

And a happy new year to all of you, I thought it best to ring it in with a hualian reunion nearly 300k words in the making! Thank you all so much for hanging in there this long!

xoxo, Evie

Look At Me

Chapter Summary

> "Does this have something to do with what you said about knowing more about the groom's identity?" Nan Feng questions, and the god nods.
>
> "I already told Fu Yao about this before, but...I've spent a lot of time around weddings in the past," he explains.
>
> "And this is all so targeted towards Ming Guang...after all, we heard before—all of his temples in the area have been burned down besides this one, which was sitting behind a magical barrier, and the ghost's behavior...jealous, vindictive, possessive... it's much more like..."
>
> Shrieking echoes down the hill, and it's clear—the fighting has already begun. "...A bride."

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

On Mount Yu Jun, Xie Lian is experiencing growing exasperation, his arms crossed over his chest as he deals with a crowd of conflicted, angry men.

"Wh—What do you MEAN you're a man?!" One of them moans, kneeling down and clutching his head.

"I'm sorry," Xie Lian replies dryly.

"I can see that this experience has clearly been a revelation for you."

"I-It hasn't!" The man sputters, leaping to his feet. "I'm fine! I-I was just confused, that's all! You look just like a—"

"Delicate featured man in a dress?"

"NO!"

He wails, "No, you're clearly in disguise, it wasn't my fault!"

That might be the case, but Xie Lian isn't in the mood to comfort someone that is horrified and disgusted over being attracted to him. "In any case, all of you need to leave."

He steps in front of Xiao Ying protectively, crossing his arms.

The young woman followed them to the shrine to make sure they were alright—only to catch the ire of the men who were after the bounty on the ghost groom to begin with.

"This place isn't safe for any of you."

"You're just trying to scare us off so you can get the bounty for yourself!" One of the men snaps. "You expect us to believe a word you say?!"

"Besides, that brat is working with the ghost groom—everyone knows it! That's why she always gets in the way!"

"I'm not!"

Xiao Ying clings to the back of Xie Lian's dress pleadingly, "I swear I'm not!"

"She's always helping that little FREAK that lives on the mountain! He's probably the groom!"

Xie Lian highly doubts that. Just from what Nan Feng said—the Ghost Groom wouldn't leave a witness.

"I doubt a ghost with such blood thirst has any plan on socializing with humans," Xie Lian shakes his head, his voice firm. "In any case, I already encountered the ghost, and it's a black fog. Nothing like you described."

"How would you even know?" One of them sneers. "It's not like you can see it!"

"I'm a Taoist," Xie Lian shrugs. "I can sense demonic energy, and there isn't any coming from her, and what attacked me before didn't take a form that matches your description. Now, please—"

"You really think we're just gonna!"

BOOM!

There's the sound of a nearby tree cracking by the trunk, and Xie Lian smiles.

Ah, Nan Feng and Fu Yao have caught up.

“Are you serious?” Fu Yao sighs, staring at the now deceased cedar, rubbing the side of his neck. “Do you always have to do that?”

Nan Feng frowns. “What?”

“Every time,” Fu Yao grumbles, and Xie Lian raises an eyebrow, “Every time we go on assignment, you always have to find an excuse to smash a tree to show everyone what a big strong man you are.”

Do the work together often?

Xie Lian’s glad to hear that, actually. “I do not!”

“Yes, you do!” Fu Yao throws his hands up, rounding on him. “And it’s always a tree! At LEAST up the ante and smash a wall or something? You’re like a guy that only knows how to do missionary!”

Missionary? Is that a martial art style? Xie Lian hasn’t heard of it.

“Trees are just usually available?!” Nan Feng glares, defensive, “Why do you care so much?!”

“Because,” Fu Yao half yells, half whispers, clutching his temples with frustration. “You literally crushed a tree in front of the *same* group of guys *yesterday* !”

Well—he has a point.

“They *already* know you can crush a tree!” Fu Yao huffs, “Leave the local flora alone!”

“ *Fine!* ” Nan Feng grits his teeth, leaning over him with a huff, “I’ll just split YOU in half next time!”

Xie Lian is just waiting for them to get it all out, twiddling his thumbs.

He notices they get oddly quiet for a moment, but he can’t see the way Nan Feng’s anger fades into clear embarrassment, his face going red all the way up to his ears, and Fu Yao goes from blinking with astonishment to...

Looking like the cat that’s caught the canary.

"I'd probably handle it better than the tree," he comments airily, and the color of Nan Feng's cheeks darkens even further.

He's literally been begging him to shut up inside the private communication array for the last thirty seconds, at least. Well.

Demanding more than begging

But after a few seconds of Fu Yao snickering at his expense, he's had enough. To the men watching, it looks like they're just glaring at each other.

Xie Lian presumes they might be having a stare down, they used to do that often. And arm wrestling.

Feng Xin always won, so Mu Qing got irritated and suggested seeing who could hold their breath the longest—but Xie Lian had to put a stop to that when the servant cheated by breathing through his nose, cackling when the prince's bodyguard fainted during a feast.

So, he assumes it's probably just something like that, and it's better just to let them get it out instead of getting in the middle. If he does, they'll just snap and yell all night —and at the moment, they aren't saying anything too hurtful.

What he does not know, is that Fu Yao's smirk is slowly fading, turning into a horrified, scandalized blush, while Nan Feng makes strong eye contact with him.

But even if he did, it wouldn't make sense, because, y'know— Private Communication Arrays and all that.

And it's while the two of them are *thoroughly* distracted that one of the men in the crowd cries out,

"Hey, look! I see the little monster! He's hiding in the bushes!"

"Leave him alone!" Xiao Ying cries out, trying to grab their leader by the arm—only to get shoved aside.

Xie Lian manages to catch her before she hits the ground, and he hears the sound of footsteps—probably the young man they've been referring to—fleeing back into the woods, and the men from the village charging after him.

And then he remembers...that's where they...

The man who pretended to be the ghost groom...when they were walking...the smell of blood, and the array, it—

“Wait!” Xie Lian cries out, “Don’t go in there!”

But...it’s already too late.

Nan Feng clears his throat, “Is something wrong, your highness? Didn’t you come that way?”

Xie Lian opens his mouth to explain, but—then he hears the men who just took off start shrieking, and what they’re saying—

“Oh god, get back! There are bodies!”

“Hanging in the trees!”

—it makes his blood run cold.

“All the blood is coming down!”

Oh.

A violent shiver runs down Xie Lian’s spine as he fumbles for his hand, grasping it tightly to stop it from shaking.

He—

Hanging bodies—

A heavy, warm hand lands on his shoulder, steadying him, and Xie Lian lets out a shaky breath.

“I’m alright, Nan Feng,” he mutters. “Thank you.”

The Deputy god nods, looking over Xie Lian’s shoulder and into the forest. “...The Night Touring Green Lantern,” he mutters, shaking his head. “Is he allied to the ghost groom, you think? That could be a problem.”

Xie Lian tilts his head curiously. “What are you talking about?”

“He’s a powerful ghost,” Fu Yao finally speaks up, his voice a little higher pitched than before—and sulking in it’s tone. “Nearly a Calamity. His trademark is hanging dead bodies from trees to make blood rain down.”

Xie Lian finds himself wracked with nausea.

Does that mean…he was walking under them, the entire time?

He claps one hand over his mouth, his face growing pale.

And he didn't know?

Nan Feng watches him with growing concern. "Is there more than what you're telling us?"

He can see the prince's distress—but he misinterprets the reason. "You came that way, did you see anything?"

Slowly, Xie Lian lowers his hand from his mouth.

"…I did see someone," he admits, somewhat hesitantly. "He was…strange."

And likely an extremely powerful ghost.

"He was able to smash the magical array shrouding the mountain with just his foot," Xie Lian remembers the crunch of it, it still echoes in his ears now. "And none of the other defenses seemed to phase him. But…he didn't try to hurt me in any way."

Actually…in retrospect…Xie Lian is actually pretty sure that the ghost healed some of his injuries, which…leaves the prince slightly mortified at the way he behaved. He would apologize if he could, but…

"Do you think that could have been the Night Touring Green Lantern?"

If he did something that gruesome, Xie Lian doesn't think he actually wants to apologize. Not if he…he was walking under—

"It's hard to say, walking a blind man down the mountain isn't exactly his style," Fu Yao glances up into the forest, frowning at the corpses. "Did he say anything?"

"…No," Xie Lian shakes his head. "But…there butterflies. Silver butterflies. They must have been made from spiritual power, because I was able to see them—"

He stops when he feels the other two go stiff with fear. "…What?"

"This…is bad."

Xie Lian blinks with confusion. What's so bad about butterflies? "Why?"

"Wraith Butterflies..." Fu Yao trails off, looking at Nan Feng. "They mean this is way beyond anything we can deal with. We need to go back to Heaven now and get reinforcements."

Wraith Butterflies?

Is that what they're called? Xie Lian thinks the name is kind of nice, actually. Eerie, but...pretty.

"I can't leave these people here if that's the case," Xie Lian mutters, shaking his head, "But if it really is that much of a problem—you go on and bring back help for us."

Fu Yao seems to hesitate—and for a moment, Nan Feng looks almost sympathetic, but Xie Lian is firm.

"If it's that serious, then more people could get hurt. We don't have any more time to waste. Meet us back at the Ming Guang temple."

He glances over to Nan Feng.

"Lend me some spiritual power?"

The god offers his hand without hesitation, but he's clearly a little confused. "Why?"

Xie Lian shrugs, glancing down at himself.

He can see the outline of his hand now, filled with that same earthy aura from before.

His hands look like that?

He shakes his head with a sigh, walking back towards the temple, Nan Feng walking close beside him. "You'll see."

Xiao Ying—who has snuck the bandaged young man (who crept out of the woods during the screaming) with her, follows after them, explaining that the child is harmless.

Maimed and unable to communicate—but he's never hurt anyone from the village, and it's unlikely that he ever would.

The prince nods, indicating for them to stay back once they get closer to the temple, and Nan Feng takes him by the elbow. “What is it that you aren’t telling me?”

“...” the Prince stares up at him, his shackle glowing dimly. “What do you mean?”

“Back there, in the forest—” Nan Feng’s voice is so tense with worry, “Something frightened you, and it wasn’t the butterflies.”

Xie Lian’s jaw tightens. “Now isn’t the time to discuss it.”

It requires explaining so much that...requires far more mental energy than what Xie Lian possesses at the moment. Not only that, but..

Xie Lian would tell Feng Xin those things, not Nan Feng—and as long as they’re pretending like this, he...

“...I just want to keep you safe, your highness,” Nan Feng’s voice isn’t harsh now, and neither is the grip on his arm, it’s—

He’s always been so rough with everyone else—but with him, only with him—there’s a gentleness.

Even—

Even after this long.

Xie Lian’s lips tremble.

“...I just had a bad experience once,” he explains carefully.

Well. Multiple times. But he doesn’t need to explain that right now.

“Hanging bodies...upset me.”

Nan Feng grimaces. If he had known that, he would have tried to keep the prince from finding out about them.

“...Before we go on,” the deputy god continues, maintaining that gentle but firm grip on the prince’s arm. “Can I ask you something else?”

Normally, Xie Lian would say it could wait, but...

Nan Feng intentionally waited until they were alone to bring it up, so he nods.

"What is it?"

They're still walking now, slowly growing closer to the temple, and Nan Feng clears his throat.

"...Centuries ago, a god ascended and came to my general for...help, adjusting to the heavens."

Xie Lian smiles faintly. He actually did it, then. That makes him happy. "And did he help?'

Nan Feng nods quickly, "Of course—but the new god...told my general something only you would have known. And he was wondering...or, I mean...he mentioned..." He struggles, stumbling over his words—but Xie Lian's tone is gentle.

"Mentioned what?"

"...He wondered why you sent the new god to him," Nan Feng mumbles, his ears a little hot.

Oh. Well—the answer to that is simple enough.

"Because I knew Feng Xin would be a good influence on him," Xie Lian explains. "And that he would keep him out of trouble."

That makes Nan Feng grow quiet for a few moments, fighting up the nerve to ask, "He also said that you—"

"Something's wrong," Xie Lian cuts him off, holding up a hand to silence him. They're standing in the middle of the courtyard leading into the temple, but...

Oh no.

He can already sense that the inside is empty.

"They moved them," Xie Lian mutters, his brow furrowed with irritation.

"Moved who?"

"The brides, probably to get payment from their families," the prince rubs his temples. "And the minute those veils come off, we're in trouble."

"Does this have something to do with what you said about knowing more about the groom's identity?" Nan Feng questions, and the god nods.

"I already told Fu Yao about this before, but…I've spent a lot of time around weddings in the past," he explains.

"And this is all so targeted towards Ming Guang…after all, we heard before—all of his temples in the area have been burned down besides this one, which was sitting behind a magical barrier, and the ghost's behavior…jealous, vindictive, possessive… it's much more like…"

Shrieking echoes down the hill, and it's clear—the fighting has already begun. "…A bride."

Nan Feng grimaces from beside him. "And there are seventeen of them."

"Eighteen," the prince corrects his friend. "If you count the one behind all of this."

Xie Lian is tired.

That's the only thing he can think of, darting around the temple, barely managing to dodge attacks from the possessed bodies of the diseased brides, throwing veils over their heads.

He hasn't actually slept since Gusu, and with his powers sealed… It creates strain and wear.

Taking some spiritual powers from Nan Feng did help, to some extent—he's able to use Ruoye more effectively, casting the weapon out over a wider area, and he can actually use the communication array, a rare luxury.

'Ling Wen? Can you hear me?'

'Yes, your highness?'

'I have a question that's going to sound oddly specific, but…'

Xie Lian backflips off of the temple roof, throwing a veil onto yet another bride.

'Has Ming Guang ever been in a romantic relationship with a jealous partner?'

There's a long pause.

'I don't mean to pry, but—'

'Past or present?'

Xie Lian is so confused by the question, he nearly misses his landing. *'Pardon?'*

'In Ming Guang's case, you're going to have to be rather specific, your highness,' Ling Wen explains flatly. *'There are many possibilities.'*

Xie Lian flushes slightly. Oh.

'It would be a woman from at least a few centuries ago,' he explains. *'She would have to be willful, violent—and extremely jealous and possessive. Obsessed with General Pei.'*

'That actually does narrow it down,' Ling Wen muses with a sigh. *'With only two exceptions that I'm aware of, Pei usually goes for weak willed partners, and only one of them could fit your description.'*

Xie Lian covers two more brides, rushing down into the courtyard, using Ruoye to make a protective barrier for Xiao Ying and the other villagers.

'And who would that be?'

'Did the ghost show signs of a limp?'

Xie Lian hesitates, thinking back on the noises he heard, when fighting that black cloud in Ming Guang's temple.

'...yes, it did.'

'I thought so. ' Ling Wen's voice turns grim. *'Then it could only be Xuan Ji.'*

Xuan Ji?

'She was a general from an enemy nation that Pei captured, then released. But they met so frequently in battle—eventually, they became lovers.'

'...That's actually rather romantic,' Xie Lian admits. Nine brides are down now, eight more to go.

The idea of admiring an opponent's strength on the battlefield, and then eventually becoming intimate with them...it's undoubtedly appealing. Xie Lian can see the temptation of it.

'I suppose,' Ling Wen agrees. *'But eventually, Xuan Ji became attached, and wanted commitment.'*

Xie Lian frowns, veiling yet another bride, barely dodging an attack from another as he listens to Nan Feng dealing with the enemies outside the temple grounds. *'Is that a bad thing?'*

Isn't commitment the point of being in that sort of relationship?

'For Pei? Yes, it is.'

Ling Wen seems emphatic on that point.

'He's an infamous philanderer. He's never been one to become attached to his partners, and despises the idea of marriage.'

Well. That explains the bitterness surrounding brides.

'From what I understand, their separation turned ugly.'

Of course—Ling Wen suspects there might be an exception to Pei Ming's beliefs about commitment, but they're only suspicions, and not relevant, so she keeps them to herself.

'How ugly?'

'Ugly enough for her to do something like this,' The civil god murmurs.

Before Xie Lian can say much more, however—there's a crash, just outside the temple doors.

The god stiffens, throwing himself in front of the villagers, the other brides now neutralized, and he hears…laughter.

Pained, almost crazed.

Followed by the heavy thuds—limping.

And then, Xie Lian sees the aura. A violent, angry shade of black, crackling with resentment.

"…My darling…" A voice croons, "Have you finally come? Was this finally enough?"

The prince glances around at first, wondering if Pei ming had actually arrived without his knowing—

But there's no other godly force in the courtyard besides him. Even Nan Feng is still dealing with the issues outside.

After a moment, the god realizes with a start—

'Oh. She means me.'

"Will you..." Xuan Ji's voice shifts into a snarl as she charges at him. "...LOOK AT ME?!"

Oh dear.

She really is quicker than Xie Lian expected, because in one fell swoop, she manages to launch herself forward, grabbing him around the neck and tossing him to the ground—then holding him there.

"LOOK AT ME!" She shrieks. "I did all of this for YOU! LOOK AT MY LEG!"

Xie Lian really is grateful that the ghost he encountered before healed his throat injury—if he ever encounters him again, he'll have to thank him. Otherwise, this would have been very painful.

"YOU USED TO CROSS AN ENTIRE COUNTRY OVERNIGHT JUST TO SEE ME!" She howls.

"AND NOW YOU WON'T EVEN LOOK?!"

"I can't," Xie Lian offers, feeling almost a little bad for her. He can't imagine how horrible it feels to be discarded like that by someone you hold so dear. "I really can't —"

"CAN'T LIVE WITH THE GUILT OF WHAT YOU DID?!" Xuan Ji snarls.

Xie Lian hopes the situation might calm down a little if he can explain that he's not Pei Ming—then there's a chance to talk her down enough to let the humans go, but—

"Leave him alone!" He hears a frantic cry, then footsteps charging, and his heart sinks.

Xiao Ying. "Don't—!"

Xuan Ji's head snaps up, her eyes narrowing into slits when she sees the village girl approaching with nothing more than a stick.

Brave.

What a brave little fool.

Just as she lifts her hands to strike out, Xie Lian does the same with Ruoye, but…

Not in time to stop the blow.

Xuan Ji isn't able to sink her claws in the way she intended—not like she did with the other humans, before—but the shove is hard and violent.

Enough so to send Xiao Ying to the ground, her skull hitting the cobblestones with a violent crack.

The boy in the bandages sobs.

Xie Lian doesn't have to see the wound to know—Xiao Ying lets out a strangled whimper, enough to tell him that the wound was fatal.

"You don't DESERVE HIM!" Xuan Ji snarls, even as Ruoye tightens, dragging her to the ground.

Xie Lian ignores her, rushing to Xiao Ying's side.

The young woman breathes raggedly, staring up at the sky as blood pools underneath her head. "Sir…" she shivers, "I tried to help, but I…"

Xie Lian reaches for her hand, squeezing. "You were very helpful," He reassures her. "I was able to capture her because of you."

That seems to bring Xiao Ying some small measure of relief, her lips twitching up into a smile as he looks towards the boy weeping by her side, "D…Don't steal food anymore, alright? People…they won't be kind to you…"

Xie Lian's chest sinks, because the girl is right.

With Xiao Ying gone, he doubts anyone in the area of Mount Yu Jun would look after the boy. They already fear and resent him for being a 'monster.'

"I'll look over him," Xie Lian assures her. "If he ever needs anything, he can come to me."

Xiao Ying's lips tremble with relief.

After a moment, he brings his other hand up to Xiao Ying's cheek—stroking over the shape of her nose, her eyebrows, and her chin, and Xie Lian smiles, squeezing her hand gently.

"I don't see why everyone was making such a fuss," He murmurs, "You're very pretty, Xiao Ying."

From the ragged gasp the girl lets out, her eyes flooding with tears—Xie Lian can surmise that no one has ever said that to her.

Oh, what a horrible thing beauty is. Whether you have it or you don't—the world torments you for it in one way or another.

"T…thank you, sir…"

He hears it when her heartbeat stops, and the boy's weeping only gets louder. With one final grimace, Xie Lian gently presses Xiao Ying's eyes shut before rising to his feet.

Xuan Ji is even more distressed than she was before, wrestling out of Ruoye's grip.

"You DARE call another woman beautiful in front of me?!" The savage ghost snarls. "Have you NO SHAME?!"

"I'm not Pei," Xie Lian replies flatly, far less sympathetic to her now as he turns around, opening his eyes to allow Xuan Ji to see his shackle. "I can't look at you, and even if I could—I have no such interests in women."

Honestly, Xuan Ji's behavior has only reinforced that preference.

The Ghost Bride hisses, taking a step back. "Then…he really…wouldn't come to see me?! AFTER EVERYTHING I'VE DONE?!"

She turns to the statue of Ming Guang, her eyes filled with rage, "I BURNED DOWN ALL OF YOUR TEMPLES! MURDERED YOUR FOLLOWERS! AND YOU WON'T EVEN SPARE ME A GLANCE?!"

She stops, her breathing ragged, and turns back to Xie Lian with a glare. "If I…"

She takes a step in his direction, her eyes flaring. "If I kill one of your PRECIOUS COMRADES, will I warrant your attention THEN?!"

Xie Lian sighs, watching as the wrath's aura explodes outward, releasing her full power.

He's tired.

Any humans in the surrounding area will be crushed at this rate.

If he had his spiritual powers, this never would have been a problem to begin with. No one would have gotten hurt at all, but...

He grits his teeth, launching himself forward. There's no choice, is there?

BOOM!

The sound of a gong fills the air, rattling so loudly that it makes Xie Lian stumble, clutching his ears. Then, the sky fills with bright, blinding light—and for Xie Lian to actually be able to see it—

It must be that of heaven.

But something's wrong.

Xie Lian's knees buckle.

Nan Feng, now finished with dealing with the other brides outside the temple, appears by his side—taking the prince by the elbow to steady him.

"Are you alright?" He murmurs, "Reinforcements are here."

Xie Lian claps a hand over his mouth, fighting a sudden wave of nausea.

His neck, eyes, and ankle throb with agony in one continuous rhythm, scorching under the glow of heaven's light.

It feels like it did in Gusu, but worse—and didn't that ghost heal him? Why does it—? But the light fades to a more manageable glow, and so does the pain.

Xie Lian's eyelashes flutter slightly as he shakes his head, holding onto Nan Fang's arm a little more firmly as he pulls himself up.

"I'm alright," he murmurs. "I'm just more sensitive to light and sound than I used to be. I was overwhelmed."

Nan Feng frowns, concerned, but...

There's the sound of multiple people descending the temple steps, and once voice calls out, “Fu Yao and Ling Wen explained the situation. It seems this falls under the responsibility of Ming Guang palace. We’ll take it from here.”

Xie Lian frowns.

That voice...

It’s deep, resounding, and...

Oddly familiar, though he can’t place why.

“...General Pei?” He questions. Of course—he vaguely remembers the god’s voice. Between his first ascension and banishment, Pei and Jun Wu were the gods he works with the most, but...

Xuan Ji shudders.

“FINALLY!” She cries, stumbling in his direction. “You came for me, my love, I—!”

Nan Feng watches as she stumbles, then frowns, “You...” She snarls. “You’re NOT PEI!”

Xie Lian looks to his friend with a frown, “He isn’t?”

“He’s Pei Xiu, a descendant of Ming Guang.”

Nan Feng explains, still keeping a watchful eye over the god, “We usually call him Pei Junior.”

Xie Lian nods, taking that in as the guards from the palace of Ming Guang place Xuan Ji into custody, placing her in spirit binding chains.

“...What will be done with her?”

“Likely sealed under a mountain,” Pei Xiu shrugs, looking Xie Lian over. “It’s an honor to meet your highness, my general mentioned the two of you used to work together.”

Xie Lian pauses, pleasantly surprised that there’s no negative undertone to that statement. “We did, but...”

He glances in Xuan Ji’s direction, his expression one of concern. “Her grudge against Pei is strong...she blames him for her deformity, as well as her current predicament —”

Pei Xiu turns his gaze on Xuan ji, his expression cold. “Is that what she said?”

The ice in his tone gives Xie Lian pause.

“Is that not true?”

The younger General stares Xuan Ji down, watching as the wrath writhes and hisses at him in response.

“Xuan Ji is a strong woman,” Pei Xiu murmurs, folding his arms behind his back. “Her choices were her own.”

“He USED me!” The ghost snarls, thrashing against her bonds. “And then he THREW ME AWAY!”

Instead of addressing her again directly, Pei Xiu looks to Xie Lian. “She offered to betray her country for Ming Guang, that much is true—but the rest of it is a lie.”

“...A lie?”

“NO!” Xuan Ji’s hair falls into her face, her eyes burning red, “He made me think—! He made me believe—!”

“If you truly loved the man,” Pei Xiu glares, his eyes narrowed, “you wouldn’t sully his honor so shamelessly.”

That’s interesting, Xie Lian thinks.

If Pei is such an infamous philanderer, Xie Lian is surprised to find that his subordinate is so concerned with his honor.

“Ming Guang never used the plans that General Xuan Ji gave him against the Kingdom of Yushi. He doesn’t believe in winning through dishonest means.” Pei Xiu shakes his head. “Xuan Ji was very aware of the General’s personal situation when he returned from the war, and when he proceeded to cut ties with her—she mutilated herself so he would keep her by his side.”

Pei’s...personal situation? Xie Lian tilts his head curiously.

“Pei took care of her—generously too, she was kept in comfort—but he wouldn’t marry her. When she realized that she wasn’t going to get her way...Xuan Ji took her own life in an effort to hurt him.”

Nan Feng watches with surprise as Xie Lian’s entire expression changes.

Xie Lian knows what it feels like, to feel the bitter ache of losing someone you love. He can understand the heartbreak and anger that comes with that suffering.

But he also knows what it feels like, to find that someone you care for has taken their own life.

The idea that Xuan Ji would do that as a punishment, inflicted to hurt someone— It fills him with such utter repulsion, Xie Lian is almost startled by it.

“I can’t say that Pei Ming bears no responsibility for the situation, but...” Pei Xiu shakes his head.

“If Xuan Ji had let go, no one else would have gotten hurt.”

Seeming tired of listening to them by now, Xuan Ji wrenches away from the guards, throwing her head back to howl at the moon, so loudly that it makes Xie Lian wince, covering his ears.

“CURSE YOU, PEI!” She shrieks. “IS YOUR HEART TRULY MADE OF STONE?!”

Xie Lian doubts that could be true, if he was still willing to take care of Xuan Ji up until her death, but...

Admittedly, refusing to address her after this long, it seems... Like a pointedly cold gesture.

“COUNT YOURSELF LUCKY THAT YOU HAVE NEVER TRULY LOVED SOMEONE!” She screams, with this bone deep knowledge that, somewhere, Pei can hear her.

She knows he can. Knows that for a man who smiles, teases, spends his whole life pretending that everything is a sport—

Pei Ming cares deeply about his failures. His losses.

He views Xuan Ji as the greatest among them. She knows. That’s why he isn’t here. That’s why he won’t ever look at her.

She *knows* .

“BECAUSE IT WOULD BURN YOU!” Xuan Ji’s nails claw at the sky. “JUST AS IT HAS BURNED ME EVERY MOMENT SINCE YOU CAST

ME ASIDE!”

Xie Lian almost wants to pity her, but when he thinks of the dead girl, just a few feet away from them—and all seventeen of the brides who came before her…

He can’t bring himself to.

“I HOPE THAT FIRE RAGES ON!” Tears of blood stream down Xuan Ji’s face now, her voice breaking between howls of rage and broken sobs, “UNTIL YOUR HEART IS REDUCED TO ASH!”

Pei Xiu watches her coldly, pressing his fingers to his temple as he receives a message.

“…That will never happen,” the deputy replies calmly. “That is Pei’s final message to you.”

Xie Lian’s eyebrows raise.

So, Xuan Ji wasn’t wrong.

Even if Pei Ming refused to deal with her personally…he was listening.

What a complicated situation.

“CURSE YOU PEI!”

Xuan Ji doesn’t stop shrieking the entire time, even as Pei Xiu bids his goodbyes to the other gods in the temple, ordering his men to carry her back to heaven.

Xie Lian’s head pulses and aches with every single shriek.

“CURSE YOU!”

“CURSE YOU!”

“CURSE YOU!”

The prince doesn’t get a chance to sleep that night, either.

Instead, there’s the bodies of the discovered brides to be seen to, and helping the men from the palace of Xuan Zhen clear the bodies from the forest.

Fu Yao and Nan Feng bicker all the while, but not as viciously.

As a matter of fact—both stop to glance at him with concern every now and then, only to return to griping back and forth over who should have to clean the rest of the bodies away, or which one of their generals is more trustworthy.

In any case…

There's only one task left.

The three of them stand with the boy from the mountain, before a freshly erected gravestone.

Nan Feng cut the stone, while Fu Yao did the lettering—and Xie Lian handled the grave itself.

The characters read, 'Hear lies Xiao Ying, believed friend.'

Burials have become nearly routine over the centuries in Xie Lian's case—as it would be for any immortal who has spent so much time in the human realm.

They fade away, he remains.

Still, he kneels—laying a hand on the boy's shoulder, "I know you miss her," his voice is soft.

"But she would want you to look after yourself."

They'll have to figure out a new situation for him soon—after all, Xie Lian is barely in a state where he can look out for himself. It wouldn't be fair to force a child to live the way he does for too long.

"Hey…is he injured?"

Nan Feng's voice makes Xie Lian frown, glancing up, "What do you mean?"

"There's blood on his bandages," the deputy god shrugs, stepping closer. "Maybe he hit his head last night?"

Given how violent the events of the battle against Xuan Ji were—that's worrisome.

"…Best to take a look at it," Xie Lian sighs, turning back to the child. "Go ahead and take the bandages off so we can take a look. Don't be afraid—we won't hurt you."

There’s a moment of hesitation, but slowly—the child complies, unwrapping the bandages around his head.

Xie Lian reaches into his sleeve, where he always keeps a fresh set, reaching up to probe at his head for any injuries, but—

To his shock, someone smacks his hands away—sharply.

“Your highness!” Fu Yao’s voice rings out, “Don’t touch him!”

Nan Feng whips around to glare.

“What do you think you’re—?!”

But then he sees the issue, and his eyes widen.

Xie Lian glances around, trying to understand, “What’s going on here?”

“It’s—!”

“He has Human Face Disease, that’s why he was wearing the bandages!”

Xie Lian's breath leaves him in a panicked rush.

His skin feels cold, and his heart—it’s suddenly pounding in his chest.

Reminding him of the last time he was sitting in the dark, listening to people scream and panic, claiming someone among them had those lesions.

Reminding him what came after. The pain.

Endless terror.

Help me.

Xie Lian’s hands begin to shake.

“...Your highness?”

Help me.

Help me, help me, help me.

Help me, help me, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help me!

He must have said it out loud at least once, because someone grabs him by the shoulders, giving him a hard shake.

“We’re both right here, what’s wrong?!”

The Deputy Gods give each other looks of panic, because—

Neither of them have ever seen Xie Lian like this.

Not once.

Pale, trembling, eyes open wide. It’s hard to read his emotions, through the shackle pattern—but this one speaks loud and clear.

Pure, unadulterated terror.

Fu Yao kneels beside both of them now, placing a hand on Xie Lian’s back while Nan Feng grips his shoulders.

“Dianxia,” it’s probably the first time the deputy god has addressed him so quietly, “You’re safe. Nothing is going to get you. It’s just us here.”

Xie Lian trembles violently, and—

Normally, he can keep it together better than this. But he’s tired. And he aches. And—

And he thought he saw Hong-ear last night, but he didn’t. And—

He chokes out two words, like he can’t even see or hear either one of them, his voice cracking—

“I-It hurts...”

His eyes roll back into his head and he goes limp in Nan Feng’s hold.

“XIE LIAN?!”

True Love Would Burn You

Chapter Summary

> There are many martial gods in the heavens. Most of them from many different walks of life—all united by skills in combat.
>
> However, among all of them—Pei Ming is the one who is always treated as one thing above all else—
>
> A soldier.
>
> Xie Lian was a soldier himself for a time. And many more, over the course of his godhood, but in his experience…it was the unhappiest thing to be.
>
> And Xie Lian can't help but wonder, now, if he's not dealing with Xuan Ji… What other personal matters does Pei Ming have?

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE
>
> CONTENT WARNING: this chapter contains heavily implied sexual content

It's all black after that. Swirling images and voices that Xie Lian can barely recognize, eyes heavy with exhaustion.

He knows he's being taken somewhere, hears voices arguing, and—

Someone holding him tight, mumbling something that he can't hear.

When he wakes again…

His head is against silk sheets, a pillow underneath his head, and for a moment, when he blinks—he sees something on the mattress next to him, wings flapping gently.

A silver butterfly.

Xie Lian blinks blearily, reaching for it as he sits up, but— It's gone.

"You're awake."

The voice is familiar, but he's still a little bit groggy, reaching up to rub at his eyes, "Where...am I?" He mumbles, feeling around a little to get a grip for his surroundings, but all he finds are sheets and pillows. Comfortable, but not informative.

"The Palace of Xuan Zhen."

Now THAT is surprising enough to make Xie Lian wake up the rest of the way, his eyebrows raising. "...Mu Qing?" He questions, then realizes who he must be speaking to now. "...Fu Yao?"

The deputy god nods awkwardly from where he's sitting at the foot of the bed, his arms crossed.

"Nan Yang's palace is holding Xuan Ji, so no it wouldn't have been a good idea to take you there. Ling Wen offered to house you in the civil palace, but..." Fu Yao examines his nails, crossing his legs. "They wanted someone to give you a medical examination, so..."

Xie Lian raises an eyebrow, "What would My King's palace have to do with that?"

Fu Yao's tone is light, unbothered. "Xuan Zhen is a martial god, but he's also a patron of doctors and other medical practitioners. He was the best qualified, so he checked you for injuries."

Xie Lian didn't know that, but...he supposes he wouldn't, since he's been avoiding the temples of his friends for centuries now.

"When did that come about?"

"There was a plague several centuries ago." Fu Yao shrugs. "Mu Qing was the god who helped manage the mortal response."

"Oh, I think I caught that one..." Xie Lian frowns, remembering how uncomfortable it had been—and just how many people all throughout the continent had died, until the kingdoms of Xuli and Yong'an banded together to create a unified response, saving countless more lives.

"You'll have to thank him for me—the treatment I got back then, I would have been pretty uncomfortable without it..."

There's a long silence, and when Fu Yao replies—his tone is a little tense. "I'll tell him."

Xie Lian smiles, a little awkward. “Thank you, Fu Yao.”

He sits up, holding his head—not out of pain, just a little dizzy.

“It was extreme exhaustion, by the way,” the deputy god mutters. “As well as dehydration and malnourishment.”

“...I see,” Xie Lian sighs, not particularly surprised. “How long was I asleep?”

“Sixteen hours.” Fu Yao reaches over, tapping the table next to the bed with his fingertip—allowing Xie Lian to get a sense of where it is. “My orders are to make sure you eat and drink before you leave, so don’t bother being annoying about it, I don’t care.”

Xie Lian pauses. “...Alright.”

He reaches for a glass of water, as well as what seems to be a plate of fruit, and...

Xie Lian was such a picky eater as a boy, he was usually thin because he hardly ever ate what was placed in front of him.

But—these are all of the fruits he was actually willing to eat.

His heart swells slightly as he rolls a slice of dried plum between his fingertips, his gaze hidden by his hair, but fond.

Mu Qing remembered. That isn’t surprising—he’s always had an excellent memory, better than anyone else Xie Lian has ever met.

Sometimes it’s a downfall.

“...You’ll have to tell him that I’m sorry for being such an inconvenience,” Xie Lian sighs, taking a bite.

He still does love plums, actually. He almost forgot what they tasted like.

Fu Yao is quiet for such a long time, that Xie Lian thinks silence is his actual answer, but...

“He isn’t heartless, you know.”

Fu Yao’s voice is small when he says that. Like he half expects someone to laugh at him.

Vulnerable.

Xie Lian finishes chewing, and when he replies, his voice is gentle enough that it makes Fu Yao flinch.

“I’ve always known that.”

Xie Lian doesn’t have a relationship more confusing or complicated than the one that he does with Mu Qing. Of everyone in his old life, aside from Hong’er...

He probably thought about Mu Qing the most. More than even Feng Xin, who he was ostensibly closer to.

Xie Lian can’t say that he’s never been angry with him. Or that he understands Mu Qing completely, because he doesn’t.

And sometimes, when he remembers the last times they really spoke... It hurts, remembering what Mu Qing did.

But that doesn’t mean Xie Lian didn’t miss him.

“...I think,” Xie Lian offers carefully, taking another bite of the food laid out before him, “that sometimes, he’s so careful about guarding his emotions from other people, that...people misunderstand him.”

Fu Yao is rigid, holding himself tightly, his lips trembling.

“...But that isn’t the same as being heartless,” Xie Lian finishes, cramming more food in his mouth to shut himself up, chewing awkwardly, feeling a little anxious, hoping he didn’t say the wrong thing—

“Chew more carefully. Or you’ll choke, and I’m not going to help you.”

The martial god swallows thickly, taking a gulp of water before speaking again, “... Okay!”

He finishes the plate, along with two cups of water—as ordered—before rising to his feet, feeling around for his boots.

“Thank you for looking after me, Fu Yao.”

But, as the one who was in charge of the Mount Yu Jun case—he’ll be expected to report back now.

“I was just doing my job,” the deputy god shrugs, setting Xie Lian’s outer robe down on the bed next to him before slipping out of the room without another word.

Xie Lian sighs.

He doesn’t expect that either of his friends feel any desire to rekindle the kind of relationship that they had before—and Xie Lian doesn’t begrudge them that, but…

Ah. Well. Better not to dwell on it, now.

His first stop is the Palace of Ling Wen, who is pleased to see him.

“Your highness,” she smiles—if only a little. But for a stoic figure like her, it’s quite an expressive move. “I’m glad to see that you have recovered well.”

“Ah, yes,” Xie Lian smiles awkwardly. “It was pretty embarrassing, but…just a case of exhaustion.”

The civil god frowns. “It was likely too soon for you to be assigned a serious case like Mount Yu Jun, apologies.”

Xie Lian waves her off, “No, no—you were only trying to help me clear my debt Ling Wen, I’m grateful to you.”

He doesn’t see the awkward slant of her gaze.

Even so—he has no way of knowing that she spoke out against the assignment to begin with, and wouldn’t understand the guilt she feels now, even if he could recognize it.

“Still, I hope you take this time to rest and recover properly.”

Xie Lian nods obediently. “I will, but…” He sighs. “There’s something else I need to report about Mount Yu Jun.”

Ling Wen raises an eyebrow, listening as he recounts his story about Lang Ying, her gaze quite concerned.

“…That’s troubling,” she admits. “We’ll start searching for him immediately. But, given his age…”

“He’s likely supernatural, I know,” Xie Lian nods. He assumes that the child must be some sort of ghost, but… “Still, I feel…”

He can't help but feel responsible.

Ling Wen's expression is one of sympathy. "We'll look for him, your highness, don't worry."

"There was also..."

Ling Wen rises to her feet, tapping the prince's arm to indicate that he should follow. "Better to follow me to the communication array—I'm sure everyone else will want to know more of this as well."

In general, most enter the communication array telepathically.

But, when in the heavens, there is a private chamber within the hall of the head civil god where one can enter physically, viewing the gods and goddesses visages through golden curtains as they come and go.

For Xie Lian, it's useless—but Ling Wen often prefers the visual aid.

And the moment they step inside—there's already arguing. And—heavens, poor Feng Xin sounds absolutely incensed.

"I have had ENOUGH of this! Xuan ji won't say a word about the Night Touring Green Lantern, she only wants PEI MING!" He shouts. "I'm not a damn PRISON GUARD!"

"Look," one of the other martial gods sighs, "you're the only one with the man power to hold her, and sealing a ghost as powerful as Xuan Ji takes time..."

"And?! Pei has plenty of resources, and this is HIS mess! Let him deal with her!" There's disgruntled murmuring all around.

After all—just about everyone agrees on that front. Xuan Ji is Pei Ming's mistake, and it seems irresponsible that he's left General Nan Yang to deal with her...

"If those two interact, it will only make things worse," Pei Xiu speaks up, his tone even—but firm.

"Xuan Ji is violent and obsessed with the man. If she sees him and doesn't get the reaction she wants—she'll become even more difficult to deal with."

Xie Lian almost pities Pei. Philanderer or not—he isn't responsible for Xuan Ji's crimes. And this situation must be upsetting.

“Still, Xuan Ji wasn’t such a menace before…” One of the other civil gods grumbles. “Qi Rong’s involvement makes everything more complicated.

Xie Lian stiffens slightly at the mention of that name. “…Qi Rong?”

“The Night Touring Green Lantern,” Pei Xiu clarifies.

“That’s his name.”

Logically, Xie Lian knows—it has to be a coincidence. It’s been eight centuries, and undoubtedly there have been countless others with that name. But…

“Was he found on the mountain?” Xie Lian questions, slightly wary now.

“No, but he likely was, not long before you arrived,” Mu Qing is the one who speaks up now, his tone slightly fatigued. “One of my subordinates caught a glimpse of the forest demon, which means he couldn’t have been far behind.”

“Forest…demon?”

“Ren Song,” Another god answers.

“He’s rarely ever seen in the mortal realm unless hunting Qi Rong, the two have some sort of feud.”

“…Oh,” Xie Lian murmurs, his brow creasing. Even ghosts have their politics then, don’t they? “Is it normal for ghosts to hunt one another?”

“No,” Feng Xin manages to calm down enough to answer that question at the very least. “Not on that scale. But Qi Rong is despised even among his own kind, so it doesn’t come as a surprise.”

“And without his meddling, there never would have been a massacre on Mount Yu Jun…”

“Speaking of Mount Yu Jun,” Ling Wen speaks up at last, lifting her chin, “none of this would have been brought to our attention without the leadership of the Crown Prince of Xianle, we all owe him a debt.”

Xie Lian squirms with discomfort, no longer used to praise.

“If there’s anything you’d like to add to the matter, your highness, now is the time."

Right.

"...There was an incident on Mount Yu Jun, when I was in the bridal sedan," Xie Lian explains. "I heard a child singing—but neither of the deputy gods could hear it."

He tilts his head, "Does...something like that sound familiar to anyone?" "Doesn't ring a bell," Mu Qing replies dryly.

"It must be related to Xuan Ji in some way," one civil gods under Ling Wen speaks up. "Better to let Nan Yang—"

"Stop dumping MORE WORK ON ME!" Feng Xin snaps "I didn't even agree to take on Xuan Ji in the first place!"

"...I'll make sure I look into it, your highness." Ling Wen sighs. "Was there anything else you wanted to ask?"

"Yes," Xie Lian agrees—and really—

He wasn't expecting the question to cause such a stir at first.

"Has anyone ever encountered a young man who could control silver butterflies?"

Really, Xie Lian thought it wasn't such a strange thing to ask, but the response? It's an immediate uproar.

"Why? Did you see any?"

"Oh hell, HE'S involved?!"

"He didn't send another challenge?!"

"Hua Cheng..." Mu Qing groans, wiping a hand down his face. "He's speaking about Hua Cheng!"

"...Hua Cheng?" Xie Lian questions, a slight smile on his face. "Is that his name? It suits him."

A City of Flowers. That's rather poetic. A beautiful image, actually.

And now that Xie Lian is further removed of the emotions of that night...There was an easy sort of elegance to the man. Like everything he did was an act of living poetry.

“…Your highness,” Mu Qing questions softly, “Have you ever heard of the Four Great Calamities?”

Calamities, calamities…

“Ah,” Xie Lian claps his hands together. It’s been centuries since he was a student, but he’s never stopped relishing in knowing the answer to a question. “Nan Feng explained that on Mount Yu Jun…they’re the most powerful among ghosts, yes?”

Everyone glances over to one of the higher ranked gods present—a sharply dressed young man in simple black robes, adorned with gold earrings, his dark hair pulled up into a high, neat ponytail.

He looks tired, and rather bored—but he sighs.

“Calamity is the name of their rank, not their title,” he explains in a low, even voice— almost scholarly in the way he speaks, like he might be given a lecture. “They are known as Ghost Kings.”

“Ghost Kings…” Xie Lian repeats slowly. “The Ghost Realm has royalty?”

“Not in the way that humans or gods think of it,” the young man explains. “Each Ghost King is born after facing the most fierce trials available in the ghost realm— only three in history have ever attained such a rank.”

“But…” Xie Lian frowns. “I thought there were four?”

“Qi Rong is included on the list—but only to round them out in equal measure with the Four Famous tales,” Mu Qing explains. “Balance between the Heavens and the Ghost Realm is rather crucial.”

Xie Lian doesn’t need the Four Famous tales explained to him. After all, he’s one of them.

The Crown Prince Who Pleased the Gods.

The Young Lord Who Poured Wine.

The General Who Broke His Sword.

The Princess Who Slit Her Throat.

“And who are the four calamities, exactly?”

"As the only one who hasn't risen as a Ghost King, Qi Rong is the weakest among them," the dark haired god from before replies. "He's called the Night Touring Green Lantern—and known for his violent, garish tastes. His followers hang dead bodies in forests as offerings to him."

Xie Lian swallows hard, trying to remind himself that—while that's a startling, uncomfortable coincidence—

That's likely all it is.

"After him," the god continues, twisting his earring between his fingers, "Is Black Water Sinking Ships. He's the most reclusive of the four."

"Is he a water demon?"

"Very astute, your highness." The scholarly god replies dryly, making Xie Lian flush. "Little is known about him besides that very fact. The eldest Ghost King was by far the most powerful in his time—The White Clothed Calamity."

"Bai Wuxiang," Ling Wen supplies, not missing the way Xie Lian immediately pales in response, "but he's long since been slain by the Heavenly Emperor."

Xie Lian knows that. But...he...

Just remembering what he did yesterday was enough to make him faint.

The scars left by that time—they still exist on his soul, even if his flesh will always heal over time.

Just the mention of that name leaves him feeling mangled. Like an open wound.

"And finally, there's the most powerful one still living," the dark haired god seems to be a little reluctant to admit that fact for some reason, "Crimson Rain Sought Flower —Hua Cheng."

"He's known for his wraith butterflies," Ling Wen explains softly. "Those must have been what you saw."

"...Is he really that much more powerful than the others?" Xie Lian questions, remembering the aura he saw that night. It was undoubtedly strong, yes—but he felt no ill will from it.

“He makes Qi Rong look like an insect by comparison.”

Feng Xin explains. “And if the Night Wandering Green Lantern doesn’t manage to survive the trials to become a Ghost King, many believe it will be Hua Cheng’s subordinate who takes that spot.”

“Subordinate?” Xie Lian questions softly.

“He’s already been mentioned,” Ling Wen explains, leaning one hand on her hip. “Ren Song, a forest demon—Autumn Twilight Shrouding Forests.”

“He rarely involves himself in conflicts with heavenly officials,” the god who was explaining the tales before speaks up once more. “But he does occasionally hunt humans, and his magic is known to cause madness.”

Hua Cheng is so powerful, that a ghost strong enough to nearly be a calamity himself is his subordinate?

“Some even say Hua Cheng is more powerful than Bai Wuxiang was,” Feng Xin comments warily. “It’s hard to know, since the two never walked the earth at the same time—but Hua Cheng has been far more of a threat to the Heavens.”

That leaves Xie Lian slightly startled. “...Really?”

“Well, Bai Wuxiang destroyed many mortal kingdoms,” Mu Qing murmurs, crossing his arms.

“But he only ever targeted Heavenly Officials that were in exile. He never mounted direct confrontation with the Heavens himself. He picked weaker targets—and it was easy for Jun Wu to slaughter him. But Hua Cheng...” Mu Qing trails off, his eyes narrowing slightly from the memory “He destroyed thirty three gods at once—and single-handed.”

Xie Lian’s jaw goes slightly slack, trying to conceive of such a thing. “...He did?”

Mu Qing nods. “He challenged thirty five heavenly officials who offended him somehow—and bet his soul as collateral.”

That takes...quite a bit of confidence.

"If they won—the gods could disperse his spirit as they wished. But if Hua Cheng won, he demanded that they all descend as mortals once more."

"Thirty three accepted," Mu Qing recalls. "Idiots."

"And lost shamefully," Feng Xin mutters.

Mu Qing nods in agreement, remembering the entire affair with little joy. "They were so humiliated—they refused to fulfill their end of the bargain. But Hua Cheng wouldn't let them get away with it—so he burned all of their temples to the ground in a single night."

For a god, that's essentially a death sentence.

"...but I thought you said he challenged thirty five officials, not thirty three." Xie Lian raises an eyebrow. "Who were the other two?"

For a moment, no one answers—until Ling Wen replies delicately—

"That would be Generals Nan Yang and Xuan Zhen."

Oh. Them? How did they offend the ghost king?

Xie Lian's eyes flicker in the directions where he heard Mu Qing and Feng Xin speak before, questioning, "...And you two declined?"

The silence is tense.

"We were busy," Feng Xin replies tersely. "By the time either of us realized a challenge had been made, the fight was already over."

"Yes," Mu Qing's voice is a little faint—and a man with such a sharp memory is suddenly vague with the details.

"If I recall correctly, there was some sort of conflict over a temple."

Feng Xin clears his throat, nodding in agreement. "Yeah—it was something to do with that."

"In any case," Ling Wen shrugs, "his butterflies still haunt the dreams of many heavenly officials."

Xie Lian finds that hard to believe. There wasn't anything frightening at all about them, really...if anything, they were...

Comforting in their beauty. But never frightening.

"Did he...do anything strange to you, your highness?"

"No," Xie Lian answers honestly. "He was actually very courteous. He guided me down the mountain—and even healed one of my injuries before disappearing."

Feng Xin and Mu Qing stiffen—because the god never mentioned that before, and a confused murmur spreads throughout the array.

"What on earth is he up to?"

"Could it be some sort of trick? Having Hua Cheng, Qi Rong, and Ren Song on the same mountain in one night—that's very foreboding. What if the calamities are planning something?"

The God who explained the tales of the Calamities to Xie Lian smiles faintly, canines flashing.

"If the calamities are planning something," he murmurs. "That could spell disaster for the heavens. We should tread carefully."

Ling Wen sighs heavily. "Ming Yi is right. In any case—I'll speak to the emperor about these developments. That concludes our meeting."

Most of the gods take that as an excuse to leave, but Xie Lian is quick to speak up.

"Nan Yang—Xuan Zhen." He blinks, hoping that they heard him—and it feels like they're listening, so he continues, "Thank you for the junior officials. They were quite a help."

Both martial gods are quiet for a moment, with Nan Yang shifting awkwardly until he mutters, "...It's nothing."

"Really," Xuan Zhen agrees, listening as Nan Yan slips out of the array without another word. "Just focus on paying off your debt with the offerings you earned."

Xie Lian nods, "And...Mu Qing," he glances in his friend's direction, a little awkward. "I already told Fu Yao, but since we're here I might as well—" He bows once more, "Thank you for your assistance—and for allowing me to rest in your palace. It was very kind of you."

The martial god pauses, not accustomed to being called 'kind,' not under any circumstance, and eventually offers the gruff reply—

"It was the most practical solution. Don't think much of it. Ling Wen," he turns his attention to the civil god, his tone dry.

“You should speak to that friend of yours about Xuan Ji. I doubt Feng Xin is an optimal solution for the problem.”

“I was just in a meeting with Pei Ming and the Heavenly Emperor this morning,” Ling Wen replies calmly. “He’s aware of the situation.”

Xie Lian pauses, surprised.

A sentiment Mu Qing seems to share. “Pei is in the heavens right now? And he didn’t attend the meeting?”

“Even he has to report back to Jun Wu every once in a while,” Ling Wen shrugs. “But he’ll be gone by the end of the day on another assignment.”

Xie Lian frowns with sympathy. “That really is a rather unforgiving workload.”

“Indeed.” Ling Wen agrees. “And what little time he has left before his next deployment—I’m sure he’ll want to spend it attending to personal matters.”

Deployment.

That’s an interesting choice of words.

There are many martial gods in the heavens. Most of them from many different walks of life—all united by skills in combat.

However, among all of them—Pei Ming is the one who is always treated as one thing above all else—

A soldier.

Xie Lian was a soldier himself for a time. And many more, over the course of his godhood, but in his experience…it was the unhappiest thing to be.

And Xie Lian can’t help but wonder, now, if he’s not dealing with Xuan Ji… What other personal matters does Pei Ming have?

"E…enou—!"

A slightly overstimulated gasp pierces the air, toes curling, fingers wrapping tightly around a bed post.

"Enough…!" the god pants raggedly, his chest flushed and heaving, covered in bruises and teeth marks. "I thought you'd be tired…"

The older martial god collapses on top of him, his weight heavy but pleasant between his thighs, breathing heavily against his lover's neck.

"I am…" Pei grumbles, mouthing at his pulse, taking satisfaction in the way it throbs under his teeth. "But it's been months."

And this is a pleasant sort of tired. One where the muscles in his abdomen ache pleasantly from exertion, and the scratches down his back ring with a victorious kind of sting.

He doesn't have to think. He can just enjoy the warmth of a body underneath him.

Well. For as long as his partner is willing to tolerate being smothered by his frame.

Which the other god does allow for a few moments, stroking his fingers through Pei's hair, waiting for his breathing to slow—but eventually he gives a pointed push, and Pei rolls over with a groan

"Oh, stop being such a baby," Shi Wudu rolls his eyes, rolling over onto his stomach as he reaches for the wine pitcher on the nightstand, casting Pei an annoyed look when he starts kissing his bare shoulder. "I said enough."

Pei grumbles, pitiful. "I only have a few hours."

"And then you can fuck any mortal you like to your heart's content," The Water Master grumbles, pouring himself a glass. "I'm already going to have to spend a week's worth of spiritual energy to make sure I'm not limping out of here."

"Or," Pei offers, eyeing the rapidly healing bite marks and finger shaped bruises on Shi Wudu's hips, thighs, and torso with irritation, "You could just limp."

The raven haired man snorts, taking a long sip of wine, "Sometimes it's like you don't even know me at all."

"Proud," Pei grumbles, sitting back against the headboard. "Are you ashamed of me?"

Shi Wudu's eyes cut to the side, flashing at him slightly as he reaches for a silk robe, pulling it around his shoulders, "Oh, very."

But there's a playful edge to his tone, and Pei grins.

"I might cry, if you keep talking to me like that..." He hums, reaching one arm around the god's waist, dragging him in.

Shi Wudu could stop him, but seems content to be pulled into the martial god's lap, bare thighs straddling Pei Ming's hips.

"My cruel, proud little water tyrant..." General Ming Guang muses, nosing underneath his lover's jaw, mouthing at his sensitive places until Shi Wudu shivers, one arm wrapping around the martial god's neck. "Always making me cry..."

"I hate that nickname," Shi Wudu grumbles. "Why do you always have to bring it up?"

"Well," Pei smiles, one playful nip softening into a lingering kiss against the hollow of the water god's ear, "because you're a very different kind of tyrant with me."

"You mean I set boundaries with you."

"Cruel, vindictive..."

Shi Wudu is quiet for a moment, taking another sip from his wine, and he comments —

"I'm surprised you let them push that woman off on Nan Yang. That's not like you."

After all—the reason Pei Ming and Shi Wudu have always gotten on so well is because they both have great pride.

Pei Ming doesn't speak—but the water god feels the grip around his waist tighten sharply, and then—

"If she was here, then I couldn't have you here." He mutters, resting his chin against Shi Wudu's shoulder. It's sharp, digging in slightly—but the younger man doesn't complain. "And it's been months."

Shi Wudu sighs, lowering himself down until he's sitting in Pei's lap more comfortably. "My palace is just as suitable."

Now, Pei sulks. "Your brother is there."

"It's your own fault that he doesn't like you."

"You would say that no matter what I did."

"He's cuter than you," Shi Wudu shrugs. "And he doesn't annoy me as much."

"And you wonder why I call you a water tyrant..." Pei whines. "It's been months, and you still talk to me like this..."

Dark hair flows freely over the water god's shoulders as he snickers. Shi Wudu doesn't laugh often, and he smiles even less.

Those moments are all for Pei, locked behind bedroom doors, hidden beneath sheets and layers of secrecy. He clings onto them greedily, calls them his own.

"You say that like you actually missed me..."

Pei's reply startles him.

"Of course I did."

His arms are still firm around Shi Wudu's waist, face buried in his neck.

It takes the younger god a moment to respond, but when he does—he pushes against Pei's chest, making him lean back so Shi Wudu can look at him more clearly.

"..." Shi Wudu sets his wine glass down, gripping Pei's chin between his thumb and his index finger.

He's as handsome as he's always been. All sharp features, a square jaw, strong eyebrows—magenta irises glimmering up at him with hazed desire.

But there's a darkness there.

Pei is a man of contradictions. He's competitive, but he's fair. Ruthless, but often kind. Playful, but one who carries a heavy burden.

Few people realize how haunted those eyes can be. The countless years of pain that lurk behind an arrogant shell.

"...That woman," Shi Wudu repeats.

"Xuan Ji," Pei supplies helpfully, but the water god still refuses to address her by her actual name.

"That woman," he continues, watching Pei's expression, "did a number on you back then, didn't she?"

The martial god doesn't reply immediately

Instead, he pulls Shi Wudu closer in, dipping his chin down, pressing his mouth over the curve of his shoulder, his collarbones, relishing in the warmth of their skin sliding together.

"She reminds me of a time in my life that I'm not proud of."

"Your greatest victory?"

"No," Pei snorts, "Yushi wasn't my greatest victory."

He says that so bitterly, that the water master is left rather surprised. "Forgive me," he muses, "my tutors always used to teach me that."

"Stop making me feel old," the general sighs. "Especially when we're in my bed."

"I thought you got off on having a younger lover," Shi Wudu muses, "silly me...what was your greatest victory then?"

Pei Ming pretends to think that over very seriously, one broad palm sliding up the water god's spine, making him shiver—the other wrapping firmly around his hip.

"Any time you say my name."

Pei Ming always has this talent for finding the one phrase that could make even the coldest hearted—Shi Wudu being among them—fill with butterflies.

"Those would be the greatest victories I've had."

It isn't difficult to see how he's managed to seduce so many, and leave even more broken hearted.

And for once—the water master doesn't have much of a response. No sly comeback or harsh criticism.

He just tips forward, resting his forehead against Pei's chest, silent.

It's an unusual reaction. Enough so to make the general frown. "…Are you alright?"

Shi Wudu doesn't answer, both arms wrapped around Pei's neck. Breathing him in. Allowing himself one small moment of comfort and weakness.

'Maybe I missed you, too.'

But he can't say that.

Because missing someone for him means something very different than what it means for Pei.

"Hey," Pei's fingers stroke the back of his neck, his voice taking on that warm, gentle tone, full of the pseudo-intimacy that breaks Shi Wudu a little bit, every single time. "You know you can talk to me."

With the way Shi Wudu's head is pressed against his chest, Pei Ming can't see the way his lips tremble.

'I can't.'

It's rare that the Water Master gets to feel safe. To find moments that feel close to freedom—or defiance.

Every time, he's always found those moments in Pei's embrace. Filthy little secrets that he carries with a vindictive sort of satisfaction.

But if Pei knew the truth—Shi Wudu would have nothing. And he needs this. Besides—

'He's already using you to hurt me.'

Instead of answering, when Shi Wudu lifts his head—he surges up, capturing Pei's lips once more with his own, sinking closer into his embrace, all moans and scraping teeth as the general's hands slide lower, bruising him in the most pleasant way.

"I thought you'd had enough," Pei rasps, hips rising up until Shi Wudu's breath hitches, relishing in the shudder that wracks the younger man's body.

“…I lied,” the water master breathes, pulling him closer, closer, until Pei rolls them over, pinning him down.

Shi Wudu is always lying, after all. One way or another.

Pei is slower this time, in the process of taking him apart. After all—he leaves in a few hours, and this is what will have to last him until his next homecoming.

He’s tired.

The water master is limp after, curled against his chest, his breaths slow and deep.

Pei doesn’t speak, allowing his lover to sleep, watching the peaceful set of his face as he strokes his hair.

‘You’re lucky you’ve never truly loved someone.’

That was what Xuan Ji said.

‘Because it would burn you.’

Burn his heart to ash.

That was what she said.

And Pei’s response had been that such a thing wouldn’t be possible.

He meant that—but only because he knew that love, the sort of love that means something—it doesn’t feel like burning.

Pei has been burned by desire many times throughout his life. He’s made countless mistakes as a result. All of them a result of his arrogance and his youth.

But falling in love, needing someone—it feels like drowning.

An anchor in his chest, dragging down until he chokes.

The current of it is impossible to resist, because he never actually wants to.

He wants to sink. To be dragged underneath the surface until it crushes him, pinned to the ocean floor by the cruelest of tyrants.

But it also means that he cannot resurface.

Even if staying submerged might spell doom for them both.

Still—he's tired, and he missed his bed, and the body beside him is warm.

Pei rests, and like always—he relishes in each moment like it might be his last.

Their last.

Ling Wen presses her forehead against her hands, letting out a tired breath.

Her next meeting with Jun Wu, she knows, will not be particularly pleasant. He's never in a pleasant mood when Pei returns, but—

"Ling Wen?"

She glances up, forcing a polite smile, "Your highness?"

Xie Lian smiles back at her warmly, his gaze focused a little too high on her forehead to be actual eye contact, but she appreciates the effort. "I wanted to thank you again for helping me so much with this incident, I appreciate it."

Once again, Ling Wen seems uncomfortable with accepting gratitude, but she nods.

"Just doing my job, your highness–and I think you'll be pleased to know that, with the offerings made from Mount Yu Jun...your debt has been completely cleared."

Xie Lian's eyes widen.

"...All of it?" He questions, clearly struggling to believe it.

After all, Xuan Ji was a difficult case–but 800,000 merits, just for that? It's a little difficult for him to grasp, and yet...

"Some very wealthy mortals called for our help, remember? Take it as good luck."

Xie Lian stares at her, wary to explain why he's so doubtful of it being a matter of 'good' luck–

(Given that his has always been rather bad)

--but he eventually forces another smile, nodding stiffly.

"I wanted to tell you that–and that I don't want to have to come begging to you for help every time I have a problem, so..." Xie Lian beams, lifting his chin, "I'm going to try and become self-sufficient!"

Ling Wen blinks, her eyebrows raising. "Like raising your profile?"

There are ways they can go about that, certainly. If Jun Wu intended to release his shackles soon, that certainly wouldn't take any time at all, but in the meantime...

Well, Pei is certainly overloaded. Maybe she could convince him to allow the prince to assist?

It seems mutually beneficial–Pei would be foolish to deny the help, so–

"I decided–since I don't have any worshippers at the moment, I'll just build my own shrine and bring them in myself!"

He explains this in a rush, as though he knows how it's going to be received.

Ling Wen knows he can't see her expression (which is staring at him like he's grown a second head), so she makes a low sound of disapproval, "Your highness–!"

After all, is such a thing not beneath him, a god of his age?

"I'll see you again soon!"

And with that, he's off.

Despite his rather rushed delivery and exit of the heavens (this time, descending far more gingerly--though he still smacked into a cloud or two), this idea wasn't one that Xie Lian came up with on the spur of the moment.

Actually, he had been thinking about it on Mount Yu Jun.

During his first banishment, Xie Lian had been desperate to ascend once again. For his parents sake, and that of Feng Xin and Mu Qing. That became more complicated after meeting Hong-er, but...

Going back to the Heavens was always the plan.

Then, during his second banishment, at some point...it felt less like ascension was the ultimate goal. More like he was simply enduring one day to the next. And when he was finally in the Heavens again–

Xie Lian found himself unhappy, confused, and overwhelmed.

In the end, it's probably something defective with him. He's been living this way for so long–he just...doesn't know how to...and, well...

He deserves to be alone.

But regardless of the reasoning behind his decision to return to the mortal realm–Xie Lian did make a plan.

Back when he was working on his dress in Nan Yang's temple, Xie Lian had asked himself–if he could go anywhere, and start over again, where would he go?

And the answer that came to him was simple–but comforting. There's a small village, sitting in the foot of the mountains.

Xie Lian stops on the path, leaning one palm against the trunk of a maple tree, the wind stirring in his hair.

It smells fresh, clean–like the forests surrounding. A river running at the foot of the mountain. And from the slightly wet smell–

They have rice paddy fields now.

Xie Lian smiles faintly, fingers digging into the bark.

It's changed in many ways. There are slightly more people now than there were back then--though this is still far too small to be called a town.

But the air feels the same, and the road bed is ancient, but familiar.

And the people–tens of generations removed from the ancestors that Xie Lian once knew–are still kind, directing him towards what has long since been an abandoned shrine, informing him of the village's new (three centuries old) name–

Puqi.

Honestly, Xie Lian hadn't expected the former shrine to still be standing–and to be fair, it's rather different from what it used to be.

It's burned down to the stone foundations several times. Been rebuilt as a shop, an inn–and now, a half built and abandoned family home.

And now, with it long since unoccupied, the locals see no harm in allowing a blind taoist take up residence, particularly if he wants to build a shrine.

None of them can remember the last time there was a real shrine in the village–most of them have to walk to the next town over to pray.

One of the farmers sends his sons to help Xie Lian settle in, even though he insists it's unnecessary–and they express their curiosity.

"Sir, which god are you going to be worshipping here?" One of them questions, holding the parts up for Xie Lian while he sets up his loom in the corner.

Right. Introductions. First impressions are important!

Xie Lian clears his throat, "For the Crown Prince of Xianle."

"Who?"

Well. He should have seen that one coming.

"Well...he's...a prince," Xie Lian explains awkwardly.

"We...kinda figured."

Right.

"What sort of stuff does he do?" One of the boys questions, fiddling with Xie Lian's hat before setting it back down carefully.

"Protects his believers I think," Xie Lian mutters, wishing he sounded more confident. Shouldn't he, of all people, know the answer to that? "Oh! And weaving, he's a patron of weavers."

That doesn't really get much of an inspiring stir from the group of villagers.

"...What about wealth, or good luck? Can he offer anything like that?"

"No," Xie Lian shakes his head. "He's not that sort of god, I'm afraid."

"Oh..." The boy frowns. "Maybe you should build a shrine for the Water Master instead! He's totally amazing, we'll all be rich!"

"Or what about Ling Wen?" Another speaks up. "Maybe we'd have a scholar then!"

"Or..." The last in the group seems to be the most shy about his suggestion, but it doesn't stop him from making it–

"What about General Dick Yang?"

Oh boy.

"Thanks for the suggestions!"

Xie Lian bows his head, smiling pleasantly. "But I think I'll be sticking with the Crown Prince of Xianle just the same."

Though worshipping the Water Master is just a little tempting, if only from a financial perspective, but...

Doing so just to make money for his own shrine seems more than a little dishonest, so...

Xie Lian sighs.

He doesn't have much at the moment–he really didn't leave Gusu with anything but his loom. So, for now, until he can start making money off of his weaving again...

He's really back to square one–and since busking really isn't that popular in the countryside, there's only one way for him to make money–

Scrap Collecting.

Which isn't so bad–Xie Lian has actually developed a knack for picking out worthwhile junk.

Most people would find that to be a pretty useless skill–and most people don't have absolutely nothing to their name, so they would be

right.

But in Xie Lian's case–it works. Not to mention the fact that people are always so generous, he never struggles with finding donations!

(In truth, it's because of his good looks–but the Crown Prince has no way of knowing that.)

In any case, he manages to get his hands on some fortune shakers, an incense burner–the sort of things you need for a proper shrine, along with a few scrolls that seem interesting.

The villagers felt a little bad about donating such things to a blind man at first–but relaxed when Xie Lian assured them he could put them to good use.

His feet are pleasantly sore on the walk back–a feeling that he's never minded, but... An Ox cart draws near.

"Ah, Mr. Priest?" A kind faced farmer leans over, pulling the cart to a halt. "You heading back? Why don't you hop on, rest your feet for a while."

"Oh..." Xie Lian smiles, a little unsure. "I couldn't impose–"

"It's no imposition at all, please!"

Xie Lian's smile softens.

The people of this mountain have always been so kind. Clearly, that was something they passed down to their descendants.

"Alright, thank you," he murmurs, climbing up and into the back of the wagon, leaning against a pile of hay.

What he can't see now, is that a pair of long, shapely legs are visible from the other side of that same very bale of hay. Clad in black leather boots, trimmed with fur.

For now, the prince focuses on examining one of the scrolls he was given–running his fingers over the ink.

This scroll seems to be an informational text about the gods–perfect for his temple, and when he opens it, the first line–it's actually about him!

Prince of Xianle...ascended three times... God of Misfortune.

Xie Lian grimaces.

A Rubbish God.

And finally, in parenthesis–

(A martial god as well.)

Well. At least they remembered that much.

The prince lets out a low sigh, setting the scroll down in his lap–trying to be positive. It's his main method for self soothing at this point.

"Well...a god is a god," he mutters. "They're all equal."

"Just like all living things."

"Is that so?"

Beside You Again

Chapter Summary

> “...Well,” the prince sits forward slightly, “you know a bit about gods. What about ghosts?”
>
> The way he talks now—
>
> It sounds like he’s smiling.
>
> “I’ll tell you anything I can. Which Ghost do you want to know about?”
>
> “...Hua Cheng,” Xie Lian offers delicately, paying close attention to the young man’s reaction.
>
> His heartbeat and breathing are easy, undisturbed.
>
> “Hmmm...” The boy muses. “What about him?”

Chapter Notes

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Xie Lian stops, jumping a little at the sound of a voice that isn't his own. A deep, smooth...warm voice, one with an almost playful edge to it, and—

Surprisingly nearby.

"I had an argument with a teacher about that once."

Xie Lian turns his head in the appropriate direction, peeking around the hay, but...for the most part, the air around him is just as dim and blank as ever.

Quickly, realizing the person must be mortal—he shuts his eyes. "You did? What sort of argument?

Xie Lian can hear the young man hum in response—but he can't see the youth's relaxed posture. The way he folds his arms behind his head—the lazy way his eyes glance over Xie Lian's face.

"She said that all things are equal too—but once we ascend as gods, we're infallible."

"Ah, well," Xie Lian laughs softly, shaking his head. "That's obviously not true. If it was, why would some of them fall?"

"That's exactly what I said," the youth smiles, eyes never leaving Xie Lian's face. "Plus...a little extra."

The prince raises an eyebrow. "Like what?"

"Oh..." He trails off for a moment, then admits, "That if gods were fallible, they had little authority to dictate right and wrong to mortals."

Xie Lian lets out a startled laugh, covering his mouth with one hand, "My, that's...quite a statement."

"You don't agree?"

"...Not with the premise of your assumption," Xie Lian replies, his tone mild. "I don't think it's about authority."

The youth raises an eyebrow, eyes as bright as starlight. "Then what do you think?" "Humans choose who they worship," he murmurs, fiddling with the scroll.

"If gods are wrong, or they fail to meet their obligations—people stop following them. If they don't live up to the beliefs they preach, then they don't last for very long."

He certainly didn't.

"So, in that sense...all gods are equal." He finishes.

Then he realizes how rude he must sound, talking over the young man like that, and he tacks on—

"Or, well—that's just what I think, anyway."

"Quite the philosopher," the youth muses. It sounds like a phrase that would be mocking, but...

From him, it sounds sincere.

After a moment, Xie Lian glances back down at his scroll—trying to regain some air of casualness, brushing his fingertips over more information about the gods. This time, speaking of the Water Master.

"...You know," Xie Lian frowns. "I never understood how a water god ended up being the god of wealth. I don't see how the two are connected."

"Ah," this time, when the young man speaks—he sounds a little cocky. "That has little to do with him being a water god."

"Oh?" Xie Lian lowers the scroll once more. "It doesn't?"

He shakes his head. "It's everything to do with him being a Water Tyrant. No ship leaves the harbor without an offering. If it does, they sink. As such, he controls trade—so naturally, he's the wealthiest of the gods."

"...You certainly do know quite a bit about gods," Xie Lian comments, setting the scroll back in his bag. "Particularly for someone so young."

"Oh?" The young man sits forward. "How old do you think I am?"
"Ah..." Xie Lian pauses, turning his head away, slightly unsure.

Which would be the least offensive thing to do–over estimating, or underestimating? And can he really judge that accurately based on only his voice?

"...Eighteen?" The god guesses awkwardly–and he hears a soft chuckle in response, un-offended.

"Give or take."

Xie Lian hears soft rustling, like the young man has kicked back against the hay once more, and there's such an ease to him, it...

“Either way, you know more than I would have expected for someone that age. Are you studying cultivation?”

He hears a snort in response.

“No—I just like reading whenever I get the chance, I pick up a lot that way.”

Xie Lian finds himself in the odd position where he’s struggling to keep his eyes closed.

He doesn’t normally struggle with that. After all—there’s not much temptation when there’s nothing to see.

Besides—this is a mortal, so he can't risk looking at him anyway. And yet...

There's something strikingly familiar about him, one that makes Xie Lian feel like, if he could just look at the young man properly—he would recognize him from somewhere.

But even when he peeks under his eyelashes—there's only darkness.

"...Well," the prince sits forward slightly, "you know a bit about gods. What about ghosts?"

The way he talks now—

It sounds like he's smiling.

"I'll tell you anything I can. Which Ghost do you want to know about?"

"...Hua Cheng," Xie Lian offers delicately, paying close attention to the young man's reaction.

His heartbeat and breathing are easy, undisturbed.

"Hmmm..." The boy muses. "What about him?"

"...Crimson Rain Sought Flower," Xie Lian pulls one leg underneath him. "How did he get that name?"

"Well, the stories are vague and contradictory..." The teenager mumbles, "But the most common tale is that—when he loses control—the sky rains blood."

"Oh my," Xie Lian murmurs.

"I suppose it's a good thing he's always wearing red."

He can't see the surprised look the young man gives him, but he hears an amused grunt, "What do you mean?"

"Well..." Xie Lian pauses. "...The stains won't show up on his clothes?" There's a long pause.

Then, laughter, but—not the sort that makes Xie Lian feel embarrassed, or like he's the butt of a joke.

Delighted little peals of laughter, the sort that make Xie Lian's heart wobble uncertainly against his ribs.

“I never thought of that, but yes, you’re right!”

He clutches a hand over his stomach, letting out a few more amused chuckles, “And that’s not so far off from how he got the name.”

Xie Lian tilts his head, for some reason—he’s smiling, just a little—without even meaning to.

“It is?”

The young man nods, “He lost his temper while clearing out another ghost’s lair—and when he saw a white flower getting stained by the bloody downpour, he tilted his umbrella to protect it.”

He says the story a little sheepishly—almost like he thinks it’s silly, but... Xie Lian’s smile softens.

“...What a lovely way to get a name,” he shakes his head, unaware of how closely he’s being watched.

For the most part, anyway.

“Is he violent?”

“...” The smile on the young man’s face isn’t quite as bright now. “That depends.”

“On?”

He fiddles with the end of his sleeve, glancing away from Xie Lian’s face for the first time. “If he’s been provoked.”

Well—there are certainly worse things to be.

“Do you know what kind of person he was, before he died?”

Now, the teenager’s smile fades completely.

“A bad one.”

He doesn’t offer much more explanation than that, and with how quiet his voice becomes, Xie Lian...doesn’t pry.

Instead, he opts for what must sound like the silliest line of questioning ever, coming from him, but...

“Do you know what he looks like?”

The young man doesn’t make fun of him for asking. Instead, he sits up, scooting closer to Xie Lian until they’re truly sitting side by side, his legs crossed in front of him as he leans close, and—

The tips of the God’s ears are a little warm.

“What do you think he looks like?”

“...” Xie Lian turns his face away, his throat a little dry.

He—isn’t used to having people sit close to him anymore, that’s all.

“...Probably a young man, like...you.”

“What makes you say that?”

His eyes bare down on Xie Lian’s cheek, and the god keeps his chin turned away.

“Just a hunch,” he murmurs, “And he can probably take whichever form he likes, so...”

“But his true form,” The boy presses. “You think that would be a young man too?”

“Well,” Xie Lian hums, thinking. “...I think so, yes.”

And then, remembering Mount Yu Jun, he adds—

“And tall.”

From the way Xie Lian’s face easily fell into his chest when falling from an elevated sedan—he’s likely quite tall.

The young man doesn’t debate that point, despite having questioning every other statement Xie Lian has made so far.

“I do know one thing about his true form.”

That catches Xie Lian’s attention. “Really? What is it?”

“His eye,” He explains, leaning his chin on his head. “His right one.”

“Oh,” The prince crowns with sympathy. As someone with a complicated relationship with his own eyes—that would be a horrifying thing to go through.

“I wonder how that happened…”

“Something stupid,” is muttered half under someone’s breath, and Xie Lian smiles.

“What was that?”

“People say he gauged it out himself,” the young man explains, not acknowledging the outburst. “That he went mad.”

“…I see,” The god replies.

“Does he have any weaknesses?”

He’s surprised by how quickly the teenager replies now, “His ashes.”

His ashes.

Xie Lian’s fingers drift to his throat absentmindedly, unaware of the way the young man’s eyes follow him. “Because if he lost those, he…”

“Would be gone forever,” the young man agrees. “That’s right.”

What a frightening thought.

“But rumor is—Hua Cheng’s ashes have been hidden for a long time.”

“Hidden?”

“The love of his life carries them for him,” the boy explains softly. “That’s the story I know.”

Oh. That—

That’s horribly romantic, but…

“That’s a lot of trust to put in someone,” Xie Lian murmurs, “what if he ended up betrayed?”

He can’t imagine a more heartbreaking thought—but the youth doesn’t seem bothered.

“Even if he was—I don’t think he’d care about that.”

The teenager explains firmly. “If it were me—even if the person I chose to give my ashes to destroyed them, I’d be fine with it. I wouldn't have any regrets."

That's...an unparalleled level of commitment that Xie Lian struggles to comprehend, but...

It's oddly comforting, too.

"...I just realized," he murmurs, lifting his chin, "I'm sorry for not asking earlier, my friend—but what's your name?"

Xie Lian wasn't the only one, making plans after Mount Yu Jun.

Hua Cheng had worn countless faces over the years. Dozens of aliases.

But never once did he feel like himself. It was never his true face, and he—

He was never Hong'er.

Hua Cheng suspects—even if his name hadn't been stolen, he would have taken a different one eventually anyway.

Because the name Hong'er—it was the one his mother gave him.

It's a name that belongs to his humanity, and—

Xie Lian is the only one left who knows the part of him.

It belongs to him, and Hua Cheng wouldn't have wanted anyone else using that name either.

The silence stretches for so long, Xie Lian begins to wonder. "...H..."

The god sits there patiently, unable to see the way that the teenager grits his teeth, wiping blood from the corner of his mouth with a glare.

It was worth one more try.

But...

He glances around them.

The road is framed by a sea of maples, turning red with the end of summer.

He lets out a slow, shaky sigh, taking in the beauty of it—almost like a sea of fire, swallowing up the entire valley.

Hong'er is dead, and Hua Cheng isn't human anymore. But dead isn't gone.

And there's another name that a mother gave him.

"...Me?" He questions softly.

Xie Lian can't imagine why the teenager is so hesitant, but—the question seems to genuinely vex him, and it really isn't worth that.

He's about to tell him that it's alright, he doesn't have to answer, when—

"I'm the third in my family," the teenager replies in an easy drawl. "So, they call me San Lang."

He folds his hands behind his head on the cart, maple red robes gleaming in the twilight.

Dark, wild hair pulled over his shoulder in a loose ponytail. Eyes like falling stars, staring up at the setting sun.

And when he looks down...

The Crown Prince is smiling, the setting sun hitting his hair just right, highlighting the lighter strands of brown in a sea of chestnut waves, his face filled with warmth.

And the youth can't do anything but stare back at him, eyes wide and helpless. "It's nice to meet you, San Lang," he murmurs.

San Lang.

Xie Lian—he really likes that name.

"My name is Xie Lian."

The younger man swallows dryly, clinging to some semblance of composure. "It's...nice to meet you too," he murmurs, swallowing down heartbreak. "...Xie Lian."

There's a pause, with Xie Lian left unsure of what to say. He isn't sure what about such a subject could leave the young man sounding...

Sad. Quietly so, but still—the last thing the prince wants is to upset him. “So…are you traveling somewhere in particular?”

San Lang shrugs, blowing a maple leaf off of his shoulder. “My mother and I got into a disagreement, so I got kicked out for a little while. I’m just wandering around and killing time for now.”

Xie Lian cracks a small smile. What a carefree way of thinking. “Is it alright to ask what the fight was about?”

San Lang’s smile is lopsided, eyes flashing—and any sadness in his tone is replaced by a calm air of playfulness. “Fighting with my teachers.”

Xie Lian covers his mouth, laughing softly. “I hope you’re welcome back soon…”

“Don’t worry about me,” the youth shakes his head. “I’m her favorite. A little disagreement in the family every now and then keeps things interesting, don’t you think?”

Xie Lian knows he should probably scold him—it’s a rather misbehaved way of thinking, but…endearing.

“You said you have two older brothers?”

San Lang hums in agreement. “Zhang Wei and Bolin.”

Xie Lian nods, noticing that the young man never did mention his family name—but he doesn’t protest. They’re lovely names, actually. “Do they miss you, with your mother kicking you out?”

“Ah, no, they’re both out of the house by now,” San Lang shakes his head. “With lives of their own. Besides—they’re much older than I am.”

Xie Lian nods—such things are rare, but not heard of. It also explains the cocky, slightly childish attitude.

Any family would be delighted to have another son later on in life. Particularly such a clever, charming young man. It’s easy to imagine that San Lang likely grew up a little spoiled, but…Xie Lian isn’t one to judge on that front.

“It must have been a little lonely growing up.”

After all—Xie Lian was an only child himself, and he often longed for company. But his mother’s health was never such where they felt it was safe for her to try for another child. That was why he worked so hard to make friends his own age, even…if it didn't work out.

"They were gone before I could really be used to having them around," the youth explains, then adds with a small smile, "My mother—she actually used to tell me that my older brothers were dragons, and they just flew away for a little while."

Xie Lian smiles softly.

"That's a sweet story. Does that make you a little dragon too?"

"Sometimes," he almost doesn't sound like he's playing along when he says that—like he's actually being completely serious. "But usually not."

Xie Lian tilts his head, but now, San Lang has his own questions. "What about you, gege? where are you traveling?"

Xie Lian's expression freezes for a moment—and all thoughts of dragons, brothers, and indecent behavior are forgotten.

Gege.

It's been…so long since…

His heart swells with something bittersweet. "Is everything alright?"

"…Yes," Xie Lian smiles apologetically. "Sorry, I was in my own head for a moment. I'm returning to my shrine—in the Puqi Village, though you're probably not familiar —"

"I am, actually." San Lang states firmly. "I visited when I was much younger."

The prince can't remember the last time he sat down and had such a pleasant, easy conversation with a mortal. Normally—people don't spare much time for a blind man, and Xie Lian…

Isn't used to having company.

But this—

This is rather lovely, actually. "You did?"

San Lang nods.

Xie Lian can't see the nostalgia in his gaze, when he watches him. Can't know how much he longed to tell the god such things about himself, before—and always regretted that he never did.

"I was born further north, in Qinghe." Xie Lian is familiar with the port city.

Ancient—formerly a stronghold of the Kingdom of Xuli, even though the once mighty empire of the north has declined and broken up into smaller territories now.

"But there were better opportunities for my family in the central plains. So, when we traveled south..."

San Lang shrugs, his eyes sliding over to the maple trees once more, watching as the sun slips underneath the horizon, the valley slowly falling into shadow.

"We took this road. The leaves looked just like this—even back then."

Xie Lian glances around them, having to continuously remind himself to shut his eyes around San Lang—that's the problem with getting so comfortable. "Have the leaves already started changing?"

"Mhmm," San Lang agrees, plucking one falling maple leaf from the air.

He drops it in the god's lap, giving Xie Lian the chance to feel for himself that it's dried and fallen, making way for autumn. "See?"

Xie Lian smiles faintly. He always liked that time of year—it brings back the fond memories he has from his youth.

"So, gege—" San Lang tilts his head, "Which god is your shrine for?" Ah.

Xie Lian smiles over at him, prepared for the same reaction he's gotten so far. "The Crown Prince of Xianle," he explains. "But it's okay if you haven't heard of him."

The younger man frowns. "I—"

The wagon jolts slightly, coming to a sudden stop—and Xie Lian, unbraced for such a movement, is sent toppling forward, half expecting to go tumbling out of the cart.

'Oh well,' he thinks to himself grimly, bracing himself for landing, *'the*

robes aren't new anyway.'

But he doesn't fall.

Someone catches him—easily, but with an immediacy that makes it seem like he started moving as soon as Xie Lian did.

And for a moment, he finds himself cradled against the young man's chest, the soft fabric of his tunic underneath his cheek.

The god forces himself not to feel excitement this time, when he catches the scent of the forest and rain. Not after what happened last time.

An arm is wrapped around the small of his back, holding him steady.

"Are you alright, gege?"

For a moment, he doesn't lift his head.

But when he does, he offers a small smile. "Yes—thank you, San Lang."

The young man smiles, patting Xie Lian's back gently in response before letting him go.

At the front of the carriage, the farmer struggles.

"Blasted beast!" He cries. "I'm sorry, boys—she won't go further!"

Xie Lian frowns slightly, reaching over to use San Lang's shoulder to brace himself as he stands up in the cart, his head poking out from behind the hay, peeking his eyelids open in order to look for a disturbance.

(He doesn't see it, but San Lang's eyes flash pleasantly when Xie Lian initiates contact, even for something so small.)

And there, maybe a few dozen yards down the path...he sees a group of dark auras. Weak. Not a threat to Xie Lian, but with two mortals to look after...

It could be troublesome.

"Is there some sort of event going on?" He mutters, half under his breath, only to hear San Lang reply—

"A Ghost Festival."

A time when the Ghost and Mortal realms are impossibly close together, and…it's easy to lose your way without even meaning to.

Xie Lian frowns, walking towards the front of the cart. "…It'll be alright," he murmurs, allowing Ruoye to sneakily slide down his sleeve and slip around the cart, forming a protective barrier. "We just have to keep quiet."

San Lang manages it just fine—but the poor farmer is in such distress, Xie Lian isn't given a choice other than knocking him out with two gentle strikes to his pressure points, easing him back against the hay.

The group of ghosts approach, yellow lanterns swinging in the night

They stop when they run into the barrier created by Ruoye, clearly a little baffled, but after a moment they shrug it off, circling around and continuing on their way.

Xie Lian lets out a shaky breath of relief, "Are you alright?" "No," San Lang mumbles, his tone sullen.

Before Xie Lian can ask what's wrong, he drops down onto the driving bench at the front of the cart next to him, sliding closer until Xie Lian can feel the heat of his body against his side. "I'm pretty scared, actually."

Funny—he doesn't sound very convincing, saying that.

In any case, Xie Lian offers him a comforting smile, resting a hand against his knee. "Don't be," he reassures him. "I'm a priest, remember? I can handle a few ghosts—I'll keep you safe."

Those eyes are watching closely again, fixing on the hand resting against his knee.

He's quiet, long enough that Xie Lian is about to ask him if he's alright, when voices start crying out again in the distance.

"The Ghost Fires!" Someone cries out, "Someone's been out here scattering them!"

"How cruel!" Another Ghost whimpers.

His head isn't actually attached to his body, so he uses his hands to shake it with dismay. "Who would do such a thing?"

“Hey…” One of them trails off, “That magical barrier back there, you don’t think…” Xie Lian winces, praying his rotten luck won’t—

“…it’s a Taoist?”

Yeah, who was he kidding?

They need to get moving, which is why Xie Lian starts to reach for the reins—quickly realizing just what a horrendous idea that would be, when…

San Lang, seeming to understand his intention, leans back, sweeping one arm and leg around, taking the reins for himself, using them to gently flick the oxen to life.

It’s very helpful, but it also…

He tilts his face down, and even with the breeze—his face is hot.

The action leaves the god sitting between San Lang’s spread thighs, the young man’s chest pressed against Xie Lian’s back—warm and solid.

It’s—not inappropriate, exactly—but Xie Lian isn’t used to having people so close. Not —

Not ever, really.

“Gege, did you hear me?”

He jumps, startled out of his thoughts, slightly embarrassed by the slightly higher pitch to his voice when he replies, “I’m sorry, but I didn’t.”

San Lang shrugs, leaning closer so he can whisper next to Xie Lian’s ear, “There’s a fork in the path. Which way should we go?”

That doesn’t help at all with the confusing rush of warmth down the back of Xie Lian’s neck, but he clears his throat. “I…it’s easy to get lost in the Ghost Realm once you’re in it,” he explains. “It has to be a lucky guess, and—”

“That’s why I asked you,” San Lang blinks.

“…Lucky guesses aren’t my specialty, San Lang,” Xie Lian protests weakly, fighting the urge to shrink between his eyes with shyness, feeling so horribly silly.

"Don't worry, gege," San Lang's voice is warm and reassuring. "Just pick, and everything will be fine."

Xie Lian squirms silently, and for the first time in years—he feels like a child.

"...Left," he mutters, clearing his throat, then trying to say it again with more confidence, "That was the original path, anyway."

San Lan smiles faintly, flicking the reins. "Then left it is."

At first, when they veer in that direction—Xie Lian thinks he's made a mistake, hearing the ghosts come their way, but...just as he and San Lang both turn their heads back to look, all trace of the ghost procession seems to disappear.

Xie Lian frowns, raising an eyebrow.

"Did they just...leave?"

San Lang shrugs, his eyes returning to their original color, fangs shrinking back as he leans away to an appropriate distance. "That protection spell you cast was amazing— you probably scared them off."

It sure didn't seem like it, but...

Xie Lian smiles, "...I supposed I did! I really didn't realize it was so intimidating..."

The night is cool and calm. There's an occasional breeze, the temperature dropping slightly—but San Lang is warm against his back, and they almost sit in comfortable silence.

Xie Lian says almost, because, well...

He spends most of it with a nearly rigid posture. Never spreading his knees even a little bit, less his legs brush against San Lang's. Sitting at just the right angle, shoulders hunched in, so they brush one another as minimally as possible.

And yet...

The journey back takes at least an hour, and San Lang's posture is so easy, so relaxed —he even pulls one leg up to rest his foot against the bench. A lazy stance, but it makes Xie Lian feel comfortable enough to spread his knees—if only a little bit.

That calm is contagious, enough so for Xie Lian to slowly—cautiously, hoping the young man doesn't find it rude, but he was the one who placed them so close together in the first place—ease back until he's leaning against San Lang's chest, fingers fidgeting in his lap.

But there is one thing that keeps nagging at him.

After seeing that many ghosts—and watching Xie Lian cast a spell like that—shouldn't San Lang be a little less relaxed?

Honestly, while he does have a playful demeanor that can be easily mistaken as youth…he feels older.

Much older.

As a matter of fact—there are moments when Xie Lian feels as though he's talking with someone—or something—far closer to himself in terms of years, but…

"San Lang?" he questions softly.

The chest against his back rumbles slightly as San Lang hums in response.

"Yes, gege?"

"Do you…" He starts, then stops, his fingers fidgeting a little more quickly, then stopping. "…Have you ever had your palm read?" He blurts out.

In all honesty, it isn't much of a ruse—but if he's mortal, it won't matter, right?

San Lang is smiling down at him, eyes shining with affection he doesn't have to hide, not when there's no one around to witness it.

His voice, however, is casual as ever. "Nope! Why?"

"…Do you mind if I take a look?" Xie Lian questions, holding his own hands up in offering.

"Not at all," the young man replies, gathering the reins in one hand, before placing the other in Xie Lian's.

It's bigger than he expected it to be—a little more sturdy with his own than he was expecting.

And when he feels a few callouses—on the underside of his palm mostly, and he blurts out—

“Have you ever used sabers?”

San Lang doesn’t look surprised that he figured that out, his gaze warm, but he still speaks with awe, “You can tell just from holding my hand? How amazing!”

Xie Lian’s touch is featherlight, running over the details of his palms. After all— ghosts can fake many things in their human skins, but very few could manage to capture the details flawlessly.

And yet...

His palm lines are perfectly normal. “Well?”

Right.

Xie Lian clears his throat, trying very hard not to sound terribly distracted. “You’re a determined, loyal person with a strong sense of self. You’re capable of turning negative circumstances into blessings. My friend—your future is very blessed.”

Of course—he’s making all of that up. Xie Lian never bothered to learn actual fortune telling from Mei Nianqing, always so sure in his own path that he never felt the need to look ahead.

(As one might imagine, he has some regrets.)

But in general, he’s found that no one ever complains when he offers some vague, overall positive obfuscations about their future.

He lets go of San Lang’s palm with a smile, but the youth doesn’t draw it back immediately. “You don’t see anything else?”

“Um...”

Xie Lian trails off, trying to think if there was something more that one needed to include in something like palm reading—and San Lang leans closer, his smile turning sly.

“Like my love life, for example? Anything about marriage?” Xie Lian pauses, slightly flustered.

“...I’m sure you won’t have any trouble on that front, no need for a fortune teller there!” He laughs nervously, rubbing the side of his head.

“Oh?”

Now, Xie Lian feels somewhat aware of the fact that he’s being watched closely. “What makes you say that?”

“Well…”

Xie Lian leans away, only to end up leaning into San Lang’s arm on the other side of him, and his cheeks are slightly hot once more. Actually—he’s been blushing on and off ever since they got into this position.

How pitiful, at his age.

“Well—you’re clever, and handsome.” Xie Lian shrugs. “I have no doubt that girls spend a lot of time throwing themselves at you. So, you’ll have no trouble finding a wife. I-If that’s what you’re interested in, anyway—”

“Husband or wife,” San Lang replies with a confident drawl, “if they’re the right person, it makes no difference to me.”

That answer is vaguely familiar—in a way that makes the prince’s stomach lurch, but San Lang doesn’t give him very much time to think about it.

“But gege—how do you know that I’m handsome?”

Xie Lian pauses, swallowing dryly. San Lang’s arm is warm and firm against his back, and his torso is pressed comfortably against Xie Lian’s side, and he just…

“You…have a nice voice?” He mumbles, hands balling up nervously.

“Plenty of people with nice voices have horrible faces,” San Lang muses, clicking his tongue with dismay. “Maybe I should invest in a proper mask—”

“I highly doubt you need to do that,” Xie Lian mumbles, only to jump when San Lang leans even closer.

“Why not see for yourself?”

“I, oh…” Xie Lian’s eyebrows crease slightly, “I wouldn’t want to intrude…”

San Lang's laugh is soft and easy, just like the night breeze itself. "If gege is shy, that's perfectly fine—but I wouldn't think of it as intruding at all."

...He's really shameless, isn't he?

Xie Lian has never considered himself shy before, but....

He reaches up, awkwardly patting his palm against San Lang's cheek, finding the skin there soft and smooth, without a hint of stubble that one might expect from an older man.

His jaw is squared, though not quite out of the softness that comes with youth. And—

Xie Lian was right, he is smiling—and there's a soft, endearing dimple in the right corner of his mouth that makes the god's heart flutter.

His examination isn't as thorough as what he might have done normally—he just traces his fingertip down the line of San Lang's nose before he retreats, not wanting the young man to notice how unsteady Xie Lian's hands have become.

"Well, I was right."

The youth smirks, "Oh?"

Xie Lian smiles up at him awkwardly before looking away, scratching the side of his cheek. "You're very good looking, San Lang."

He can't see the way the youth's expression shifts into a sulking pout, because that wasn't the exact word he had been looking for.

"Very good looking?" He questions softly, carefully fishing for the exact reaction he wants, but...

Xie Lian turns his chin slightly, his eyebrow raising with endeared amusement. "San Lang...are you just trying to get me to compliment you?"

Instead of a polite denial, Xie Lian gets an impish laugh in response, and his lips turn up into an endeared smile.

Yes—definitely shameless.

"Ah, gege—it looks like we've arrived at your shrine."

The wagon is gently pulled to a halt as San lang climbs down first, offering Xie Lian a hand to help him down in turn—his grip gentle, but firm as he bears the god's weight with ease. And Xie Lian...

He really can't remember the last time someone looked after him so considerately "Thank you, San Lang..." he murmurs.

It's a brief matter, waking the farmer up, politely requesting that he not repeat the events he had witnessed, and once that's finished—he looks back to the young man.

"Where will you go now?"

"Oh..." San Lang trails off with a shrug.

"I'm not sure—I'll probably just find a cave or something to sleep in. Thank you for the company and the conversation, I rather enjoyed it."

Really, Xie Lian enjoyed it as much as he did, but...he frowns.

"Why don't you just sleep here?"

He hears San Lang's footsteps stop.

"In your shrine? Can I?" The young man questions, turning around. "I wouldn't want to intrude..."

Xie Lian smiles softly, nodding up at him, "It's probably not as nice as what you're used to, but it gets cold here during the nights, so it's better than some...cave..."

He trails off when he feels San Lang lean close—so close, his hair brushes against Xie Lian's cheek as he—leans over to pick up the god's back of scraps, pulling them over his shoulder.

Right.

"As long as you don't mind," he smiles, following Xie Lian down the stone path.

Crickets sing gently in the night, and Xie Lian doesn't need help walking up the front steps—they're far too familiar to him now.

"San Lang? Are you alright?"

The young man has paused in the doorframe, staring down at those very steps.

"…Yes," he murmurs, stepping over the threshold. "Where should I sleep?"

After all—it's already quite late into the night, and Xie Lian…

Seems more fatigued, than the young man would have expected.

"Oh, there's only one bed, so…" The prince laughs, a little awkward. "We'll have to share. Unless that makes you uncomfortable! I can—"

"It's fine," San Lang replies with ease, setting the bag of scraps down by the door, so that Xie Lian can look through them later. "I don't mind."

There was a time when he absolutely did mind.

When he would insist on sleeping on those shrine steps, even when the snow started to come down. Only tempted inside by Xie Lian calling to him, pleading that he was cold.

Hua Cheng is old enough to understand now that the prince was pretending for his sake.

He drops down onto the bamboo mat, watching as his god goes about getting ready to rest. Slipping his bamboo hat down onto the counter, coming over to sit down beside him as he fiddles with his boots, carefully slipping them off of his feet.

He's too trusting.

Xie Lian can defend himself against many things. Mortal and god alike—but there are still things in this world that can harm him.

Hua Cheng could harm him, if his intentions were different.

'You need to guard yourself more, ' he thinks—but doesn't dare say. *'What if I wasn't here?'*

But—he hasn't been here.

For eight centuries, through hell only knows what sort of pain, he hasn't been there.

"I'm sorry, the place is a little rundown," Xie Lian murmurs, sitting up and reaching for the pin holding his hair up into a small half-bun.

It's only when he feels the slight breeze of exposed air against his ankle that he stiffens, clapping his hand over the shackle there.

Knowing that he has to be careful—because no matter how comfortable San Lang's presence might be—he's still mortal, as far as Xie Lian knows.

But if San Lang saw—he doesn't say a word about it, simply replying —

"I think it's perfect—just missing a thing or two, but then you'll be up and running."

Xie Lian thinks that over, rubbing his chin. "I think I got pretty much everything I needed today..."

San Lang raises an eyebrow, watching as the prince combs his fingers through his hair—too tired to bother with a comb for one evening.

"What about a divine statue?"

Xie Lian pauses, his cheeks a little warm.

He'd...forgotten the most important part, hadn't he?

"...I have paper and paint somewhere," Xie Lian smiles, "I'll try and put something together tomorrow."

If not—he could always make a tapestry. Not exactly the normal medium for such a thing, but he could certainly manage that.

"I'm somewhat artistic," San Lang offers. "I could give it a try."

"Ah, that's very kind, but..." Xie Lian waves that idea off gently, "You would have to know what the prince looks like."

San Lang's answer comes so easily—it startles him.

"I do."

The god pauses, slowly turning his chin in San Lang's direction.

"Weren't we speaking of him earlier on the cart?" San Lang reminds him gently. "I know the Flower Crowned Martial God."

Xie Lian's throat tightens, not having heard someone use that title in who knows how long.

“...you really know of him?” The prince murmurs.

“I do,” the young man replies, watching the glimpse of happiness he sees in Xie Lian’s gaze. Cautiously hopeful.

“And what do you think of him?”

Telling Xie Lian exactly what he thought, at this stage—it seems like too much too soon. So, San Lang opts for something less intimate.

He rolls onto his back, folding his arms behind his head. “That the Heavenly Emperor must really hate him,” he murmurs, glaring at the ceiling of the shrine.

Xie Lian raises an eyebrow, shrugging out of his outer robe. What an...interesting sentiment.

“Why do you think that?”

“Why else would he banish him twice?”

“...” Xie Lian slips the robe the rest of the way from his shoulders, shaking his head. What a childish way of thinking—but then again, San Lang is rather young.

“When people are wrong, they have to be punished,” the prince murmurs.

“They don’t learn otherwise.”

And heavens, did the Crown Prince of Xianle have so much to learn. It mortifies him at times, to remember how naive and carefree he was back then. How arrogant he must have seemed.

“The Heavenly Emperor was only doing his duty,” Xie Lian shrugs.

“I’m sure that the crown prince doesn’t blame him.” He reaches over, handing San Lang a blanket, “Here—it’s already late, we should rest.”

The young man nods obediently, watching as the god lays down, pulling his outer robe over himself as a blanket, slowly drifting off.

‘Maybe he should.’

That’s what Hua Cheng wants to say, but doesn’t dare now. Not so soon.

He sighs, closing his eyes for a moment, entering the password to Yin Yu's communication array—just to ensure that the festival went off without incident, which it did.

Next, he enters another private array—one that used to include others, but now only two remain.

'Progress?'

'He's trying to build a new lair in Quan Yizhen's territory,' Shuo replies calmly. From the creaking Hua Cheng can hear in the background—he's in one of his forests.

'But I'm probably going to push him East.'

Understandable. The martial god of the west is rather unpredictable, and while Hua Cheng doesn't feel wariness in dealing with him, Shuo hasn't developed to that point.

'Have you already begun?'

'He should be falling into the trap in three...two...'

There's a loud, wailing shriek in the background, and Shuo lets out a surprised chuckle.

'Ah, he was a little early this time.'

'How is his demeanor?'

Hua Cheng doesn't consider Qi Rong worth dealing with directly anymore.

He's weak enough where it's a struggle for the Ghost King not to kill him accidentally, if he's too irritated, and, well...

Shuo's version of handling him is far more amusing.

But the younger ghost doesn't sound smug when he replies.

'Unstable.' Then, after a pause—

'Xuan Ji was completely out of control herself, even under his orders. Something's happening, gege. Everyone's unsettled.'

Hua Cheng lets out a low sigh, watching the ceiling of the shrine with a cold, impassive gaze.

'It might be that time.'

There's a tense silence.

Hua Cheng effectively selected the last Ghost King, through his actions with He Xuan on Mount Tonglu. Most aren't aware of that, but if the Kiln does open again soon—

They've already discussed the possibility of what they would do, if Qi Rong tries to become a calamity.

But those plans aren't for anyone else's ears. Not at the moment.

'Keep pushing him east. If anything else noteworthy happens, contact me.'

There's a pause, more screams from Qi Rong, and then—

'Yes, gege.'

The array goes silent, and the Ghost King is left to his thoughts.

Xie Lian's breathing is gentle and even, only broken by the occasional shiver as the wind blows through the gaps in the wooden siding on the side of the shrine.

He wasn't wrong—it does get cold at night. Hua Cheng will have to deal with that tomorrow.

Still—he hasn't needed to keep warm from the cold in centuries, and as such, he's quick to take the blanket that Xie Lian gave him before, carefully spreading it over the god's sleeping form.

Still, when the youth's fingertips brush against Xie Lian's cheek—his skin is cold.

He's reminded of the first time Xie Lian left Puqi, after his death—collapsing in a ditch, shivering from the cold, and no matter how hard Hong'er tried to help—

A ghost fire burns cold.

At first, his intentions really were completely pure.

Because it's a simple matter, increasing the temperature of his own body, turning it into the equivalent of a small furnace, allowing that warmth to radiate towards the prince, making him more comfortable.

And watching those shivers slow and stop—it makes him smile.

Because even if there are plenty of things that Hua Cheng can't do, can't be for his god right now—he can keep him warm. And that—that's more than he could do before.

That was all he was thinking of, in the beginning. Before Xie Lian rolled over in his sleep with a soft sigh.

Hua Cheng watches, eyes slightly wide, as the god unconsciously squirms towards that source of warmth, until he—

Until he's face first against Hua Cheng's chest, their legs bumping against one another, breaths coming out soft and slow against the ghost king's tunic.

Oh.

Hua Cheng has dreamt of this so many times, he's lost count of the nights. Wondering if that was really how it would feel, to have his god in his arms. If the weight of him would really be so intoxicating. Or if his breath would really sound that musical against the air.

And—

Xie Lian sighs, turning his head until his cheek presses closer against Hua Cheng's chest, legs curling in slightly.

—it does.

The Ghost King was never living under the impression that he was a good person. He always knew that he was selfish.

A shameless child, a reckless teenager—and now, a selfish man.

'I'm a horrible person,' he thinks to himself, wrapping one arm around the prince's back, encouraging him to press as close as he wants.

In doing so, Hua Cheng allows the warmth emanating from him to flare, which only draws Xie Lian in like a moth to a flame.

Until their legs are intertwined, and his face is pressed into the Ghost King's shoulder, sighing contentedly.

Slowly, Hua Cheng presses his face into his God's hair, taking a slow, contented breath.

A horrible fucking person. And Xie Lian—he's too trusting.

His other arm comes around the prince now, cradling him close.

But that's fine.

He's here now, and he'll—

He'll keep him safe.

His fingertips slip up the god's back, rubbing slow, meaningless patterns—gently pushing his hair to the side, finding the chain at the nape of his neck.

'You would be happy, if you knew Hong-er was holding you, right? '

Maybe not for the reasons Hua Cheng would like, but...

He takes that weak justification, and he clings onto it. Uses it to soothe him as he rapidly oscillates between guilt and euphoria, holding Xie Lian close.

And in the end—all the prince knows is that it's been years—decades, even—since he slept so well.

Then, he wakes up alone.

The Puppet Master

Chapter Summary

“Hey, gege…” one of them calls over to him, stopping to pick up the ball they’ve been kicking back and forth when it rolls close to the shrine. “Have you been praying in the shrine too?”

San Lang doesn’t open his eyes, arms propped behind his head as he lays back in the grass.

“That’s right,” he murmurs, legs crossed as he enjoys the sun—like a cat stretched out beneath a window.

“And it’s for the…flower god,” One of the boys mumbles, scrunching his face up as he tries to remember.

Honestly, Xie Lian is pleased that he remembered the flower part.

“The Flower Crowned Martial God,” San Lang corrects him softly.

“What kind of Martial God wears flowers?” Another child pipes up, baffled by the thought. “Shouldn’t he have armor or something?”

San Lang’s reply makes Xie Lian’s fingers go still, his face flushing.

“The beautiful ones,” he answers smoothly, “and he doesn’t need any armor.”

Chapter Notes

You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

CONTENT WARNINGS: this chapter contains a scene that depicts an abusive relationship, including physical, emotional, and (implied) sexual violence. Discretion is advised!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The God sits up, somewhat groggy, reaching up to rub at his eyes—and he notices two things:

First, his hair is completely smooth, despite the fact that he really didn't brush it properly the night before—and two, the mat beside him is empty.

And it's not odd for him to wake up alone. if anything—that's the norm. It's that he didn't fall asleep that way, and he—

Xie Lian shuts his eyes, squeezing down bad memories, his hands balling up on either side of him.

But when he listens closely, he realizes he isn't alone.

"...San Lang?" He questions cautiously, fighting to keep his voice even—and the reply that comes back to him is swift, calling from outside.

"Out here, gege!"

Xie Lian swallows dryly, taking in the sound of the young man's heartbeat, his breathing.

It's fine. He's fine.

And—from the sounds of it—he's chopping wood.

Xie Lian lets out a shaky sigh, forcing himself to calm down as he goes about the process of getting dressed for the day, pulling his hair up once more.

He's fine.

But when the prince makes his way towards the door, he stops.

When he places his hand upon the altar as he walks by—he notices that there's something that wasn't there the night before, hewn from smooth stone.

Actually—to Xie Lian's surprise—it feels like something close to marble, delicately worked—

Into a statue.

At first, the god doesn't know what to think—wondering if maybe he had picked one up yesterday during his scrap collecting and simply forgotten about it, but...

The robes the figure is wearing—they feel familiar, and...

In one hand, it clutches a flower—and in the other, a sword.

By the time Xie Lian's fingers reach the top of the statue's head—he already half expects to find the crown of flowers sitting there, but still —

His breath catches when he does.

"...San Lang," he mumbles, walking out through the curtains hung in place of a door. "Did you carve that statue?"

Xie Lian imagines he must have—after all, there are few divine statues of the Crown Prince of Xianle left intact, and this one felt completely new, devoid of weathering.

The teenager stops, leaning an ax against the log he was using to split wood.

"Do you like it?" He questions, watching him closely—and Xie Lian feels a big, warm smile spread across his face.

"Yes—but how did you do that so fast? You never told me that you were an artist—"

"I'm really not," San Lang waves him off with a smile. "It's just a hobby, really."

Xie Lian would beg to differ. It's not as though he's been around many divine statues recently—but he knows the work of a skilled artisan when he sees one.

"Surely, someone must have taught you..."

"No," San Lang murmurs, stretching his arms over his head with a yawn. "I just practiced a lot when I was growing up," he shrugs, "I got in trouble fairly often, and when I was punished—there wasn't much else to do besides practice."

Confirming Xie Lian's earlier suspicion that he was a poorly behaved child, but...it's endearing.

But it's also just...yet another thing that San Lang is good at, nearly inexplicably so. And...he can't help but wonder...

The god walks over, making a point of standing just close enough that his arm brushes against the young man's hair.

"San Lang?"

“Hmm?”

“Your hair—it’s a little messy,” Xie Lian murmurs, knowing it’s a little clumsy, but, well—

It’s the only pretext he could think of, to be honest with you.

“You’ve been so helpful this morning—why don’t you let me brush it for you?”

There’s just a moment of hesitation, but...

“If gege insists,” the young man shrugs, dropping down onto the log he was just using to chop wood, pushing his hair behind his shoulders. “But it’s not necessary.”

“Ah,” Xie Lian smiles, fumbling in his sleeve for a comb, “even if it’s just a small thing, it’s nice to...”

The prince is just beginning to gather San Lang’s hair under his fingers, when he stops, his face suddenly hot.

Eyes wide with mock innocence, the young man glances back over his shoulder. “Is everything alright, gege?”

“Yes, I...just...um...” Xie Lian swallows hard. “I didn’t realize that you were...ah...”

When he had gone to reach for San Lang’s hair, he hadn’t expected to feel...bare skin underneath his fingertips.

“Oh,” San Lang murmurs, glancing down at his bare torso, “It was rather warm this morning. Have I offended you?”

“Oh, I—no!”

Xie Lian laughs awkwardly, “Why—why would I be offended? I just—I was just surprised, that’s all!”

He fumbles with the comb twice, almost dropping it, trying very hard not to touch the young man’s skin more than he has to—but there’s one detail that can’t be avoided.

San Lang has broad, rather toned shoulders, and Xie Lian’s mouth is very try as he struggles to focus on the task at hand.

Palm lines would be exceedingly hard for a savage ghost to fake, yes—

but human hair is such an intimate, intricate detail—it's nearly impossible to imitate.

After all—it would require the ghost to change every individual hair—and doing that effectively would require an incredible amount of power.

And given how sensitive his fingertips are, he should be able to detect the smallest flaw in the disguise, but...

He doesn't find any.

"Gege?" San Lang questions, his feet stretched out in front of him—leaning back until the god jumps, allowing the young man to lean back against his chest rather than fall over, face tilted back to smirk up at him. "Are you really just brushing my hair?"

"I—Of course!" Xie Lian sputters, eyes squeezing a little more tightly shut as he fumbles around, working San Lang's hair into a loose, slightly messy braid before letting it go once more. "See? That's—ah, that's better, isn't it? Now, I, um...are you hungry? Of course you are, you must be..."

He mumbles, briefly putting his hands on Hua Cheng's shoulders—if only to help him sit up properly before he flees a few steps back, his mind frantically trying to think of something he could put together for breakfast, when it occurs to him—

"Oh—and why were you chopping wood?"

San Lang rises to his feet with an easy going smile, "Oh—I thought your talismans might work a little better with something like this."

Xie Lian doesn't know what he means at first—just hears the sound of something wide and heavy being moved into place.

Then, after a few strikes from what sounds like a hammer, San lang leads him over, and Xie Lian is guided to press his palm against...

"You made me a door?" The prince questions, somewhat incredulous.

He carved a divine statue and built what feels like a very high quality door—all in the time before Xie Lian woke up?

"You took me in," the teenager shrugs, clasping his hands behind his back. "I wanted to make myself useful." Then, after a moment of watching Xie Lian's expression, he adds, "...Do you like it?"

It's not a matter of like or dislike, it's the fact that...

Xie Lian genuinely forgot what it was like to have someone be so generous with him— simply for the sake of it.

There was a time in his life when he might have distrusted it—or simply waited for his bad luck to take the moment away from him, but now...

Xie Lian turns his head to look up at San Lang with a wide, happy smile. "It was so thoughtful of you, San Lang—I love it, thank you!"

It's the beginning of a different time in one god's life. Exchanging loneliness for companionship. Sadness for a hopeful sort of happiness.

But, in the Heavenly Realm above—other gods are also going through changes. Some of them far less pleasant.

"Shi Qingxuan," the elder brother's vocal is tinged with disapproval, "You're being ridiculous."

"..." The Wind Master huffs, crossing his arms as he leans against the balcony overlooking the edges of the heavens, staring down at the world below. "You didn't even invite me."

A far cry from the small, frightened child that he used to be—the younger of the Shi Brothers has grown into a handsome, charming young man. Long, perfectly styled waves falling down his back, eyes always bright with laughter.

Except for times like this—when he's sulking.

Shi Wudu rolls his eyes, fiddling with one of his earrings, twisting the sapphire between his thumb and forefinger. "You have never once expressed interest in coming along to the mortal realm with me before."

"Maybe not," The Wind Master admits. "But you always ask me."

Between the two of them, Shi Qingxuan has always been down in the mortal realm far more frequently. Chasing adventure, or simply dragging that simple little friend of his on wild goose chases.

Shi Wudu rarely descends, and when he does—it's usually to deal with mundane matters.

"I assumed you wouldn't want to go," the elder brother shrugs. "I was assisting in one of Pei's patrols, and you can't stand the man anyway."

Shi Qingxuan's eyes narrow at the mere mention of him. "You've never helped someone with a patrol before," he mumbles, "Why now?"

The Water Master looks away from his brother for a moment, eyeing the other gods and goddesses walking down the central avenue of the heavens. "It never hurts to have powerful people owing you favors. Maybe you should learn that, and start playing nice."

It's a little bit hypocritical for Shi Wudu of all people to be saying that —after all, between the two of them, Shi Qingxuan is beloved by the heavens all over—

The only one he really has a problem with is Ming Guang.

"Would you have gone, if I asked?"

"...Probably not," Shi Qingxuan admits, crossing his arms.

"Then there's isn't an issue," Shi Wudu shrugs. "Honestly, I don't have time to indulge whatever petty grudge you hold against the man."

"You're not even a martial god," his little brother's frown deepens. "What could he need you on a patrol for?"

Shi Wudu arches an eyebrow, lifting his fan from his sleeve.

There are six elemental masters, by rule: Earth, Water, Wind, Fire, and Lightning and Rain.

But with one flick of his wrist, Shi Wudu easily displays a well known fact—Raising a rogue wave, the height of several palaces, and sending it towards a small fleet of ships in the mortal realm, swallowing them in an instant.

(Pirates, for the most part.)

Of all of the Elemental Masters in the heavens, The Water Master is by far the strongest.

As a matter of fact, even among martial gods, he's respected for his strength.

"Not all of us use our gifts to throw parties and toss around merit credits as charity," he glares. "And as far as I can recall, General Pei has never actually done something to warrant your behavior."

"He's practically forced Pei Xiu over all of the other deputy gods in the middle court, even though he hasn't ascended himself," Shi Qingxuan points out, clicking his tongue. "And this whole Xuan Ji business—"

"You were also a member of the middle court once, with a higher god as your benefactor," Shi Wudu reminds him coldly. "Hypocrisy isn't a good look on you."

Shi Qingxuan huffs. "I know that! But I actually ascended, and Pei Xiu hasn't!" Shi Wudu falls silent, his gaze...complicated.

After all, there's no way of actually knowing whether or not Shi Qingxuan's ascension was natural, or a result of the...

But Shi Wudu won't bother justifying Pei's every act to his little brother, he isn't the man's keeper.

In any case—he's somewhat aware of the actual reason for Shi Qingxuan's resentment: jealousy.

And acknowledging and addressing that would mean, in turn, acknowledging why the Water Master's friendship with Pei would make Shi Qingxuan feel that way.

He isn't willing to do that.

"...I don't need you to like the people I associate with," Shi Wudu mutters, wiping a hand down his face. "But someday you might be glad that Pei counts me as a friend."

The Wind Master scoffs, looking away. "As if I'd ever—!"

"If something ever happened to me, he would feel obligated to look after you." Shi Wudu cuts him off flatly. "And you would be left with a powerful ally in the Heavenly Court. Ling Wen too. So, you can turn your nose up at it for now—but you might be grateful one day."

Shi Qingxuan stops, giving his brother an odd look, eyes pinched with worry.

“... Happened to you?” He questions. His older brother has never said anything like that before. “Are you worried about something?”

“Other than you irritating me to death?” The water master mutters. “Not particularly.”

But the next words out of Shi Qingxuan’s mouth make him stop.

“Besides, if something ever happened to you—I have Ming-Xiong. And even if I didn’t —the Emperor would look after me. You’re basically his favorite, everyone knows that.”

The Wind Master rattles the words off thoughtlessly—then stops, when he sees the look on his brother’s face.

How pale he’s gotten.

“...Gege?” He questions, raising an eyebrow. “What’s wrong?”

The Water Master doesn’t answer immediately, his expression tense.

And before he even begins to try—a familiar voice echoes from over Shi Qingxuan’s shoulder.

“Shi Wudu, there you are,” Ling Wen murmurs, dark circles ever present beneath her eyes. “I trust your trip to the mortal realm went well?”

The Water Master reluctantly lifts his gaze from his brother to offer her a stiff nod. “Yes, I was able to examine several of my more recently built temples while I was down there.”

“I’m sure General Ming Guang was glad for the help,” the Civil Goddess smiles politely.

“In any case, I’m glad I ran into you—you’ve been summoned to the Imperial residence. I’m already headed in that direction myself—walk with me?”

Shi Qingxuan spreads his hands, like Ling Wen just proved his point. A personal summons from Jun Wu—to his “favorite.”

Without looking at him, Shi Wudu nods, pushing away from the balcony, turning his back on the human realm once more. “Very well.”

They start to walk off, side by side, and the Water Master calls over his shoulder, “Shi Qingxuan.”

The younger glances up, eyes curious, “Yes?”

His brother gives a firm look, his eyes stern, “Don’t cause any trouble while I’m busy, understood?”

“...” Shi Qingxuan huffs, crossing his arms, whisk flicking casually between his fingers. “I never do!”

The walk towards the imperial residence is mostly silent.

That in itself isn’t odd—Ling Wen isn’t the type for initialing conversations, and he isn’t one for small talk, but...

Eventually, quietly, she murmurs, “Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

The Water Master stares straight ahead, the set of his shoulders suddenly tense.

“If you want a proper answer, you’re going to have to be more specific.”

The Civil Goddess waits until they’ve passed a crowd of wandering junior officials, her voice low. “As things stand, you enjoy the emperor’s favor...”

Ah, yes—Jun Wu’s precious ‘favoritism.’

“...whatever is going on between Jun Wu and Pei Ming,” Ling Wen reasons carefully, “you don’t want to be in the middle. It won’t end well.”

For as long as Shi Wudu has been a god, Ling Wen and Pei Ming have been his closest friends in the Heavenly Court. His only friends, really.

Even in the beginning, there was a flirtatious edge to his relationship with Pei Ming— but nothing came of it. Not for several centuries. In part, because Shi Wudu knew it wasn’t something he could take back, if he started it.

And because he knew he wouldn’t want to.

But Ling Wen—she always seemed keenly aware of something about Shi Wudu— something that no one else ever seemed to notice, or take into account. Something that he himself often forgot—

Just how young he was.

And while she's never condescended, occasionally, she can be....

Protective.

But in this case, she's wrong.

Shi Wudu isn't the one caught in the middle.

"...You know," the younger god muses, watching as the approach the imperial residence, "of everyone in the Heavenly Court, your position is probably the most secure."

After all, she's capable—and Jun Wu will never dispose of someone that does the work he isn't inclined to do.

Ling Wen doesn't answer, but she doesn't need to.

They both know Shi Wudu is correct.

"I've always envied you for that," he mutters, shaking his head.

Shi Wudu is all too aware of how much work Ling Wen does. How thankless and grueling it is.

He would still take all of that, over the things he's done to maintain his own position. The Civil Goddess frowns, concerned. "I—"

"I'm assuming he asked for a private audience?"

"...He did," she agrees reluctantly, hiking her scrolls underneath her arms.

The Water Master's expression is smooth, bored—almost as though he's been summoned by a school teacher, rather than the leader of the heavens.

"Then I suppose we can't afford to keep him waiting, hmm?"

She watches, her lips pursed, as Shi Wudu ascends the steps to the imperial palace, shutting the doors behind him.

The first time the Water Master came here, he was a newly ascended god. A young man of twenty years old—and the sight of it used to leave him awestruck.

Golden floors and ceilings, heavy curtains of silk, windows that show visions of the mortal world below. They'll show you anything you want to see, if you only give them the proper incantation.

But now, those windows are blank—and the air is tense. "...You summoned me?"

"How was your little trip to the mortal realm?" He can see the shape of Jun Wu, sitting behind one of the silk curtains that partitions the entrance of his residence from one of the sitting areas.

"Not particularly special."

(The nights, however, were spectacular.) "You didn't ask me before leaving."

From Shi Qingxuan, it was a childish, petulant complaint. One stemming from insecurity and jealousy—worried at the idea of sharing his elder brother's attention with someone else.

From Jun Wu, it isn't so harmless.

"Do I need your permission to leave the heavens now?" Shi Wudu questions flatly, "That would be a rather startling development."

"And you're defensive," the emperor muses. The Water Master watches the shape of his head turn slightly beyond the curtain. "How disappointing."

Shi Wudu doesn't respond at first, his eyes slightly narrowed.

"Of all of the people to be swayed by that man's platitudes," Jun Wu sighs, lifting a wine glass to his lips. "I really thought you were too intelligent for that."

"Clearly not," the younger man replies flatly. "I was swayed by you, wasn't I?"

Silence follows, and Shi Wudu is more than aware of the fact that it wasn't the correct thing to say, silently berating himself for not holding his tongue—

"Come here."

His tone is soft—but not out of gentleness.

There’s an underlying threat, like a snake in the grass.

He makes his way over, and doesn’t say a word when the emperor catches him by the wrist, dragging him down.

“Sometimes, it’s like you think I enjoy this.”

Shi Wudu doesn’t reply, glaring at the ceilings above.

Jun Wu doesn’t pin him down. He doesn’t need to. Just the grip on his twist is enough to keep the Water Master locked in place on the chaise lounge, unable to move an inch.

“I go through all of this effort, raising you so high…” The emperor trails off with an irritated sigh.

“And you won’t even listen.” It’s all a lie, of course.

Other than teaching the Water Master how to switch fates—Jun Wu hasn’t done much more than publicly show him favor.

Shi Wudu cultivated on his own. Ascended on his own. Faced two heavenly calamities on his own.

And yet.

Every accomplishment has felt tainted. Claimed by someone else, like they don’t even belong to him anymore.

“You saw what became of Xuan Ji,” Jun Wu muses, “Do you really think he won’t discard you, the moment he realizes what you actually are?”

Shi Wudu knows as much.

He was forced to reconcile himself to it long before now. And to the fact that, as miserable as it is, there’s only one person on heaven and earth who knows the truth of his character—and accepts it.

Jun Wu.

“You say that like you won’t do the same thing,” he mutters. “I’m honestly surprised you even remember I exist, after the Crown Prince of Xianle came back. Oh—or maybe that’s it?” He muses. “He jumped back down to earth, so now you’re back to—”

CRACK!

The slap is violent, but Jun Wu's tone is gentle.

"Oh, poor, poor Water Master..." He trails off, stroking his thumb over the space where Shi Wudu's lip is now split, blood trailing down.

There won't be a mark, by the time he leaves here. There never is.

But words leave deeper scars than that.

"Do you really think I would ever treat Xianle like this?" Jun Wu muses, his eyes glancing him over.

"Do you think he ever would have placed himself in such a position?" No, no, he—

Shi Wudu turns his face away, glaring at the back of the couch, his posture screaming that of wounded pride, but...

His eyes sting, and his lips tremble.

He wouldn't have.

And Jun Wu isn't wrong. That's exactly why he treats Shi Wudu differently.

Because they're accomplices. And if Shi Wudu ever said a word, tried to explain to anyone what they had done—

No one would believe him.

He knew that, when they made their deal.

Jun Wu warned him of as much.

Has constantly reminded the Water God over the years, of how many opportunities he's had to say, 'no.'

And yet, in moments like this—the word 'no' is robbed from his vocabulary. Locked behind layers of intimidation and shame.

Even so, Shi Wudu couldn't say that it's unfair, or that he doesn't deserve it.

That these private moments of hell aren't the price he pays for his own pride—and the crimes he committed to pull himself—and his brother—up this far.

Even when it feels like he wants to crawl out of his own skin, Shi Wudu can't manage to think that he hasn't earned it.

That he doesn't deserve to feel this way.

Jun Wu stares down at him, his gaze cold—brimming with annoyance.

It wasn't always so difficult.

The Water Master is as beautiful now as he ever was. Silky dark hair, hateful eyes that burn an enchanting shade of cerulean.

But he's changed in the last century or so. Turned soft and spoiled by the attentions of a frivolous, vapid man.

Jun Wu never particularly disliked Pei Ming. Always found that the martial god served his purposes well, and never saw reason to lash out at him. The General knew his place—and his ambitions were never above his station.

But no one is perfect, and Pei has his own fatal flaw:

He has a penchant for touching things that do not belong to him.

And now, even after his energies are spent, and the Water Master is firmly back under his thumb—resentment remains.

So, naturally—it only seems fair that Jun Wu should take something of Pei's, next.

If there's one thing that Xie Lian had forgotten in the last eight centuries—it's how much faster work goes by when you have help.

He had expected to need a month—maybe two in order to renovate his shrine completely.

But with San Lang?

It's done in a matter of days.

Sure, it's not the looming temples of gold and marble that Xie Lian used to have dedicated to him when he was a child, but—

Somehow, he thinks he likes this better.

And San Lang is the most pleasant company he's had in some time.

He's playful, and often a tease—but also rather attentive. Far more so than what Xie Lian is used to. And there are moments when...

When he'll stumble on the path back to the shrine, only to be caught with ease—or when he hears San Lang calling 'Gege!' From out front...

And he's reminded, over and over, of the boy who looked after him just when he'd lost everything. The smile it draws to his face each time is bittersweet, but he's grateful for the ache of it.

Xie Lian knows he'll have to go home eventually—but this is nice, while it lasts.

It's the beginning of autumn—with warm afternoons and cooler evenings. And yet Xie Lian always wakes up pleasantly warm, his body relaxed.

San Lang has noticed how tense the god gets in the mornings when he isn't nearby— and he's questioned it, but Xie Lian has never explained.

He always smiles calmly when the young man asks, and says something along the lines of:

'I'm just being silly, San Lang—don't worry about it.'

But now—he always makes sure to be in earshot whenever Xie Lian wakes up, and the god is sheepish, but...silently grateful.

And on days like this, Xie Lian will sit by his loom, working out a new pattern, listening as a few worshippers from the village come filtering in to give their offerings.

(The farmer did not keep silent about what happened that night, despite Xie Lian's request.)

San Lang is just outside, leaning against the temple steps, taking a rest from mending the roof. Young women from the village often stop by to bring him a drink of water, or an extra bit of lunch from their own tables.

He always smiles politely in thanks—but usually passes the food on to Xie Lian before they've even left, which leaves the god feeling a little sorry for them.

Several of the farmers have already asked Xie Lian if San Lang happens to be looking for a wife, as a matter of fact.

Usually with their daughters in mind—and the mention always leaves Xie Lian slightly startled. He tells them that, as far as he knows—San Lang isn't, but they're welcome to ask him for themselves.

But the youth rarely shows any interest in such things what-so-ever.

He spends his time trailing after Xie Lian, telling him fascinating stories—laughing with him, splitting buns of Mantou on the temple steps as they enjoy the breeze.

And right now, while Xie Lian works at his loom, San Lang reclines out front as local children play nearby.

"Hey, gege..." one of them calls over to him, stopping to pick up the ball they've been kicking back and forth when it rolls close to the shrine. "Have you been praying in the shrine too?"

San Lang doesn't open his eyes, arms propped behind his head as he lays back in the grass.

"That's right," he murmurs, legs crossed as he enjoys the sun—like a cat stretched out beneath a window.

"And it's for the...flower god," One of the boys mumbles, scrunching his face up as he tries to remember.

Honestly, Xie Lian is pleased that he remembered the flower part. "The Flower Crowned Martial God," San Lang corrects him softly.

"What kind of Martial God wears flowers?" Another child pipes up, baffled by the thought. "Shouldn't he have armor or something?"

San Lang's reply makes Xie Lian's fingers go still, his face flushing.

"The beautiful ones," he answers smoothly, "and he doesn't need any armor."

"Cause he's just that strong?" A little boy questions, eyes wide, and San Lang hums in agreement.

The beautiful ones.

Xie Lian has been called beautiful many times in his life, but rarely… Rarely has it ever made his heart skip a beat.

And it wouldn't be entirely accurate to say that Xie Lian has never worn armor. He did, during the war against Yong'an—but only at Feng Xin's insistence. In the end, it only ever seemed to slow him down.

"Was he from Yong'an?"

"Nope," San Lang shakes his head, plucking a long blade of grass from the ground, placing it between his teeth.

"Xuli, then?"

It's a sweet conversation, to be sure, but…bittersweet for Xie Lian to listen to. After all—no one wants their home to be completely forgotten.

"If you'll sit still and be quiet for a moment, I'll tell you."

That seems to make all of the children nearby snap to attention, their eyes wide with curiosity. Xie Lian finds himself listening closely—curious to see how accurate it will be.

No one ever gets it right anymore.

But when San Lang actually begins to speak…

"Long ago, in the central plains," he murmurs, his voice carrying easily through the open yard before the temple, "there was a kingdom known as Xianle."

The god stops weaving once more, his fingers growing still.

"Xianle was vast and powerful—but known for having four great treasures; beautiful women, prized music and literature—gold and gems beyond compare. But, above all else was their Crown Prince."

Xie Lian's lips press together tightly, listening to him speak, hands suddenly wobbly. "He cherished his people, and in return—he was beloved by all."

The way San Lang tells it—there's such a fondness to his voice, one that Xie Lian struggles to comprehend.

San Lang doesn't open his eyes, but the corner of his mouth quirks up, one dimple making an appearance.

"Tale of his valor were often told."

The group of children lean closer now, some of them sitting down to listen, their attention rapt.

"He once saved a falling child on Martial Deity Avenue."

Xie Lian's hand flies up to the chain around his neck instantly, his throat tight.

The only part of Hong-er's story that is well known—and often, he was blamed for falling off of that city wall. Like his interrupting the parade somehow brought misfortune on the kingdom.

The prince is happy that he's remembered, yes—but not like that. "And vanquished a demon with dazzling skill on Yi Nian bridge."

That tale is a little better known, but the way San Lang says the words 'dazzling skill,' he...there's a breathless tone of admiration to it, and...

Xie Lian can't remember the last time someone spoke of him that way

"The Heavenly Emperor saw great potential in this crown prince. And thus, he ascended at a very young age."

He speaks with emphasis on the word 'very,' and Xie Lian pauses, leaning back from his loom with a pensive expression.

He really was young back then, wasn't he?

Actually, it's startling, because Xie Lian has made a point, over and over, of the fact that San Lang is still rather young, but...

Xie Lian was younger than him, when he ascended. Actually—by the standards of Xianle, he hadn't even been of age.

A child, and a god.

Back then, he'd been baffled by his parents' sadness in the beginning. Of course, they would miss him. He missed them—but wasn't ascension always the goal? Hadn't they been prepared for it?

But later, Xie Lian understood.

They had been prepared to say goodbye to a grown man, one who had already had the chance to live his life with them.

They hadn't been prepared to say goodbye to their child.

A seventeen year old, who, in the end...knew very little of the world—and it's cruelty.

The thing that seems so strange about it now, is that Xie Lian doesn't recall being eager to grow up. Eager to become a god, yes, but...

It wasn't until Jun Wu singled him out, raising him so high above the other martial gods, that Xie Lian felt so desperate to seem grown up.

Now, he wishes he had been kinder to himself. A little gentler with his own expectations.

Maybe if he had, he wouldn't have made so many mistakes.

The children still sit eagerly around San Lang now, asking more and more questions about the Flower Crowned Martial God.

Asking about his strength, his beauty, and Xie Lian is left listening to San Lang humming words of affirmation until his ears have gone completely red, when—

"MR. PRIEST!"

The god stiffens as he hears several villagers crying out—and the sound of someone being dragged.

When Xie Lian rises to his feet, he listens as several men from the village drag a limp figure inside, his feet dragging across the floor, sand pouring from his boots, his robes, all over.

"Please help him, Mr. Priest! He's dying!" Dying?

Xie Lian frowns, making room so that they can lay him down on the floor inside the shrine. "What happened, sir? Can you hear me?"

He smells like travel—carrying scents of foreign soil, his shirt gritty from the sand.

"It's...the...the pass!" The stranger rasps, eyes wide.

Xie Lian raises an eyebrow, kneeling down beside him, "Pass? What pass?"

From what he can tell, the man seems like a cultivator himself—one of moderate level. Now, he reaches up, grasping Xie Lian's wrist tightly, clinging as he whimpers—

"The Crescent Moon Pass!"

BANG!

The cultivator jumps, slightly startled by the sound—only to see a young man in maple robes sitting by the table, having slammed his palm onto the wooden surface with some force, eyes flashing menacingly until he lets the blind Taoist go.

If Xie Lian notices the exchange, he doesn't comment on it, focused far more intently on what the man is saying.

"What about the Crescent Moon Pass? What happened to you there?"

"I..." The cultivator swallows hard, coughing up more sand. "I-It's a dangerous route for most..."

"A group of merchants hired me and a few others to escort them through safely...t... there were sixty of us, originally, but..." The cultivator sinks back down, wheezing. "I- I'm the only one who survived..."

One out of sixty?

That's enough to raise Xie Lian's brow with concern.

But before he can ask more, San Lan speaks up, his tone slightly sharp.

"You traveled all the way here from Crescent Pass by yourself?" The teenager questions, flipping a chopstick between his fingers. "In that state?"

The cultivator nods vehemently, "To get help! I almost didn't make it!"

San Lang raises a cup of tea to his lips with a shrug, his eyes never leaving the traveler, watching him rather closely. "I see."

"..." Xie Lian raises to his feet, moving to the basin by the corner, pouring a cup of water for their guest.

"You must be thirsty after traveling all that way," the god smiles kindly, kneeling down beside him once more as he offers the cup.

“Here, drink.”

The cultivator stares, somewhat hesitant—and from behind him, San Lang twirls his chopsticks with a little bit more aggression.

“There’s no need to be shy,” the teenager intones flatly, watching him with a sharp gaze.

Of course—the fact that a man who supposedly just ran for his life all the way from the desert would hesitate when being offered water is suspicious enough, but...

Xie Lian listens closely.

He noticed fairly early on that there was something not quite right with the man— after all, for being as psychically and mentally distressed as he claimed to be, his breathing and heart rate were completely unaffected.

At first, he suspected a ghost wearing a human skin.

After all, any savage rank ghost could probably manage something like that—and after the Xuan Ji incident, Ling Wen did warn him to be on his guard.

But now, listening to the hollow sound the water makes inside the cultivator’s chest, it becomes clear that this is no such thing.

He seems to be trying to make a show out of it, thirstily gulping down several swallows—until a hand wraps around his wrist in an iron grip, and he looks up to see the white robed god smiling down at him.

“There’s no need to pretend if you can’t drink it, is there?”

Instantly, the situation shifts as the cultivator glares, coiling in Xie Lian’s grip, pulling a sword from its sheath, but...

Before he can even lift it in attack, the prince gives the blonde one sharp flick, sending it spiraling out of the cultivator’s grip with a clatter.

The blade buries itself deep into the ground, and the grip the god has on the cultivator’s wrist is still like iron.

“Now,” Xie Lian muses, “who on earth is sending a puppet all the way out here?” Rather than responding, the creature’s arm goes elastic in Xie Lian’s grip.

Stretching out like a worm as it flees out the shrine doors, clearly trying to make a break for it—

THWAP!

There's a distinct popping sound, like someone popping a balloon, then the sound of it deflating as the puppet collapses to the ground, turning into a mass of clay.

It takes Xie Lian a moment to realize it—but San Lang must have thrown one of the chopsticks he was holding at the creature, piercing it's form and forcing it to deflate.

The young man strolls over, poking at the remains with his remaining chopstick, tilting his head.

"What an interesting little shell," he muses, "it would take someone with a high level of magical skill to create something like this."

Xie Lian nods, making a face when he notices that his hand is now a little sticky, shaking it out and away from his body with disgust.

"You're pretty informed about magic, aren't you San Lang?" He muses, only stopping when he feels larger hands grip his own gently, using a wet cloth to wipe the mud from the god's fingertips.

San Lang shrugs, his touch feather light, "I dabble."

Xie Lian pauses, his heart a little unsteady, struggling to keep his fingers still under the young man's touch.

'…What's so different about you?'

It's a thought that's been going through his head for days now. "Gege? You alright?"

'How do you get to me so easily?'

Xie Lian swallows dryly, unintentionally squeezing San Lang's fingers in response before shaking his head, pulling out of his grip. "Yes, I'm fine—I just need a minute," he mumbles, turning around to walk back inside.

For something like this—he needs to consult the Heavens.

And—at that very moment—the Heavens are going through a bit of a reckoning.

Not of an unusual sort, this happens about once a month—they were actually slightly overdue for this, so it's more like nature reasserting itself.

The door to the room swings open with a thud—and when Mu Qing turns around, he's initially pleased to see that Feng Xin actually answered his summons without needing to be blackmailed, but—

Then he sees the bag in his hand, and his eyes narrow. "What the fuck is that?"

The Martial God pauses in the doorway to Mu Qing's library, looking like a deer caught on unawares. "...Isn't that why you called me here?"

Mu Qing sets down the scroll in his hand, staring at Feng Xin like he's grown a second head. "What the hell did you think I wanted?!"

"I just..." Feng Xin can admit, it's wishful thinking. Well. Probably delusional thinking.

And when Mu Qing takes in the dark circles under his eyes and his unusually pale pallor, it's not hard to believe that the martial god is hallucinating.

"You just? Just what?!"

"The last time we saw each other, I was asking for someone to help out with Xuan Ji, and then...you've never asked me to come to your palace...ever, so—"

"You thought I was going to let you STAY here?" Mu Qing sputters incredulously, sure that couldn't be it, but—

Clearly, Feng Xin really did think that. "No! Obviously not!"

"Mu Qing," the former guard actually takes on a pleading tone, "I haven't slept in four days—"

"And? We don't actually NEED to sleep! Besides, your bizarre phobia of women isn't my problem!"

"I would do it FOR YOU!"

"No you WOULDN'T!" The martial god rolls his eyes. "And I would never ASK!"

"C'mon, look—" Normally, Feng Xin really is too proud to ask Mu Qing for help for any reason at all—even if they have been in a slightly less combative state lately.

"I've tried everything, she only wants Pei Ming. Pei Xiu is NO help at all, Ling Wen isn't answering my messages—I even got desperate enough to ask the Water Master to take her on, and he laughed me out the door!"

"What did you expect?!"

"I don't know," Feng Xin moans, wiping his hands down his face. "Look, Mu Qing— I'll sleep on the FLOOR—"

"The number of beds isn't an issue," the martial god replies flatly, crossing his arms over his chest. "You wouldn't help me out if she was my problem."

"I just told you I would!" Feng Xin snaps. "It's not my fault that you're a paranoid bastard who doesn't believe me!"

"Name one time you've helped me out before!"

"You've never asked! And if this is about the other thing—I can sleep on the opposite side of the palace!"

The mention of the 'other thing' was obviously a mistake. It makes Mu Qing's eyes flash at him menacingly, narrowing into a glare, and Feng Xin...

He lets out a sigh, wiping a hand down his face.

"Alright Mu Qing, fine. Why did you send for me?"

"...It's about his highness."

That seems to sharpen Feng Xin's attention immediately, his bag dropping to the floor with a thud as he looks at Mu Qing intently. "What about him?"

Mu Qing hops up on the edge of one of his reading tables, crossing his legs, “I checked in on him.”

When Feng Xin raises an eyebrow—he’s quick to make the statement seem slightly less out of character, “I thought it would be amusing, watching him try and build his own temple. But when I did…there was a young man with him. An odd one.”

The other god frowns. “What do you mean, ‘odd?’”

Mu Qing shrugs, bouncing one foot as he tilts his head to the side, examining his fingernails—the act only serves to highlight the choker around his throat.

God, Feng Xin hates that stupid little accessory.

“His intentions seem suspect to me.”

“…Suspect?” Feng Xin questions, and Mu Qing sighs, throwing up his hands with a shrug.

“He’s an oddly intelligent, skilled young man who seems to need very little motivation to take his shirt off around the prince.”

That last little tidbit makes Feng Xin’s eyes widen sharply.

“Oh,” Mu Qing adds dryly. “Did I mention he has a preference for red?”

They both stare at each other now, eyes filled with suspicion and concern for their prince, and Feng Xin starts to ask, “You don’t think—?”

Then, the sound of a new voice in the general communication array makes them both stop, their eyes widening.

‘Excuse me,’ Xie Lian’s voice echoes clearly through both of their minds, along with that of many others. *‘Have any of you heard anything about the Half Moon Pass?’*

Xie Lian listens closely, his fingertips pressed to his temple—but he never hears much in the way of a response, only excited cries, “Ten thousand! I got ten thousand! How many did you get?!”

And a subsequent groan—

“Only a hundred! How is that fair!”

Xie Lian frowns, confused, but willing to speak up again in case someone didn’t hear him, *‘Has—?’*

“THE WIND MASTER GAVE OUT ANOTHER HUNDRED THOUSAND MERIT CREDITS!”

By that point, the fervor of the gods scrambling to snatch up a share of the prize is so loud, Xie Lian winces.

He doesn’t have much of a choice other than signing out of the general communication array to get away from it, rubbing his head, when he hears one voice —this time much calmer, speaking out in his private array.

‘Your highness, were you asking about the Crescent Moon Pass?’

Xie Lian lets out a low sigh of relief, *‘Ah, yes, Ling Wen—someone sent a puppet to my shrine today mentioning killings that have been going on in that area. I found it rather concerning.’*

There’s a pause as he waits for her response—and somehow, it’s even more flat than usual.

‘Your highness, I would leave this matter alone if I were you.’

And then—Xie Lian notices something odd.

There’s a magical aura around any communication array, that which seals the password and keeps spies out. Xie Lian’s, without spiritual powers, has always been weak.

But now, he feels a rush of power forming a barrier, reinforcing his defenses—and he realizes it must be Ling Wen.

“…I heard only half of the travelers who enter the pass survive,” Xie Lian murmurs, “Is that true?”

‘It’s better if we don’t discuss it any further.’

She doesn’t want them to be overheard.

Could the Crescent Moon Pass really be such a sensitive subject in the Heavens?

'...I understand,' Xie Lian replies quietly. *'I won't say any more.'*

'But if your highness insists on investigating...' Ling Wen trails off, reluctant. *'It would be best to do so independently of the Heavens.'*

Well, for any other official that might pose a real challenge—but Xie Lian is used to working rather independently with this sort of thing.

"Understood," he murmurs, severing the connection. How strange.

In any case—he can't justify ignoring it. Not when so many have been harmed already —and the Heavens are clearly turning their gaze away from it.

Like they did in Gusu.

"...San Lang?" He calls, listening as the young man returns to his side, "I'll be going away for a while."

The young man raises an eyebrow, reaching into his trouser pocket and pulling out a long length of white bandage, casually wrapping it around his left forearm. "If that's the case—do you mind bringing me along?"

Xie Lian pauses, unsure.

"...It could be very dangerous, San Lang," he murmurs, his expression tinged with worry. He's mortal, after all—and while Xie Lian would protect him, there's always a risk... "Are you sure?"

The teenager hums in confirmation. "If it's that dangerous, you shouldn't go alone, gege."

Xie Lian cracks a small smile, endeared by the young man's care as he reaches over, placing a hand on San Lang's shoulder. "You're very kind to worry, San Lang—but I can look after myself."

He wasn't expecting a broad, warm hand to cover his own. "You shouldn't have to."

The god pauses, a little startled—and suddenly hyper aware of how close they are, the warmth of San Lang's body emanating invitingly.

And it seems a little silly that, after everything he only just now noticed, but— Has San Lang been taller than him this entire time?

Xie Lian tilts his chin back slightly—and even if he can't open his eyes and look at San Lang (it would be pointless to try, anyway)—he's aware of the fact that the teenager must be watching him rather intently.

He swallows hard. “I…ah…”

Knock, knock, knock!

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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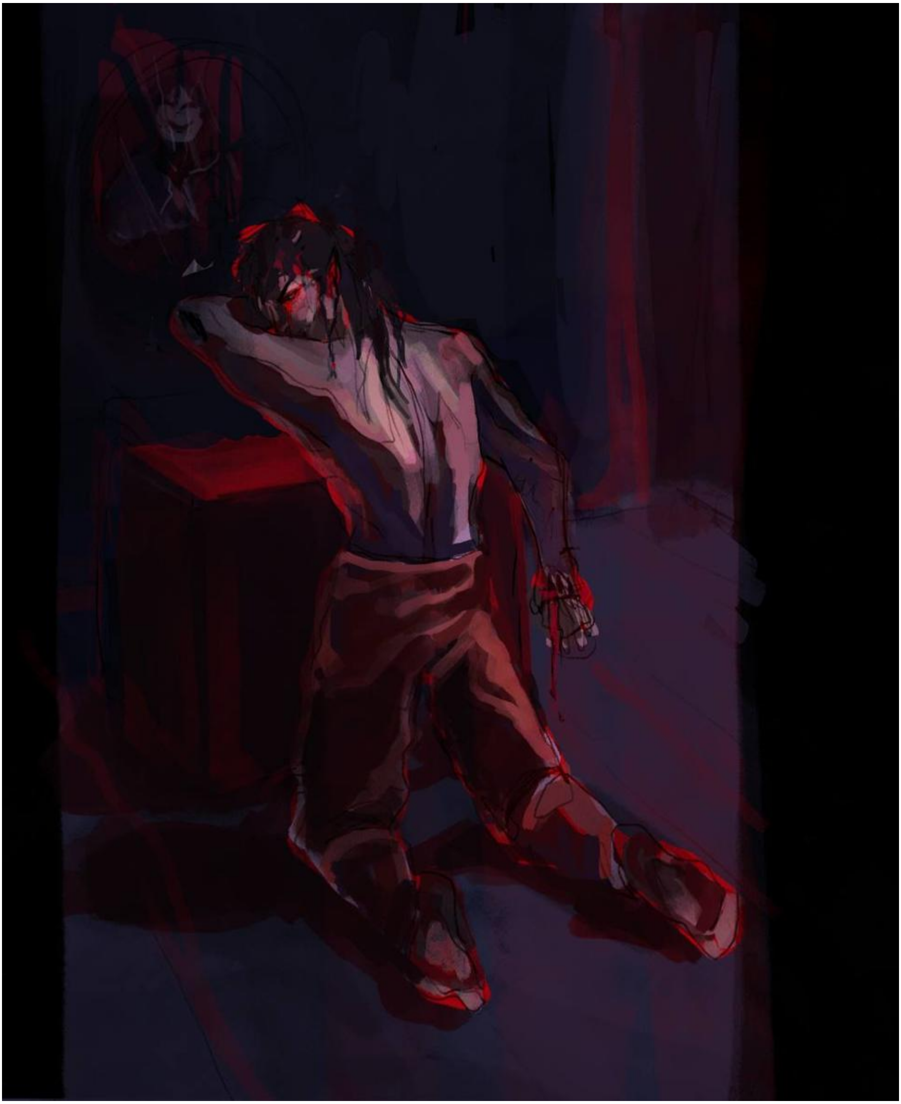
(Hua Cheng following the Bridal Sedan scene)



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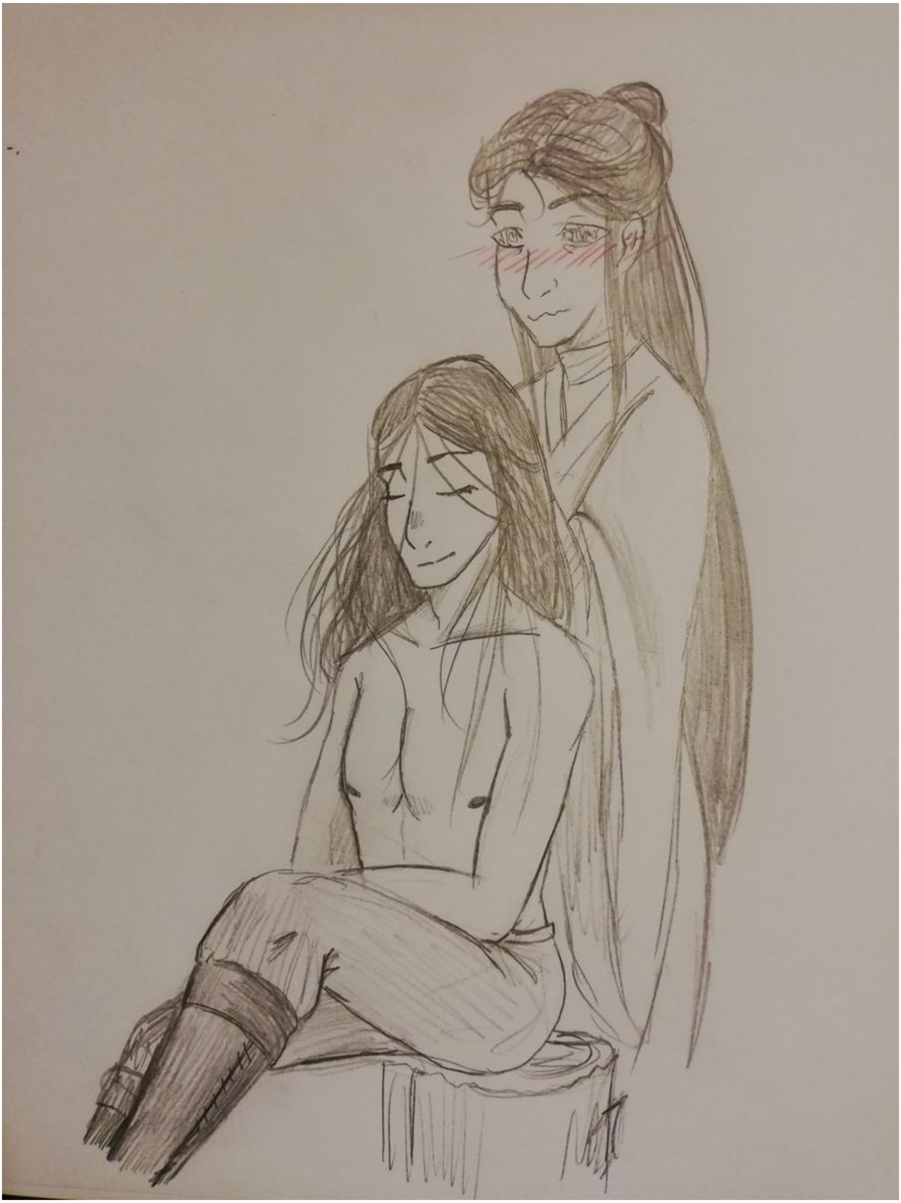

CREDIT: EVE

Long ago,
in the central plains,
there was a kingdom known as
Xianle...

CREDIT: **ESME**

Chapter End Notes

thank you to Esme, Eve, Seong, and Kageherhin for their beautiful artwork, and allowing me to share it! I'm very grateful!

xoxo, Evie

Tales of the Half Moon Pass

Chapter Summary

> Nan Feng, however, breaks him from his worrying by asking—"Your highness, you really trust him?"
>
> "…" Xie Lian nods, fiddling with the chain around his neck absentmindedly. "He hasn't given me a reason not to."
>
> "You don't find anything about him suspicious?" Fu Yao interjects, frustrated, and the god shrugs.
>
> "Of course I do—but I've already tested him several times."
>
> "And…he passed?"
>
> Xie Lian nods, crossing his arms. "So, that only leaves two possibilities: he's a normal mortal, or…"
>
> He trails off, but Nan Feng finishes the statement for him grimly: "A Calamity."

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

The sound of the knock at the door makes him jump, awkwardly slipping his hand out from underneath San Lang's, then giving his shoulder a few frantic pats, laughing nervously.

"I should get that!" He mutters, hurrying over to open the door, his heart flopping unsteadily.

And the moment he does, peeking through his eyelashes—he's met with the familiar sight of two different auras: one earth toned, the other ice blue, one squared out and the other slightly spiked in shape.

"…Nan Feng?" He blinks, surprised, "Fu Yao?"

"We're here to—" Nan Fang starts, then stops, sputtering as the wind catches in Fu Yao's hair, blowing his ponytail into his face, "Because we heard—" He chokes a little, trying to bat the hair out of his face, only to get punched in the arm.

"Stop messing with my hair, creep!"

"It's in my MOUTH, what do you *expect* me to do?! You should tie it up properly!"

"It's already tied up, maybe *you* shouldn't be standing so close to me!" Fu Yao grouses, adjusting his ponytail with a glare, while Xie Lian stands in the background, a bit awkward.

"The two of you...came here because...?"

Suddenly reminded of their primary purpose, they stop fighting, turning back to the prince.

Nan Feng rubs the back of his neck, tamping down his irritation, "We heard you talking about the Crescent Moon Pass—?"

Then, he stops.

"What's—?"

Nan Feng's hand grips Xie Lian's wrist suddenly, yanking the god behind his body— an action that makes the blind cultivator's guest glare, his eyes flashing with annoyance as the deputy gods leap into action.

"STAY BACK!"

"Your highness, who is this?!"

"Guys..." Xie Lian speaks up, pressing one palm against Nan Feng's back, "It's really fine—"

For a mortal teenager being faced down by two deputy gods holding crackling balls of energy in each hand, San Lang seems fairly calm—setting down his incense sticks before responding.

"Wow," he muses, his eyes slightly narrowed as he takes the two newcomers in, a sly smile on his face—but his tone is that of someone completely awestruck, "Such amazing magic—gege, you know these two?"

Fu Yao's glare intensifies. "You—!"

Xie Lian quickly throws himself between them, holding his hands up, "There's nothing to be nervous about San Lang, they're just—"

“Don’t talk to him!” Nan Feng glares, “Besides, he doesn’t seem nervous at all!”

Xie Lian arches an eyebrow, “Do you two know him?”

“...No, we don’t,” Fu Yao glares, crossing his arms.

“Then why are you both overreacting?” Xie Lian smiles, trying to placate them. “He’s my guest, he really isn’t—”

“What’s his full name?” Nan Feng barks, his eyes narrowed. “How did you meet, where is he from, and why is he here?!”

“San Lang, we ran into each other while I was scrap collecting a few days ago, he got kicked out of his home for the time being, and I invited him to stay with me!” Xie Lian replies quickly. “Could you please calm down?”

Nan Feng doesn’t seem particularly comforted by that, “If you don’t know where he comes from, why would you let him in like that?!”

Fu Yao speaks up now, glancing around. “And if he’s been staying with you, where has he been sleeping?”

“Um...”

After a moment, the deputy god’s eyes widen sharply, “Have you been sleeping TOGETHER?!”

Xie Lian winces, holding his hands up, “Is there a problem with that?”

“OBVIOUSLY!”

Now, San Lang pipes up from behind him—his tone light and casual. “Gege, are these two your servants?”

Mu Qing balls his hands up into fists, glaring, and Xie Lian laughs awkwardly, rubbing the side of his head. “No, no, if anything they’re more like...assistants!”

“Oh, I see...” San Lang nods, his eyes zeroed in on Mu Qing. “If that’s the case, then you might as well help out.”

Xie Lian hears the sound of something being tossed over, and then, wincing sharply when he hears Fu Yao catch it, he realizes—

It’s a broom.

“No, Fu Yao…” The god smiles awkwardly, “Let’s not overreact—”

BOOM!

Aaand there goes the newly renovated shrine wall.

San Lang is fine, Xie Lian can hear as much from the way he moves behind him, his heart rate never increasing.

Xie Lian, however, while a very patient person, is not infinitely so.

“You guys…” He trails off, and there’s a tone that makes Nan Feng stiffen. “I didn’t—HGNH—!”

Fu Yao is in the middle of shrieking at San Lang like a cat that’s been doused in cold water when a hand grips him by the back of the neck, reducing him to more of an angry kitten.

Nan Feng isn’t as lucky, because he’s caught by the front of the neck in more of a stranglehold.

Fu Yao’s arms flail in San Lang’s direction, infuriated by the delighted, smug look on the teenager's face as he gets dragged away.

“LET ME AT THAT LITTLE—!”

While Nan Feng chokes, clinging to Xie LIan’s wrist, “I WASN’T EVEN THE ONE WHO BROKE IT, I—!”

Both of them collapse to the ground in a heap when Xie Lian deposits them by the shrine gates, pointing to the sign posted by the entrance. “What does this say?”

His tone is as lighthearted and easygoing as ever, but there’s a layer of iron underneath.

“…”

Fu Yao sits up, his hair slightly askew, “…Currently looking for donations to renovate this shrine…seriously, your highness? Where’s your dignity as a Heavenly Official?”

“If you keep fighting in there, you’ll knock the entire shrine down. Understand?”

Nan Feng sits up, immediately catching a face full of Fu Yao's hair, only to get shoved back down when he spits it out, batting it away.

"STOP TOUCHING MY HAIR!"

"THAT WASN'T MY—!"

There's a pointed poke against the sign, loud enough to make them both stop, mildly sheepish.

"Did you two come here because you wanted to help me with the Crescent Moon Pass issue?" Xie Lian questions, his tone still light, and Nan Feng looks away from Fu Yao with a huff, rubbing his throat.

"Yes."

"Then you're both welcome to help—but San Lang is my guest."

Xie Lian emphasizes, crossing his arms. "And a friend. So I won't let either of you bully him."

"..." Nan Feng glances from Xie Lian, back towards the shrine—where San Lang is leaning against the doorframe and watching with a satisfied smirk. "I'm not sure if we even could..."

Now that the issue has been addressed, Xie Lian turns back walking back towards the shrine. "I'm sorry about that, San Lang—there was just a bit of a misunderstanding. We cleared it up."

When responding to Xie Lian—the teenager's tone is perfectly charming.

"If you say so, gege—there's no problem. After all—maybe I just remind them of someone."

Fu Yao steps inside behind Xie Lian, his hands balling up into fists. "Yeah," he mutters, watching San Lang with narrowed eyes. "You do look pretty familiar."

The teenager smiles.

"Both of you look pretty familiar to me too, actually."

That makes both of the deputy gods stiffen, with Fu Yao looking like he might gear up to throw another ball of lightning—and Nan Feng clears his throat.

“Move away from the door—I need space to draw the array.”

Xie Lian is pleasantly surprised to observe that, despite his often pretending not to know better—Nan Feng actually does know how to manage Fu Yao’s temper.

(When he wants to—and when it isn’t directed at him.)

“That’s very helpful of you, Nan Feng—that will save so much time.”

While Nan Feng closes the door behind them, working to draw the appropriate symbols on the back of the wooden planks—Fu Yao glances around, his arms crossed over his chest.

“To think that you’re living in such a place…” He mutters under his breath, disapproving.

Xie Lian doesn’t seem to pay him any mind, grabbing his bamboo hat from where it’s sitting in the corner, slipping it back over his shoulders.

“I’ve always lived in such places,” he murmurs with a cheerful shrug. “So, it’s perfect for me!”

The deputy gods grow slightly tense.

Nan Feng doesn’t find that as shocking. After all, back when they were living with his parents after the fall of Xianle, well…

“It’s finished,” he mutters, straightening up.

“And messy,” Fu Yao drawls, always critical.

“Do I look like the earth master to you?!” He snaps.

Xie Lian tilts his head curiously. “Is the Earth Master particularly good with arrays?”

“Ming Yi was known as an engineer in his mortal life,” Fu Yao mutters. “He runs most of the connections for the arrays that Heaven uses now.”

“And this one is perfectly functional.” Nan Feng grumbles, stepping back.

“I’m sure that it is,” Xie Lian agrees, smiling politely as he moves forward to take the door handle.

Most travel arrays with simple activation chants—and this one is no different.

He grips the handle, taking a deep breath:

“By Heaven Official’s Blessing, No Paths are Bound.”

When he pulls the handle back—the first thing he’s hit with is the smell of smoke and sand, the dry desert air blowing through his hair as he steps forward.

San Lang is just behind him, clapping his hands in polite applause.

“Wow, such impressive magic…” He muses, sticking close to Xie Lian’s side. “You have such amazing assistants, gege.”

Fu Yao’s eye twitches as he steps out behind them, followed by Nan Feng as they start walking down the sand dunes. “At least we’re useful, and not freeloaders.”

Xie Lian shakes his head, allowing San Lang to take his elbow as he guides him over a dip in the sand. “San Lang is very helpful—he’s incredibly well informed about things.”

“Is that so?” Fu Yao grumbles, watching the teenager closely. San Lang shrugs, “I’m somewhat well-read.”

“And I’m sure that’s very helpful in this situation,” he sneers, making the teenager raise an eyebrow.

“Well—I have read a bit about the Crescent Moon Kingdom in the past,” he muses. “I know a thing or two.”

That makes Xie Lian perk up eagerly, “You do?”

San Lang nods, keeping his hand on Xie Lian’s elbow for good measure. “The Crescent Moon Kingdom reached its height around two centuries ago—known as a culture of warriors who ruled the desert Oases. However, the Kingdom of Yong’an wanted control over the trade routes.”

Xie Lian listens carefully, lining it up with what he already remembers—and most of it seems to check out.

“This led to border skirmishes with increasing violence—and eventually all out war between the two nations,” San Lang explains. “It was during this time when the Imperial Preceptor of the Crescent

Moon Kingdom rose to prominence—and later became known as one of the two infamous demonic cultivators.”

“Demonic Cultivators?” Xie Lian murmurs, tapping his chin thoughtfully. He’s never heard of such a thing.

“The Imperial Preceptor of the Crescent Moon kingdom earned the name after she opened the gates of the city to the soldiers of Yong’an, leading to the slaughter of her people,” San Lang explains. “It’s said the sacrifice allowed her to rise as a powerful Savage Ghost.”

Xie Lian tilts his head, considering the idea. Such a sacrifice could lead to a powerful release of resentful energy—but it isn’t possible to harness such things in a stable or controlled manner.

Even in Gusu, Wen Jiao was drawing power from living humans—not blood sacrifice.

“There are rumors that the ones who go missing in the desert now are being fed to the souls of those slaughtered soldiers—in order to appease their hatred of her,” San Lang concludes. “But there haven’t been any survivors to confirm it.”

Xie Lian nods, taking it in.

“Is there a possibility that she and the other imperial preceptor are working together?”

San Lang shakes his head. “It’s highly unlikely,” He murmurs. “They’re often referenced in tandem—but the other lived a century before her. He was known as the Guoshi Fangxin of Yong’an.”

Xie Lian stops walking for a moment, his entire expression changing.

San Lang watches as it shifts from something like remorse, to pain, then—terror, even if it’s only a brief flash of trembling in his lips, his body tensing in a frightened shudder.

Then, blank numbness.

“...Gege?” He questions, watching the god closely, his eyes slightly narrowed. “Are you alright?”

Xie Lian lifts his chin, lips turning up into a tired smile, but before he can respond, Fu Yao speaks up.

“You certainly are well-read,” he comments dryly. “How peculiar.”

San Lang glances back at the deputy god over his shoulder, eyes flashing—one sharpened canine peeking out slightly from the corner of his mouth. “Hardly,” he smiles, “you’re just ignorant.”

“Would you WATCH YOUR MOUTH?!” Fu Yao snarls, sending another crackling projectile.

In the temple before, the teenager made a show of jumping behind Xie Lian to avoid the attack. But this time, he does no such thing, making eye contact with Fu Yao as he tips his head ever so slightly to the side, the ball of energy missing him by less than an inch.

“My, my...” He smirks, watching as Fu Yao’s expression darkens with sheepish fury, “How terrifying.”

The deputy god glares, his eyes raging with fury, but before he can act further, Xie Lian looks back, his smile pleasant—but with an underlying warning.

“Fu Yao, be nice.”

“I—!” He sputters, looking over at Nan Feng, gesturing wildly in San Lang’s direction, as if silently asking if he’s the crazy one—to which the other deputy god simply shrugs, throwing his hands up helplessly.

Of course, it’s odd—but Xie Lian seems determined to indulge him.

They walk through the entire night without issue—even if San Lang does occasionally whine about why they couldn’t have taken a traveling array all the way to their destination.

Xie Lian patiently explains that doing so would have used too much energy, and the teenager grumbles.

“That one has enough energy to throw fireballs at me every hour or so, couldn’t he have helped?”

“Fu Yao isn’t going to do that again,” Xie Lian replies cheerfully, “he’s saving his energy now—in case we end up needing it.”

But when the sun gets high enough, he does start to worry—enough so to lift his own hat from his head, reaching over to place it on top of San Lang’s.

“Here,” he murmurs, reaching to fasten it under the teenager’s chin, “the sun gets rather intense this time of day—”

But before he can finish explaining, a set of hands covers his own, gently placing them back down before placing the hat back on Xie Lian's head. "It's alright, gege," the teenager reassures him—and despite his earlier whining, he sounds perfectly fine now. "I don't need it."

"..." Xie Lian can't help smiling a little, "Let me know if you change your mind, alright?"

Instead of responding, the teenager tilts his gaze away sheepishly, muttering, "I think I see a structure ahead where we can take a rest. I'll go take a look."

Xie Lian isn't particularly fond of that idea.

The sand and wind around them dampens sound, leaving him unusually out of sorts. And of everyone present, San Lang doesn't have an aura of spiritual power for Xie Lian to keep track of, the way he can with Nan Feng and Fu Yao.

Letting the teenager get more than a few feet away means letting him out of Xie Lian's perception entirely—which leaves the god...inexplicably stressed, his posture suddenly tense.

Nan Feng, however, breaks him from his worrying by asking— "Your highness, you really trust him?"

"..." Xie Lian nods, fiddling with the chain around his neck absentmindedly. "He hasn't given me a reason not to."

"You don't find anything about him suspicious?" Fu Yao interjects, frustrated, and the god shrugs.

"Of course I do—but I've already tested him several times."

"And...he passed?"

Xie Lian nods, crossing his arms. "So, that only leaves two possibilities: he's a normal mortal, or..."

He trails off, but Nan Feng finishes the statement for him grimly: "A Calamity."

"Shouldn't that be more concerning?!" Fu Yao glares.

"Not particularly."

Xie Lian shrugs, “I mean—think about it: what would a Ghost King be doing following me around? He would have nothing to gain from that. Besides—I would think he would be a little too busy for things like squabbling with the two of you over sleeping arrangements.”

Neither of them have a strong argument for that, except…

“…He could be trying to take advantage of you, your highness.” Nan Feng points out carefully, his tone gentle. “A sick creature like that—he might get satisfaction out of doing that to a god.”

Xie Lian raises an eyebrow.

“Nan Feng—I don’t have anything of worth for him to want to take.”

He doesn’t even have enough pride to be humiliated for being tricked—so what is there to worry about?

Nan Feng pauses, hesitant—but Fu Yao—

He seems genuinely distressed, watching Xie Lian with frustration.

“There is always something left for men like that to take,” he hisses, his expression slightly pale. “You of all people should understand that!”

Nan Feng stiffens, sending Fu Yao an unreadable look, and Xie Lian… Just stares back at him with confusion.

Men like that?

San Lang has never been anything but considerate towards him—and even with plenty of chances to harm him (if he were such a powerful ghost, that is) he hasn’t taken a single one.

“…Fu Yao,” the prince frowns, “I really don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

The deputy god stands there, his hands balled into fists, his expression roiling with a dozen different emotions when San Lang calls over the wind—

“Gege! I found something over here!”

Xie Lian turns, following the sound of his voice in that direction, and Nan Feng…

Reaches out to place his hand on Fu Yao's arm, his tone uncharacteristically neutral as he says, "We can test him ourselves," he points out, "We came prepared for that."

The deputy god doesn't respond, glaring at the sand beneath their feet, and Nan Feng frowns.

When he speaks again, his voice is even quieter, like he's speaking to an animal that is likely to bolt, "Is there something—?"

Which Fu Yao promptly does, stomping towards the abandoned house after Xie Lian without another word, leaving Nan Feng to follow with a sigh.

Once inside, they find San Lang and Xie Lian sitting side by side at a table, sharing a cask of water.

The teenager watches as his god takes several long swallows from the flask, chin tilted back, throat bobbing with each gulp.

His gaze turns dark and shrouded as he watches one drop of water escape the god's lips, slipping from the corner of his mouth and down his chin as he asks—

"Is there any left?"

Xie Lian lowers the cask from his lips with a nod, moving to hand it over, when Fu Yao speaks up.

"Why don't you take mine?" He offers, reaching into his sleeve for his own flask. "I haven't had any yet."

San Lang casts his gaze in the deputy god's direction, bored and disinterested. "Is that so? Why haven't you?"

Xie Lian sniffs, then stiffens, smelling the enchantment.

It's been laced with a spell that would reveal the true shape of anyone who drinks it— and, given that San Lang would have to be a Calamity if he truly was a ghost—it must be powerful.

"You're the guest," Fu Yao smiles thinly, sliding it over. "So you should go first."

San Lang smiles back at him, his eyes squinting with an obviously fake sort of friendliness. "You're the one offering—so by all means, you should go first."

Fu Yao grits his teeth, his tone turning strained with annoyance, “Why are you refusing? Do you have something to hide?”

“You’re the one that’s being weird,” San Lang muses, kicking back. “What if it’s poisoned?”

“Then you could just ask him about that,” Fu Yao sneers, pointing in Xie Lian’s direction.

When he feels San Lang look to him, the god squirms with discomfort. “It’s...not, but —”

The teenager promptly takes the bottle without any more need for reassurance, tilting his head back as he swallows down the entire thing in three gulps, his posture relaxed as he tosses the bottle aside, his form...

Completely unchanged, other than the smirk on his lips.

“That tasted awful...” He mutters, clicking his tongue. “You’re sure it wasn’t poisoned?”

Fu Yao’s eye twitches with annoyance. “It was just regular water, you little—!”

But before he can finish speaking, Nan Feng slams a sword scabbard onto the table, sliding it over.

“Here, friend,” he offers with a forced smile. “It might be dangerous where we’re going—and you’re the only one of us that isn’t armed. Take this for protection.”

Xie Lian frowns, reaching over to feel at the scabbard curiously, feeling the engraving on the pommel—

Red Mirror.

“...I thought this was pawned back when I was first banished.” Xie Lian mutters, his expression tinged with the unpleasantness of the memory.

He gave it to Feng Xin for that purpose, anyway.

The deputy god shrugs, “Nan Yang tracked it down again—and he allowed me to borrow it.”

The blade was originally a gift from Jun Wu—and known for the enchantment that, if held by someone inhuman, it would turn to the color of blood, revealing the true form of it's wielder in it's reflection.

San Lang lifts the sword, his expression…complicated.

Almost as though he's just as familiar with the blade as Xie Lian is—but that wouldn't be possible.

He lifts it, one hand on the scabbard, the other gripping the hilt.

"This is interesting metal work on the cross guard," he muses. "Do you know who forged this weapon?"

Feng Xin seems a little baffled by the question, his brow furrowed. "No? It's far too old for that."

San Lang shakes his head with a sigh. "Keeping track of the master who forged a weapon is key to maintaining them as they age. The method of construction impacts longevity."

Xie Lian turns his chin in San Lang's direction, genuinely impressed. It's rare that he encounters someone with a passion for blades comparable to his own—and even more rare to encounter anyone with such technical knowledge. "That's exactly right," he murmurs.

"…Well if you're so worried about maintenance," Nan Feng mutters, his tone slightly annoyed, "Why don't you take it out and see how you like it?"

San Lang shrugs, seeming to find that reasonable—and Xie Lian can't help but tense as he starts to draw the blade, when—

The teenager stops, glancing up at the deputy gods and raising an eyebrow. "…Gege, are your friends pranking me?"

Nan Feng stiffens, offended by the accusation. "We wouldn't do that!"

San Lang sets the scabbard down, pushing it over to him. "This sword is broken."

Nan Feng raises an eyebrow, sputtering, "It's not—!"

But, when he pulls out the handle of the weapon, the actual blade itself comes calling out of the scabbard in several pieces, landing on the table with a clatter.

San Lang leans back, rolling a shard of broken metal between his fingers expertly. “I suppose it must have been an accident, giving me a broken blade. Maybe something happened to it during your travels?”

“That’s—!” Nan Feng fumes, his eyes narrowing. “That’s not possible!”

“Relax,” the teenager drawls, kicking his feet up on the table. “I can re-forge it for you, when all of this is over with.”

“Reforge?!” Fu Yao snorts, shocked, “What are you on about?”

San Lang shrugs, tossing the metal shard into the air, catching it without ever getting cut.

“My mother is a master bladesmith,” he explains calmly, “she’s been training me to carry on the family craft. Re-forging a simple short sword like this wouldn’t be a challenge.”

The deputy gods sputter at the arrogance it takes for a mortal to call a Heavenly arm, ‘simple.’

Xie Lian, however, feels his chest warm up with curiosity, turning to San Lang with a delighted smile, “You never told me you were a smith, San Lang.”

The youth watches the look on Xie Lian’s face, clearly pleased.

“I’m not as good as my mother yet—but I’ve made quite a few weapons already. I’d be happy to show gege anytime.”

Xie Lian’s smile widens with a genuine eagerness, “I’d like that—and to meet you mother too, she sounds like an impressive woman.”

The warmth in San Lang’s expression fades significantly, but his tone remains fond as he replies—

“She certainly is.”

Xie Lian sits back, pleased with the idea of being able to see San Lang’s work up close. And it also explains quite a lot.

The tension between San Lang and his mother—it’s likely a young man bucking under the pressure of taking on a family business. It also explains the callouses on his palms, his knowledge of weapons, and, well…

Being a smith would explain how toned his arms and shoulders are.

Not that Xie Lian has been touching them all the time or anything, it's just—San Lang helps guide him around rather frequently, often while not wearing a shirt, and sometimes you can't help but notice—

Xie Lian glances away from the group, opening his eyes blearily.

Initially, just because he's kept them closed so often around San Lang, it's left them slightly itchy, but—

Then he notices something to the east, far enough to be outside of the shack, moving quickly.

An aura—no, two distinct shapes of spiritual power, moving quickly.

Both strong—one light green in color, swirling like a small tornado as it rockets across the dunes. The other is dark, shades of deep blue, black, and gold—and far more stagnant in shape, flowing behind it's companion like a wave.

San Lang is the first to notice the change in his posture, leaning over with concern. "Gege, are you alright?"

Xie Lian doesn't look away, a frown forming on his lips, "...Something else is here." The teenager glances over his shoulder—spying two women moving across the desert.

One with warm brown curls and vividly green eyes, wearing robes of white and emerald, a whisk clutched between her fingertips—and moving behind her, a woman dressed in black, dark tresses flowing behind her in the wind.

San Lang's eyes narrow slightly. She's somewhat familiar.

"...There are two female cultivators outside," he explains softly, speaking next to Xie Lian's ear. "One in black, the other in white. They're owing rather quickly."

Xie Lian doubts that's a coincidence, moving to follow them outside.

"Do you think one of them is the Imperial Preceptor?" The prince asks, having to raise his voice to be heard over the wind.

San Lang shrugs, sticking close beside him. "It's difficult to say from that distance." And now, they're far enough that Xie Lian can't see a trace at all

What he can feel, however, is the wind picking up violently, the noise level rising as the sand whips around them—and as the chaos around them increases, Xie Lian feels his senses becoming overstimulated, making his anxiety spike.

He fumbles over to grip San Lang once more, mainly looking to reassure himself that the young man is still there—and when he does, he feels that his outer robe has been slightly displaced by the wind, making the god reach to fix it with a frown.

The teenager stops, watching fondly as Xie Lian fusses over him, his expression softening. Just then, the wind gets strong enough to even knock the god's hat off of his head, but before it can fly away, San Lang reaches out to snatch it between his fingers.

"Here," he murmurs, bending over as he places the hat back on Xie Lian's head, reaching under the god's chin to pull the strap tight, keeping it there.

The prince shivers slightly, telling himself it's from the wind, and not the brush of San Lang's fingers over his skin.

"...Thank you, San Lang," he murmurs.

When he hears Fu Yao and Nan Feng catch up, he raises his sleeve to shield his face from the wind.

"I think we should go back inside," he calls to the others. "This storm looks like it's going to be pretty bad—we should just wait it out!"

"I don't think that's a good idea," Fu Yao calls back, "this storm almost seems like it's intended to keep us out of the pass—it'll probably just continue until we move past it!"

Xie Lian can admit that's probably true, but...

He's already so disoriented, he finds the idea of moving through the storm like this until the reach the Crescent Moon Pass completely daunting.

"Couldn't...we give waiting a try?" He offers, his tone somewhat meek. "And waste all of that time?! No way, I'm not doing that!"

Now, when San Lang speaks up—his tone is sly, but his expression is genuinely irritated, no—

There's a spark of protective anger behind those eyes.

"Do you enjoy being difficult on purpose?" He glares. "Or can you genuinely not help yourself?"

Fu Yao sputters, offended. "I—!"

But before he can really retort—or San Lang can throw anymore insults—the wind around them suddenly increases in force, swirling violently, and—

"Oh!" Xie Lian gasps, eyes widening as he's yanked off of the ground, sent flying up into the air, sucked into the whirlwind.

"Gege!"

San Lang cries out sharply, his voice slightly panicked—but before long it's far away as Xie Lian finds himself being flipped around over and over again, hair and clothes whipping around him, unsure which way is up or down.

It leaves him heavily disoriented, every breath sucked out of his chest as he tries to take it, his head spinning.

"R..." He grits his teeth, fumbling for something, anything to hold onto, "Ruoye! Grab onto something solid!"

The bandage surges forward in an effort to obey.

Xie Lian clings on, relieved when the other end of Ruoye wraps around something weighty enough to stop him from spinning—but instead of it dragging him back down to earth, it's dragging whatever it grabbed up towards the prince, making him frown.

"I said something solid, not—!"

SLAM!

Something warm and solid slams into him, very obviously not a rock or stone, but rather a living person—and when Xie Lian breathes in, he catches the scent of the forest, letting out a shaky sigh.

"Gege," San Lang murmurs, sounding perfectly calm, "there you are."

He wraps his arms around the god's waist from behind as Ruoye binds them together, and Xie Lian shouts in apology, "I'm sorry! I didn't mean for Ruoye to grab you!"

The teenager shrugs, chin resting against Xie Lian's shoulder as he surveys the storm around them, “It’s alright.”

Xie Lian finds himself a little baffled as to how the young man can be so relaxed in a situation like this—but for now, he’s too focused on getting them out of this to pay it much mind.

“Ruoye!” He cries, throwing his arm out, “Try again, but don’t grab a person this time!”

The prince can feel it now, when the white bandage once again latches onto something solid—but, once again, instead of dragging them back down, it drags the object back up, and when he hears voices, he groans.

“HOW MANY TIMES TO I HAVE TO TELL YOU TO STOP TOUCHING MY HAIR?!”

Nan Feng snarls, writhing to get away from him, “THIS TIME IT COULDN’T BE MORE OBVIOUS THAT IT ISN’T MY FAULT!”

“It’s got your spit ALL OVER IT NOW! SO FUCKING GROSS!”

“I ALREADY SAID I CAN’T HELP IT! MAYBE YOU SHOULDN’T HAVE IT SO LONG!”

“Why did it grab you two…”

“Like WE know!” Fu Yao glares, squirming uncomfortably as he ends up pinned with his front against Xie Lian, and his back against Nan Feng’s chest. “Ask that stupid bandage of yours!”

“Would you—!” Nan Feng grunts, his expression clearly uncomfortable, “Stop SQUIRMING?!”

Fu Yao turns his head to give him a nasty look, “WHAT DO YOU EXPECT ME TO DO?! I DON’T WANT TO CATCH YOUR FLEAS!”

“JUST STOP MOVING LIKE THAT WHEN YOU’RE ON TOP OF MY—”

“YOUR WHAT?!”

“Gege,” San Lang mumbles, not lifting his chin from Xie Lian’s shoulder, his tone petulant.

“Maybe you should just drop them.”

Fu Yao glares, trying to flail his arms in the direction of San Lang’s neck as though he wants to strangle him, all while Nan Feng lets out a pained groan, “YOU—!”

“Ruoye!” Xie Lian shouts, “please don’t grab the wrong thing this time!”

The bandage shoots back down once again—but this time, it does manage to latch onto something solid enough to drag them back down, slowly but surely—until they’re slammed down into the sand dunes once more.

/ ***BOOM!*** /

Fu Yao and Nan Feng are quick to scramble apart, but San Lang’s grip on Xie Lian’s waist remains firm, making sure the god doesn’t end up sucked back up into the storm once again.

“There’s a cave nearby, gege,” the young man murmurs, helping him to his feet. “Come with me.”

Xie Lian nods, allowing himself to be pulled along, listening as the two deputy gods follow close behind—and letting out a breath of relief when they slip into the cavern, leaving the furious winds outside.

The god coughs, spitting out sand as he questions—

“Why didn’t either of you use the thousand pound spell?”

Fu Yao shakes the sand out of his hair (most of it landing on Nan Feng’s face), “You think we didn’t try that? Something about this place is suppressing our powers, we couldn’t do anything.”

Xie Lian frowns, concerned. “How odd…”

Then again, everything about this incursion has been strange so far. It’s like something is trying very hard to pull them in—while an equal, opposing force is doing it’s best to keep them out…

“Gege?”

“Hmm?”

“It looks like you’re sitting on some sort of marker.”

Xie Lian jumps, straightening to his feet as Fu Yao lights a small fire in the palm of his hand, holding it out as San Lang kneels down to examine it.

“...It seems like some sort of grave marker,” he murmurs, tilting his head. “The language is certainly that of the Crescent Moon.”

The prince turns to kneel down beside him, reaching out to feel the characters for himself. “...They do feel familiar,” he murmurs in agreement, making Nan Feng raise an eyebrow.

“...Your highness can read the language of the Crescent Moon Kingdom?”

“Ah...” Xie Lian glances up with an awkward smile, “to be honest with you, I used to collect scraps in that area.”

“...” Fu Yao crosses his arms over his chest, raising an eyebrow. “Is there anywhere you haven’t collected scraps at this point?” He questions dryly.

Xie Lian thinks it over, scratching the side of his head. “You know, I’m not sure?” He admits, running his fingertips over the characters more carefully. “...I can see that one of the words here says General,” he murmurs. “But the rest of it is a mystery to—”

He stops.

Nan Feng sends him a curious look, but the first thing Xie Lian does is reach for San Lang, gripping his elbow as he whispers—

“We aren’t alone here.”

There are other people in the cave—and from how many heart beats he hears—there must be somewhere around twenty of them.

It’s in that moment when Nan Feng looks up and spies a young man peering at them from around the corner of one of the rock formations in the cavern—and upon seeing one another, both scream, jumping back.

Fu Yao glares, using his fireball to illuminate the entire space. “REVEAL YOURSELVES!”

What he ends up revealing, in the end, is a bunch of terrified merchants—and some of their companions are young enough to almost be considered children.

“What are you doing here?! Why were you hiding?!” “Taking shelter from the storm!” One of them cries.

“You were the ones who showed up and started using magic all of the sudden! What were we supposed to do?!”

Neither Fu Yao or Nan Feng respond, because, well… It’s a fair point.

Xie Lian smiles, rising to his feet, “It looks like we’re just a group of merchants and Taoists.”

One of the older merchants nods, eager for the opportunity to avoid quarreling with the newcomers. “Us ordinary folks have to stick together!”

“Are you really ordinary?” San Lang questions, eyeing them curiously. “After all—you came in spite of the rumors about this place.”

“Well, yes…” One of the merchants agrees, “But we have A’Zhao with us, so we have no reason to fear. He was the one who led us to this cave so we could take shelter from the storm!”

He points, and San Lang’s gaze drifts towards a dark haired young man seated in the corner.

“I’m just doing my job,” the youth murmurs, not seeming to take much pleasure in being praised.

“He’s the most reliable guide to get you through the desert pass,” the younger boy explains—known by the name Tian Sheng. “He’s the reason we made it this far!”

Xie Lian nods with an encouraging smile, but he makes a mental note to tell Fu Yao and Nan Feng that they’ll need to escort the mortals out of the desert when the storm clears out before continuing on, it’s too dangerous otherwise.

While he’s lost in thought, San Lang kneels in front of the grave marker once more. “…You were right, gege.” He muses. “It does say that this is the Tomb of the General.”

The sound of that makes Xie Lian perk up, turning back to him. “San Lang—you can read that language?”

The young man smiles over at him and offers a small shrug, “I must have picked it up in a book somewhere.”

“Aren’t you full of surprises,” Fu Yao mutters dryly, but San Lang elects to ignore him, reading more off of the tombstone.

“It says here that he was beloved by the people—constantly intervening when soldiers on either side of the war attempted to harm civilians,” the youth explains, hair slipping over his shoulder as he leans forward. “As a result, he was demoted.”

“So he wasn’t really a general?”

“Not towards the end of his life, no.” San Lang shakes his head. “He was promoted to the level of officer at one point—but as punishment for his interference, he was demoted all the way back down to the bottom.”

“Just for trying to help people?” Tian Sheng frowns. “That’s stupid!”

“And an oddly familiar tale,” Fu Yao comments, eyes narrowed. “Reminds me of a certain god I know.”

Xie Lian’s smile turns a little strained. “He broke the rules, and he was punished.”

“How did he die?” One of the merchants questions curiously.

“Um...” The god laughs a little nervously, running his fingertips over the rest of the stone, reading what he can. “...He was in the middle of trying to stop yet another conflict, and when that failed, he, ah...”

“What?”

“…Ended up trampled,” Xie Lian explains lamely.

That draws a few surprised laughs from the merchants standing around, and San Lang raises an eyebrow. “Is that supposed to be funny?”

“I didn’t mean anything by laughing!” Tian Sheng mumbles, rubbing at his neck. “That’s just...kind of a...silly way to go, is all.”

“There are sillier ways to go,” Xie Lian comments, his tone a little far away, like he’s remembering something. “I once saw a man choke to death on a piece of spun sugar in the middle of a circus act.”

Everyone sitting nearby stops to stare at him, and he adds—

“He was performing as a clown at the time, so everyone thought it was part of the show. But later on, everyone said he died doing what he loved, so…”

He trails off, realizing that no one else seems to find it as interesting as him. Well. Except for San Lang.

“…In any case,” the teenager shrugs, straightening up, “It says that anyone who bows before the grave of the general three times will pass through the desert unharmed.”

And that statement has all of the merchants scrambling to kneel before the tombstone, bowing their heads.

“…San Lang,” Xie Lian murmurs, biting back a smile. “Why are you playing with them?”

The teenager shrugs, his side pressing against Xie Lian’s lightly when he sits back down. “They were laughing at him,” he murmurs. “So it’s only fair if we laugh at them a little bit too.”

“…” Xie Lian’s lips twitch, and he finds himself leaning back against San Lang, just a little bit, when—

“SNAKE!”

One of the men towards the back of the cavern starts shrieking, running forward, joined by a few of his companions.

“THERE’S A SNAKE!”

Xie Lian listens closely—and he can hear it, slithering across the cave floor. The sounds made by it’s forked tongue when it slides out between it’s lips. The clicking noise of it’s tail.

His first instinct is to step in front of San Lang. “Everyone, be careful!” “Scorpion snakes are native to the area—they’re highly poisonous!”

In that moment, he can sense the creature launch itself in an attack—but before the god can respond, San Lang snatches it out of the air with ease.

“What an interesting little creature,” he muses.

He doesn’t sound particularly frightened, having caught the snake in a grip with his thumb pressed against its heart, ready to kill it at any moment.

Still, when Xie Lian hears it move, he tenses with worry. “Watch out for the tail—!"

San Lang moves faster than the god can speak, catching the stinger before it can pierce him with his other hand, stretching the snake out and examining it. "How curious, a scorpion snake you said?"

"Yes, and they're very dangerous…" Xie Lian mutters, fretful.

"You shouldn't go and grab them like that."

San Lang shrugs, twisting the snake by the neck until it goes limp. "You know, these animals were often controlled by the Imperial Preceptor of the Crescent Moon Kingdom? They used to be heavily associated with her."

Xie Lian frowns, listening all around them.

If the Imperial Preceptor is the one that could control the snakes—and theoretically, she's the one drawing travelers into the pass in order to feed them to the ghosts of Crescent Moon soldiers, then…

"There's more of them."

"…What?"

Xie Lian straightens quickly, raising his voice, "There's more snakes in the cavern!" He calls out to the others, "We should get out of here!"

At first, everyone is doubtful of the blind man—until they start to see the shadows for themselves.

Then, everyone is screaming and fleeing the cave as fast as they can, charging out the mouth and into the waiting desert outside.

Lucky for them, the sandstorm has passed—but when Xie Lian hears a pained groan, he knows not everyone made it out unscathed.

"Uncle Zheng!"

He listens with a grimace as one of the elderly merchants falls to the ground, and Tian Sheng clings to his arm, calling out, "I think he's been bitten!"

"Somebody help!"

Xie Lian rubs his temples before calling out to the others—

“Check yourselves for wounds!”

“If you find any, be sure that you tie them off before the poison can spread any further!”

Fu Yao elbows past the others, kneeling down beside Old Man Zheng, examining the wound on his hand before tying it off, looking back at Xie Lian and the others.

“This is bad...”

Tian Sheng sniffs, tugging at Fu Yao’s sleeve, his eyes filled with worry. “I-Is he gonna be okay?”

The deputy god stares down at him, reluctant to offer bad news—and that’s when their guide, A’Zhao, finally decides to speak.

“The venom is deadly to humans within ten hours.”

That causes panicked muttering within the group—and Fu Yao sighs, reaching into his sleeve. “I have medicine,” he mutters, opening a small pouch, lifting out a small bundle of herbs from inside, placing it in the old man’s mouth. “It won’t cure him— but it should buy him time.”

“Is...Is there no antidote for Scorpion Snake venom?” One of the merchants questions, his voice trembling. “Is the man doomed?”

After a moment of silence, San Lang replies, “There is one herb that is known to treat it. The Shan Yue fern—but it only grows in Crescent Moon lands.”

Tian Sheng beams hopefully, “A’Zhao, why didn’t you mention that? We can save Uncle Zheng!”

“He didn’t mention it because going there would be a death sentence for at least half of you,” San Lang shrugs. “It’s a risky option.”

Xie Lian rubs his chin, contemplating.

It’s actually a rather ingenious way for the Preceptor of the Crescent Moon Kingdom to lure humans in. Send her snakes out to bite travelers in the desert, then feed the humans who come looking to the cure to the resentful spirits of her former soldiers.

It makes the situation dangerous—and even though Ling Wen asked him not to bring the issue to the Heavens, with so many mortals at risk…Xie Lian doesn't feel like he has a choice.

But now, when he tries to enter the communication array—he only receives silence in answer.

"…Nan Feng, Fu Yao," he murmurs, his brow furrowing. "Can either one of you get into the communication array right now?"

Both deputy gods try, making efforts of their own—but both shake their heads. "Something here is suppressing our powers, your highness."

Xie Lian frowns.

Something in the area is sealing it off—suppressing the powers of heavenly officials, and stopping communication from going in and out.

Just like Gusu.

Which could mean, the closer Xie Lian gets to the Crescent Moon Kingdom, his shackles might start…

Just then, a rustle nearby snaps him out of his train of thought—followed by a rush of movement, lunging in San Lang's direction.

Xie Lian doesn't hesitate to react, whipping his hand out, grasping the snake briefly by the head before hurling it to the ground.

THUD!

"…Stay on guard," he mutters, shaking his head, "there are still snakes nearby—"

Xie Lian stops, however, when he feels someone grasping his wrist rather tightly, and —

He can't see the look on San Lang's face, but he feels the tense, dark cloud that seems to have shrouded him.

"…San Lang?" He questions.

The teenager doesn't speak at first, staring down the darkening wound on the god's hand, eyes smoldering with rage. But when he speaks, his tone is far calmer than he looks.

"You were stung, gege."

He was?

"Oh...I didn't even feel it," Xie Lian admits sheepishly, rubbing the side of his head with his free hand. To be fair —something like that would only be a pinprick to him, and it all happened so fast...

San Lang doesn't say a word, snatching Ruoye—who, despite being manhandled by a stranger, doesn't protest.

He wraps the bandage around Xie Lian's wrist tightly, binding off the wound before lifting a dagger from his hip, offering it to Nan Feng without a word.

Somehow understanding what the young man wants—the deputy god lights a small flame.

San Lang holds the knife there for a few seconds, allowing it to heat up before he brings it down on the sting on Xie Lian's hand.

The prince doesn't wince, not even when San Lang cuts a bloody x, allowing blood to flow. "San Lang, it's really—!"

He cuts himself off with a high pitched sound of surprise, his body going slightly rigid when he feels San Lang's lips against his skin, and —

A flash of the younger man's tongue as he begins to suck, drawing the venom out. "That's—!" Xie Lian starts, then stops. He waits until he can trust his voice before he starts, again, clearing his throat, "The venom is potent, you shouldn't risk yourself!"

San Lang pays him no mind, spitting a mouthful of contaminated blood onto the ground, while Fu Yao huffs, crossing his arms.

"You don't even know if he would have been bitten," he grumbles. "Why make such a fuss?"

"But what if he had been hurt—?" Xie Lian starts, but is forced to stop again, a shiver running through him when San Lang's mouth returns to his skin once more, and...

There's something familiar about this.

Something that stirs inside of him like a familiar ache.

Most of Xie Lian's memories are constructed from touch and sound alone, and now, he's remembering...so, so long ago...

A ghost kneeling before him, asking for one reward.

It was such a small thing, in comparison to everything he had done. When placed in line with everything Xie Lian had put him through, but…

The only reward Wu Ming asked for was to kiss Xie Lian's hand.

And now, with San Lang kneeling before him, his lips pressed against the god's skin, he can't help but remember…

"…San Lang," he murmurs, swallowing hard. "I'm alright now, really."

The teenager pulls back, however reluctantly, blood dripping from the corner of his mouth.

He grasps Xie Lian's hand tightly for one more moment—examining it before he lets him go.

Xie Lian shakes the limb out, squeezing his fingers. They're tingling now, but that doesn't have much to do with the snake venom.

"I'll be alright," he murmurs. "It can't kill me, but…"

There's some mention from Fu Yao about reporting back to the Heavens on the matter—but Xie Lian promptly decides, remembering Ling Wen's warning, and…

"Saving lives comes first," Xie Lian murmurs. "We'll go to the Crescent Moon and get the Shan Yue fern, but,,,"

He points in A'Zhao's direction, "We'll need him to take us there."

That earns a reluctant stir from the merchants, who seem wary of the idea of being left alone in the desert without a guide—after all, they may not come back.

But, the promise of leaving Fu Yao behind seems to soothe them enough to agree to the plan—which works out, because it just so happens to be the only plan.

They set off from there—just the four of them: Xie Lian, Nan Feng, San Lang, and A'Zhao.

It's a quiet journey.

Partly because Xie Lian is lost in thought, contemplating their situation—what A’Zhao’s role in this might be, and what their course of action will be when they arrive, but also…

San Lang has been incredibly quiet. Sticking very close to Xie Lian’s side, but not saying a word.

Xie Lian can’t help but wonder if something happened back there to make the young man upset—but he can’t put his finger on a single cause of what that might be.

Well—aside from the snake, but Xie Lian’s clearly alright, so it couldn’t be—

“We’re here.”

Leaps of Faith

Chapter Summary

> "…San Lang?" He whispers, his voice unsteady. "What are you—?"
>
> He stops, shivering when a second kiss is pressed against his hand, this time over his sting, long since healed.
>
> "Don't be afraid, gege."
>
> San Lang murmurs, his tone so gentle, it makes Xie Lian soften without meaning to, until—
>
> "I'll be gone for just a minute."

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE
>
> CONTENT WARNING: this chapter contains NSFW language (aka: dirty talk)

The desert sand beneath their feet slowly transforms into streets of sandstone, worn and broken down buildings rising around them as day turns into night.

"This is an entire kingdom?" Feng Xin questions, slightly disbelieving. "It just looks like a small city to me."

"It might look that way," Xie Lian murmurs, "but the Crescent Moon Kingdom was a powerful adversary. Even with a smaller population—their warriors were fierce."

A'Zhao's gaze cuts back to him, an eyebrow raising. "You're quite knowledgeable." The god shrugs, "I've traveled."

Nan Feng stares into the distance, using his hand to shield his eyes from the harsh rays of the setting sun. "What's that wall in the distance? It almost looks like a tower of some sort…"

But with no proper roof, it would seem.

“...That would be the Sinner’s Pit,” Xie Lian sighs, picking through older memories. “Basically think of it as a prison.”

Feng Xin peers at it a little more closely, “Then why call it a pit?”

“Because the bottom is filled with vipers and deadly beasts,” San Lang supplies. “Once someone in the Crescent Moon Kingdom was convicted of a serious crime, they would be thrown down into the pit to suffer indefinitely until they perished.”

Feng Xin shudders at the notion, clearly finding it barbaric—but the next words out of his mouth make Xie Lian stop.

“Is that someone hanging over there? Over the pit?”

Feng Xin isn’t looking at him—so he doesn’t see the way Xie Lian suddenly goes still, his face becoming quite pale.

San Lang doesn’t say a word, but he steps slightly closer, his warmth a comforting presence against his back.

The prince doesn’t speak for a moment, his expression unreadable.

There’s something about the image of it—someone hanging there, alone—with him below, not even knowing it—

He tenses, his hands balling into fists.

“Someone’s coming,” he mutters. “Two people—fast.”

The immediate response is to scatter and hide, of course—with San Lang pulling Xie Lian into an adjacent building, both of them standing close together behind a half crumbling door frame.

In the street outside, a white and emerald robed figure comes to a halt with a sigh.

“They’re so fast,” she whines, flicking a whisk between her fingers as she looks around, hands on her hips. “What am I supposed to do, hunt them down one by one?”

Another woman, standing a head and a half taller and dressed in black, lands beside her—her tone far less amused.

“Why don’t you call one of your friends to help you?”

“Hmm...” The smaller woman turns around, clasping the whisk behind her back as she rocks back on her heels, eyes glinting up at her companion playfully. “I only like calling for you,” she murmurs, “don’t you like that?”

Dark blue eyes, almost black—flash down at her with an appealing sort of hunger, the sort that makes her stomach blossom with warmth.

“What’s there to be happy about when it’s always boring messes like this?” The dark haired woman replies, taking a step closer to her.

“Mmm...” The smaller woman smiles, not backing away as her companion steps fully into her space. “I have a theory,” she hums.

Hands settle on her waist, and an eyebrow raises. “What sort?”

Ming-Xiong is an expert on theories. She’s an expert on everything, actually.

Always knows the answers to Shi Qingxuan’s questions, no matter how far off and ridiculous they might seem. She rarely speaks at length, and the Wind Master isn’t known for her attention span, but...Sometimes, it feels like she could listen to Ming- Xiong forever and not get bored.

“...That you’re stronger than you want most people to realize,” Shi Qingxuan murmurs, her hands resting delicately against her companion’s biceps as she leans back to look up at her. “But you’re lazy, and you don’t want Jun Wu to give you extra work, so you lay low.”

Dark eyes flash once more—this time with a little more danger than there was before. “And what does your little theory have to do with the situation at hand?”

Shi Qingxuan grins, rocking up onto the balls of her feet, her arms sliding around her friend’s neck as she whispers—

“Because you have a soft spot for impressing pretty girls,” she murmurs, feeling those arms tighten around her waist just a little bit, tempted.

It’s like the cosmic version of tempting a man with a helpless damsel who can’t open a jar. Ming-Xiong is no exception to the rule.

Still, she knows what Shi Qingxuan is doing, so it’s all about whether or not she’s willing to play along. And the gambit isn’t as tempting when said damsel just so happens to be carrying a fan that can start a cyclone at a moment's notice, still…

The dark haired woman whips her head to the side, glaring in the direction of one of the city structures. "…Ming-Xiong? Are you listening?"

"You," she murmurs, ignoring her smaller companion, "back off." She lifts one palm, a massive explosion of flames firing out.

Before they actually impact the building they explode upward into a fiery column, the form only broken by a dark shadow, hovering in the middle.

Nan Feng hovers for a moment, taking the sight of the two women in, his face illuminated by the flames.

The woman in white watches him with naked curiosity—but her companion in black? Her eyes are narrowed, ready to attack.

The deputy god gathers the flames in the column within his own hands, throwing them back at her with a loud—

CRASH!

But she doesn't stumble back.

Not even a single step. The amount of strength that would take is startling—but not as much so as the way she catches the flames within her hands, intensifying them before they're sent flying back at her opponent.

BOOM!

Xie Lian breathes out a sigh of relief, thankful for Nan Feng's quick thinking, taking the attention onto himself and away from the mortals that are with them.

That's when he notices the way that San lang is leaning over him, his arms bracketing Xie Lian's head against the wall.

Likely to protect him from dust or any falling debris—and the moment Xie Lian seems to take notice of this, the human backs off, offering him a hand to help him to his feet.

"Thank you, San Lang."

He doesn't get a full blown response from the teenager—who still seems to be…

In a mood. Or sulking. The prince still doesn't understand why—or if maybe, perhaps, he's done something wrong…

Since he can't answer that question for the moment, he focuses on finding A'Zhao, listening for his heart beat, then clearing away some rubble to help him out.

"Whatever that woman is—she's strong," Xie Lian murmurs as A'Zhao brushes the dust off of his robes. "Nan Feng won't last against her indefinitely. We should go ahead and focus on finding the Shan Yue fern."

"…I'm sorry," A'Zhao murmurs, shaking his head. "I know how to get into the city—but I don't know where to find the fern."

Xie Lian sighs, not blaming him—but that does make the mission more complicated.

After a moment, with a reluctant sigh, San Lang speaks, almost like he's directly reciting something from a book:

"The Shan Yue fern is the size of a peach, has broad leaves and thin roots, and likes shade. It typically grows in the shadow of tall structures such as buildings, large trees and the like."

Xie Lian smiles gratefully, "And the tallest structure in the city would be…"

The palace, obviously.

As they start to make their way in that direction, across the city, Nan Feng is struggling against his adversaries.

Well—just the one, really. The woman in white seems far more content to watch as her companion bats the deputy god around like a cat toy.

"He's surprisingly durable," Shi Qingxuan muses, perched on a crumbling wall as she watches Nan Feng struggle to block another flaming projectile, slamming him into a nearby building. "Even if fire is your weakest form of magic. What sort of cultivator is he?”

Ming Yi takes a step back, wiping the soot from her hands. “A deputy god, I think. Sent to assist the crown prince.”

“No one sent him,” Shi Qingxuan shakes her head, kicking her foot out with a pout. “No one else in the Heavens cares about this place.”

“A volunteer, then.”

Interesting...particularly when one considers how little Heavenly officials help one another willingly. Not unless there’s a prior relationship in place—and the Prince of Xianle is infamous for having no friends in the Heavenly Court.

But, speaking of relationships...

“Ming-Xiong,” she murmurs, kicking her feet “When we’re done here, and I repay the favor—will you keep that form?”

“No.”

“Please?” Shi Qingxuan pouts. “I like it, you’re so pretty this way, and you almost never play along—”

“It’s something different for you than it is for me.” The Wind Master pouts, but...Ming Yi isn’t wrong.

She’s the only one that hasn’t ever given Shi Qingxuan much grief over enjoying her female form. She doesn’t always understand it, and sometimes she gets irritated with Shi Qingxuan’s silliness—but she doesn’t mock it.

And the Wind Master suspects, on some level, that’s because...

Ming Yi understands how comfortable she is like this. That sometimes, she prefers to be this way. For her, this skin is just as real as her male form, where as for Ming Yi, hers is...

More like dress up.

She’ll indulge in it, even enjoys it sometimes, given her own independent appreciation of the female form—

(And Shi Qingxuan can attest—Ming Yi really, really does appreciate a woman’s body, whether she’s wearing one or on top of one.)

But for Ming Yi, wearing this form—it is something different than it is for Shi Qingxuan.

"...But it's still fun, isn't it?" Shi Qingxuan pleads with a small pout. "You're so soft like this, and you smell nice..."

Her male form is all hard muscles and sharp edges.

Shi Qingxuan is always a little soft, no matter what skin she wears—but Ming Yi's real body is firm, almost unforgiving.

If she was being honest, she would admit that she loves it—but it also intimidates her at times.

"Do I smell bad, otherwise?" No. He's never unpleasant.

He smells like leather and iron—not soft or inviting smells, but there's an undeniable appeal to them, one that makes Shi Qingxuan want, want, want.

She's rarely ever denied anything. Any time she asks for something, her brother gives it to her—even if he grumbles at first.

As a result, Sh Qingxuan never grew out of being a somewhat spoiled child. Always sweet natured and generous, but a little impatient and greedy as well.

Until Ming Yi, she never experienced someone telling her no. A hard, firm denial. At first, it was surprising. Frustrating.

And gods, does she enjoy it when Ming Yi tells her no. When she makes things difficult—even when she makes her cry.

"No," she admits with a pout. "But I was looking forward to..."

She falls silent when Ming Yi's eyes flash, and glances over to see the deputy god starting to crawl out of the rubble.

"Spin him up for a minute," her companion murmurs. "Now."

Shi Qingxuan doesn't always follow orders—but when they're given in that tone? She usually does.

A fan snaps out of her sleeve, and with a quick flick of her wrist, a small cyclone appears, swirling high into the air, and taking the deputy god with it.

While he hovers, Ming Yi walks over, her pace slow and purposeful, until she's standing between the Wind Master's knees.

"I'm going to shed this form when we get back," She starts, and when Shi Qingxuan starts to pout and protest, she grabs her by the chin—long black nails digging in until the Wind Master goes pliant, "and you can keep whichever you like, it makes no difference to me."

The assurance isn't technically necessary, but it makes Shi Qingxuan smile, instantly comfortable, even as she's effectively being pinned down.

"Because when we get back," Ming Yi continues, her tone low, eyes never leaving the smaller woman's face, "I'm going to fuck you."

The Wind Master's eyes widen sharply, her cheeks flushing as the taller woman steps in, their faces close. "I've been thinking about it all day," she purrs, feeling it when Shi Qingxuan's thighs shiver in response, trying to close, but Ming Yi's hips are in the way. "And I'm not going to be satisfied until I'm inside you."

She has such a blunt, rough way of speaking—a tone she never uses when speaking to the other gods. One that her intelligent, often scholarly manner never portrays.

Shi Qingxuan shudders, her face suddenly rather hot.

Shi Qingxuan's brother would kill anyone who dared speak to her that way—if he knew. The thrill of him not knowing is half of the enjoyment.

"How does that sound?" Ming Yi murmurs, her lips maybe a breath above the Wind Masters, pulling back when she tries to lean forward.

She won't let Shi Qingxuan steal a kiss, and that makes her whine. But, as always— the choice to give in is always hers.

And she crumbles, as always, like a thin piece of paper.

"Yes," she breathes, thighs tightening around Ming Yi's hips. "It sounds so good, it—"

Ming Yi gives her a kiss then—deep, slightly messy and quick, leaving her a mess of flushed cheeks and smeared lip stain before the taller woman pulls back.

“Good girl,” she murmurs, squeezing Shi Qingxuan’s chin once more, drawing out a pleasured little moan. “Now, let him down.”

She steps back, and with a bored, half-assed flick of Shi Qingxuan’s fan, Nan Feng comes crashing back to earth, leaving a small crater beneath him.

CRASH!

The Palace of the Crescent Moon Kingdom is more like a tomb, left exactly as it was the day of the siege. Broken swords and bones still litter the ground in the courtyard, and Xie Lian has to scope the ground in front of him with his toes before moving forward.

At first, San Lang was insistent on staying by his side—but Xie Lian was firm on the fact that it would be ridiculous.

After all, he can do quite a bit without his sight, he isn’t helpless—but this is a situation where he would only slow San Lang down.

He doesn’t mind admitting that. Of his eight hundred years of life, he’s only had his sight for eighteen years or so of it. He’s more than learned how to accept his limitations.

And it’s because of those limitations that he’s able to hear the nervous breathing of someone hiding.

Xie Lian stops, peeking his eyes open in the dark, glancing around for any dangerous intruders—but other than the cursed energy that seems to cling to the city like a blanket, he finds nothing.

Shutting his eyes again, he reaches out, quick as a scorpion snake, grabbing a wrist.

It’s small, bony—that of a teenage boy, and the body attached to it jumps with fear as Xie Lian glares into the dark.

“Who are you?”

“Mr. Priest, it’s—it’s just me!” The boy cries.

Tian Sheng.

Normally, Xie Lian would suspect a trick—but he already checked for cursed aura.

“...What are you doing here?” The god sighs, his tone turning stern.

"It's very dangerous."

"We, ah…" Another one of the merchants from the cave speaks up from a few meters away. "We thought you'd have a better chance of success with more people, so we followed you."

"Your friend you left with us," Tian Sheng pipes up, "he's escorting the rest of us out of the desert right now. We thought this was the best way!"

Xie Lian sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. Well, at least a few mortals are guaranteed safety.

"You'll have to stay close," he mutters, straightening up. "This place is incredibly dangerous for ordinary people."

"No need to tell us twice," Tian Sheng shivers, rubbing his arms. "This place gives me the creeps!"

"Gege?" Xie Lian glances over in the direction of San Lang's voice, visibly relieved as he listens to the youth approach. "I found some."

The others in the group hurry forward to take a look, but San Lang marches over to Xie Lian's side with a look of single minded focus.

He reaches for the god's hand wordlessly, crumbling the fern in his fingers into a powder simply by curling his hand into a fist before applying it to the sting, his eyes slightly narrowed.

Xie Lian is quiet, starting to wonder if San Lang really was upset over the snake.

Is he upset with Xie Lian for jumping in to protect him? He does seem rather proud, and he was able to handle the snake in the cave just fine on his own, but…

"Did it work?" One of the merchants asks cautiously, and Xie Lian lifts his head with a slightly pained smile.

But that has nothing to do with the sting at all.

"Oh, I can already feel it making a difference—it's definitely an effective antidote."

As he says this, he senses San Lang finally relaxing beside him, letting out a low, heavy sigh.

"Hey!" One of the merchants cries out from the other side of the courtyard. "I found more over here! There's tons of it!"

The others move towards him, and as Xie Lian starts to follow, San Lang holds onto his hand.

"Better not to go over there," he murmurs, shaking his head.

Xie Lian pauses, tilting his head with confusion as he hears—

"AHHHHHHH!"

At first he thinks it must be one of the merchants, that maybe one of them got bitten by another snake, but…

There's something wrong with this voice.

Something rasping and gnarled.

Inhuman.

"CAN'T YOU SEE YOU'RE STEPPING ON ME?!" The voice howls.

Xie Lian's fingers tighten around San Lang's without necessarily meaning to. He certainly could have dropped the young man's hand by now—that probably would have been more appropriate, but…

Instead, he holds on tight.

Even as they walk closer—at Xie Lian's insistence, San Lang seems to drag his heels a bit—he holds on, listening as that voice rasps,

"Who are you people? Why have you come here?"

Xie Lian's brow furrows as he looks around, trying to understand why the direction sounds odd…

"He's in the ground, gege," San Lang murmurs next to his ear. "He's been buried alive."

Xie Lian stiffens, gripping the young man's hand so tightly, he lets go soon after, mumbling an apology.

This place really is just full of grim reminders, isn't it?

"…We're from a traveling caravan," one of the merchants explains, "we came here looking for the Shan Yue fern."

“Ah, I ssssee,” the voice hisses, almost like there’s a lisp, something dragging down it’s tongue. “I was part of a caravan too once…ssssome sixty odd yearsss ago…”

Sixty years? He—

He can’t be human, but Xie Lian can’t open his eyes to check, not now, surrounded by mortals.

“It’s been ssssso long sssince I sssaw other humansss…” That voice purrs, and there’s something about it that sense an ugly, disgusted shiver down Xie Lian’s spine.

“Won’t you….come…clossser?”

There’s something about it that reminds him of some sort of vermin. Like a rat, but more sinister. Something that bears a cruelty borne from weakness.

“H…How did you get that way, mister?” Tian Sheng questions.

He shrinks a little closer to Xie Lian and San Lang—the former of the two reaching out to pull the young man behind him protectively.

“I wasss planted, here…assss fertilizer…for the Shan Yue fern…”

Xie Lian grimaces upon hearing that—and San Lang is quick to reassure him;

“The one used on you was fine, gege.”

The god exhales softly, relieved, when the creature presses on—

“Issss…no one going to come clossser? That’sss a…sssshame,” it lets out a wheezing cackle. “You ssssee, I thought I …recognized one of you…”

How could that be possible?

Xie Lian has already confirmed the mortality of the group that’s with them—and for what this creature is saying to be true…that would make one of them an elderly man —

But none of them are.

“Pleasssee, I’m jussst…another human…like you,” the creature pleads.

“Is that so?” San Lang speaks up, his voice cold. “You don’t look human at all to me.”

“I am! I am, I sssweaar! I—”

Just as it’s in the middle of pleading, one of them men kneels down to pick up his hat, fallen down into the grass, and Xie Lian’s heart drops.

“Get back—!”

But it’s already too late.

A long, snake-like tongue whips through the air in a flash, lodging itself deep in the merchant’s ear, before pulling a piece of flesh out with it, blood spattering across the grass.

The man is dead before he hits the ground.

“HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!” His laugh cackles sharply, piercing through the night. “YOU’LL HAVE TO FORGIVE ME, I WAS JUST SO HUNGRY!”

Xie Lian reaches up to rub at his own ear—overly sensitive, after so many years of relying upon sound—his stomach twisting with nausea.

“GENERAL!” The creature howls. “I STALLED THEM FOR YOU, SEE? WON’T YOU LET ME GO NOW?!”

Xie Lian pauses, his blood running cold. General. That would mean—

Someone is already watching them.

Just as the god realizes that much, San Lang grabs his wrist, yanking him to the side and behind him.

BOOM!

The moment Xie Lian is pulled out of the way, something heavy slams into the earth —from the sounds of it, some sort of metal club.

When he peeks through his lashes—he can see several swirls of resentful energy surrounding them. Likely the ‘general,’ and that of other soldiers.

“SSSEE?” The man in the ground cries, “I LURED THEM IN FOR YOU! CAN’T I GO NOW? CAN I GO HOME?”

The tallest of the group, a bearded man with dark eyes and sallow skin, looks the creature over with some small amount of disgust before plunging his weapon into the ground once more.

And in doing so—reveals that the creature in the ground is just a skeleton, with only a warped, mummified face remaining.

Xie Lian can't see that much—but he is startled by San Lang's sudden, cruel laughter. "The little freak doesn't even realize that he's dead, does he?"

Hearing that genuinely seems to vex the creature, who lets out a low whimper of denial. "I...I'm not..."

San Lang kneels down—clearly not frightened of that tongue, in spite of what they just saw. "After what you just did, you still think you're a human being?" He snorts.

The worst part is—he doesn't seem to realize that San Lang is speaking of the cannibalism, no—

He thinks the young man is mocking his tongue.

"My tongue is just—it's just a little longer than average, that's all! There's nothing inhuman about that, you—" The creature stops.

Then, he says something that would have normally given Xie Lian pause.

"You...you can help me, can't you?" He whimpers, eyes fixed on San Lang, filled with desperate hope. "W-Won't you?"

The young man tilts his head to the side, eyes flashing in the dark. "No," he murmurs.

But he doesn't say 'I can't'

"I won't."

Before Xie Lian can contemplate that, or ask San Lang what he means—he hears the ghosts talking to one another, and his expression turns grim.

"Listen everyone," he murmurs, trying to remain calm. "Don't try and fight them."

With so many, and not knowing their strength level—Xie Lian isn't sure he could fight them on his own, especially taking into account those two women running around the city.

And even if not for that—

His ankle and throat—they ache, just as he suspected they would.

“They’re discussing moving us somewhere to interrogate us, so I suggest going along with it for now.”

As if any of them really had the means to struggle, anyway.

San Lang straightens up, calm as ever as he takes Xie Lian’s elbow, guiding him along with the rest of the group.

“…San Lang,” Xie Lian mutters, leaning his head close as they walk, “When you were reading about the Crescent Moon Kingdom—did you ever hear about a general that this ghost might be?”

The teenager glances the figure ahead of them over.

“There was only one general when the nation fell.” He murmurs, keeping his voice low. “His name was Ke Mo. Nine feet tall, an infamously strong giant. And devoted to the Imperial Preceptor.”

Xie Lian stiffens with worry.

Does that mean he could be taking them to her right now?

A powerful savage ghosts, with this many soldiers assisting her…not to mention the number of mortals Xie Lian would need to protect…

This could get very bad, very quickly.

They already have the Shan Yue fern, and a limited time window to return…they have to escape—soon.

Preferably before dawn. But how is that even possible?

Even now, Xie Lian can sense the curving slope to the steps they;re being led up now, and he knows where they’re going:

The Sinner’s Pit.

And already, he can sense the array that covers this place.

Filled with powerful magic, likely cast with one intention: to keep anyone thrown to the bottom from escaping.

Which already seems sinister enough—but Xie Lian can't see the look on A'Zhao's face.

The darkness in his eyes as he surveys the top of the pit—and the figure hanging. But, if Xie Lian could see her—

Well, the situation would be very, very different.

When they reach the top of the pit, San Lang is still holding his elbow, one hand at the small of his back—attentive in a way that makes Xie Lian smile, enjoying the familiarity.

But that peace lasts only for a moment, before a voice pierces through the darkness:

"BROTHERS!" Ke Mo roars, lifting his club over his head.

There's a responding roar that rings so loud, Xie Lian claps his hands over his ears with discomfort.

It must be the souls of the dead soldiers, but what Xie Lian finds the most daunting is the sheer number of them. There must be hundreds—maybe even thousands.

Just how many humans would have to be lured here on a regular basis to feed them all?

And how have the heavens not noticed anything wrong?

Xie Lian feels Tian Sheng trembling with fear beside him, and he turns his head to reassure the boy—

"Don't worry," he murmurs. "If anything happens—I'll be the first to charge ahead, alright?"

Which may have sounded comforting, in just about any other scenario—if not for Ke Mo's orders to his men—

"Go ahead and toss two of them down—we'll save the rest for questioning."

Xie Lian stiffens, gritting his teeth.

Well. So much for avoiding a fight, then.

Xie Lian had wanted to avoid that for as long as possible, but if it can't be helped...

His train of thought is broken, however, when he feels a rush of movement past him, with one of their group letting out a frenzied cry as he throws himself at the General.

And, of all people—

Xie Lian finds himself frozen with surprised to find that it's A'Zhao.

The quiet, almost overly cautious guide. Making what could only be generously described as a suicide charge, because he doesn't have a chance.

Xie Lian lunges forward, reaching; "Wait, don't—!"

But A'Zhao's momentum never stops. Ke Mo simply catches the mortal's arm, using it to throw him out and over the pit—only to disappear into darkness.

Xie Lian stops, his hand frozen in midair with shock—then grits his teeth, lowering it. Another unnecessary loss.

And just like he did on Mount Yu Jun, Xie Lian finds himself frustrated with the shackles on his body. Never during his banishment did he resent them—but now, as a god once more, he can't—

Xie Lian can't even protect people properly. And it vexes him.

If he just had his spiritual powers, even one thousandth of them, he could—

"Quick, throw another one over so we can get on with this," Ke Mo grouses, and this time, his men reach for the boy standing next to Xie Lian, Tian Sheng.

"...General, wait!" He cries, stepping forward.

Finally, that seems to get Ke Mo's attention, making him pause.

"...You speak our tongue?" He questions, rounding on Xie Lian. "Where are you from?"

"The Central Plains," Xie Lian replies immediately, drawing angry hisses. "Listen, we mean you no harm—"

"You think I care?"

Ke Mo is sneering now, shaking his head. "How did a Central Plainer come to know our language? Our tongue has been dead for some two centuries now."

Xie Lian falls silent, unsure of how to explain that away easily.

Part of him considers the idea of just throwing the 'I'm a God' card down on the table. It might work as an intimidation tactic. After all, they don't know that he has the shackles, and Xie Lian could probably get Ruoye to do something intimidating, but...

It's unlikely to work.

And now, as he contemplates, the dead begin to moan in the pit once more.

"...Looks like that whelp has already been devoured," Ke Mo mutters, irritated. "Go ahead and throw the child down."

Xie Lian steps in front of Tian Sheng before they can. "Please!"

He cries, throwing his arms out. "If you need to throw someone else down, throw me instead, alright?"

After all—the fall might turn Xie Lian into a bit of a pancake—but that's happened many times before, and he knows he can survive.

Ke Mo, however, is less agreeable.

"No way—I have questions I want to ask you!"

Xie Lian grits his teeth, trying to think of a way to stall until he can think of a plan— until something makes him stop.

San Lang slips/ his hand from Xie Lian's elbow to his wrist, using his grip to lift the god's hand up.

At first, the god suspects it must be to examine the sting on his wrist once more, and just when he opens his mouth to explain to the teenager that now is not the time—

San Lang places a kiss there, just over his knuckles—and Xie Lian's heart goes still in his chest.

Aching with a memory, so painfully familiar, it's hard to breathe.

"…San Lang?" He whispers, his voice unsteady. "What are you—?"

He stops, shivering when a second kiss is pressed against his hand, this time over his sting, long since healed.

"Don't be afraid, gege."

San Lang murmurs, his tone so gentle, it makes Xie Lian soften without meaning to, until—

"I'll be gone for just a minute."

Those words turn his skin to ice as San Lang lets him go, walking forward. "W…"

No.

"What are you…?" Xie Lian questions, his chest tensing.

"I said not to be afraid," San Lang reminds him, his tone light.

The god shakes his head, taking a step forward, "I'll stop being afraid when you get back over here," he mumbles, heart pounding in his chest.

Xie Lian can't explain it, but—

He *is* afraid.

He's lost countless people over the years. Seen misfortune come down upon people no matter where he goes. Grief is something that he's become almost numb to. He makes friendships, but he doesn't form deep attachments. Not anymore.

But he wants San Lang to get away from the edge.

Xie Lian doesn't—

He fights to keep his breathing, and his hands tremble.

Xie Lian doesn't know what he's doing, but he doesn't want San Lang over there, he—

"Don't worry," San Lang murmurs, glancing back at him with a smile.

And since his god cannot see—he doesn't need to hide the affection in his gaze, the palpable softness in his expression when he looks upon

Xie Lian's face. The mortals nearby might see—but they could never possibly understand.

"I'll always come back."

Something about that phrasing makes Xie Lian stop, laden with confusion.

...Always? What—what does that even—?

But then, he hears the sound of San Lang's footsteps near the edge—then nothing but a quiet rush of air.

Like he—

Like he just walked right off. "S..."

Thud .

He stumbles forward, arms reaching out frantically, but only finding empty air as he flees towards the edge, but—

No one is there.

Thud .

No.

No, no, no. He—he's—

The god trembles, and for the first time in centuries—

He's absolutely terrified.

"SAN LANG?!"

He trembles, peering blindly into the darkness below, seeing nothing but swirling, daunting resentful energy, and he—

Xie Lian's shoulders square as his jaw locks.

No. Not—

Not him. Not today.

He starts to throw himself over the edge without a second thought—
But something stops him. A grip on his arm, trying to pull back up.

"I'm...not DONE WITH YOU YET!" Ke Mo snarls—

But the god is having none of it, bracing his feet against the side of the wall as Ruoye wraps itself around Ke Mo's arm and throat, yanking.

And now, Xie Lian opens his eyes, his shackles burning up at Ke Mo through the dark, startling him as the god grabs onto Ruoye, yanking with as much strength was he can without ripping the bandage as he snarls—

"THEN WE CAN GO TOGETHER!"

But Ke Mo isn't the only ghost who sees his shackles at that moment.

And the other, who has been hanging limply over the center of the pit for countless years now, opens her eyes, her body snapping to sharp attention.

Finally, she leaps into action.

There's a rush of air as she sweeps over to the wall, knocking several soldiers over the side in one swoop, attacking with a fury.

"HEY—!"

"IT'S THAT BITCH AGAIN!"

But the chaos is just enough to make Ke Mo lose his grip as Xie Lian yanks—And they both tumble into darkness.

They separate quickly, with Ke Mo falling further faster due to his greater weight. Xie Lian sends Ruoye up, assuming the magical tool can latch onto something up top to slow his fall, then bring them both back up when he finds San Lang, but—

Ruoye doesn't make it.

It slams against an invisible barrier, illuminating the spiritual energy upon contact—

BOOM!

But it has no effect, sending the spiritual tool fleeing back to Xie Lian's neck as he falls.

Unable to catch himself, now—which makes for a nasty fall.

A fall.

He’s always falling

He never used to. Xie Lian used to be the one that was catching people. Lifting them up. Be it his friends, or fierce little orphans that he hardly knew.

But then, he fell from Heaven.

He fell far, and he fell hard.

Since then, Xie Lian never stopped falling.

Small trips and falls. Other times off of bridges. Or cliffs.

There used to be someone that would catch him—but since then, Xie Lian has become an expert at taking a good fall. Learning how to brace for impact. Never panicking.

And he supposes, in the end, it might be fate. After all, he loved the boy who fell first.

And now, as he stares up at the dark mass of cursed energy overhead, he wonders how afraid that little boy must have been, falling from the sky like a star.

Wonders what Hong’er thought about, in that moment. If he had many regrets.

He thought those were his last moments. Xie Lian knows these won’t be his. He’s just bracing himself for the pain of the landing—and what he’ll find when he does.

Because he’s used to this. He’s done this before. He’ll survive it. He always does.

But then—

Clink!

Xie Lian isn’t falling.

He doesn’t hit the ground. His body doesn’t smash in on itself, every bone shattering while he waits for the long, arduous process of stitching himself back together.

It doesn’t hurt. It—he— Someone is holding him. Someone…

Someone caught him.

The Sinner's Pit

Chapter Summary

> "Are you alright?"
>
> "I'm fine," the figure replies—and—if he's answering to that name — It must be San Lang, but his voice is noticeably different.
>
> Deeper, with the sort of tone that rumbles in Xie Lian's bones, almost familiar., The god swallows, his throat dry.
>
> "Could you...put me down, please?"
>
> He might have phrased it like a polite request, but—
>
> "No."
>
> The prince didn't actually expect San Lang to refuse him.
>
> "...Why not?" He questions, contemplating protesting but—
>
> "It's dirty."

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE
>
> CONTENT WARNING: this chapter contains discussions of discrimination, as well as a disassociation episode. Proceed with caution.

There's one arm hooked under his knees, the other wrapping around his back— cradling him against someone's chest, instantly arresting the incredible force with which Xie Lian was plunging to the earth.

The sudden stop leaves him slightly dizzy, his head spinning.

When they land, it's so light, like the strength of the arms around him have rendered Xie Lian utterly weightless, and—

Xie Lian can't actually remember the last time someone carried him like this, cradling him in their arms. Maybe when he was a child.

The closest he's come since was probably when someone was dragging him by his ankles to bury him after they ‘murdered’ him. Or maybe Lian Qianqiu carrying him to his grave, but—

This feels different—

Safe.

“…San Lang?” He whispers cautiously, reaching up for him.

He feels at the chest and shoulders of the one holding him with his palm, and—it doesn’t feel like San Lang.

The teenager is taller than him, but slender. This figure—

He dwarfs Xie Lian. No, when he’s holding him like this—his arms practically envelop the prince.

His fingertips trail up the ice cold column of the figure’s throat, finding the hard protrusion of an Adam’s apple, and—

Xie Lian flushes, pulling his hand back, realizing what he's doing.

“…” He swallows dryly, his cheeks warm. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” the figure replies—and—if he’s answering to that name— It must be San Lang, but his voice is noticeably different.

Deeper, with the sort of tone that rumbles in Xie Lian’s bones, almost familiar., The god swallows, his throat dry.

“Could you…put me down, please?”

He might have phrased it like a polite request, but—

“No.”

The prince didn’t actually expect San Lang to refuse him.

“…Why not?” He questions, contemplating protesting but—

“It’s dirty.”

His responses are unusually short, clipped—but even stranger is the fact that…

Well, Xie Lian spent a significant portion of his eight centuries wandering sleeping in alleyways and ditches. The idea that any surface could be too ‘dirty’ for him feels almost ludicrous, and yet...

San Lang squeezes him tighter all of the sudden, bouncing the prince in his arms until he’s tipped closer, made to almost cling to San Lang’s chest in a way that makes his cheeks heat up with embarrassment.

Xie Lian decides not to protest for now.

Maybe it would be proper of him to do so, but...

There’s a voice in his head whispering to behave himself. Which is silly. He’s the older one, if anything, San Lang is the one being badly behaved, but—

“MY BROTHERS!” Ke Mo’s voice cuts through the darkness, raging. “WHO KILLED YOU?!”

Xie Lian stiffens in San Lang’s arms, his eyebrows raising.

It’s only been a few minutes since he first heard those voices— thousands of them— screaming from the bottom of the pit.

What could have killed them so quickly?

San Lang squeezes him tighter all of the sudden, and then, Xie Lian realizes—

He can’t hear San Lang’s heartbeat anymore. It was always calm and steady before, no matter the situation—but now? It’s silent.

His breathing, too.

“IT WAS YOU, WASN’T IT?!”

Xie Lian tenses when he feels Ke Mo running towards them, fingers tightening in the front of the man’s robes, “San Lang, careful—!”

But he only receives a soft chuckle in response, one hand rubbing the god’s arm soothingly.

“It’s nothing to worry about, trust me.”

The way he says it—it doesn’t even sound like bragging—it’s more like he’s almost bored, stating the obvious. Like Ke Mo is an irritating distraction, and the person holding him would much rather devote all of his attention to Xie Lian.

Just as Ke Mo gets close enough to land an attack, San Lang spins to the side, allowing the ghost to stumble past him, the bells on his boots jingling softly as he does so.

Clink!

"You..." Xie Lian tries again, embarrassed by the way he sounds almost shy.

"You could really let me down now, I..."

He feels San Lang shake his head, bending his chin to whisper next to Xie Lian's ear—

"I've got you."

His breath is cold, but that has nothing to do with the shiver that runs down the god's spine, goosebumps raising on his arms.

"Just sit back and relax," he murmurs, like he's offering to do some simple household chore like cleaning the dishes, sweeping the floor, or, well—

Taking out the trash.

He bounces Xie Lian in his arms again—and now, the god realizes it isn't because he can't keep him steady.

No—it's because he wants Xie Lian to cling onto him even tighter as a result.

"..." The prince allows his cheek to rest against his companion's shoulder, another shiver running through him.

Shameless.

Ke Mo fights somewhat like a raging bull, barreling forward with brute force.

San Lang—he seems to treat fighting like something similar to a dance. In this case, anyway.

He dodges most of the attacks with ease, never jostling Xie Lian in his arms when he does so—and when he does decide to attack Ke Mo, he doesn't even need to lift a finger.

In this case, he uses one foot, lifting it up to kick Ke Mo squarely in the chest—still not jostling Xie Lian as he does so—and when it makes contact, it sends the ghost flying until he violently slams against the opposite side of the Sinner's Pit, making the walls rumble.

BOOM!

Xie Lian jumps, whipping his head in the direction of the sound before mumbling—

"…You can't keep holding me forever, you know." He feels like he has to try, just a little bit—because if he doesn't—

Then, he'd have to focus on how pleasant it feels, being held.

San Lang's reply is characteristically cocky, except—

"Why not?"

He sounds completely serious about the question. Like, if the option was available to him, he would be willing and able to hold Xie Lian in his arms indefinitely.

It's not a terrible thought.

Before Xie Lian can say anything more, Ke Mo chooses that moment to pull himself out of the rubble, snarling—

"YOU SLAUGHTERED THEM ALL! I'LL—I'LL RIP YOU TO SHREDS!" This time, he doesn't even make it close.

CLANG!

San Lang doesn't move, but…

Xie Lian can hear the clash of blades.

One of them is simple mortal steel, not bad, but not particularly special either—Ke Mo's club.

But the other…

Xie Lian has never heard a kind of metal that makes that sound before.

CLANG!

CLANG!

CLANG!

At one point, when he hears Ke Mo get just a little bit too close, Ruoye strikes out as well—knocking the ghost down to the ground once more.

"...Two against one," he snarls, pounding his fists against the earth. "COWARDS!" San Lang snorts.

"One or two—it doesn't change the outcome for you," he sneers, and there's that clash of steel once more.

"C-CENTRAL PLAINER!" Ke Mo snarls, dropping to his hands and knees, "S-SHE'S THE ONE MAKING YOU DO THIS, RIGHT? THAT...EVIL FUCKING BITCH!"

Xie Lian raises an eyebrow.

That certainly does make him wonder—but there's something more pressing at the moment.

"...San Lang?" He questions, assuming now is as good of a time as any. They aren't moving, and San Lang seems to be taking a hands off fighting method at the moment.

"Yes?"

"Did you..." Xie Lian stops, trying to find a way to phrase the question delicately—but he can't. "Those soldiers—did you kill them all?"

San Lang only misses a beat before replying—and his answer is bone chilling in it's calmness.

"Yes."

The god grows still, taking that in.

It's one thing, to suspect that San Lang might be more than he lets on.

It's another, to process the scope of power it would take to wipe out so many ghosts instantly.

"..." Xie Lian takes a shaky breath, "Make sure you don't kill Ke Mo for now, I have questions to ask him."

The larger man hums in acknowledgement. "If I wanted him dead, he would have been by the first blow."

Normally, anyone would have been cowed enough by that statement, but Xie Lian— he's never been just anyone.

San Lang pauses, surprised when he feels Xie Lian tug repeatedly at the front of his robes, like he wants him to lean down—which he complies to, bending until they're eye level, and—

Xie Lian turns stern, letting him go and crossing his arms.

"Don't do that again!"

San Lang's eye widens slightly with shock as he listens, eyeing the god as he—

"You can't just jump down any hole you come across! It's dangerous! I couldn't even stop you, and I didn't know what to do..."

...Scolds him.

San Lang doesn't seem accustomed to being scolded.

He's silent for a moment, like he doesn't even know how to respond—and when he does, it doesn't even directly address the scolding itself—

"Aren't you going to ask me something else?"

Xie Lian pauses, his brow creased. "Like what?"

San Lang is slightly tense against him.

"If I'm human or not."

That makes the prince pause for just a moment, his lips parted, arms still crossed, and finally—

"Well, that doesn't really matter, does it? I don't need to ask."

San Lang stares down at him with wide eyed wonder, slowly tilting his head.

"...You don't?"

Xie Lian shakes his head. "Whether you have a heartbeat or not—that doesn't change your actions since we met."

Which have been undoubtedly kind, thoughtful, and generous.

"If I make a friend—I care about their actions, and if we get along." Xie Lian shrugs. "Whether or not they're living or dead is immaterial."

It certainly isn't to most of the world, particularly the living, but...

San Lang lets out a soft laugh, his embrace around Xie Lian perfectly firm.

"I suppose you're right, he murmurs."

The god nods firmly—like he knows.

"We can discuss the rest later, but for now—can you put me down?" This time, San Lang doesn't immediately deny him. "One moment."

He starts walking—and with him comes that gentle jingling sound of the bells on his boots.

CLINK!

CLINK!

CLINK!

Xie Lian couldn't tell you why, but...there's something about that sound that brings him the most pleasant form of heartache. Something familiar—something you feel so much affection or, that it hurts—but he has no idea why.

And now, leaning his cheek against San Lang's chest, he cracks his eyes open, peeking into what the god knows should be a pit of darkness, but—

All he sees is crimson.

Xie Lian doesn't say a word, but he smiles faintly. He thought so.

He closes his eyes again as San Lang comes to a halt, bending over slightly so the god can slip one leg out of his grasp, probing at the ground with his toe before he slowly eases himself down.

He's a little woozy once he's solidly on his feet, his shackles aching, but...

Xie Lian already knew that was probably going to be the case when he jumped into this pit—and he's used to the feeling now, even if it's uncomfortable.

“Thank you, San Lang,” he murmurs, turning his attention to the other ghost in the pit with them. “General Ke Mo!” He calls.

The general snarls in response, writhing on the ground—and when Xie Lian nods in San Lang’s direction, he allows the dead man to struggle to his feet.

“The ‘she’ you referred to before…” Xie Lian trails off. “Who were you speaking about?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know!” Ke Mo glares, blood streaming down his chin. “THAT DEMONIC CULTIVATOR SENT YOU HERE!”

Could he mean one of the women that they saw before?”

“You mean the High Priestess of the Crescent Moon?” Xie Lian questions. “I thought you were loyal to her.”

The mere mention of past loyalties make Ke Mo flinch, his eyes burning with rage. “NEVER!” He snarls, pounding his fists against the ground. “I’ll NEVER be loyal to that traitor. NOT EVER AGAIN!”

“You…” Xie Lian stops, his eyebrows raising even higher.

If the soldiers aren’t in league with the Imperial Preceptor, then…

“I DON’T CARE HOW MANY TIMES I HAVE TO HANG HER!” Ke Mo snarls, slamming his fists down over and over again. “I’LL DO IT FOR ALL ETERNITY IF I HAVE TO!”

Xie Lian freezes, his expression contorting.

“You…You’ve been hanging her?” He questions, his voice quiet. “That’s the person who was hanging above the pit?”

“Who else?!” Ke Mo glances back and forth between the two men in the dark, glaring furiously. “Don’t play STUPID!”

For a moment, Xie Lian can’t speak.

It’s funny, because in what comes close to being a millennia—you can really convince yourself that you’ve changed.

There are moments when Xie Lian feels so far removed from the angry, broken child that he used to be.

But now, he feels a skin's breadth away from him.

The moment he heard Ke Mo say, ‘I’ll hang her,’ regardless of what the young woman had done, or what she deserved—

In that moment, he ceased being a human being to Xie Lian. Twisted into something monstrous.

And if he hadn’t changed, he would have ordered San Lang to hurt him.

It crosses his mind even now, but—

The god grits his teeth, his hands balled into fists.

He won’t.

He won’t use people again—not the way that he used Wu Ming.

He promised.

Xie Lian takes a deep breath. “I wanted to ask—”

“YOU THINK I CARE?!” Ke Mo roars. “AFTER WHAT YOU TWO DID TO MY SOLDIERS, YOU THINK I’LL TALK TO YOU?”

“You had better,” San Lang replies calmly, his arms crossed as he stares the general down, one eye flashing in the darkness. “For the sake of your men, anyway.”

Ke Mo stops, eyes narrowed. “What...What are you talking about?”

San Lang smirks, and when he steps into the moonlight and speaks again—his voice is more familiar. The way it was before—light and youthful. “Isn’t it the belief of the Crescent Moon that the condition of a corpse determines its next life?”

Ke Mo stiffens with horror, realizing what the ghost intends—and it almost seems too horrible for the General to comprehend. “You...you wouldn’t...”

San Lang tilts his head, and while he doesn’t lift a finger—the savage ghost before him still stumbles one step back. “Try me.”

The General trembles, then stumbles forward, like he might attack, but— He falls to his knees instead, hanging his head low.

His men have suffered enough, over the centuries.

He can’t bear to make them suffer one final indignity.

“...Ask your questions,” he spits out.

“The Imperial Preceptor,” Xie Lian murmurs. “Tell me more about her.”

Ke Mo’s eyes narrow, burning with pure hatred. “There isn’t much to say,” he mutters, his words trembling with anger. “Other than the fact that she hated the Crescent Moon Kingdom.”

“...Hated?” Xie Lian questions, wondering how that could be.

After all—they gave her so much power.

“Wasn’t she one of you?”

“...Not exactly,” Ke Mo mutters, and his words—they make Xie Lian’s jaw lock. “She was a half breed. Her mother Crescent Moon, and her father Yong’an.”

Xie Lian doesn’t say a word, his hands balling into fists as Ke Mo tells the story. The first half of it painfully familiar.

A peasant girl—one whose mother died of a broken heart after their father left them, leaving her to scavenge on the streets at a young age.

Constantly ostracized by both countries, but particularly the larger, well-fed children of the Crescent Moon, despised for her ‘tainted’ blood.

Until she learned magic, that is.

Then, she was cautiously allowed to serve in the Royal Court—even if it was initially out of fear.

The snakes that the Crescent Moon feared became one of their greatest weapons under her hands. But initially—no one trusted her, and she was kept in a lower position as a result.

Until Ke Mo.

She saved dozens of his men during a storm in the desert, leading to a cave collapse.

Even the ones who didn’t survive, she showed respect—burying their bodies before they had time to rot in the desert sun.

From then on, Ke Mo was her first and strongest supporter. He convinced the King to trust her. The soldiers. And eventually, the people.

She was revered.

She was trusted.

But even now, without Ke Mo ever saying one way or the other—Xie Lian suspects that she was not beloved.

Still, Ke Mo supported her, put her forward over and over again, until she was elevated to the role of Imperial Preceptor of the Crescent Moon Kingdom.

And it was then, once she had it all—the love and acceptance she likely always craved on some level, that she turned against them.

When their enemies knocked on the door, she threw it wide open. She gave them the key with a smile.

“So,” He hisses, his eyes filled with hate. “I hung her.”

Xie Lian doesn’t speak, his stomach twisting with nausea.

“And every time she has tried to escape—I have tracked her down, and I have hung her again, and again, and again—and I’ll do it until we’re BOTH gone from this world!”

But if that’s the case...

“...If she’s been hanging, she couldn’t have been luring people down here,” Xie Lian mutters, “but if that’s true—has it been you, Ke Mo?”

“What?” The Ghost glares. “The humans come here on their own! When they do, we do as we please—it’s probably that TRAITOR’S curse!”

“Funny you should call her a traitor,” San Lang pipes up, moving slightly in front of Xie Lian now, crossing his arms. “It’s your own stupidity that got you in this situation.”

Ke Mo trembles, his eyes burning with rage. “You...dare call my people STUPID?!”

“No,” San Lang holds up a finger, “I called you stupid. Unlike you and the people around you, I don’t paint an entire civilization of mortals with the same brush."

"How could you judge?!" Ke Mo snarls. "You weren't there, wars—they bring out a different side to humans!"

San Lang's tone is cold, catching Xie Lian's attention, "I was a soldier, once."

He—?

"But I was never foolish enough to think a child would forget that my people brutalized her and treated her like an animal just because they gave her recognition." He sneers.

"Now you expect pity? What, because you placed your trust in and gave infinite authority to a child who grew up under your prejudice, and expected that to work out well for you?" San Lang shakes his head with a bitter laugh.

"I never ASKED for pity!" Ke Mo snarls. "I killed her MYSELF! I took RESPONSIBILITY!"

Xie Lian sighs, because that isn't even close to addressing San Lang's point, but he doubts Ke Mo would be willing to see it, regardless.

But then there's a whoosh of air, and all three fall silent, looking up. Someone else jumped.

"You want to talk about atrocities?!" Ke Mo snarls, pointing towards the falling figure. "SHE tormented my men, even after death! Threw them down into this pit to suffer, then created a formation so they couldn't escape!"

Admittedly, it sounds cruel, but...

"What choice did we have, but to take the travelers who passed through the city?! We had to feed the men—and to fertilize the Shan Yue fern to protect ourselves from those filthy snakes!"

Even in death, Ke Mo is afraid of them—which is interesting.

If he was still frightened of them, it stands to reason that the Imperial Preceptor should have been able to protect herself with them before she died.

So, why didn't she?

Instead of landing hard on the ground, like the others—the Imperial Preceptor hovers a few meters above.

Long, dark hair swirls around her like smoke, half of it fallen out of a loose braid. Her skin is fairer now, in death—but still maintains the warmer undertones that she held in life.

Her robes are hooded, made from torn silk of black, red, and silver threads.

While her clothes were once fine, and her earrings are made from expensive gems and ore—her feet remain bare, aside from one silver anklet on her right foot, bells tinkling gently in the wind.

Clink!

Amethyst eyes burn the same shade as the flame in her palm, flickering.

She was clearly a beautiful young woman in life—and now, in death, it gives her premature, cruel end a sense of tragedy.

“Ke Mo,” she murmurs, her voice far more delicate than her aura would imply, revealing her youth, “What happened?”

The General trembles upon seeing her, seething.

“You dare ask me that?!” He snarls. “After you threw those men down here?!”

“Are...” She lands on the ground lightly, the bells at her ankles clinking once again, “Are all of them dead?”

“What does it look like?! Of course they are!”

She tilts her head back, her hood falling down over her shoulders, the moonlight illuminating her face.

“...” The Imperial Preceptor stares up at that moon, bearing down upon them in the Crescent phase on this night, her eyes sliding shut. “Good,” She murmurs.

“Good?!” Ke Mo glares, “Are you finally satisfied now that you finally got what you wanted?! Is your revenge complete, you EVIL BITCH?!”

She doesn’t flinch, her demeanor remaining calm. “I simply mean that we’re all free now, Ke Mo,” she lowers her chin. “It’s over.”

Finally, she turns her attention to the other figures in the pit, flame still in hand as her gaze finds San Lang. “Was it you who killed them?”

Xie Lian opens his mouth to try to explain it away, but San Lang replies first: “I did.”

Calm, completely unabashed.

Now, Xie Lian speaks up, rubbing the side of his neck awkwardly, “He did it to protect me. I’m a Heavenly Official, here to investigate the disappearances in the Crescent Moon Pass, and San Lang here is my...friend.”

The Imperial Preceptor arches an eyebrow.

“The Heavens have never bothered to intervene here before,” She murmurs. “I didn’t think they cared.”

After all, she had no reason to, but there’s nothing bitter about her tone now—it’s simply tired, matter of fact.

Odd, for a resentful spirit not to despise the Heavens.

She must have some sort of wrath—if she didn’t, she wouldn’t have lingered on this long. Even if tormenting the Crescent Moon soldiers was her only purpose, she would simply disperse now, having no motive left to carry on.

Humans need certain things to carry on.

The air in their lungs. The blood in their veins. Food, water, sunlight.

Ghosts are no different—but for them, it’s resentment, desire, and need.

For her to be so strong, and to have survived for so long—there must be something driving her. Something powerful.

Still, as she grows closer, and the flame in her hand illuminates San Lang’s face, she stops—staring up into his eyes.

Xie Lian can’t see the recognition in her gaze, which suddenly becomes overwhelmed by a new emotion—shame.

Without saying a word, she drops to the ground.

On her hands and knees, not seeming to care that the blood of her countrymen stains her hands, feet, and knees, bowing as low as possible in complete silence.

“What are you doing?!” Ke Mo snarls, “Are you THANKING that bastard?!”

Xie Lian frowns, unable to tell exactly what’s going on—but San Lang steps further in front of him, his stance clearly protective as he surveys the young woman, quirking an eyebrow.

She doesn’t reply to Ke Mo, keeping her eyes fixed on the ground—Clearly waiting for something.

“...You should get up,” San Lang murmurs, holding out one hand. “We still have business.”

She doesn’t move at first, eyes opening wide, her shoulders trembling slightly as she looks up at him.

The expression of the youth staring down at her is unreadable, and her lips quiver.

Not out of fear—no. The emotion in her gaze is something entirely different.

Slowly, she takes San Lang’s hand, pulling herself to her feet.

“...Would you like to get out of here?” She whispers, glancing at Xie Lian—who, after a moment, nods.

“We would, but that array is making it impossible,” the god explains—to which the Imperial Preceptor immediately nods, forming a small hand sign before raising her palm to the sky, and—

Just like that, Xie Lian feels a weight lift, like the shackles on his body have loosened. Was it...really that easy?

“You’re free to go now,” the young girl murmurs, her voice so...benign. Like she genuinely means no harm.

And if this is the Imperial Preceptor—just who were those women from before? Before Xie Lian can think much more on the matter, a voice calls out—

“Is anybody down there?” Then, after not waiting particularly long—“If nobody answers, I’m leaving.”

Fu Yao?

Xie Lian lets out a sigh of relief, “FU YAO! I’m here!”

“Your highness? Who else is with you?”

“Uh...” Xie Lian frowns, “You ought to just come down and see yourself.”

“...” From the top of the pit, Fu Yao shrugs, not seeing a flaw in that logic—before he jumps down, he tosses down an array of flames to illuminate the pit, which is certainly helpful to just about everyone else, excluding...well, Xie Lian.

The warmth is nice, though.

When he lands, Xie Lian starts explaining the situation to him as best as he can before asking—

“What about the man who was bitten? Surely you weren’t able to take him out of the desert.”

“No,” Fu Yao shakes his head.

“I made an array for him and a few mortals who stayed behind.”

“...They could be in danger,” Xie Lian sighs, shaking his head.

“If they are, it’s because they disobeyed and left the array,” Fu Yao shrugs. “That won’t be on my hands, anyway—”

He glances over to the far corner of the array, raising an eyebrow, “Should we be stopping them?”

Ke Mo has the Imperial Preceptor by the throat, pressing her down into the ground, slamming her head over and over again.

“WHY DON’T YOU CALL ONE OF YOUR SNAKES?!” He snarls.

All around them now, the firelight exposes mounds of broken bodies. Countless slaughtered soldiers, the Sinner’s Pit suddenly turned into the world’s largest mass grave.

“Ke Mo...” The girl whimpers, pulling at the hand around her throat weakly, but not fighting back. “I can’t...”

“YOU BETTER!” Ke Mo glares, punching her over and over again, until even Fu Yao winces.

There's something obscene about the sight of a man that size pummeling a little girl, magical powers or not.

"IF YOU DON'T, WE'RE BOTH GOING TO DIE HERE! IS THAT WHAT YOU WANT?!"

Ke Mo glares down at her, struggling to see through the rage and the sadness, tears flooding down his cheeks.

"THAT BOY FELT SORRY FOR YOU, DID YOU HEAR?! NOW—WE'RE ALL GONE, AND I'M THE MONSTER! ARE YOU HAPPY?!" He roars, "CALL YOUR SNAKES! SHOW THEM YOU AREN'T THE VICTIM HERE!"

"Ke Mo…" She tries again, blood shining against the whites of her teeth, eyes half lidded, "The snakes…they won't….listen to me anymore…"

"…Someone should," Xie Lian agrees—and clearly, from San Lang's stiff posture and a glare the god can practically feel, he's about to.

But given the violence Xie Lian has witnessed the young man to be capable of— allowing him to attack Ke Mo while he's angry doesn't seem like a good idea.

So, the god interferes on his own, flashing across the pit in a single step, grabbing Ke Mo by the arm, his grip like iron.

He only uses one hand—and yet, even a man of Ke Mo's size can't move, veins bulging from his forehead as he struggles.

"That's enough," Xie Lian mutters, his voice stern, but—

But then he stops, feeling a small hand land on top of his, squeezing softly, fingers trembling.

The words she whispers—in the space of a moment, they make an ancient, lonely mind screech to a halt.

"G…General Hua?" She whispers.

Xie Lian's eyes snap open without meaning to, knowing he wouldn't be able to see the person before him anyway, and yet—

The aura before him is a soft shade of lilac, burning slightly brighter in the core. Stronger than the other ghosts nearby, though not the sea of crimson that he saw before.

And that voice—it's older, but—

"...It's you?" He replies, his voice trembling. From joy and sadness.

She smiles through the blood and the bruises, her eyes shining as she looks up at the god's face, her voice cracking as she lifts her palm, pressing it against Xie Lian's cheek.

"Y...you're okay," She croaks, tears rolling down her cheeks, dripping from her chin. "I...I'm glad."

Xie Lian wishes he could cry now. He wants to. There's an unspeakable ache in his chest, filled with the friction of different emotions crashing together, and he wants to release it—but he...

He can't cry as easily now, as he did before.

"Banyue..." He whispers, sorrowful.

The tears flow faster, and her voice cracks.

"Y-You remember me?" She whimpers.

"...Oh, little one," Xie Lian sighs, covering her hand with his own against his cheek. "Of course I do."

Ke Mo makes the mistake, in that moment, of reminding Xie Lian of his presence. "WHAT'S—?!"

The god's eyes snap in his direction, cursed shackles burning in his direction.

A little girl of mixed race being tormented by the Crescent Moon is an unpleasantly common story. He didn't realize, when she was being beaten, who she was.

But now that he does, he realizes—

'Who is that person hanging there?'

He—

Xie Lian's hands begin to tremble, remembering the tiny, impossibly small little girl who used to fit so easily in the cradle of his arms. Who would bury herself inside of his cloak to stay warm.

How little she asked for.

How frightened she was of strangers. The way she would give her own meager scraps to kittens on the street, until Xie Lian was subsidizing a small colony of strays.

And Ke Mo— He hung her. He—He—

CRACK!

It takes a moment for anyone to recognize the sound.

When Ke Mo looks down, he finds his arm limp, bent at an impossible angle, bones protruding from the skin—but his body is still in too much shock to process it. “YOU —?!”

Xie Lian clutches the young ghost to his chest, trembling from head to toe. From rage, grief, and fear.

San Lang isn’t far away, his expression dark now, starting to put it together, but Fu Yao—

He stands on the other side of the pit, his expression a mask of confusion. What was that reaction?

Even when Xie Lian was as angry at him as he’d ever been, he…Never looked like that.

“Ruoye,” Xie Lian snarls, his voice guttural, using a tone that makes San Lang’s eyes widen slightly with recognition.

Let him see.

“Hang him.”

Let him see how it feels, to be a broken, helpless thing, dangling overhead.

Let him see.

The bandage hesitates for a moment.

Just a brief moment, before it springs into action. And even if Ke Mo is a strong spirit, well—

This is what Ruoye does best.

It flings itself around the ghost's throat, hauling him up, up, up, until he's dangling over the Sinner's Pit—from the same pole as she had been before.

"General..." Banyue rasps, wincing from the pain in her jaw. "D-don't kill him..."

"He won't die," Xie Lian murmurs, his tone cold, distant. "I didn't order that."

She's quiet, staring up at the god—but he isn't looking at her.

He's glaring up at Ke Mo, cursed shackles gleaming.

Let him see.

Xie Lian can't stop shaking, to the point where it feels like there's pressure on his temples, his teeth starting to chatter.

Who does he think he is, doing that to anyone? What makes him think he has the right?

Let him see.

Xie Lian won't let him.

He won't let him get off so—

There's a weight on his shoulder that makes him jump—that of a hand. Warm, familiar, paired with a voice in his ear.

"Gege," Xie Lian's eyes widen blearily, hurt and confused. "Come back."

"..."

The god hangs his head, lips trembling.

"...I'm sorry," he mumbles, his voice faint. "I don't know what came over me."

It's a blatant lie—of course, he knows. He's far too disoriented to contemplate the fact that San Lang was able to recognize his disassociation and pull him back so easily, but...

Xie Lian knows exactly what happened, just now—and to have it happen in front of so many people leaves him feeling raw, ashamed, and exposed.

"...Yeah, neither do I." Fu Yao mutters, walking closer—and while his words are blunt, his tone isn't. It's just—

Concerned.

"What the fuck was that?"

"..." Xie Lian swallows thickly, hugging Banyue a little tighter. The teenager doesn't protest, leaning against him, but Fu Yao isn't so docile.

"Your highness—"

"He just said he doesn't know," San Lang cuts him off, his tone sharp edged. "Let it go."

"Who do you think you are to tell me—?!"

"It's alright," Xie Lian cuts them both off, his voice still a little faint. "I just—" He swallows dryly. "You weren't here before when I explained it to San Lang and Nan Feng, but...hanging bodies upset me," he mumbles. "I had a bad experience."

'Upset' being the understatement of the century.

"...That's a pretty delayed reaction," Fu Yao mutters, watching him warily.

San Lang's eyes flash, and Xie Lian just sighs, pressing a hand against his shoulder to make him back off.

"It's worse when it's someone I know," he explains, struggling not to allow himself to remember—knowing that he's too fragile for it at the moment. "I had...a very bad experience. Alright?"

Describing it as 'very bad' seems to be enough to make the deputy god get the point. "...Alright," he agrees, holding his hands up in a peace gesture. "Alright, fine."

The prince lets out a shaky breath, sinking to the ground with Banyue in his arms, cradling her close.

(The ground here is mysteriously clear, for some reason.)

She isn't quite so small anymore, but Xie Lian doesn't care, pressing his face against her hair. "Banyue..." He mutters, "What happened to you? How did you end up here?"

The priestess swallows thickly, and when she speaks—her own voice is thick with tears.

"General Hua...I..." Her voice cracks. "I messed up."

Xie Lian sighs, rubbing her back. He very much doubts that, even in this situation.

"...General?" Fu Yao mutters, realizing—then, his eyes widen. "You—!"

Xie Lian glances up with a shaky, slightly awkward smile.

"That was my tombstone in the cave," he admits. "Sorry for not mentioning it before."

"You..." Fu Yao sputters, glancing around the group with wide eyes. "You were—! How did you end up in that situation?!"

"Well..." the prince thinks back with a frown. "Remember what I said about the circus?"

"I...what?" Fu Yao questions, exasperated, but San Lang pipes up with no issue.

"About the clown who choked during his act?"

Xie Lian nods, sheepish. "That...was partially my fault. Among other things that went wrong."

"Other things?!"

"...And for that, and other personal reasons, I needed to get away for a while," Xie Lian explains. "So, I ended up hiding out on the border of Yong'an, near the desert. As I recall, I was busking—and doing so well that the local soldiers didn't believe I was bind, so..."

"...You got drafted into the army?!" Fu Yao groans, wiping a hand down his face. Honestly, it's the worst luck—

"And while I was there, I ran into a little girl scavenging for food," Xie Lian continues, stroking Banyue's hair. "She had no parents, so I looked after her as best as I could. And the rest...happens just like the tombstone said," Xie Lian finishes with an awkward little laugh, but—

San Lang doesn't seem to find the story very funny. "It said that you died."

Right. Well.

"I...pretended."

"It was my fault," Banyue croaks, "General Hua was trying to protect me."

"I—" Xie Lian sighs, shaking his head. "I was trying to break up a riot, when I saw her in the crowd. I got her out, but I was too injured to escape myself, so I just...played dead."

He can feel everyone watching him, and he waves his hands with a nervous little laugh, trying to wave off the concern. "It wasn't so bad! I didn't even end up buried, that would have been much more inconvenient! They just threw my body in the river! But..." Xie Lian sighs.

"...By the time I came to, I had already drifted all the way back to Yong'an because of the current, and I wasn't able to find Banyue again, so...I never knew what became of her."

The young woman swallows thickly, rubbing at her eyes. "I...General Hua, after you died, I..."

She hangs her head. "My life was like before, but worse, and...I was so angry at everyone, for what happened to you...and guilty, and..."

"Oh, Banyue..." Xie Lian frowns. "It wasn't your fault—"

"There's—a ghost—one that you can pray to," she explains, her voice tense. "If people are being cruel to you. He—he helps children who are being mistreated, takes revenge for you."

Xie Lian finds himself curious. He didn't realize that there were ghosts out there that people prayed to. It's...a surprising concept.

"She's speaking about Hua Cheng."

Fu Yao's voice is cold now—certainly more than a little judgmental—and Banyue does seem at least somewhat remorseful, though not for that reason.

"I prayed to him...but when he came, I didn't want him to slaughter the people that were hurting me, I..." Banyue sighs. "I just never wanted someone to get killed trying to protect me again. Like—Like you did," She bites her lip. "I told him I wanted to be strong, and...he taught me magic for a little while."

"Is that your story?" Fu Yao frowns, crossing his arms. "The Ghost King corrupted you?"

Banyue sits up in Xie Lian's arms, shaking her head vehemently. "No! He didn't do anything like that, I—I made my own choices," she mutters. "I came back to my homeland, ended up in a position of power, and I..." She trails off, hanging her head once more. "I messed up."

Fu Yao seems to have heard enough, pulling a length of spirit binding rope from his pocket. "That's enough information for now."

Xie Lian stiffens, his arms tightening, and the deputy god sighs.

"I respect the fact that you two have a history—but you were the one who wanted to investigate the Crescent Moon Pass. We can't ignore the crime just because the perpetrator happens to be an orphan you used to look after."

Xie Lian grits his teeth, and Banyue smiles.

"It's okay, General Hua...I'm glad you came to investigate. Otherwise, I never would've known..."

Xie Lian lets her go, however reluctantly—but as Fu Yao is tying her up, he comments —

"I don't think it was her doing all of this."

Fu Yao glances up with a frown. "What?"

"Before you came down, Ke Mo told us that they weren't the ones bringing the merchants here. That they were drawn in by the Shan Yue fern, usually because they needed to cure their own snake bites—but Banyue—she can't control the snakes the way she used to. Isn't that right?"

"...They'll listen to me most of the time," Banyue explains hesitantly. "But sometimes —they just ignore me. I don't know why."

Fu Yao crosses his arms, thinking. "…Why don't you show us, then? Try summoning one now."

After an encouraging nod from Xie Lian, Banyue agrees.

She lifts her hands, muttering a low incantation—and, surely enough, a snake appears. Launching itself towards her and wrapping itself around her bound wrists.

Compared to the others—it seems rather tame.

"Hey!" Fu Yao shouts, glancing around. "I said just ONE!"

Xie Lian stiffens, and, just as Fu Yao said—he can hear the sound of several snakes slithering closer in the pit, encircling them—but Banyue shakes her head, her voice distressed—

"I didn't summon those!" She cries. "It wasn't me!"

"You expect us to believe that?!"

He barely manages to dodge one as it lunges at him, summoning fire to incinerate those on the ground, and Xie Lian notices—

The snake Banyue summoned as tame—it's the others that are aggressive. Summoned with a different purpose.

"Would you QUIT IT?!" Fu Yao snarls.

"It REALLY ISN'T ME! I swear!"

It takes Xie Lian a moment to understand, but then he hears it.

Hundreds of forms whipping through the air, plunging towards the pit.

The sky, it's—

It's raining Scorpion Snakes—right down on top of them.

Everyone is Right, and Everyone is Wrong

Chapter Summary

CLANG!

The blow that Xie Lian hears now makes him clap his hands over his ears with a gasp, because—

That level of force is somewhat shocking, two high quality weapons crashing against one another with extreme force. Enough to make Ke Mo look like a gnat in comparison.

And this time, Xie Lian still doesn't recognize the ring of the metal from before. It's of a quality unfamiliar to him. But the other he's quite familiar with.

The steel of a Heavenly weapon.

"Huh?" San Lang muses, sounding completely unruffled—but intrigued.

"Well, what do you know—there really is a sixth person down here," he smiles, eyes flashing in the dark. Not from fear, or anger—but the eager anticipation of a fight that won't be completely boring. "How interesting."

He passes the umbrella off to Xie Lian.

"Wait here for a minute, gege," the youth murmurs, flexing his fingers as he runs into the dark shadows of the Sinner's Pit.

"I'll deal with him."

Chapter Notes

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"LOOK OUT!"

Fu Yao tries to use a blast of fire on the first wave, crying out—

"Can't you see?! One of them must be lying!"

Xie Lian finds himself yanked close against San Lang's side, raising an eyebrow, "What do you mean?"

"Either she lied about the snakes—or it's that friend of yours!"

San Lang stiffens against him, and Xie Lian places one hand on his arm with a frown.

"It isn't San Lang, Fu Yao."

"Your highness—I know you're not a fool, you know exactly what he is!" The Deputy God snaps. "Why trust him?!"

"He hasn't given me a reason not to."

Fu Yao's eyes nearly bulge out of his head with frustration. "That shouldn't be the standard! How can you even stand beside him in a situation like this?"

Xie Lian smiles, scratching his head. "Well...his side doesn't have any snakes."

San Lang lets out an affectionate chuckle.

Just then, the sound of falling snakes gets louder, the hissing building to a dull roar, and Xie Lian frowns, concerned—just as he hears something opening up overhead, shielding him from the venomous downpour—

An umbrella.

"Don't worry, gege." San Lang murmurs. "They won't dare come under here."

Xie Lian nods, not particularly worried about them—or Banyue for that matter, controlling them or not, the snakes aren't a threat to her—but Fu Yao is out in the open.

"Fu Yao—can't you make more fire?!"

The Deputy God is barely able to dodge between the falling serpents, using palm strikes to kill those that get too close—but it's a precarious process.

"Don't you think I could if I would?! That thing beside you is suppressing my spiritual power!"

San Lang's expression darkens slightly at the mention of being called a 'thing,' rather than a person—but Xie Lian disregards Fu Yao's argument entirely.

"It's not me."

"I know," Xie Lian assures him, patting his arm once more. "But with Banyue and Ke Mo incapacitated..."

And with Xie Lian not able to use any of the spiritual power he borrowed from Nan Feng earlier, along with Fu Yao's being suppressed...

"There must be a sixth person down here," he mutters.

"Are you kidding?!" Fu Yao snaps, moving in a flurry to strike at the snakes.

It's a precarious business, just not getting bitten by any of them.

"It's an open pit! No one else jumped in—we would know!"

Before Xie Lian can explain any more, he hears a surprised gasp, and his stomach turns to ice.

"...Banyue?!" He cries, looking around.

Her aura is nowhere to be found—but Xie Lian knows, with that spiritual binding, she wouldn't have been able to leave the pit by herself. "Does someone have you?!"

"I...!"

He hears her voice, however briefly, before it disappears again. "Banyue!" He cries in a blind panic.

He whips around under the umbrella, trying to find a glimpse of her spiritual energy —but when he tries to run, San Lang's grip, which has been gentle up until now, turns to that of iron, locking him in place.

Xie Lian is stunned—and something else that he'd rather not say—to find he couldn't escape the younger man's grip right now, not even if he wanted to.

But instead of being afraid, he only feels desperate.

"San Lang!" He turns to look up at him, "Help her, please."

San Lang stares down at him for a moment, his expression unreadable—but when he replies, his voice is surprisingly soft, given the current state of things.

“Of course.”

Before Xie Lian can say much more, he finds himself hoisted up once again.

This time by just one arm, though it still feels as though it must be as easy for San Lang as carrying a feather as he moves across the floor of the Sinner’s Pit, moving Xie Lian down to a section clear from the combat before setting him down once again.

“...San—?”

CLANG!

The blow that Xie Lian hears now makes him clap his hands over his ears with a gasp, because—

That level of force is somewhat shocking, two high quality weapons crashing against one another with extreme force. Enough to make Ke Mo look like a gnat in comparison.

And this time, Xie Lian still doesn’t recognize the ring of the metal from before. It’s of a quality unfamiliar to him. But the other he’s quite familiar with.

The steel of a Heavenly weapon.

“Huh?” San Lang muses, sounding completely unruffled—but intrigued.

“Well, what do you know—there really is a sixth person down here,” he smiles, eyes flashing in the dark. Not from fear, or anger—but the eager anticipation of a fight that won’t be completely boring. “How interesting.”

He passes the umbrella off to Xie Lian.

“Wait here for a minute, gege,” the youth murmurs, flexing his fingers as he runs into the dark shadows of the Sinner’s Pit.

“I’ll deal with him.”

Xie Lian opens his mouth, but—

CLANG!

CLANG!

CLANG!

Now, it's several more blows of the same quality and force.

An actual duel now—between two fighters who very clearly know what they're doing, but—

One clearly seems to be dominating the other with an aggressive, somewhat wild style, his attacks utterly ferocious.

CLANG!

CLANG!

Xie Lian sighs, summoning Ruoye back to him. The fall probably injures Ke Mo severely, but— Xie Lian couldn't care less.

The bandage quivers around his wrist when it returns, and Xie Lian strokes it calmly, "Don't be nervous," he mutters, glancing around. "Banyue? Can you hear me? Banyue!"

Fu Yao is clearly becoming exhausted, his breathing ragged as he fights off the remaining snakes, completely without aid, "Maybe she's the one who attacked you just now!"

"No," Xie Lian shakes his head, "Banyue is a small person—she wouldn't resort to that type of force."

He glances around, still trying to find a trace of her aura, but...

All he sees is that of Fu Yao, and a flash of crimson, pulsing with each clash of blades.

CLANG!

CLANG!

"...And that was one hell of a blow," the prince mutters. Not comparable to what he could do—but still

It's more than what the average ghost could do, including Banyue. Even by the standards of Heavenly officials—no one from the middle court could do that.

"Who could it be..." He mutters, contemplating—and Fu Yao groans with frustration.

"She could be hiding her strength from you, your highness—traitors like Banyue and Xuan Ji—they're birds of a feather!"

Then, just like that, it all clicks together. Xuan Ji.

"Why do you trust her?!"

"...Xuan Ji," he mutters. "That's it."

"What about her?!"

"I've got it!"

Fu Yao almost stops, then gets clocked in the face with a falling snake, barely able to avoid getting stung before he kills it.

(Which requires punching himself in the face.)

"You might as well stop now!" Xie Lian calls into the dark. "I know who you are!"

CLANG!

CLANG!

"...You think I'm bluffing?" He glares. "Just give it up and come out, General Pei Junior!"

Fu Yao squawks with surprise, nursing a bruised cheek. "What are you talking about? What does he have to do with this?!"

"Think about it," Xie Lian mutters.

"For 200 years, the Heavens remained completely oblivious to this matter."

Gusu was imprisoned for half that time—and unlike the Crescent Moon Kingdom, travelers were left unharmed. There was no reason for those outside of the city to know.

"Someone was keeping it quiet."

Xie Lian mutters, glancing around, still searching out that aura.

CLANG!

CLANG!

"And do you remember what you and Nan Feng told me about him on Mount Yu Jun? What Pei Junior did before his ascension?"

Massacre.

He massacred a city, supposedly.

"You're saying that city was the Crescent Moon Kingdom?" Fu Yao mutters. "If that was the case—why lure travelers here? What does he have to gain from it?"

Xie Lian isn't entirely sure when it comes to motive. Slaughtering a city isn't uncommon in times of war, sadly enough.

It might make acquiring new worshippers difficult, but...

With great victory in battle, there are always great atrocities. Pei Xiu's patron, Ming Guang, is the poster child of such things.

The rise of Xuli was infamous—but there's a terrible price for all conquests.

"The key to everything is the snakes," Xie Lian mutters. Something Fu Yao, who is currently trying not to be strangled by them, isn't thrilled to hear. "They're the reasons the travelers were drawn in. Ke Mo is terrified of them, and they don't listen to Banyue, so..."

Xie Lian glares in the direction of the fighting, while Fu Yao shakes his head, confused.

"How could Pei Xiu be running Ming Guang's affair in the heavens while doing all of this? It wouldn't work."

"Not unless he isn't actually here," Xie Lian points out "It could be a clone."

The mention of clones makes Fu Yao fall silent.

"I lived in this area for years and never saw a Scorpion Snake," Xie Lian mutters. "Which I initially thought was odd—but it did create a need: for someone to guide you through the desert."

Now, Fu Yao seems to be understanding.

"When we saw that thing in the ground earlier," the fighting still carries on, even now, "I thought it was just trying to lure us in, saying it recognized one of us from sixty years ago. But what if it was telling the truth?"

CLANG!

CLANG!

"That's..." Fu Yao trails off, his eyes wide.

Plausible.

"I thought it was strange for such a calm, level headed young man to eagerly throw himself to his death—but you just wanted to get out of the way, didn't you, Pei Xiu?"

CLANG!

CLANG!

"Or should I say—A'Zhao?"

Finally, there's silence, and Xie Lian feels San Lang return to his side, a hand at the small of his back.

On the other side of the pit, a new figure appears—one in dark robes with long, black hair, and smoldering eyes of amber. Banyue remains safe—cradled carefully in his arms.

"Banyue?!" Xie Lian cries her name again, now that he can see her spiritual energy— but now she's unconscious, unable to answer.

"She's alright, just exhausted from releasing the Array," Pei Xiu murmurs. That's understandable, after keeping it up on her own for two centuries.

Although heavily injured, Ke Mo still manages to glance up, leaning against the stone wall of the Sinner's Pit. "Who are you?!"

Pei Xiu barely spares him a glance. "General Ke Mo," he mutters. "You haven't changed at all."

The General's eyes widen suddenly with recognition. "...YOU—! IT WAS YOU?!"

"The scorpion snakes were obviously being controlled by you," San

Lang interrupts the ghost without a care, watching Pei Xiu. “Did Banyue teach you that?”

The Deputy General looks rather worse for wear, beaten and bloody.

San Lang, however, is unscathed.

His clothes aren’t even rumpled—and, at best, he seems bored once again.

“...She didn’t,” Pei Xiu admits. “I was able to learn the method on my own.”

“Not surprising,” Fu Yao mutters. “Pei Junior has always been of high intelligence.”

Much like his patron.

“And how do you two even know one another?” Xie Lian questions.

Still hovering in the air, Pei Xiu looks down at Banyue’s face, bloodied and limp, his expression somewhat...anguished.

“I suppose it makes sense that you wouldn’t recognize my voice, General Hua.” He sighs.

“I was just a boy back then.”

But that fact is all Xie Lian needs to stir his memory, remembering—

“You...” He frowns, glancing up at Pei Xiu’s aura, “You were Banyue’s friend from back then! The Yong’an boy!”

Her only friend, to be honest. The only child that was kind to her.

Xie Lian had thought of him as a kind young man—one with quite a bit of potential. It had been a disappointment, when he got dragged into the army as well.

“That’s me,” Pei Xiu replies softly. “I only just recognized you as well.” “HEY!” Ke Mo crows.

“GET DOWN HERE! I DON’T CARE WHAT THAT BLIND FREAK DID TO MY ARM, I’LL FIGHT YOU ONE HANDED!”

“Speak that way again, and you won’t have any limbs left at all,” San Lang remarks coldly.

Xie Lian gives him a light pat on the arm, “Don’t mind him, San Lang. I’ve heard worse.”

Somehow, that doesn’t seem to bring the youth much comfort.

“I DON’T CARE WHAT HAPPENS TO ME! I JUST WANT AT THAT MONSTER!”

“Ke Mo,” Pei Xiu looks down on him, almost irritated by the reminder of his presence, “we already fought 200 years ago, and you lost. Second of all—how am I the monster?”

“What else could you be?!” Ke Mo howls, clutching his arm as he struggles to his feet. “If not for you two colluding against us—we never would have lost!”

“Delusional.” Pei Xiu shakes his head, his expression cold.“Even if I only had two thousand men—I was always going to break through your gates, Ke Mo. And even if I hadn’t—Yong’an was a vast empire with deep pockets. You really think there wouldn’t have been repercussions for your actions? That they wouldn’t have come down on you?”

“MY actions?!” The general shouts, his rage growing palpable. “HOW DARE YOU?!”

“...If victory was inevitable, like you say,” Xie Lian murmurs, “Why did you need Banyue to open the gates?”

Pei Xiu hangs his head for a moment—finally seeming to feel a measure of shame.

“I couldn’t let anyone leave the city alive,” he mutters. “I needed her to open the gates before they could organize an evacuation.”

The idea seems so horribly cold, it almost stuns Xie Lian—a long time veteran of war himself.

“...Because they didn’t give us a choice.”

Pei Xiu’s tone turns hard, now—glaring at Ke Mo. The loathing between the two men runs so deep—it’s almost difficult to fathom.

“Even if we won the battle, Ke Mo and his officers trained the citizens of the Crescent Moon to flee into Yong’an with explosives.”

Listening to the story—the sheer brutality of it—is almost grotesque.

"They were going to take down as many people from Yong'an as they could. Leaving any of them alive created a risk."

Xie Lian's voice is soft when he asks—

"Is that true, Ke Mo?"

"…Yes, and so what?!"

The sheer scale of the grotesque nature of the plan leaves Xie Lian speechless.

"We weren't the ones who started the conflict! It was Yong'an, for constantly invading our borders!"

"Invading?" Pei Xiu rolls his eyes. "No one agreed to those borders but the Crescent Moon."

"You declared the desert ours, and kept the oasis to yourselves."

The argument is as old as time. Older than Yong'an and the Crescent moon. Older than Xianle, even.

"It was OUR ancestral land! You had no right to it!"

"All we wanted was to pass through for trade—you were the ones constantly starting fights on the borders. Allowing horse thieves to travel into our borders and slaughter our people, then shielding them from our authorities!"

"You gave us NO choice!" Ke Mo staggers forward. "We HAD to defend ourselves!"

Xie Lian has been a student of conflict, politics, and diplomacy his entire life—and he remembers that time in the world well.

In truth, the initial blame probably lies with the kingdom of Yong'an.

By Pei Xiu's own words—they were far larger, more powerful, and wealthy. Even if they were in the process of a decline, it had only just begun.

The central plains are vast, filled with fertile land—they didn't need claim over the Oases of the desert.

And, in fairness—they had deep water ports and rivers that ran through the continent, so it wasn't about a need to be able to trade.

Passing through the desert was just faster—a cost saving measure. And the proud, unreasonable people of Banyue were an irritating obstacle.

But their transgressions to the Crescent Moon, while disrespectful, were relatively harmless. They truly had no intentions of invading, only passing caravans through.

But life in the desert is harsh, and it left the people of the Crescent Moon distrustful of strangers.

Still—while the Kingdom of Yong'an was wrong for violating their sovereignty, the response from the Crescent Moon was unjustifiable.

Slaughtering innocent people in the border towns who had very little to do with imperial trading policy. Weaponizing their own citizens.

Insurgencies are common when a much weaker state faces off against a larger empire in a war. Blending the military in with the civilians makes an opponent that is almost impossible to defeat.

But it also makes casualties skyrocket—and the crimes of war become far more violent.

And Ke Mo's actions towards the end—they were vengeful and stupid. He doomed his own nation, placing Yong'an in a position where they felt the citizens of the Crescent Moon posed an existential threat, not only the soldiers.

Their blood is on his hands, as much as Pei Xiu's.

So yes, Yong'an might have started the war—but the Crescent Moon had no right to fight it in the way that they did.

Both sides are right, and both sides are wrong. That's usually the way things go.

"You know...Most people from Yong'an are shameless." Ke Mo mutters. "But you..." He staggers towards him, "YOU'RE THE MOST SHAMELESS OF ALL!"

It's a pathetic attempt at an attack—but still, Pei Xiu deigns to kick him. So hard that he's sent flying back against the wall of the Sinner's Pit once more, spitting out blood.

"Just ADMIT IT!" He screams. "YOU DIDN'T SLAUGHTER MY PEOPLE TO SAVE LIVES! IT WASN'T FOR YONG'AN! IT WAS ABOUT YOUR

OWN CAREER! THE SON OF AN EXILED MAN, DESPERATE TO MAKE A NAME FOR HIMSELF! YOU USED BANYUE, MADE HER BETRAY HER COUNTRY—AND SHE STILL THINKS THE WORLD OF YOU! IT'S PATHETIC!"

"Her 'country?'" Pei Xiu questions coldly. "Yong'an was just as much her country as the Crescent Moon—but we never punished her for her blood. Banyue was no traitor —she simply chose a side early on, and she stuck with it to the end."

He holds her closer now, almost protective.

"You dare call her a traitor?" His voice—normally so calm and level, takes on an entirely new tone. "You speak to me as though I'm the one who used her, when she was never more than an animal to you people until she became useful?"

Pei Xiu's gaze narrows into a hateful glare.

"You were always the monsters," he hisses, "and I have no remorse for executing you."

In that moment, his motive becomes clear:

'It was for her,' Xie Lian realizes, his breath catching. 'All of this—he did it for her.'

Now, a new voice rings out across the Sinner's Pit.

"No remorse?" It's artificially loud, clearly being projected by magic. "What a statement!"

A wind rips through the open chamber, powerful—and to Xie Lian's wary recognition, familiar.

"Then what about the innocent people you lured here? Do you feel remorse for that?"

Before Xie Lian can say or think anything more—they're swept up again by a powerful cyclone, sucking every one of them up and out of the pit.

San Lang keeps hold of him this time—and with the help of the umbrella, they land safely on top of the wall.

Fu Yao lands heavily beside them, coughing, only for someone to catch him by the wrist, the other batting at his hair.

His chin snaps up with a glare, “Are you SERIOUSLY still touching my—?!”

That hand grips his hair then, fingers intertwining with the locks at the base of his skull, yanking his chin back so his partner can glare down at him. “Say something about me touching your hair,” he snarls, “ONE more time!”

Fu Yao doesn’t say anything, actually.

He just stares up at him, eyes wide, lips slightly parted—and both deputy gods start to realize how the whole thing looks, their cheeks darkening.

“...Nan Feng!” Xie Lian cries, clearly relieved. “You’re alright!”

He lets go of Fu Yao immediately, bowing his head.

“Yes, your highness—I’m glad to see that you’re alright as well.”

“...He’s been beaten half to shit, though,” Fu Yao comments, poking at one of the bruises on Nan Feng’s cheek—clearly amused.

Xie Lian pauses, surprised. Did those two women really—?

“Your highness,” that same voice from before speaks up again—that of a woman, warm and friendly. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“Ah...” Xie Lian smiles awkwardly, taking in the familiar auras before him before politely extending his arms in a bow. “Greetings!”

Honestly, he feels pretty bad now, for mistaking her and her companion for evil spirits...

What he can’t see now, is the way that San Lang is eyeing her companion, the two of them making tense, sharp eye contact.

The dark haired woman lifts her chin, almost defiant—and San Lang’s eyes flash with warning, his fingers tightening slightly around the handle of his umbrella, but saying nothing.

From behind them, Pei Xiu drops down to his knees, bowing his head.

“Lord Wind Master.”

The...Wind Master?

"...Nan Feng," Xie Lian whispers, leaning over to his friend, tugging at his sleeve. "Why didn't you tell me that this was the Wind Master sooner?"

The deputy god rankles, clearly un comfortable. "How should I know?! I've never seen the Wind Master like this!"

San Lang watches as the Wind Master speaks to Pei Xiu, her expression stern, then explains herself to Xie Lian.

All the time, He Xuan's voice is ringing in their private array.

'I didn't know it was him, when I sent that fireball. And the storm wasn't even me!'

Silence.

'You think you can just give me the silent treatment forever?'

Hua Cheng doesn't even look in her direction, his arms crossed.

'This isn't—'

'If you think I'm bothered by a tiny ball of fire, you have severely misread the situation,' Hua Cheng responds coldly.

Then, he makes the water demon's blood turn to ice— 'I'll deal with you later.'

In the meantime, the Wind Master determines that she'll take Ke Mo and Pei Xiu back to the heavens herself, while Banyue is left in Xie Lian's custody.

A courtesy on her part—one he's grateful for.

"I'll handle the rest of this," She murmurs, holding her whisk aloft, "I would lay low, for now."

"Could we hurry up and leave?" Ming Yi grouses, unamused.

"Don't rush me, alright?" The Wind Master whines, but—alas, they should hurry back. "Until next time, your highness!"

They disappear in a flurry of wind—and San Lang watches with an air of approval. "She's a rather courteous one, for doing that."

Xie Lian glances at him curiously. "Is she really?"

“She’s sparing you from dealing with Pei,” Nan Feng explains. “He’ll definitely be offended.”

Xie Lian sighs, not entirely surprised. After all—it explains Ling Wen’s initial warning.

She must have known far more than she let on.

“Understandable, I’m sure he was very invested in Pei Xiu’s career, but...” Xie Lian glances up with a frown. “What about Lord Wind Master?”

“Won’t Pei be angry with her as well?”

Nan Feng shrugs, shaking his head. “She’s half your age—but she’s far more popular in the Heavens.”

Xie Lian winces, a little sheepish.

“Besides—Pei wouldn’t dare. She has a patron he wouldn’t want to anger.”

A patron more powerful than Ming Guang? Xie Lian struggles to imagine who that would be, other than Jun Wu himself.

Then again, it’s been a very long time since he was a part of the Heavenly court—the landscape has certainly changed.

It’s a simple matter, returning to where Fu Yao left Old Man Zheng and the other mortals in the desert, treating him with the Shan Yue fern.

As he recovers, the young boy—Tian Sheng, walks over to Xie Lian’s side. “...Excuse me, Mr. Priest?” He questions.

“Yes?”

“You’re a god, aren’t you?” Xie Lian jumps, clearly startled.

“I—Ah—”

“I saw you throw yourself into the pit for me,” the boy explains, “but you and your friend game out fine!”

“...Well,” the prince smiles, glancing around nervously. “Don’t tell anyone?”

Tian Sheng nods eagerly, looking around. “We were lucky that you were there! And say—where’s that girl from before? She knocked all those soldiers into the pit. That was how we escaped! I’d love to thank her...”

“Ah, you see...” Xie Lian pulls out a clay pot, “She’s in here.”

Tian Sheng stares, somewhat disbelieving. “...That looks like something you’d use to pickle vegetables, gege.”

That draws a quiet laugh from the god. “It does—but weaker spiritual creatures can be stored in objects like this for travel. She’s rather tired now and needs to rest.”

The boy nods, rising to his feet. “...Really, thank you so much, gege.”

Xie Lian’s eyes widen slightly. Somewhat similar to Ling Wen—he isn’t used to being thanked.

“Without you—I’d never be able to see my loved ones again, so!” He pounds his chest, making a passionate vow.

“When I get back to my village—I’ll build a temple for you! It’ll be huge, I swear!”

San Lang watches the scene from a distance with his arms crossed, a smile on his face.

“Well...” Xie Lian straightens, holding the pot in his arms, “thank you very much then —and safe travels!”

The merchants go on their way after that—leaving Nan Feng, Xie Lian, and San Lang standing together in the desert, watching them go. Fu Yao left already, accompanying the Wind Master back to the heavens.

“...You shouldn’t worry about Pei, even without the Wind Master.”

San Lang is the one to make the comment, his hands clasped behind his back as he watches the party go—and Xie Lian turns to him with a curious expression.

“He’s proud—he won’t be petty, or resort to cheap tricks. Keep to yourself, and you should be fine.”

Nan Feng watches him closely now, like he’s slowly beginning to realize something.

“...Maybe that’s why you looked familiar before,” He mutters, watching San Lang closely. “You look kind of like Pei Xiu and Ming Guang.”

What with the posture, the hair, and the menacing aura of overwhelming arrogance.

Xie Lian can barely remember what Pei looked like, so it’s hard to judge—and he has no idea what Pei Xiu looks like as an adult man.

“Is that so?” San Lang replies breezily. “I’ve never met him, so I wouldn’t know.”

Xie Lian turns his head back and forth between the two, before clapping his hands together. “In any case!” He exclaims, “I owe both of you for all of your help on this investigation. I should treat you.”

He turns to Nan Feng with a warm smile, “Would you like to come to my shrine for a meal?”

Of course, the immediate spike of his heart rate and the blood draining from his face was an intended response, but Nan Feng is polite about it, pretending to get a message in his array.

“I, ah...General Nan Yang has urgent business for me, your highness,” he mutters. “I should return to the heavens at once!”

Xie Lian smiles, unsurprised. “That’s too bad...tell him I’m thankful for his help once again, will you?”

In a matter of moments—Nan Feng has left.

Leaving them alone in the desert. Normally, Xie Lian would be worried about making their way back, but...

“...What would you like, then,” he murmurs, turning his head in the direction of his companion, lifting his chin and opening his eyes, revealing his shackle.

“Hua Cheng?”

Before him is a sea of crimson once more, expanding across the entire desert horizon, but...there, in the middle, is a silver core. Warm, inviting—not frightening at all.

“...” The Ghost King is quiet for a moment, examining Xie Lian’s expression closely, looking for...

Fear—disgust, or disapproval.

Finding none—he smiles, leaning in. So close, that Xie Lian can feel his breath, can sense how close their faces have become, and he doesn't know why, but his lips are tingling. Is that normal? He—

"I would prefer it if you called me San Lang."

Shades of Regret

Chapter Summary

> Regret is a complicated feeling. Like a weed that climbs and twists inside of you, ivy on brick. It starts as something small, but it never ends that way.
>
> It can wear the face of hope or desire.
>
> But sometimes, regret is one side of a coin flip, and the other....
>
> Is revenge.

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE
>
> CONTENT WARNING: this chapter contains a sex scene.

Feng Xin's life has always been defined by battle tactics, in one way or another. It's the first language he ever learned, from the hands of his father.

There are three modes of living: attacking, defending, and retreat. When he was young, everything was about the attack.

Feng Xin attacked things he didn't understand. Things that frightened him. Things that frustrated him. He protected what he loved ferociously—and never retreated. Not until he was ordered to.

He hasn't changed since then—but he often wishes that he had. And now, he...

The minute he steps back into his palace, he's slammed against the wall, his eyes widening slightly as he instinctively reaches out, grabbing his attacker by the front of the shirt, twisting them around and pinning them down, only to get pulled in.

...He's usually on defense.

But there's really no defending from someone who knows every weak point in your armor. From someone who has a key to the castle gates.

Mu Qing has always tasted familiar, even the first time, when it should have felt alien. And now, after eight centuries of battles, there's nothing more familiar than this.

"That other skin of yours…" Mu Qing mutters, hands bunched up in the front of Feng Xin's robes, words cut off between kisses and stolen breaths, "Is fucking hideous…"

He says that about every form Feng Xin wears, but it never stops them from ending up back here. Except—

It's been quite a while since they did this. Three centuries, in fact.

And this is the only time that Mu Qing has initiated physical contact.

Usually, his form of 'initiating' is antagonizing Feng Xin until he starts it, that way he can dangle it over the god's head teasingly after, but this—

Feng Xin slides his hand up into Mu Qing's hair, fingers tightening, just as they did before, earning a small moan in response.

"…You really liked that, didn't you?" He mutters, a frustrated grunt slipping out when Mu Qing's palm presses against his chest, shoving him away.

"More like I was testing a theory," the god drawls, staring up at him impassively, his arms crossed.

"…Theory?"

Mu Qing doesn't answer him, leaning back against the wall for a second, working through the process of catching his breath.

It's been three centuries, yes—three centuries of avoiding one another, since the last fight they had.

That's one misconception about them:

Whenever people see them arguing, it's always, 'Oh, Nan Feng and Xuan Zhen are fighting again, what else is new.'

But that isn't them fighting. Those are spats. Or maybe you could call them disagreements.

When they actually fight, someone always gets hurt, and the scars linger.

And three centuries ago—the scars that they left on one another ran deep.

Mu Qing hasn't spent that much time with Feng Xin since then, not until these last two missions. And being down there, on either side of Xie Lian, arguing over stupid shit that doesn't matter, it…

It was reminiscent, in many ways, of the way that they used to be—and it made Mu Qing wonder…if they did this again…if it would feel the same. If Feng Xin would respond in the way that he always did.

And, no surprise, the most consistent person Mu Qing knows hasn't changed.

He just really thought—always thinks, in a way—that Feng Xin is going to push him away in disgust one day. That eventually, his dislike of Mu Qing will no longer allow him to indulge in…

Whatever this sexually charged game of cat and mouse is, anyway.

When Feng Xin sees that Mu Qing is about to leave, however, he does have something to say.

Something that isn't quite playing defense. "I have a theory too, you know."

Mu Qing stops, one foot towards the door, then turns around and crosses his arms. "Oh, this should be good."

"About your cultivation method."

Finally, the other god goes stiff—his eyes slightly wide.

"…What about it?" He questions flatly, his shoulders already hunching defensively.

"It requires being pure of mind and body," Feng Xin explains, staring him down. They both know—Mu Qing has only ever achieved the latter with complete success.

Someone 'pure of mind' wouldn't react that way to someone pulling at their hair. They would probably smile with serenity and start reciting the ethics sutra.

Like Xie Lian would—but not Mu Qing.

"If you have a point," the martial god mutters, his gaze sharp, "Go ahead and make it."

Feng Xin's father was a soldier, his grandfather before him. He comes from a long line of imperial guards of Xianle, and in many ways, it's still all he knows.

Attacking, defending.

And when he's been attacking—almost always—the target has been Mu Qing.

This isn't entirely meant to be an attack. It isn't meant to cause harm—but that doesn't mean that it won't.

"You've been here long enough to learn other cultivation methods," Feng Xin points out. "But you haven't."

Mu Qing's eyes have always been incredibly dark, but full of depth—and now, they seem even more shrouded than ever. "Most gods don't."

But Mu Qing clearly isn't disinterested in physical intimacy—despite his claims of not missing out on much.

"I think it's because of me."

Because if celibacy wasn't a barrier to entry, Mu Qing wouldn't have an excuse to stop this, over and over again.

Normally—Feng Xin isn't so pushy. Mu Qing shoves him away, and he grouses, but he lets it go. But—

They're getting too old for this.

Feng Xin isn't delusional. He isn't living under the pretense that they'll ever be more than something between friends and enemies. But—

Wouldn't their lives just be easier if they got whatever this tension is between them out of their systems?

Maybe then they could move on.

Because eight centuries of rising tension is exhausting to navigate, and if they just broke it—

Maybe he wouldn't end up going back to Mu Qing like this, over and over again. Mu Qing's first instinct, his only instinct really, is to think of something hurtful.

That's what he's doing right now. Running through scenarios in his head. Trying to find the one where he hurts Feng Xin just enough to make him back off—

Like a snake rattling its tail. A warning.

Don't come close. Don't hurt me. I'll hurt you first, and I'll hurt you worse.

But then he remembers something. Something that makes him stop.

What Xie Lian said, when Fu Yao tried to say that he wasn't heartless.

'I've always known that.'

At first, Mu Qing distrusted it. Thought it was just an attempt to look generous and saintly, but…

'I think that sometimes, he's so careful about guarding his emotions from others… people misunderstand him.'

That felt sincere. And—if that's true—

Mu Qing isn't particularly brave. He doesn't like putting himself in the position to feel afraid, or insecure.

And he especially doesn't like change, so he's never tried to change himself, either. Treated any opportunity to grow like an existential threat, but—

For once, he tries something different, even if it might not initially seem that way.

"If that theory of yours was right—have you ever thought of why I would want an excuse not to sleep with you?"

Feng Xin stops, his eyebrows knitting together with frustrating (and somewhat endearing) concentration.

He's not stupid, but fairly lacking in emotional intelligence.

"I always thought it was about pride," Feng Xin admits—because that's what it is for him.

And hearing that—it wounds Mu Qing a little bit, because no. He isn't particularly prideful. He has a self aggrandizing veneer, but actual pride—

That requires self worth.

For Feng Xin, sleeping together would mean admitting the attraction exists. Bending his pride. But—Mu Qing admitted the attraction so early on, it's just an accepted fact for him.

He's been far more aware of his own feelings for far too long.

"...Why," Mu Qing is quiet, his tone not overtly harsh, the way it usually is when he asks Feng Xin a question, "would I want to put myself in a vulnerable position with someone who thinks so little of me?"

He was desperate enough for that when he was young.

Feng Xin could have had him in any way back then, and Mu Qing would have accepted it—because he was so desperate for a form of acceptance that he could trust.

And someone wanting him like that—that felt concrete. He could believe that.

Until—

'Your highness...'

There's no way to describe that kind of heartbreak. It isn't special. It's actually fairly normal, but that doesn't make it easier.

To be a teenager, in love for the first time—wanting someone that badly—and feeling someone else's name against your lips, said with such longing.

Mu Qing might be self destructive by nature, but he doesn't have it in him to put himself through that again.

That was why he left. Because he knew, when Xie Lian came back—if he ever came back—

Mu Qing would hate him a little bit, even if it wasn't his fault.

Feng Xin stares down at him now, his face still pinched with thought, trying to wrap his mind around what Mu Qing is saying—

"I don't—"

"You're only pushing this now," Mu Qing stares back at him, eyes expansive in their lonesomeness, “because of the last few weeks. Because you saw me helping the prince. I don’t know if it made you think I had changed, or what—but you don’t think I’m a good person. You never have.”

And Mu Qing can admit—he probably isn’t.

But Mu Qing knows how Feng Xin treats someone he respects. Someone he cares for. He doesn’t treat Mu Qing that way. He never has.

And while Mu Qing is open to many forms of self destruction, he isn’t particularly brave. Not brave enough to let Feng Xin in that deep, just to make it hurt all over again.

“…I don’t…” Feng Xin swallows dryly, struggling.

“Don’t what?”

“…I don’t think that,” The martial god mutters, averting his eyes.

Liar.

Mu Qing grits his teeth, his throat tight.

Liar, liar, liar.

“You honestly expect me to believe that?”

“Why would I lie about it?”

Mu Qing’s chest hurts. Breathing feels punishing.

Because he wants Mu Qing to give him what he wants. Even if he’s never been like that before—

People are always like that. He—

Mu Qing feels like a rubber band rapidly reaching the end of its elasticity, ready to snap.

He’s tired, he hurts, and he’s scared.

“…You still treat me like you did when we were teenagers,” Mu Qing mutters, staring pointedly at the floors. “Like I’m some uppity servant waiting to fleece my master the first chance I get. And you expect me to believe that you don’t think I’m a bad person?”

"...Fleece your—?" Feng Xin throws his head back, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I never once accused you of stealing from him back then. Why is that always the first thing you go back to?"

"You didn't have to say it out loud," Mu Qing mutters, shaking his head "You hated me."

"Mu Qing—I-I really didn't," It's hard not to lose his temper, in the face of what he views as an asinine refusal to be reasonable—but Feng Xin tries. "And it's been eight centuries. You want me to say I don't think you stole the pearl?"

He throws his arms up, exasperated.

"Fine, Mu Qing—I don't think you stole the STUPID fucking pearl! And his highness was never going to let something happen to you, even if you had. It's been eight centuries—why does it even matter?! What's the point in being so goddamn paranoid?!"

"I had a reason to be!"

"What, because you didn't give back a block for a golden palace one fucking time?!" Feng Xin groans. "You think I cared about that?"

Of course, Feng Xin wouldn't understand. His position was never that precarious. But —

Mu Qing's eyes snap back up to him sharply.

"You really don't think I'm a bad person?" He repeats, watching the building frustration in Feng Xin's eyes.

"How many times do I have to say it?!"

Mu Qing doesn't trust him. He doesn't believe him, but— He gives Feng Xin a chance. One, solitary chance to prove it.

"Then I'm going to tell you something," Mu Qing mutters, his arms so tight around his middle that his ribs physically ache, just to hide the fact that his hands are trembling. "And if you can honestly look me in the eye and say that again the next time we're in this position..."

And let's be honest—there will be a next time.

They always end up here.

"I'll believe you."

Feng Xin crosses his arms, clearly mimicking Mu Qing's posture—but not in a mocking way, more like he's bracing himself. "Fine. What is it?"

"It wasn't about the golden palace."

Feng Xin stares, trying to understand what he's getting at, because it seems so out of the blue—and Mu Qing takes a deep, shaky breath.

Some secrets are so old, so horrible, that telling them feels like peeling off your own skin.

"That wasn't why I was so paranoid back then."

So terrified of losing his place. Of what would happen to him if there was the slightest hint of suspicion on him—for any reason.

Of what would happen to him. To his mother. His little siblings.

Feng Xin stares, watching how pale Mu Qing has become—the way his lips tremble.

After eight centuries—whatever it was, it bothers him that much?

Because right now—Mu Qing looks absolutely terrified.

"Mu Qing, what—?"

And of anything that Feng Xin could have guessed in the moment before Mu Qing spoke—

"I was a murderer."

—it wouldn't have been that.

Feng Xin is silent for a moment, trying to wrap his head around that statement. "You...what?"

He was that paranoid when they were teenagers—that worried about something as small as being accused of stealing an earring—because he—?

"By the time the palace even hired me."

That makes Feng Xin even more wary, struggling to wrap his mind around what Mu Qing is trying to say, because—

That was before Feng Xin even knew him. And— They were thirteen when they first met.

How could he…how could he have—?

“Was it…”

For once in his life—Feng Xin speaks cautiously, his tone lacking the anger or aggression he had before.

Just…shock.

“…Self defense?”

Because for someone that age—he can’t imagine another— Mu Qing breaks eye contact, hanging his head.

“…No,” he croaks. “It wasn’t.”

There’s a difference between killing someone and murdering them.

Feng Xin and Mu Qing fought a war side by side. He’s seen Mu Qing kill countless times.

But he used the word murder intentionally. It was carefully phrased.

Mu Qing feels almost nauseous. His knees are weak.

“I slit someone’s throat in their sleep. It wasn’t self defense. I made a choice.”

One that he would have been executed for, easily. Or his mother, if she had tried to take the fall for him.

And Mu Qing knew, in his bones, that she would have. She thought it was her fault.

“…Did anyone else know?” Feng Xin questions, because—

He doesn’t think Xie Lian could have. When they were that age…the prince honestly thought the worst thing that could happen to a person was being forced to eat something green.

“My mom,” Mu Qing mutters.

Feng Xin isn’t entirely surprised. Mu Qing’s family was poor, but incredibly close knit. Especially after his father’s passing.

“...and the King.”

But that—that completely throws Feng Xin off kilter, making him sputter with shock.

He doesn’t think Mu Qing is lying, but...

How could the King, knowing that, allow Mu Qing close to Xie Lian? And—

Why would he bring a murderer into the palace to begin with? It—

Feng Xin’s stomach sinks with discomfort, and his right arm aches painfully from a ghost injury. An unpleasant memory.

It sounds like a coverup—to protect someone of higher status.

The King had done such things many times before. Which implies...

That there’s more to it than what Mu Qing is saying, because Xie Lian’s father would have had little reason to protect him.

“...What were the circumstances?” He questions, eyeing Mu Qing closely. The martial god doesn’t say a word, his hair hiding his expression.

“I’m not talking about that.” He mutters, his voice hoarse.

Feng Xin’s brow furrows—frustrated and confused.

“Then why tell me?”

“You want me to believe you didn’t think I was a bad person all this time?” Mu Qing mutters, lifting his chin.

He’s all naked bravado now. Pale, with gaunt eyes and quivering lips—but— Feng Xin’s heart aches as he watches Mu Qing attempt to sneer, even now.

“You’ve known me for more than eight hundred years. You can think back on how you felt about me all that time—and you can decide if you think I had a good reason or not.”

He turns around quickly, his hair slapping Feng Xin in the face.

“Then—maybe next time, I’ll believe you.”

He makes a show of marching out, his head held high—but really, he's fleeing. And by the time Feng Xin has recovered from the shock enough to speak—

He's standing alone in the entryway of his palace, and Mu Qing is gone. It was a terrifying thing to do, and Mu Qing...

He doesn't handle fear particularly well.

When he makes it back to his own palace, he ignores his own deputies and servants, making his way down to his rooms, and doing the same thing he used to do, when he was small.

He hides under his own desk.

Knees pulled against his chest, arms wrapped around himself, taking comfort in a small, enclosed space until the hyperventilation stops.

It's been so long, but peeling that back, even speaking those words— It felt like breaking open an old scar.

He's never been honest with anyone about it. He's never given anyone the chance to accept him, in spite of it.

No one has ever had the chance to reject him either.

And it might be karma. It really might be fucking karma, because— In the end, he would regret telling Feng Xin.

Regret is a complicated feeling. Like a weed that climbs and twists inside of you, ivy on brick. It starts as something small, but it never ends that way.

It can wear the face of hope or desire.

But sometimes, regret is one side of a coin flip, and the other....

Is revenge.

If there's one thing He Xuan has developed over the years...

"O-oh god—!" She chokes, fingers tightening in his hair, thighs quivering around his ears, heels digging into the muscles of his shoulders.

He smirks, hands tightening around her hips. ...It's a sense of irony.

"In a place like this," he murmurs, turning his head to nip at the soft skin of her inner thigh, "you're going to have to be a little more specific."

She opens her mouth, but all that comes out is a choked cry when he dives back in, working his tongue over her.

It's been a long day, he's built up quite an appetite—and before he sleeps... He Xuan wants the simple pleasure of devouring something.

"M-Ming-Xiong!" Shi Qingxuan pants, eyes rolled back into her head, nails scraping at his scalp as she pulls at his hair. "I-I—!"

His tongue dips inside, and she actually squeals, her legs flailing against his back, spine arching as her other hand clutches at the pillows behind her head—and he smirks.

Cute.

"I c-can't!" She sobs, turning her face into her own bicep, hips rocking into his mouth.

"I—"

She's such a fucking baby, tears pricking at the corners of her eyes, toes curling in pace with his tongue as it flexes inside.

"I really, really can't!"

He Xuan has had her in every possible combination of form since they started doing this.

With every possible version of himself. Well. Except for the real one.

And in every single one, she's been desirable. If he was feeling generous, he would say that Shi Qingxuan was beautiful in every iteration.

But it's been a long day, and he's not feeling kind.

He likes her like this, though. Likes how soft and supple her thighs feel around him. Craves the narrow dip of her waist under his hands. Memorizes the sight of her breasts heaving with pleasured gasps.

But most of all, he likes watching the way her makeup runs when she cries.

Eyeliner running and streaking from the corners of her eyes, smeared lip stain— giving her this ruined, half undone look.

It makes every inch of him pulse with want, like a lion waiting to go for the jugular.

“I-If you don’t stop, I-I’m gonna—!”

“And?”

They make eye contact, even if the sight of his face…there…makes her flush and squirm, held in place by the iron grip on her waist.

“I can make you finish as much as I want, when you’re like this…” He muses, maintaining that eye contact as he rolls his tongue over her again.

“O-oh—!”

“So,” his hands slide down from her hips, gripping her inner thighs instead, wrapping all the way around as they dig delicious bruises into her flesh. “Go ahead.”

He dives back in, with such a ferocity that it makes her tremble, both hands sliding into his hair.

Thankfully, Ming Yi’s palace doesn’t have any deputy gods or servants crowding the halls.

“M-MING-XIONG!”

She can scream to her heart’s content as her body convulses, heart pounding in time with the throbbing between her legs, and—

He Xuan devours her climax, insatiable.

Swallows every inch of pleasure, every scream, moan, and whimper whole.

He starts kissing his way up her torso before she’s even stopped shaking, nipping at her navel, her ribs, lavishing her breasts with his teeth and tongue.

And she says that name, over and over.

Ming-Xiong, Ming-Xiong, Ming-Xiong.

But not his name. Never his name.

She only knows how to repeat the lies he told her. “Ming—!”

Shi Qingxuan cuts herself off with a choked moan as his hand envelops her throat, squeezing.

He stares down at her, eyes dark, churning.

Shi Qingxuan knows him as the earth master, but she’s never thought the title suited him, not really. There’s something about him that reminds him of the waters she used to watch outside her window at night, as a child.

Black and swirling, dangerous—but tempting.

It’s the mystery that draws you in, when you see the sea at night. The way it blends in almost seamlessly with the midnight blue of the horizon.

It seems like the biggest thing in the world, and you have no idea what lies beneath. Not that she ever tried to find out.

Ironically enough, despite being sibling to the God of Water—Shi Qingxuan has never been a strong swimmer.

When He Xuan looks into her eyes, he sees something markedly different.

Bright, vibrant shades of green. Colors that remind him of warmth, forests, and summer.

They’re hopeful. Full of good memories, hope, promises for the future.

Those eyes are all of the things that He Xuan cannot be.

All of the things that were stolen from him.

Shi Qingxuan pants, wrapping one hand around his wrist—and her gaze turns questioning.

“M-Ming—?”

She’s always tight in the wake of an orgasm—and now, when two fingers plunge inside, there’s a pleasurable stretch in the feeling of being spread open, her eyes rolling back into her head as they make scissoring motions inside.

He watches, eyes dilated in the dark. Takes in every inch of the sight.

How small her throat looks under his fingers. The way her hips tremble as they rock into his hand.

Shi Qingxuan isn't big, for a man—but as a woman, she's even smaller. Vulnerable, eyes half lidded from the pleasure as his fingers work deeper.

He could crush her right now. It would be so stupidly easy. And she would let him, drinking in pleasure until the last second, never knowing what was coming.

Instead, he slips a third finger inside, watching the way her lips part with a silent gasp, eyes growing wide.

This wasn't part of the plan.

He Xuan doubts anyone would believe him, if he said that. This position doesn't exactly leave him looking particularly innocent.

But at the end of the day, he's a starving man who is prone to his indulgences, and she...

She wanted him.

It started as sneaking glances and touches that lingered a little too long. Teasing that was too embarrassingly obvious to be mistaken for anything but flirting, even if the little idiot thought it was subtle.

And He Xuan, he...

He wanted her. And he couldn't stop it.

And when those eyes focus in on him once more, they seem so open, so trusting.

It's in moments like this, when it becomes so easy for him to almost forget that he doesn't have a heart.

That it died centuries ago, and ironically enough—it was for her sake.

For just a moment, staring up at him in the dark, Shi Qingxuan thinks she sees those eyes flash with gold, burning down at her with an unnatural glow.

But then she blinks, tears sliding down her face—

And then, his fingers are sliding away, making her whine from the emptiness.

But not for long, before he replaces them with the thing that she really wants, making her arch beautifully underneath him, an unrestrained moan slipping from her throat as he lets it go, gasping.

His hands brace against the mattress on either side of her head as he rocks in.

Deeper, deeper, deeper.

Until she feels pleasantly hollowed out, her arms clinging around his neck, ankles crossing behind his back.

His mouth is against her cheek, not kissing it, but— Drinking in her tears with satisfaction.

Still, she pleads.

"M...Ming-Xiong..."

There's a powerful thrust that draws a broken cry from her, arms trembling around his neck.

"K...Kiss me," she mumbles, the tears flowing faster, but He Xuan isn't worried. "P- Please?"

She likes it when he makes her cry.

Still—sometimes, he indulges her, kissing slow and deep.

She hugs his neck closer, and he nips at her lips until she smiles, opening further for him, and he asks—

"Still okay?"

Not because he cares, but because it's something that Ming Yi would do. He's the sort with a hard exterior, hiding affection underneath.

Even so, that smile widens against his lips, even as her own tremble.

"M-Mm' okay," She mumbles, rocking up against him for emphasis, making his own lips turn up at the corners against his will.

His mouth trails back up her cheek.

“Crybaby…” He murmurs, slamming in harder.

Drinking in those tears, as they flow faster.

“M-Mean…!” She cries, whimpering all sorts of things.

That he’s a bully. Relentless. A tormentor of the cruelest kind.

Even as he wrings out climax after climax, not stopping until they start to blend together in one long crest.

But that’s alright, because she loves it when he’s mean, and he loves it when she cries.

She’s passed out against his chest by the end of it, limp, breaths trembling against his throat as He Xuan keeps one arm wrapped around her back, staring at the ceiling.

Maybe he overdid it.

That’s entirely possible, but…

‘I’ll deal with you later.’

It seems somewhat likely that statement will be coming back to haunt him sooner rather than later. And if He Xuan is going to have to deal with that, well—

His arm tightens around her back, his expression unreadable.

Shi Qingxuan is loud. Overstimulating at times. But—being around her, it’s enough to keep his mind quiet when he needs it to be.

Which is necessary—because sometimes, it becomes unbearably loud. Like it is right now.

And by the time it quiets down again—it’ll be too late.

Pei Ming could not possibly begin to explain how grateful he is, for the fact that he ascended before he ever had children.

Realistically, he probably did—but he was lucky enough to never find out. Because dealing with children?

Not his forte.

“Listen,” he wipes a hand down his face.

Normally, he could shrug this sort of thing off with a laugh.

But this is Pei’s thirteenth mission in one month, and he just received some incredibly unpleasant news from the Heavens.

“When I tell you to stay back, you stay back.”

The Martial God of the West stares up at him blankly, clearly not seeing any problem. “You said to get out of the way, Ming Guang. I think that’s different.”

Pei is smiling, but his eyebrow is twitching consistently. “And did you get out of the way?”

Quan Yizhen blinks. “No.”

Honestly, the worst part is that Quan Yizhen isn’t even a child. He’s just so goddamn eccentric that Pei Ming doesn’t know what else to call him.

He’s tried everything to get the Martial God under control on missions. Threats. Asking nicely. Guilt tripping.

Making promises he doesn’t intend to keep. Absolutely none of them are effective.

“Look around you,” Pei’s smile is so strained, it looks more like a grimace now as he grabs Quan Yizhen by the front of his robes, “and tell me where we are.”

The younger god obeys in near comical fashion, turning his head and looking around him in a slow, exaggerated fashion, expressionless as he takes in the sights around them, before looking up at Pei Ming and answering promptly:

“Qinghe.”

“Very observant,” Pei hisses.

And the worst part?

Quan Yizhen actually seems a little flattered by the praise, incapable of detecting Pei’s blatant sarcasm. “Thank you.”

Pei wants to kill himself. No. He wants to kill Quan Yizhen, then himself. Murder suicide. That’s the way to go.

“And whose territory is it?”

“Yours.”

“And whose mission is this?”

“Yours.”

“And who is the senior god present?”

“You.”

“You understand all of these things.” Pei Ming is normally a fairly easy going person. Go with the flow. Shi Wudu and Ling Wen hate that about him.

But right now, he’s exhausted. He’s been exhausted for the better part of a decade now, because that’s how long this stint of increasingly difficult missions has been going on.

And Quan Yizhen is possibly the most effective help there is in a fight, but he’s also a liability.

“And have you listened to a single goddamn thing I’ve said this entire mission?”

He has these big, hazel eyes, and they stare up at him with a level of earnestness that borders on stupidity.

“No.”

The mission seemed simple enough, in the beginning—not so out of the ordinary.

There was a savage ghost preying on young women in the area—spiriting them away to the point where not even their corpses or ashes could be traced.

Jun Wu has been concerned about high level ghosts recently, because, for some reason, he thinks Mount Tonglu is going to reopen.

Soon.

And by his logic, sending Pei Ming, the most consistent martial god available, to eliminate the strongest savage ghosts available before it does, is somehow the best means to make sure the next Ghost King to be born isn't particularly powerful.

Pei doesn't understand it—because Jun Wu didn't ask him to look into it when He Xuan was created, or Hua Cheng before him. The only rationale he can discern is that two powerful ghost kings are a pair, but three make a worrisome party that Jun Wu doesn't want to deal with.

And what's worse—not every ghost Jun Wu has sent him to eliminate has been violent, or even a threat to humans. In which cases, Pei Ming felt more like a glorified butcher than a protector of mortals.

At no point has Qi Rong's name come up, despite his destructive nature, and…

With each assignment that gets passed down, Pei Ming becomes more and more wary each time that he might see the name of the savage ghost Ren Song on the mission file.

He relishes in a good fight, and ten years ago—he would have leapt at a conflict with Hua Cheng.

But now?

The thought exhausts him more than it thrills him.

Still—in this case, the threat turned out to not even be from the ghost. Not in the way they expected.

There's a local cultivation clan—one who started from a family of butchers, known for using sabers as their weapon of choice

The only problem was—they were using the resentful energy from animals and other forms of beasts to cultivate with said sabers.

And when the cultivator wielding the weapon died, it left that energy with nowhere else to go.

Forming multiple, incredibly violent blade spirits.

Slaying those that currently existed was one thing—one difficult, incredibly violent task—but this was a cultivation clan that had existed for the last century and a half.

That meant hundreds of graves, hundreds of spirits.

In the end, he was able to work with the clan leader to work out a feasible solution— sealing the remaining sabers in stone castles with corpses of their dead counterparts to keep the spirits sealed, but...

Wrangling them all was a bloody process. And a dangerous one.

One that cost many cultivators their lives—and quite frankly, almost severely injured Quan Yizhen several times, because the stupid little shit doesn't listen—

But, Pei digresses.

And now, they're standing here, basking in the real tragedy of the situation: The Ghost.

Initially, the killings were blamed on a local spirit known to hide in the forest, one that everyone thought to be harmless—but, when the violence escalated, well...it was the most obvious candidate.

Simply because it was old. Old enough that the stories traced back centuries.

The stone castle built to house the blade spirits just so happened to be within that very forest—and, in the process—

The cultivators attacked the ghost, who was entirely innocent in the situation, leaving it to slowly disperse, alone.

Like a wounded animal left to die.

The leader of the cultivation clan glances back and forth between the two gods, seeming to think that their disagreement must be coming to an end, bowing to Pei apologetically,

"I should have had better control of my men, General Ming Guang. Deepest apologies."

Pei lets out a tired sigh.

The Nie Clan is an honest group of cultivators, if not unconventional. Nie Feng, their leader, is no exception.

“They’re cultivators. They attacked a ghost they perceived as a threat. There’s nothing to apologize for,” he mutters, shaking his head.

Still, it’s difficult not to pity the creature.

“...You go,” the god sighs, pushing his bangs back from his forehead. “Take your men and celebrate your victory. We'll report back to the Heavens shortly.”

After a moment the clean leader nods, bowing deeply to show thanks.

Once he leaves, Pei Ming and Quan Yizhen are left alone in the forest, watching the ghost slowly begin to fade.

It’s far more ancient than Pei realized before. Not a matter of centuries, no.

This spirit is older than him. And, Pei suspects—

It could be even older than Jun Wu.

“...What’s your name, friend?” He murmurs, watching with a sympathetic gaze.

The old man shakes his head, his face a gnarled mess of wrinkles, eyes reduced to dark pits, sporting a head of white, scraggly hair.

“My name is Deng Shihong,” he rasps. “And you are not my friend.”

Slowly, his eyes drift over to Quan Yizhen, flashing with something Pei Ming doesn’t quite recognize.

“Young man...” He murmurs, “you’re a warrior, yes?”

The Martial God of the East shrugs with a nod. “Why?”

“...Come,” the ghost murmurs, “I have something for your emperor.”

He lifts one trembling hand to coax the young god forward, fingers gnarled nearly beyond recognition. “He’ll want it, I’m sure.”

Quan Yizhen’s eyebrows raise slightly—but his curiosity has been piqued enough for him to listen, stepping forward.

Deng Shihong smiles.

There’s a flash in his eyes, and in that moment, Pei realizes—

It’s a mistake.

“Quan Yizhen!” He barks, “STAY BACK!”

But, in typical fashion, the little idiot doesn’t listen, leaving Pei Ming with exactly one choice:

Grabbing him by the back of his robes and yanking him away.

But in doing so—

Thud .

Pei Ming grimaces when there’s a sharp pain in his side, and when he looks down—

He sees the hilt of a dagger sticking out between his ribs.

One with a hilt unlike any he’s seen before. Intricate, with a gilded snake curled around the pommel.

“...Ming Guang,” Deng Shihong smiles, revealing a mouth full of sharpened teeth, “I remember you clearly.”

The pain is noticeable—enough to make him grit his teeth—but when Quan Yizhen tries to rush forward to assist, Pei reaches behind, shoving him back.

“You’ve done enough.”

He snarls the words, turning back to the ghost, who seems pleased.

“I always thought it was fascinating, how a man responsible for so much bloodshed could have such honor...” Deng Shihong smiles. “You didn’t hesitate to throw yourself in front of the blade for that young man.”

Responsible for so much bloodshed.

Pei Ming’s eyes flash slightly from the reaction, and he glares.

“What were you trying to do?”

Rather than answering his question, the ghost shrugs, his form becoming somewhat transparent.

“How many children were buried, because of you?”

Pei Ming's expression doesn't change, trained with stoicism, his eyes narrowed—

But there's a flash of pain there. An old, infected scar being jabbed at viciously.

"I suspect you're a killer too," he replies, his voice calm. "You wouldn't have lasted this long if you weren't."

Deng Shihong smiles thinly, his head leaned back against the trunk of the tree behind him, "Yes," he sighs, "but not of humans. That...honor lies with you, my friend."

Pei rests his elbows on his knees, knelt before the ghost, watching his face with an eerie sort of stillness.

"I thought you said we weren't friends."

The ghost barks out a broken laugh, shaking his head, "No, no...I suppose I did..."

Slowly, his gaze trails down to Pei Ming once more, and he adds—

"...It would have been more poetic if I went for the throat, don't you think?"

The General's eyes narrow sharply, then widen with recognition.

"...Is that it, then?" He questions wearily. "You're from Yushi?"

Deng Shihong shakes his head, the pits of his eyes glittering with amusement. "That was long after my time. But I watched you, Ming Guang."

The Martial God's expression finally twists with shame. "I saw what you did."

What he did.

He...

"...And what," Pei mutters, staring him down.

Not the smiling, fun loving, easy going version of himself. Not the non-threatening personality he projects to most.

This is a side of himself he's only shown to one other person in the last few centuries. Never intentionally, only ever in moments of weakness, aching to be understood.

And he was.

“What were you trying to do? Slay a god on your way out? Make a legacy for yourself that way?”

The ghost shakes his head, his expression one of deep satisfaction. “I already have a legacy, my boy.” He murmurs, nodding towards Pei Ming, but, more specifically—

To the dagger buried between his ribs.

“I only wish…” His voice takes on an echoing quality, fading.

The face that stares back at him now is that of a soldier, worn and battle weary. Haunted.

A last sight befitting a ghost such as him, Deng Shihong thinks, eyes gleaming one final time.

“…I could see the look on Jun Wu’s face, when he sees it…” And just like that, he’s gone.

“…” Pei Ming rises to his feet, yanking the dagger out with a wince, tucking it into his belt. “Let’s go.”

“…That was my fault,” Quan Yizhen mutters—and for once, he seems to understand the consequences of his own stupidity.

Pei sends him a tired glance, waving him off.

“It was,” he agrees. “But no harm done.”

After all, a wound like this is nothing to him.

And now, all he wants is to get back home. To his liquor, to his bed—and to the person he wants to see in it, but—

He stops, reaching up to touch the corner of his mouth.

When his hand comes away—

There’s blood there, staining his fingertips.

And when Pei Ming looks down at his abdomen, expecting to find his wound healing from the spiritual energy he's pouring into it—

It's still bleeding.

"...Ming Guang?"

The general stumbles.

"...The hell?" He mutters, pressing his hand against his side, staunching the bleeding.

It—

It's not healing.

Suddenly, he finds himself looking down at the weapon at his hip with greater suspicion, his eyes narrowing.

...Just what kind of dagger is that, anyway?

Foolish, but Brave

Chapter Summary

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>
> “…You’ve never called me by my title before,” he murmurs.
>
> That’s not technically true. But it was a transgression, one that Hua Cheng corrected the moment he could do so without suspicion.
>
> “How do you like it?” The ghost smiles, leaning his elbows back against the counter.
>
> “It…” Xie Lian struggles to find a way to phrase it that doesn’t sound…odd, “…sounds different, coming from you.”

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Returning to Puqi Shrine is far simpler than the first leg of their journey. After all— with no further reason to hide his strength, Hua Cheng is perfectly willing to draw an array that takes them back in one jump.

It’s nighttime once again, the crickets chirping outside.

Xie Lian stands before the stone counter on the far wall, carefully chopping up vegetables before sliding them into the pot.

In all honesty, he knows it’s not much of a meal to serve a ghost king, but… His skills must have improved over the years, at least a little, right?

And even if they haven’t—having an excuse to do something with his hands makes it a little easier to concentrate, which he often finds…

Difficult, when Hua Cheng is around. Which makes sense now, Xie Lian supposes. Ghost Kings must have that effect on most—he’s no exception.

But, rather than sit in comfortable silence—he supposes he has to start this conversation, one way or another.

“...So,” he murmurs, sliding a handful of chopped onions into the pot, “Crimson Rain Sought Flower.”

Hua Cheng leans against the counter beside him, arms crossed.

Xie Lian can feel it now, the weight of the Ghost’s eyes upon his every move. It isn’t unpleasant at all, and he really doesn’t mind, but—

It’s distracting, that’s for certain.

“Taizi dianxia,” He replies easily, and the way he says it... Xie Lian swallows hard.

“...You’ve never called me by my title before,” he murmurs.

That’s not technically true. But it was a transgression, one that Hua Cheng corrected the moment he could do so without suspicion.

“How do you like it?” The ghost smiles, leaning his elbows back against the counter.

“It...” Xie Lian struggles to find a way to phrase it that doesn’t sound...odd, “...sounds different, coming from you.”

Hua Cheng arches an eyebrow, tilting his head slightly. “Is that so? How?”

“It just sounds...”

The prince finds himself in the rare position where he really, truly wishes he could see Hua Cheng’s face—if only to see his expression.

“...Very respectful.”

Most of the time, when people call him ‘dianxia,’ it sounds...almost mocking, like a joke. From Hua Cheng, though...

It sounds reverential.

And the look on Hua Cheng’s face—the one he wishes he could see—

It’s a smile.

Soft, warm with affection.

“Good,” he murmurs, sounding rather pleased.

And Xie Lian, he…he shakes himself out of it before he can think about it too hard.

“…Anyway,” he mutters, “I’ve been meaning to ask…why did you pretend to be the ghost groom on Mount Yu Jun?”

Hua Cheng’s smile widens now, eyes glittering with amusement, “I never pretended to be the groom,” he replies.

And—

Well. Hold on actually. Xie Lian stops, sheepish.

Hua Cheng is right about that.

All he did was stand outside of the bridal sedan and offer his hand, Xie Lian was the one who just grabbed it and went along with him willingly.

And proceeded to call him…

Xie Lian stops, remembering now what he said that night. ‘…Hong’er?’

“…I’m sorry for the way I reacted to you,” he mutters, mortified, quickly placing a lid on the pot so he can allow it to simmer. “I…you just…” the prince bites the inside of his cheek, struggling to hide his feelings, “…Reminded me of someone.”

Hua Cheng’s case is heavier than ever now, weighing on Xie Lian in a way that makes him feel…almost stripped bare.

“It didn’t offend me—but can I ask who?”

That question—it couldn’t possibly be more difficult to answer. But Xie Lian, he…

He tries.

“Someone…” Xie Lian reaches up, touching the ring through the fabric of his robes, clearing his throat as he tries to steady his voice, “Someone no longer living,” he explains, “but…very important to me.”

It’s probably good, in the end, that he can’t see Hua Cheng’s face.

Because then, if he could—he would see that the Ghost King was in pain.

It's written across his expression—a kind of naked, long borne suffering. A longing that leaves it's bearer straining from the weight of it.

If Xie Lian saw that, he might think he caused it, and— He couldn't. He could never.

There have been so many people in Hua Cheng's life that have caused him pain. He's lost count by now, even if most of them have been long since slain.

But Xie Lian has never been one of them. He never could be. Hua Cheng's god could never hurt him.

"I'm sorry," the Ghost King mutters, half under his breath—but still, Xie Lian hears him clearly, looking over at Hua Cheng with confused curiosity.

"What for?"

After a pause, he simply replies—

"...For your loss."

Xie Lian smiles awkwardly, but his answer doesn't bring comfort. "It's alright, San Lang," he murmurs, lowering his hand from the chain around his neck. "It was a long time ago."

Hua Cheng closes his eyes and lets out a sigh, nodding his head with agreement— even if Xie Lian can't see it.

It was a very, very long time ago. That's true.

Blissfully unaware of Hua Cheng's inner turmoil, Xie Lian asks—

"Then...why were you on Mount Yu Jun that night?"

Hua Cheng watches him, like he's always, always watching him. Evaluating which step is best to take. "There are two options," he muses.

Now, he pushes off of the counter, moving to stand behind the god, leaning close—until his voice is next to Xie Lian's ear, murmuring—

“The first being that I came just for you, your highness,” he purrs, watching as goosebumps rise across Xie Lian’s skin, his pupils dilated. “...Or,” he leans back, throwing his hands up in a neutral gesture, “You could say that I was bored and looking for something to do.”

Xie Lian thinks it over, rubbing his chin.

“I suppose both are equally plausible, but...”

When Xie Lian thinks about everything Hua Cheng has done in the past week, helping out around the shrine, and then everything he did in the Crescent Moon...

“...It does seem like you’ve had a lot of free time,” he muses. An amused chuckle rings in his ears, making them burn.

“If you say so, dianxia.” He shrugs, glancing over Xie Lian’s face—his gaze lingering on the god’s eyes. “I see you aren’t trying to hide the shackle anymore.”

“...Well,” Xie Lian instinctively turns his face away, self conscious. “Heavenly Law only forbids showing mortals.”

That’s true—though not every god would feel so comfortable exposing an obvious sign of weakness before a Calamity.

“And...” the prince shrugs. “You clearly already know who I am—so there’s not really a point in hiding the fact that I have a shackle, even if it’s...”

He doesn’t finish his sentence, but Hua Cheng frowns, knowing what he means. “I don’t think it’s shameful at all, dianxia.”

Xie Lian’s lips turn up at the corners, somewhat tired. “That’s kind of you to say, San lang,” he mutters, but says nothing more.

The Ghost King frowns, struggling to hide his own frustrations, then comments—

“But you’re not completely blind, are you?”

That’s different from the way it was before.

Xie Lian tilts his head.

“That’s...a recent development,” he admits. “The shackle was damaged during my third ascension. Now—I can’t see physical objects, but...”

He shrugs, looking around at the sea of crimson all around them. “I can see spiritual power. auras from Ghosts, Gods, and Cultivators for the most part.”

Hua Cheng considers that.

“And that’s why you can see the butterflies.”

Xie Lian nods with a happy smile, fond as he remembers the sight of them that night, filling the darkness around him like hundreds of little stars. “They’re beautiful, I’m rather fond of them.”

That…makes Hua Cheng smile back.

“I’m glad to hear that. They’re…” He tilts his head to the side, his gaze suddenly far away, “…rather meaningful to me.”

It’s interesting to Xie Lian, how Hua Cheng can so easily go from being such a coy, teasing figure, to moments of such sincerity.

“…They are?” The god questions, “Why?”

His reply is so quiet—it’s not that Xie Lian struggles to hear him, that would be near impossible—

But the softness of his tone gives the prince pause. “Because they always come back.”

Suddenly, the god is reminded of what Hua Cheng said the night before, just before leaping into the Sinner’s Pit.

‘Don’t worry, gege—I’ll always come back.’

He…?

Hua Cheng makes the choice to change the subject. “What does my aura look like then, your highness?”

“Ah…” Xie Lian glances around him, thinking it over. “…Well—Crimson, which isn’t a surprise, I suppose—and also…” He struggles for the right way to describe it—one that doesn’t sound rude.

“…Huge.”

Hua Cheng sounds horribly amused.

“Is that so?”

"The biggest I've seen," Xie Lian nods, and Hua Cheng actually has to cover his mouth with his hand to bite back a snort.

"...Well," he lowers his hand, his voice even, "It's good to know that it's proportional."

It sounds like he's making a joke—not at Xie Lian's expense, but...

Xie Lian doesn't really get it, either.

"...But I don't want to be overbearing," the ghost muses, tapping his chin thoughtfully —and Xie Lian is quick to correct him.

"It's not at all, really!"

"But is this better?"

When the prince looks up, his breath catches.

Those trained in cultivation—or high level ghosts—have some amount of control over their spiritual power, controlling the flow and direction as it moves through their golden cores, but—

Hua Cheng's ability to mold it is unlike anything he's ever seen.

What he's done now, essentially, is taken all of that spiritual power, flooding Xie Lian's frame of vision, and shrunk it down to the surface of his skin—allowing the god to see the shape of his form.

It's more of a rough outline rather than actually seeing what he looks like.

Spiritual energy is a form of light, in a sense—and without shadow, there's little available to create any depth to what Xie Lian can see.

"Dianxia?"

"Ah..." Xie Lian's eyes are so wide, staring at him now, trying to take in everything that he can. "It's..."

He clears his throat, trying not to sound as affected as he feels, he—

Xie Lian has been on his own for such a long time now, and he's become accustomed to people thinking less of him, because of his impairment.

And the prince isn't proud, not anymore, but... He doesn't want to be pitied.

“It’s not…completely clear, but…that’s amazing,” he admits, his voice a little weak. “Thank you, San Lang.”

The Ghost King tilts his head, “Is the shape too loose?”

“No, no!” Xie Lian assures him, holding up his hands with a nervous laugh. “I just—can’t see natural shadows, that’s all—which I suppose isn’t something you’d really think about, unless you couldn’t see, and —well—”

Oh heavens, now he’s rambling.

“—for most, being blind is sort of an all or nothing scenario, so I’m lucky that I can see you at all!”

Then he stops, realizing how that sounded, and—what’s wrong with him? Why is he being like this?

“And just—anything in general. Like—other auras. And your butterflies! I’m…ah,” he laughs again, ears burning, “very blessed, honestly!”

He hears an amused snort, ears burning hotter.

“I think I understand what you mean.” Good, because Xie Lian has no clue. “How’s this?”

Xie Lian brings up his gaze once more, eyes widening with shock as he watches Hua Cheng, essentially…

Use his spiritual energy to paint a living statue.

He can’t change the color of his spiritual energy, but he can change its concentration across his skin, creating varying areas of brightness, and it’s not the same as seeing him, but…

Xie Lian can see where his nose is. His mouth. Not individual locks of hair, but the shape.

And it’s the closest he’s come to seeing someone’s face, since…well…

Come to think of it—the last face he ever saw must have been Jun Wu’s, back in Lang’er bay, just before he put the shackles back on.

And now, come to think of it…

The colors of Hua Cheng's aura—

They remind him of the sunset from that day. The last sight he ever saw.

The thought of that—it makes him smile, even if the expression is a little bit shaky on his lips.

"That's amazing, San Lang—really—it's..." He shakes his head. "Thank you."

Now, he can vaguely see the curve of a smile on the Ghost's face.

It's not something he can do all the time, not with the amount of focus to detail that's required, but—

It's a beautiful gift, and Xie Lian is grateful for it. "You are very welcome."

Xie Lian finds himself struggling to look away now, drinking in the sight of another person for the first time in so long—but finally, he manages to mutter—

"You're so different from what the legends say."

Hua Cheng raises an eyebrow, intrigued.

"Really? Then how did you guess that it was me?"

Well. He wasn't trying particularly hard to hide it. If anything, Xie Lian thinks the guise of approaching him as a slightly ill behaved teenager was more about putting the god at ease than actual stealth.

And it worked.

"...Well, you were flawless," Xie Lian shrugs. "No matter how much I tested you—so, you either had to be a human, or a Calamity. But you were also highly intelligent, powerful, and fearless in battle—by the time I saw your aura again in the Sinner's Pit..."

It was pretty obvious who he was.

"Who else could you have been, but Crimson Rain Sought Flower? That only confirmed it."

Hua Cheng crosses his arms once more, watching the god fondly. "Can I take that as a compliment?"

Xie Lian smiles warmly, “Isn’t it a compliment already?”

Before the ghost king can say more, there’s a rattle against the floor, and when he looks down—Xie Lian can see the faint purple outline of Banyue’s jar rolling across the floor, gently thudding against the door.

“...You want to go outside?” He questions softly. “Alright.”

He opens the door for her, watching as the little clay pot rolls over to settle down on the porch, where the red wooden pillars that make up the overhang lead to a small drop off made from stacked stones.

Xie Lian walks over, sitting down beside her with his knees pulled up, arms wrapped around them.

“...General Hua?” Banyue murmurs, her voice taking on a slightly echoing quality from inside the jar.

“Hmm?”

Banyue appears now, mimicking his pose as she looks up at the sky.

“...Do you know what’s going to happen to Pei Xiu?” She murmurs, her voice strained with concern.

“I don’t know,” Xie Lian replies slowly.

In truth—he does.

Exile is the punishment of choice for such serious wrongdoings.

“...But he will have to be punished, at the very least.”

Banyue frowns, her arms tightening around herself.

“...He isn’t that bad, you know,” she mutters, shaking her head. “Ke Mo always said that he was using me, or manipulating me, but...”

She says the next words with no small amount of shame:

“I was the one who chose to do it.”

Of course—she means opening the city gates, and Xie Lian...

Even if he couldn’t understand that choice—and certainly, he does understand it—he wouldn’t be in a position to judge it.

He reaches over, patting the lid of the pot gently. “It’s alright, little one,” he murmurs.

Hua Cheng leans against the doorframe of the shrine, arms crossed over his chest as he watches the two—mainly Banyue—his expression unreadable.

“It’s in the past now,” Xie Lian continues. “You can’t hold onto these things forever.”

He knows that better than anyone.

“...I’m sorry, General Hua,” she mutters again, pressing her face into her knees, her eyes saddened, and Xie Lian...

He sighs, shaking his head. “Banyue...why do you keep on apologizing to me?”

She’s quiet. Banyue can’t cry now, without a physical form—but she would if she could.

“...I want to save the world,” she mutters, her eyes peering up, the purples around her irises so vivid in the dark.

Xie Lian stares blankly in her direction, tilting his head. “...What?”

“That’s what you used to say,” she explains, and Xie Lian gawks, completely floored.

“...I did?” He mutters, disbelieving.

How—how could he have ever said something like that?

Him, save the world?

He could barely save one city, and he got beaten half to hell in the process, no, he—he can’t.

Banyue nods rather seriously. “You said that was your dream.”

Maybe when he was a teenager, sure, but...

Oh, that’s—

Xie Lian winces, pressing his face into his hands.

That’s embarrassing, particularly when he knows that Hua Cheng is listening to their conversation.

“...And Hua Cheng Laoshi...” Banyue shrinks with guilt. “I’m sorry.”

The Ghost King doesn’t speak when she looks up at him, simply raising an eyebrow from where he leans against the doorframe to the shrine, his arms crossed over his chest.

“...You taught me magic to protect myself,” Banyue mutters, shaking her head. “Not to hurt people.”

Her eyes drift back out over the night, watching the fireflies drifting lazily through the air, listening to the sounds of the crickets. It’s peaceful here. But Banyue—she feels like she doesn’t deserve to Rest In Peace.

“I tried,” she mutters, pressing her face into her knees. “I tried so hard to save the people of Yong’an, but I...” her voice wavers, and her shoulders tremble. “I ended up destroying the Crescent Moon kingdom.”

Xie Lian’s chest aches, and he remembers a time when he was just like her. So young, so hurt, and so disappointed in himself.

Crying in his mothers arms, whispering the same words—

‘I tried.’

‘I tried so hard.’

“I...know you don’t think much of Ke Mo either,” Banyue mutters, and Xie Lian can’t hep but grit his teeth in response, remembering what that man did. “But before...he was good to me.”

Xie Lian didn’t admit it back in the sinner’s pit—but he’s far more of the same mind with San Lang. He doubts Ke Mo’s loyalty was to Banyue as a human being, but to her usefulness as a weapon.

“The soldiers respected me, and I...” Banyue grimaces. “They weren’t evil, General.”

Xie Lian believes that much. The foot soldiers of war rarely ever are. They’re usually young men. Sons and brothers and school boys, marching to death for reasons they can’t possibly understand before their time comes.

“But I...I got them killed...and I couldn’t even free them.”

Banyue's fingers tremble where they grip her shins, her lips pressed together tightly.

"General Hua...I know I've made mistakes, but...where did I go wrong?" She whispers. "What should I do?"

There was a time in his life when Xie Lian probably would have given some arrogant, well intentioned speech about believing in herself. In always doing what she believed was right, even if it was hard.

But now—now, Xie Lian only sighs, resting his hand on top of the jar.

"I'm sorry, little one," he murmurs, shaking his head. "I didn't know the answer back then—and I still don't."

The ghost hangs her head, biting her lip to the point where, if she had physical form— it would bleed from it.

"...What have I been doing for the last two hundred years?" She mutters, her voice filled with shame. "Such a failure..."

Xie Lian stares into the darkness ahead contemplatively, his expression unreadable.

Then what was he doing for the last eight centuries?

He's a far greater failure.

Finally, Hua Cheng speaks up from his perch in the corner, arms still crossed as he observes the two.

"I didn't teach you magic for self defense, Banyue." He murmurs, taking on a different tone now, than the one he's used with Xie Lian.

There's something stern about him now.

It makes him seem older—less like the young man he posed as for Xie Lian's benefit, and more like the Ghost King he actually is.

And it's a keen reminder—he must actually be close to Xie Lian's own age. The thought makes his stomach flip inexplicably.

"I gave you the freedom to make your own choices." Hua Cheng concludes, watching her with an evaluating gaze. "You said just now that opening the gates was your choice, and yours alone. Remaining in the Crescent Moon Kingdom—that was your own choice as well."

Banyue hangs her head even lower. “They were mistakes, Hua Cheng Laoshi.”

“Mistakes are the result of free will.” The Ghost King replies calmly. His tone almost sounds flat, unfeeling—but Xie Lian doesn’t think that it actually is.

It’s more like…the ‘tough love’ approach.

“Be grateful that you had the opportunity to learn from them, and move on. Don’t apologize to me.”

Hua Cheng has too many mistakes of his own, he doesn’t have time to bear someone else’s remorse.

With that, he turns around to walk inside, giving her space—and Xie Lian quickly makes the decision to follow, rising to his feet, giving the younger ghost a gentle kiss on top of the head before leaving her with her thoughts.

The door shuts, and Xie Lian sighs.

“…That was good advice,” he mutters, shaking his head. “I wish I…”

He almost says that he wishes he could follow it—then realizes how silly that must seem.

“…Thank you,” he glances up with a somewhat pained smile. “For teaching her, I mean.”

“Even with how it turned out?”

Xie Lian thinks about it for a moment—and then he nods, “Because if you hadn’t, she probably…”

She probably wouldn’t have survived very long, and certainly couldn’t have risen as a powerful ghost.

It’s such a selfish way of thinking, but…

If Xie Lian could have had the first person he lost come back to him as a ghost, he would have. He can’t say he’s not grateful to at least have her.

“I never would have gotten the chance to see her again,” Xie Lian shrugs, swallowing hard. “So, thank you.”

The Ghost King stares at him, long and hard, and Xie Lian isn't sure if he's not going to answer, or if he just doesn't know what to say, so he asks—

"There's one thing I don't understand," he mutters. "It was pretty obvious that Pei Junior was trying to help her, but..." Xie Lian frowns, pondering the matter. "Why not just destroy the ghosts trapped in the pit himself, if that was the trouble?"

After all—it would have ended so much unnecessary suffering and death.

"Because he was using a clone," Hua Cheng replies with ease.

It's almost startling at times, the way he seems almost omniscient. Xie Lian supposes it makes sense, given what he is, but still—sometimes, it's like talking to a walking dictionary.

"His spiritual power was greatly reduced. He couldn't have dispersed all of the spirits."

Hua Cheng watches as Xie Lian goes to his altar, feeling for some of the flowers that were left earlier that day as an offering, arranging them more delicately.

Of course, as a prince, he was trained in many refined arts. Dancing, singing, calligraphy—and floral arrangements.

Naturally, he can maneuver the flowers into a more appealing shape just by feeling the petals—and Hua Cheng watches him, thoughtful.

"Just feeding humans to the creatures was probably the fastest way to appease them," the ghost concludes, plucking one blossom from the bouquet. He twirls it between his fingers for a moment, commenting, "After all, for a Heavenly Official— human lives are like that of ants."

Xie Lian sighs, but doesn't protest. He doesn't necessarily agree that all Heavenly Officials are like that, but some of them are, and...

Obviously, someone from the ghost realm would have a different perspective—but that doesn't mean Hua Cheng's experiences are less valid.

Particularly when you consider the fact that he slaughtered 33 Heavenly Officials— and after spending time with him...

Hua Cheng had a reason.

Xie Lian has no idea what that reason could have been—but he's spent enough time with the man to understand that he's not violent without provocation.

Sure, maybe he doesn't need *much* provocation—but still. "I suppose —"

Then, the ghost does something that makes him pause.

He reaches out with little warning, on a whim, really, no— An impulse. And he...

Tucks that flower behind Xie Lian's ear, pushing some of his hair back with it before pulling his hand back, watching the god closely.

Xie Lian's expression is frozen, difficult to read. Remember.

That's what Hua Cheng is thinking, his gaze burning into the curve of Xie Lian's cheek, his posture relaxed, but everything inside of him is tense.

He can't say his own name. Can't answer when Xie Lian calls him.

Don't you remember?

And he can tell from the twist of Xie Lian's mouth—he does.

Remembers the day he woke up with a flower tucked behind his ear. Remembers the Ghost he snapped at over it, ungrateful.

It was the day I kissed you.

It was the only kiss that Xie Lian chose. The only one he wanted.

And Wu Ming was so gentle. He—

He was the last person that was so gentle with Xie Lian. The last person who—

Hua Cheng watches his god's lips tremble, and after letting out a shaky breath, he—

"Your clone," Xie Lian mumbles, his voice small, "...how is it so powerful, then?"

There's a pause, and—

Hua Cheng closes his eyes briefly, forcing his chest to relax, unwinding the knot in his stomach.

It's alright. He—

This isn't about him, and it's alright.

Slowly, he opens his eyes—and a sly, cocky smile spreads across his face. "This is my real body."

"...Really?" Xie Lian snaps out of it now, eyes wide as he looks him over curiously, taking in the form that Hua Cheng is still projecting for him.

"Authentic," Hua Cheng agrees, that smile turning slightly lopsided with affection as he watches that intelligent curiosity.

And he's not the only one that's prone to being impulsive, not between the two of them.

Xie Lian finds himself reaching up without thinking, both palms pressed against the Ghost King's cheeks—just because he wants to see what a Calamity's skin must feel like, and—

He realizes three things very quickly.

First—his skin is cool. Not unpleasantly so—but noticeable.

Second, it's perfectly smooth, not a scar or blemish in sight.

And third—he has a dimple in the right corner of his mouth.

They stare at one another, eyes wide.

Hua Cheng, from the silent delight of the fact that his god would deign to touch him so easily, and—

Xie Lian, from mortification that he *dared* to touch Hua Cheng so easily. He—He was just curious, he hadn't even been thinking.

And the ghost's cheeks might be pleasantly cool, but Xie Lian's are on fire, burning an alluring shade of pink that Hua Cheng can't seem to take his eyes off of.

He yanks his hands away quickly, hiding them behind his back, rocking on his heels awkwardly.

“...Nice,” he croaks.

Hua Cheng’s eyes flash slightly with annoyance, not necessarily with Xie Lian, never him, but...

It’s not the word he wanted to hear.

Still, he smirks, taking on a teasing tone.

“Oh?” He muses, leaning closer. “This skin looks nice to you?”

Xie Lian isn’t used to the sensation of eye contact anymore, even if he can’t see Hua Cheng’s clearly, he—

He breaks it, clearing his throat. “...Yeah...” He mumbles, then realizes — “If that’s a skin, then...”

He looks over the tall, broad form before him.

“...This isn’t actually what you look like?”

“No,” Hua Cheng admits, shaking his head. “Not precisely.”

“Then...” Xie Lian tilts his chin back up, even if his eyes are still averted, “...could I take a peek at the real one?”

The pause is long, and a little...tense.

“Ah...it’s not that serious,” Xie Lian smiles awkwardly, taking another step back, “don’t worry about it—”

And then, a scent tickles his nose—burnt soup.

Oh, he forgot!

He spins around, going to see if it’s salvageable, and...

It’s hard as a rock against the pan, smoldering.

So much for improvement.

“...I can make another—?”

“It’s alright,” Hua Cheng assures him. It’s already late, after all. “I’m not particularly hungry.”

They make ready for bed, and when Xie Lian is combing his hair, Hua Cheng offers him a small bundle to use as a pillow.

“Oh,” the god takes it with a smile, “thank you, San Lang.”

It’s only when he lays down, his cheek pressed against it, that he realizes. It smells like the forest. Like rain. It’s—

It’s San Lang’s outer robe.

Xie Lian’s cheeks heat up slightly as he curls on his side.

He can’t remember the last time he blushed this much, for this long—all in the span of one evening. And honestly—

Xie Lian doesn’t think it’s ever happened.

He tries to sleep, to will his mind to just stop, but…

His eyes blink open, and his fingers twitch restlessly.

“…San Lang?” He whispers into the dark, “are you awake?”

There’s a soft chuckle in response, and Xie Lian is a little sheepish, knowing he sounds like a child sleeping over at a friend’s house.

“Yes, dianxia,” the Ghost King replies. “I’m awake.”

“…”

The prince rolls over onto his stomach, fiddling with his fingers, looking to see if Hua Cheng is still projecting his aura across his skin, and…

He is, kicked back and relaxed, one leg pulled up and slightly bent, his arms folded behind his head.

He’s so…

“I’ve been wondering,” Xie Lian mumbles, eyelashes brushing against his cheeks as he speaks.

Hua Cheng has counted each of them a hundred times, long, thick, and dark.

“Don’t you have to report back to the Ghost Realm at some point?” He questions. “Won’t you get in trouble?”

The younger man cracks a lopsided grin, raising an eyebrow, "Report to who, exactly?"

Xie Lian pauses, thinking—

"I'm the strongest there is." Hua Cheng reminds him—cocky as ever, but gentle in his casual arrogance.

The prince nods, his stomach doing a small backflip.

He certainly is. What he did in the Crescent Moon Kingdom—Xie Lian doubts that required even the smallest effort with him.

Hua Cheng enjoyed himself, but he toyed with Pei Xiu, like a cat batting a mouse between it's paws.

Xie Lian hopes that someday...

He might get to see what it looks like, to see San Lang go all out.

Just imagining what such a battle might look like sends a thrilled shiver down his spine.

"Besides," the Ghost King continues, taking Xie Lian out of his day dreaming, "ghosts are rather independent creatures."

"...Oh?" Xie Lian mumbles, his nose tickling against Hua Cheng's robe, feet kicking slightly behind him, "I always assumed the structure would be parallel to the Heavenly Court."

"I suppose it could be, if that was what I wanted," Hua Cheng shrugs. "But that's not my philosophy."

The thought of that gives Xie Lian pause, because...he never considered the idea that such things were a matter of choice.

After all—the Heavens function the same way that they always have, even in the dynasties that predated Jun Wu, as the emperor has explained before.

Is he just a traditionalist? Xie Lian—he doesn't think so.

After all, Jun Wu always seemed so remorseful about enforcing the rules when it came to him. Like it pained the emperor to do so. Xie Lian doesn't think he would have done that if he had a choice.

"Then...what is your philosophy?" He questions.

Hua Cheng shrugs, fiddling with one lock of hair, rolling something braided into it between his fingertips.

“Free will,” he replies.

Xie Lian can’t help but smile.

Right—like what he was saying to Banyue, before.

“...Then have you met the other Ghost Kings?” He muses, curious. His feet are still kicking in the air slightly as he speaks, the hem of his trousers slipping down slightly, bunching at mid calf.

It reveals the shape of his ankles. Slender, surprisingly delicate, and...

That cursed shackle, the one he tried to hide from Hua Cheng the first night he slept here, is on display.

The Ghost King loathes the reminder of his god’s punishment, but reluctantly appreciates the shape of his legs, nonetheless.

Then, averts his gaze to the ceiling respectfully when he catches himself doing so. “What about the green ghost, Qi Rong?” Xie Lian continues. “Have you met him?”

“...That tasteless piece of shit?” Hua Cheng mutters.

It’s the first time Xie Lian can remember hearing him swear.

“I’ll drop in and visit him every now and again, but he usually runs away as soon as I greet him,” the Ghost King drawls. “Such a shame.”

“...What sort of greeting is it to make him run?”

Now, his eyes lower back down to meet Xie Lian’s, his smile turning impish.

“The same kind that earned me the name Crimson Rain Sought Flower,” he replies easily.

“...” Xie Lian props himself up on his elbows, back curving slightly. “Is there bad blood between the two of you?”

‘Oh, you have no idea.’

“He’s an eye sore and an embarrassment.” Hua Cheng shrugs. “Black Water feels the same way.”

"...Black Water Sinking Ships," Xie Lian recalls. "Are you two friends?"

He doesn't answer immediately, but Xie Lian doesn't interpret this silence as a refusal to answer. He's just...thinking very carefully.

The god waits.

"...We know one another very well," Hua Cheng finally replies, choosing his words carefully. "And he's my only peer."

"He's equal to you in strength, then?" Xie Lian's eyebrow arches slightly, and the ghost shakes his head.

"Nine times out of ten? I'm significantly stronger."

"...And the one time out of ten?"

The prince is curious—after all, there are always exceptions.

"In his lair," Hua Cheng explains with a shrug. "Any ghost is at their strongest within their own territory."

Even Jun Wu wouldn't dare fight Hua Cheng in Ghost City, for instance.

"And any other ghost, well..." the Ghost King shrugs. "They don't have the right to speak to me unless I allow it."

Xie Lian smiles faintly. "I see," he murmurs, rolling onto his back. He's certainly cocky, but...not in an abrasive way.

"By the way," Hua Cheng turns his head, "that was a nice line."

Xie Lian blinks slowly, his expression a mask of confusion. "What line?"

The young man grins, a sharpened canine glinting.

"'I want to save the world,'" he replies.

"..." Xie Lian yanks his robes over his face with an embarrassed whine. "San Lang!"

The Ghost King rolls onto his side, propping his chin up on his hand so he can watch him, chuckling with fond amusement.

“What? Is there something wrong with it?”

Xie Lian’s voice is muffled under the robe, slightly high pitched with sheepishness. “It’s so silly…”

One lock of the princes hair is peeking out from underneath his robes, strewn across the bed—and Hua Cheng is just bold enough to twirl it between his fingers, “The fact that you dared to say it out loud means that you were willing to try,” the ghost murmurs. “Of course I admire that.”

It doesn’t make Xie Lian feel any less silly, but…it’s very kind of the ghost to say, and so the prince peeks his face out from under the robe, however hesitantly.

“…I suppose I said sillier things when I was young,” he mutters, relenting.

Hua Cheng’s eyes never leave him. As if he would ever want to look away. “Like what?”

“Well…” Xie Lian trails off.

He almost never talks about it. Not anymore.

He’s told little stories here and there, vague on the details, but…

He trusts San Lang.

In a way that a person trusts their instincts. Less of a choice, and more of something that just comes naturally.

“…After my first ascension,” he murmurs, “I met a young boy. And he—he was just about as lonely and miserable as a human could be,” the god recalls. “San Lang, he—he was so young, and he was saying that he wanted to die. That the world was so cruel that he wanted to destroy it, and then kill himself.”

And Xie Lian’s life—it was so beautiful back then. He couldn’t understand how someone so young could be so broken.

Because the world hadn’t been cruel to him yet. Because he hadn’t known what it was like, by then, to be utterly alone.

“…He asked me why he was still alive,” Xie Lian murmurs. “And if there was any meaning to life. And do you know how I responded?”

Hua Cheng's gaze is distant, but when he replies—his tone is filled with a sort of gentleness that has only ever had one witness.

"How did you respond?"

"...I said, 'If you can't find a meaning in life,'" Xie Lian repeats, biting his lip, "'then allow me to be that meaning.'"

Just saying it out loud now makes him feel so arrogant.

"I told him to live for me. To use me as his reason to go on."

The god falls silent after that, and after a moment, Hua Cheng probes.

"And what did the boy do?"

Xie Lian's heart aches with bittersweet adoration.

"Oh, he did..." Xie Lian stops, composing himself.

He can't cry these days, even when he knows he needs to.

Unless it's about Hong'er.

"He did exactly what I asked, San Lang, he—" Xie Lian swallows thickly. "He completely devoted himself to me for the rest of his life."

But he deserved so much more.

"...and his reward," Xie Lian mutters, clearing his throat, "was getting murdered trying to protect me. So—I couldn't say anything like that now. I'm not..."

He huffs out a long sigh.

"I'm not worth it."

He just deserves to be—

"I disagree."

Xie Lian glances up, startled, and Hua Cheng averts his gaze, looking up at the ceiling.

"You just told me he followed you until the end of his life. That means—until the moment he passed, the boy's life had meaning. More than it did before." The Ghost King reminds him.

"You gave that to him. That's worth more than you could ever know."

But was it a fair trade? Xie Lian still couldn't tell you that. Every second of every day, he struggles with it.

And yet still, he…

"…Thank you, San Lang," he murmurs. "That means…a lot to me."

The Ghost King watches him, allowing the lock of hair he was fiddling with before to slip through his fingers. "I meant it."

Xie Lian knows—it's not something a person would lie about.

"I don't think I could say that again now, though." The god admits, swallowing hard.

"I only said it back then because I…" He presses his lips together tightly, and his voice gets so small, "…I really thought I could do anything I set my mind to."

Little does he know, the person Xie Lian is speaking to now is the only one who still believes that he can.

Hua Cheng opens his mouth to reply, then stops when he hears a voice, entering a private communication array.

'Hua Chengzhu.'

His eyes flash with irritation at the interruption, but his expression doesn't change.

'Not now.'

Normally, he never has to ask Shuo twice.

'I need to know where Blackwater is, he isn't answering in his array.'

Hua Cheng fights the urge to allow his eyebrow to twitch, and he simply replies—

'In the Heavenly Capital, most likely. I'll deal with him tomorrow.'

'But—!'

'Unless someone is about to disperse you, don't contact me again until tomorrow morning.' The Ghost King replies flatly.

After a few beats of silence, he returns his full attention to his god once more.

“It might have been a foolish thing that you said when you were young,” he murmurs, watching Xie Lian nod with agreement. “...But it was brave.”

The prince pauses, seeming genuinely surprised that anyone would say that but... He smiles, nonetheless.

Still, Hua Cheng feels like he has to ask—

“Now that you’ve poured your heart out to me—don’t you want to know what my intentions are?”

Xie Lian considers it, tapping his thumb against his chin—and Hua Cheng silently hopes that he’ll insist, but—

“I don’t think I need to.”

Hua Cheng bites back the urge to scold him, knowing how odd that would seem, but —

He’s too trusting.

And that’s alright for now, because Hua Cheng knows he would die before he harms his love—but the rest of the world isn’t so well intentioned.

“If you want to tell me, you will,” Xie Lian shrugs. “And even if I decided I didn’t like the answer, and I drove you away—what could stop you from coming back with a different face? I’m sure you’re clever enough to fool me a few more times.”

Hua Cheng doesn’t feel particularly guilty, because he isn’t keeping information from Xie Lian by choice, but...

Technically, he’s already done what Xie Lian is saying—and despite hinting, the god has no idea.

“...And what if my true form is hideous?” He questions softly.

Xie Lian smiles, in spite of himself—remembering the last time he was here, in this very shrine, and someone he cared about said the words —

‘I’m not beautiful.’

And he was such a little liar.

“It isn’t.”

Hua Cheng raises an eyebrow. “How could you know that?”

Xie Lian shrugs, “I just have a feeling.”

And he suspects the form that held him in the Sinner’s Pit might have been the real one. Xie Lian didn’t get to see it, or feel very much, but…

He very much doubts that it’s ‘hideous.’ “I wouldn’t be so sure…”

Hua Cheng reaches over, allowing one fingertip to shift into a long, menacing claw before teasing it lightly over Xie Lian’s knuckles, watching as the god shivers, but doesn’t flinch away.

“It could be quite monstrous.”

Xie Lian very much doubts that, but even so…

Claws are a rather useful feature to have. Practically speaking. What’s so wrong with that?

“…Even if you were,” Xie Lian shrugs, turning his head to look over Hua Cheng’s aura, “we’re friends, aren’t we? So, we should be genuine with one another. I promise I won’t—”

He stops, then—noticing that the Ghost King’s shoulders have begun to shake.

…Was it because Xie Lian showed so much trust in him? Did that make him emotional, or—?

Then, he hears a soft chuckle, and his lips turn into a slight frown. “What’s so funny, San Lang?”

Of course, it’s just—

‘Friends should be genuine with one another.’

Xie Lian couldn’t know, because Hua Cheng can’t tell him, but… He literally cannot be genuine with the man, and it’s so—

A full blown laugh slips out of him, and Xie Lian huffs, giving his shoulder a light shove.

"San Lang!" He cries out, his face turning pink all over again, "Why are you laughing so much? Did I say something wrong?"

"N-No," The Ghost King snickers, covering his mouth.

Xie Lian frowns. Honestly, with the way his lower lip juts out, it's more like a pout, and Hua Cheng, even in his laughter, finds his gaze narrowing in on that mouth longingly.

The prince pulls his hand back, huffing. "You're so insincere!"

He starts to pull his hand back, but before he can—Xie Lian feels long, slightly cool fingers enveloping his wrist, holding firm before tugging him forward, and—

When Hua Cheng presses Xie Lian's palm over his chest, the prince bites back a gasp, eyes widening sharply.

There's a sharp contrast now, between the heart underneath his palm—one that no longer beats—and his own, pounding unsteadily against his ribs.

He's firm under Xie Lian's palm, the cotton of his undershirt smooth to the touch. He —

Xie Lian hasn't...

It's obvious, that most people cannot touch a prince. Xie Lian was treasured as a child and a young man—carefully protected. And as a god, he cultivated in such a way that mandated keeping firm physical boundaries.

But what most people don't consider about being a prince, is... You learn not to touch anyone. Ever.

Xie Lian hugged his parents, but rarely—and only in moments of distress. He used to be somewhat closer with Hong'er, because...

Because he was so new to being in the dark, and Hong'er made touch into something beautiful. A comfort.

And then, Bai Wuxiang...

He made it into something that petrified him.

But nothing ever felt so violating as that day by the river, when he wore Feng Xin's face. Xie Lian knows, it's unreasonable to still feel so…hollowed out by what happened. To still hurt, when he remembers.

The last person he allowed to touch him casually was Wu Ming. Since then, in the last eight hundred years…

Nearly every touch Xie Lian has experienced has been that of violence. There were occasional exceptions, but…

This feels different. It feels… Personal, somehow.

Hua Cheng touches him gently, but firmly. In a way that isn't terrifying, but… grounding.

His fingers are long enough to overlap where they wrap around him, thumb pressed against the inside of his wrist—where he must feel Xie Lian's pulse throbbing.

A hummingbird heartbeat.

And when he speaks again, initially—he leaves the god speechless.

"I swear," he murmurs, his voice low, resounding, like he's taking an oath of the most serious kind, "That on heaven and earth, you won't find someone more sincere than me."

Oh.

Thump .

Xie Lian…

Thump .

He can hear blood rushing in his ears. And his heart—

Thump .

Xie Lian can't remember the last time it pounded like this.

And he's not completely oblivious, he—he can tell that there's an underlying meaning to Hua Cheng's words.

Even if he can't understand that meaning—he knows it's there. And he's—

Xie Lian shrinks his arm back, swallowing hard—and Hua Cheng lets him, Xie Lian's wrist slipping out from between his fingers.

He's overwhelmed.

"I—we—"

Xie Lian rolls over onto his side, facing away from him, still pressing the wrist Hua Cheng was holding to his chest rather tightly.

"It's already late," he mutters, his cheek pressed against Hua Cheng's outer robe. "We should try to sleep."

The Ghost King doesn't protest.

Instead, he just watches the curve of Xie Lian's shoulders as he starts to relax, his breathing slowing down. The way his hair fans out all around him, completely loose.

His fingers seek out one strand again, and this time...Hua Cheng lifts it to his lips, closing his eyes.

"Next time," he murmurs, "when we see each other again—I'll meet you in my true form."

Xie Lian's head moves slightly in response—and while he's likely half asleep...

Hua Cheng is fairly sure that the god heard him.

And not much longer after that, he completely drifts off.

Hua Cheng has never been under the impression that he was a good person. He's said that many times before.

He was a selfish child. A selfish teenager, and now...

When his body flares with warmth, he knows Xie Lian will unconsciously press back against him, leaning close.

Allowing Hua Cheng to lean his chin against his god's shoulder, one arm draped over him. Not daring to hold him close, but aching from the satisfaction having him near.

He's a selfish man.

A low sigh slips out of him, his cheek pressed against Xie Lian's hair.

He mouths the words, but he doesn't put any air behind them.

They're always there. Lurking behind every action, every touch, every word he speaks, slipping between the syllables.

They rattle against the inside of his teeth, begging for release, but he doesn't have the right to say them.

'I love you.'

Those are Hong-er's words, not his. They—

They wouldn't hold the same meaning, hearing them from Hua Cheng. And at first, he thought he might…

When he gave Xie Lian that flower, he thought—at the very least—he might be able to get close to the god by getting him to realize that he was Wu Ming.

The Crown Prince trusted Wu Ming. Cared for him. Hua Cheng felt that.

But then, he saw the look on Xie Lian's face.

And it was in that moment, that Hua Cheng realized—

Wu Ming is a painful memory for him. A reminder of a time that he clearly regrets, and…

He squeezes his eyes shut now, biting his lip until one of his sharpened canines breaks skin, blood beading up.

This isn't about him.

'If your beloved knew that they were the reason you haven't moved on…it might cause them pain.'

It's never been about him.

'Then I just won't let them find out.'

As badly as Hua Cheng wants to be recognized, it wasn't Wu Ming that Xie Lian asked for that night.

It was Hong'er. He—

There's a voice in his mind again, in spite of his orders, speaking into their private array. He's irritated by the presence, ready to snap, but...

'G-gege...'

When he hears Ren Song's voice, his attention sharpens.

Trembling—and horribly frightened.

Hua Cheng's eyes snap open, burning in the dark as he whips his gaze towards the door, pupils narrowing into cat-like slits.

'Shuo?'

'I...'

The ghost's voice breaks, and Hua Cheng can't decide what they're frightened of—

An enemy, or Hua Cheng.

'I...m-messed up...'

Hua Cheng listens silently as they stumble through their explanation, eyes flickering about the room as he takes it in—and when Shuo is finished—

The Ghost King is furious.

'I...'

'Come home. ' He speaks into the array firmly. ' *Now.'*

'Gege, he—'

'Now. I'll be there soon.'

He doesn't dare sever the connection, not until he knows the ghost has made it back to the city safely—but when he listens, he can hear Ren Song using distance shortening magic—

They'll be safe. For now.

He sits up slowly, looking down at Xie Lian's sleeping form, remorseful.

"...I'll see you soon," he murmurs, reaching town to tuck some of the god's hair behind his ear.

The flower is still there.

His fingers trail down to the god’s neck, finding the chain there—gently pulling until a silver ring slips from the front of his robes.

He lifts the ring up, holding it in the flat of his palm for a moment, examining it in the moonlight streaming in through the window.

Ironically enough, it’s the first time in close to a millennia of the afterlife that Hua Cheng has touched his own ashes.

They feel warm.

That’s from Xie Lian, though—not him.

Slowly, so carefully, not daring to wake him, the ghost king leans down—pressing a kiss against the God’s forehead, the touch featherlight as the ring is carefully slipped back inside his robes.

“…keep taking care of me until then, love.”

When he rises to his feet, he walks silently through the shrine—and when he opens the door into the nice, there’s the gentle rattling of dice.

Clack!

Clack!

Clack—!

“HEY!” One of the Ghosts barks, “It’s Hua Chengzhu!” “Welcome back, my lord!”

“Did ya have a nice—?”

The moment the crowds in the streets of Ghost City see the look on Crimson Rain Sought Flower’s face, they scatter like tiny birds swooping out of his way as he stalks down the street.

‘Where are they?’ He barks into another array. Yin Yu’s response is quiet.

‘Paradise Manor.’

He doesn’t even bother walking across the city, rattling his dice irritably in his palm.

Clack!

Clack!

Clack!

With his next step, he's in the entrance hall—stalking past servants and messengers, boots thudding sharply against marble floors.

The door to the bedroom rips off of it's hinges from how forcefully he wrenches it open, not that he's particularly concerned about property damage—and when he sees the occupants within, he takes a deep breath, shoulders slumping subtly.

She's fine.

Wearing a female skin today, curled up on the floor beside the bed, hissing like an angry cat as Yin Yu tries to wipe the blood from her cheeks with a cloth, baring her fangs defensively, but—

Ren Song isn't angry, she's just frightened— And the blood isn't hers.

But her eyes are bloodshot and swollen, cheeks wet with tears when she looks up at the Ghost King, lips trembling apologetically.

"I-I tried to..." She starts, then stops, deeply ashamed.

Shuo finds value in ability, and berates herself brutally for the smallest failures. But this wasn't Ren Song's mistake.

"...I know."

Hua Cheng's tone isn't harsh now, not the way it was in the array.

He walks over, kneeling down beside Yin Yu, taking the rag from his hands. Ren Song doesn't shove his hand away, when he presses it against her cheek.

Instead she gulps, pressing a hand against her chest.

There isn't a heartbeat there, and she doesn't need to breathe, but—

She can't stop hyperventilating.

"He—they're—when they find out what I did—"

Ren Song will become a target.

"He'll d…disperse me…"

Hua Cheng is calm, mopping the blood from her cheeks, reaching down to do the same with her hands.

Of course—she means Jun Wu.

"Did anyone else see you?"

Ren Song shakes her head, eyeliner streaked at the corners of her eyes. "B-But he…s- sent the…"

People will come looking.

"Did you leave any evidence?"

The younger ghost shakes her head, sniffling.

Ren Song rarely feels fear anymore, but when she does—it overwhelms her.

"Look at me."

She shakes her head, whimpering, and Hua Cheng repeats himself.

"Look at me, brat."

Slowly, she does.

One eye stares back at her, the color of a darkening scar, and in the place of the other, a dark eyepatch.

The gaze she's known since she was small—and unlike the rest of the world, living and dead—it's never frightened her.

"Even if they did come for you," he replies evenly, sitting back on his heels. "What do you think I would do?"

The mere possibility of Jun Wu setting foot in this city—or sending one of his lackeys —with the intention of taking Ren Song would be signing a death warrant.

And Hua Cheng would be the executioner.

Yin Yu watches the exchange between the two…surprised.

He was always aware of the fact that Shuo had a long history with the

Ghost King— and while Hua Cheng isn't a particularly affectionate man...

He can be protective in rare moments.

Usually over territory. Belongings. Things he views as his.

But never over a ghost. Yin Yu hasn't seen that until now.

After a moment, Ren Song's form begins to shift again—this time shrinking smaller and smaller, until she's just a small child again.

Curled up into a ball.

Yin Yu glances over at Hua Cheng, confused, and the Ghost King sighs, explaining.

"This is how old she was when she died," he mutters, not protesting when the little girl crawls into his arms, clinging around his neck. "She's aged past it, but, when she's destabilized..."

Shuo regresses until she calms down. Yanlin used to do the same thing—but far more often, given how much more easily shaken she was, compared to Shuo.

"She'll be over it in a day or so," Hua Cheng mutters, rising to his feet with the ghost in one arm, hitched against his hip.

He walks over to Yin Yu, making like he's going to hand her over, and the former official stumbles back, holding his hands up in confusion—

"What do you want me to do with her?" He mutters, confused.

Hua Cheng stares at him like he's lost his mind. "Put her to bed, obviously."

"I..." Yin Yu blinks, looking down at the tear streaked face of a little girl—one who more often than not presents as a grown man—a grown man that *bullies* him at times—

"Wouldn't she rather have you do it?" He mumbles, clearly uncomfortable.

Hua Cheng glares, "Maybe, but I have to deal with the one that caused this mess." He holds her out until Yin Yu relents, gingerly picking the little girl up in his arms.

Ren Song doesn't seem thrilled either, but clings to him anyway. "...But..."

Yin Yu looks down at her, then back up at his boss, muttering—

"Didn't she cause it?"

Hua Cheng's expression darkens as he shakes his head, turning around, stalking out of the room.

"No," he mutters, rattling the dice in his hand. "She did not."

The two ghosts are left alone in the manor after that, and when Shuo starts demanding bedtime stories before she'll let Yin Yu tuck her in—he can't even enjoy the prospect of holding it over Ren Song's head later.

"Do the voices!"

And he really, *really* needs that raise.

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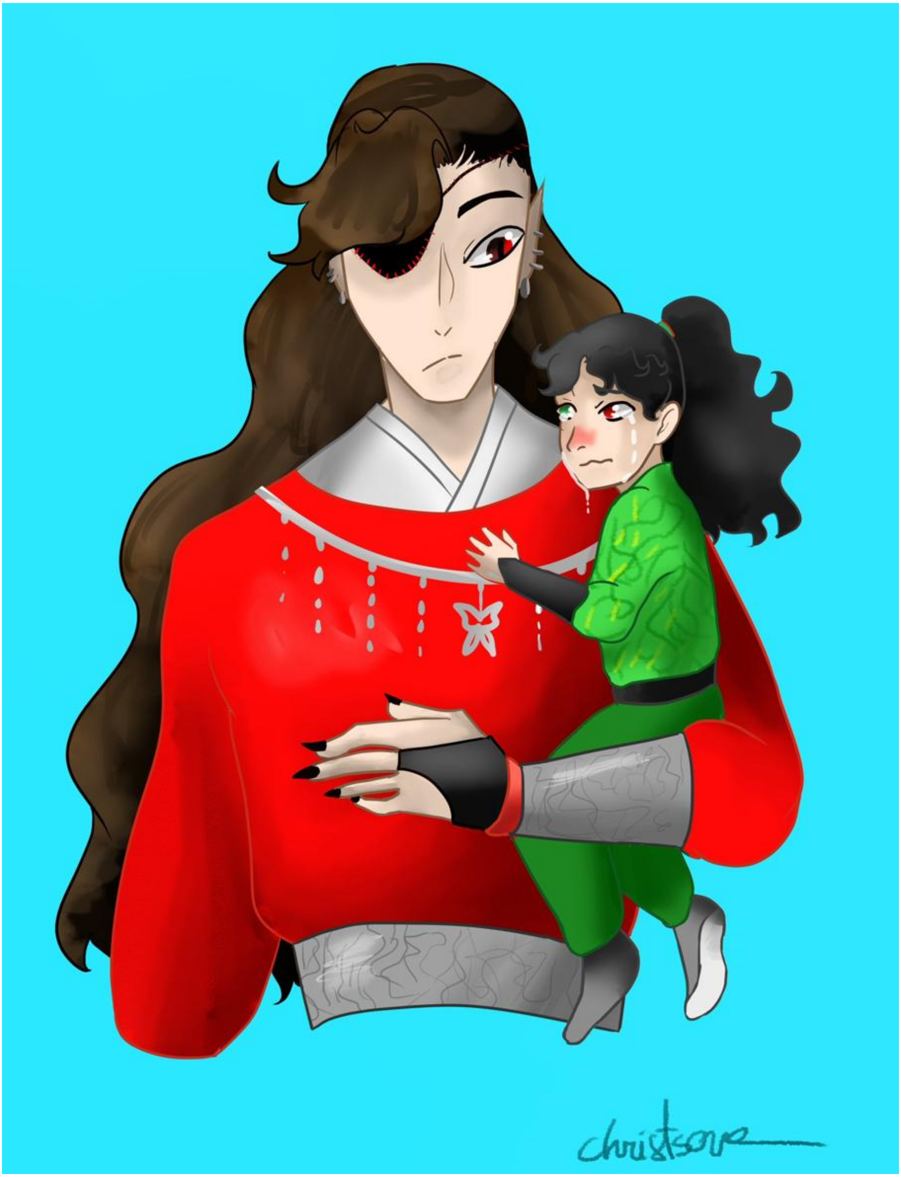
Ren Song (Male Form)

CREDIT: PRI

Hua Cheng and Shuo/Ren Song (child form)



christsove

CREDIT: EVE

Ren Song (female form) CW: blood

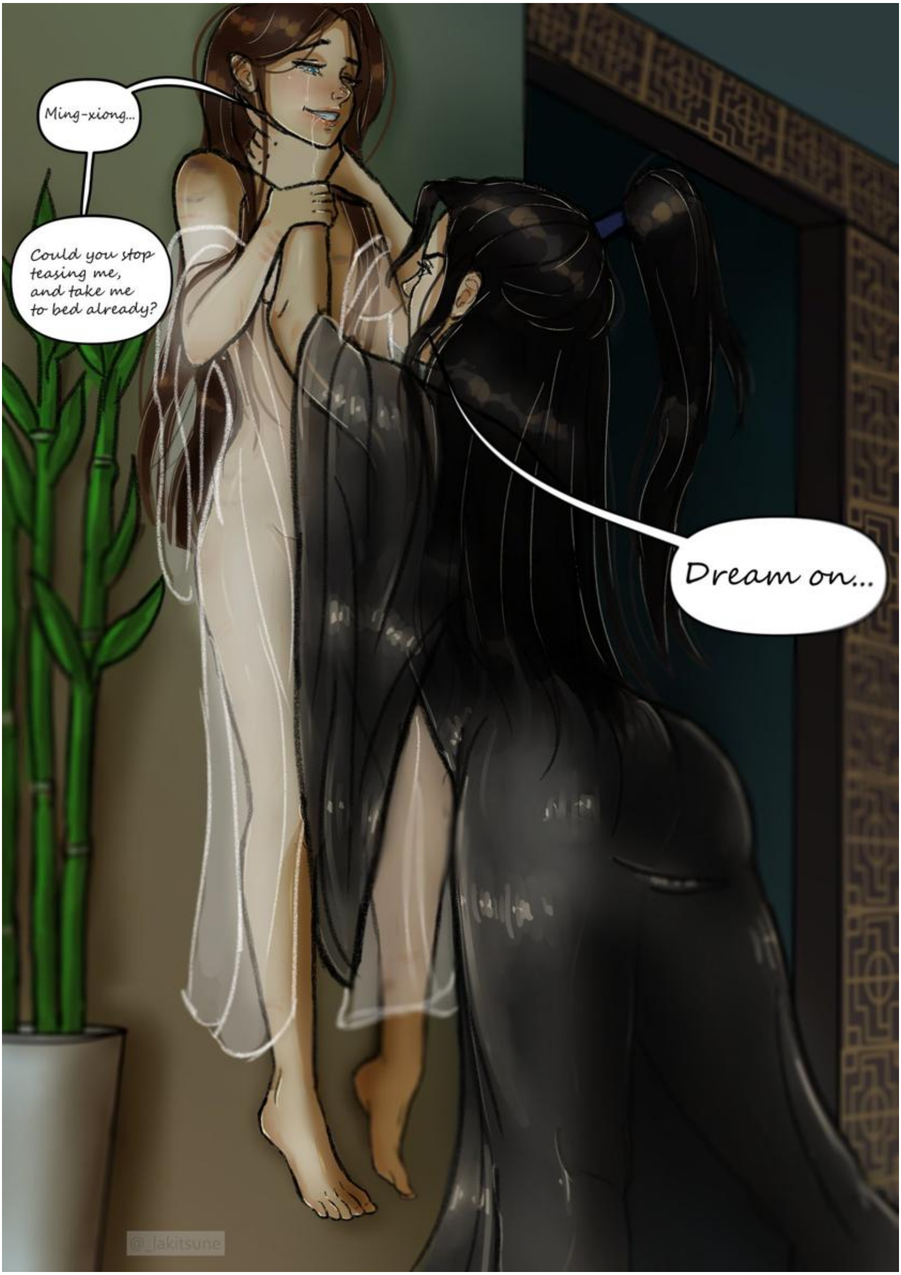
[image]

CREDIT: SEONG

XIONG LI

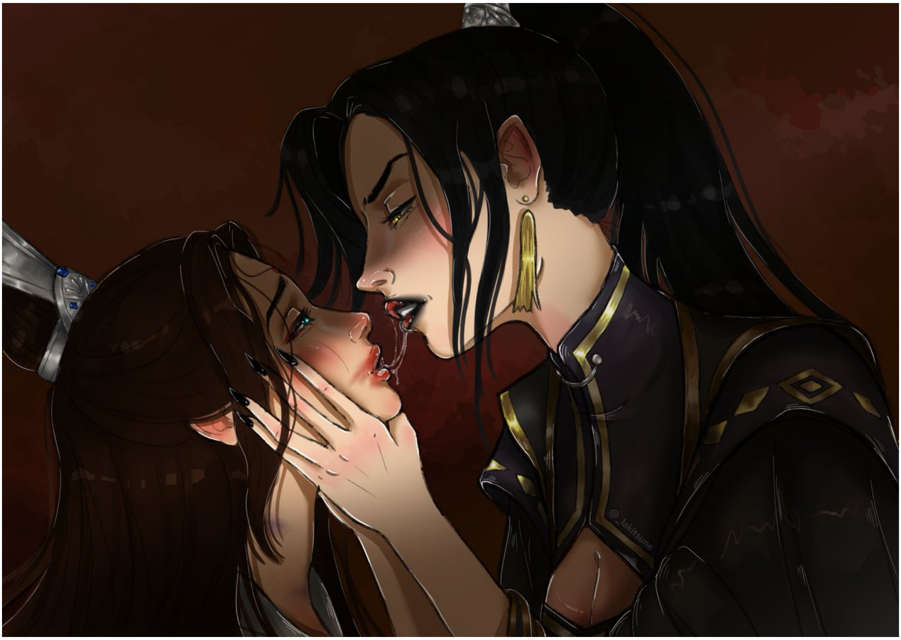
CREDIT: **YUE LING**

(wlw) Beefleaf getting Frisky (NSFW version is in the twitter replies!)


Ming-xiong...
Could you stop teasing me, and take me to bed already?
Dream on...
@_lakitsune

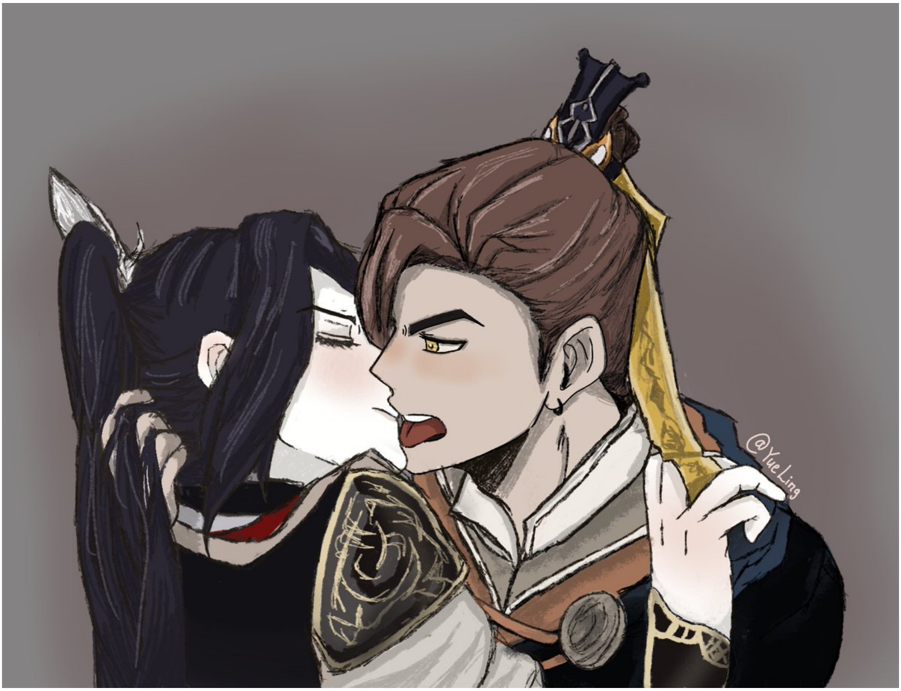
CREDIT: LAKI

"Good Girl..." (wlw) Beefleaf



CREDIT: LAKI

Feng Xin touches Mu Qing's hair...again.



CREDIT: YUE LING

THERE IS ALSO A NSFW ILLUSTRATION OF THE BEEFLEAF SEX SCENE THAT I, FOR OBVIOUS REASONS, CANNOT INCLUDE. BUT PLEASE ENJOY CASS'S WORK HERE.

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you to Seong, Cass, Yue Ling, Laki, Eve, and Pri for their beautiful artwork, and allowing me to share it!
>
> xoxo, Evie

The God Slayer

Chapter Summary

> "Xianle."
>
> The prince stiffens, his shoulders straightening at the sound of that voice.
>
> "You're here."
>
> As if Xie Lian ever would have refused a summons, but…his stomach twists with uncertainty, trying to read the emperor's tone.
>
> He sounds…happy to see Xie Lian, which is…
>
> A relief, but surprising.
>
> "I'm sure you also know why you've been summoned here."

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Xie Lian wakes up that morning, he can feel that the mat beside him is empty— and at first, that isn't startling. San Lang wakes up before him most mornings, making breakfast, or doing chores just outside, but…

It's quiet in the shrine, and the god's stomach plummets.

"…San Lang?" He mutters, sitting up quickly. Maybe a little too quickly, because his head spins slightly in response.

Xie Lian presses his palm to his temple, looking around for the Ghost King's aura, his heart pounding in his chest.

Where is he? Did something happen? Did he—?

Xie Lian's throat constricts suddenly with horror, and he wonders if something happened, and he slept through it.

There's no logical thought, only—

Only the memory of what happens, when he falls asleep beside someone and wakes up alone.

"S-San…San Lang!"

Clink!

That sound makes Xie Lian whip around in the proper direction, scanning around for any sign of him, for more footsteps, but—

Instead of seeing a sea of crimson, or the more tailored form that Hua Cheng made for him last night—it's mostly darkness.

Except for one thing.

A butterfly, sitting on the blankets beside him, wings flapping gently.

Trembling, Xie Lian extends one finger—and when he does, the creature lands on him delicately, sparks of warmth firing into his skin.

'Dianxia.'

Xie Lian lets out a shaky sigh, covering his mouth.

It's clearly a recorded message, left behind for him, but—

Still, just hearing an echo of Hua Cheng's voice makes him ache with relief.

'I wanted to wait until you woke up before leaving, however—urgent business came up, and I was forced to deal with it personally.'

Xie Lian lets out a breath he didn't know he was holding.

'I'll see you again soon.'

After a moment—Xie Lian has the chance to feel mortified for even panicking to begin with, having had no reason to think that San Lang was in danger, but…

At least now, Xie Lian knows that he's alright. That's all that matters, even if… It'll be a little quiet, until San Lang comes back.

Even still, Xie Lian should be used to the—

'Your highness?' The sudden intrusion of Ling Wen's voice startles him. *'You've been summoned.'*

Xie Lian might not be particularly keen on lingering in the Heavens more than he must—but even he knows better than to refuse a summons to a meeting of all officials of the upper court.

After all—this is likely about his actions in the Crescent Moon pass. He can't avoid it.

He makes an effort to become presentable, only to find his hair doesn't have any tangles from sleeping through the night—something that's happened all week, and he finds it somewhat unusual, but...

He stops curiously when his hand lands on the counter, reaching for the white ribbon he normally uses to tie up his hair, finding something that wasn't there the night before.

A hair piece—crafted from ivory and jade, from the feel of it, with a flower caved into the face.

Somehow, and he couldn't tell you why—Xie Lian has the sense that the flowers must be white, just like the...

He shakes himself out of it, taking the hair piece between both hands, examining it more thoroughly.

It must be a gift from Hua Cheng, but...what for?

Xie Lian certainly hasn't done anything to deserve a gift. San Lang is the one that has gone out of his way, over and over again in the last week—all to cater to the God's wishes...

He'll have to thank the Ghost King, the next time he sees him. And... Xie Lian turns the hairpiece over between his fingers, thoughtful.

It's not like he can't give the Ghost King something in return. He should, actually— after all, he's done so much, and Xie Lian managed to burn the meal he tried to cook him in gratitude beyond recognition.

Xie Lian resolves himself to the new plan, using the new hairpiece instead of his usual ribbon. It's surprisingly easy to maneuver, despite the fact that the God hasn't used anything like it since his first ascension, even if it's slightly less ostentatious.

But if this was anything like the jewel encrusted, golden pieces he used to wear—Xie Lian probably would have been too uncomfortable to use it in public.

Not because he doesn't enjoy fine things or find them frivolous—that isn't it at all, he just…

After everything that has happened, Xie Lian doesn't deserve to accept that sort of luxury, and even if he did—after 800 years of living off of scraps on the streets…he wouldn't know how.

In any case, Hua Cheng's gift…he doesn't deserve it, but the prince certainly likes it.

Given the importance of the meeting in question, Xie Lian goes through the effort of changing into a different robe. It's his usual shade of white, but…

This time, Xie Lian reaches for a piece he had meant to sell, one with a simple outline of a floral pattern stitched into the hems of the sleeves in silver thread.

Nothing like the robes he used to wear—Xie Lian would feel embarrassed, wearing something like that now.

Still, he's an ascended god once again, and…

Xie Lian sighs, straightening as he reaches for where he left his hat hanging by the door, surprised to find…it's far sturdier than it was before, with the addition of a simple, translucent veil.

Did San Lang do this as well?

In spite of everything, the god can't help but smile, lifting the hat up and over his head, tying it off underneath his chin.

San Lang really is good at everything, isn't he?

The Heavenly Officials he spoke to before—they made Ghost Kings seem like such inelegant creatures.

That they were violent, almost animalistic beings with little humanity left to them, but after spending time with Hua Cheng, Xie Lian…

He suspects there's more to becoming a Calamity than what meets the eye.

When he ascends to the heavens once more—the first thing he notices is all of the movement.

Generally, the Heavens are a somewhat tranquil space. No one rushes anywhere, there's no need to.

But now? All of the officials seem to be moving about in a flurry.

Most of them are deputy officials, as the meeting in the Grand Martial Hall is supposed to start any moment—Xie Lian is the one that's running late, but still...

All of this over Pei Junior?

Xie Lian doesn't mean to belittle the loss of life, but...

It isn't necessary to bring the entire Heavenly Court into the matter to deal with it.

Xie Lian grimaces, remembering his own trial before his first banishment.

Such a matter—it doesn't need to be an act of public humiliation. And General Ming Guang won't be pleased.

Which isn't particularly good news for Xie Lian, since he's the reason that—

"Your highness! Your highness the crown prince!" A voice cries out, strained—and Xie Lian halts in midstep, lifting his chin to try and figure out who is calling to him.

After all—no one does.

Not here, anyway.

But the figure calling out—he rushes past Xie Lian, chasing down...

Xie Lian squints ahead, making out an orange aura in the distance, bright, flickering slightly like a flame, and...just underneath it is a shape that looks like that of...

A tiger spirit?

"Your highness," the deputy official stops by the martial god's side, breathing hard— so much so that he has to bend over, pressing his hands against his knees as he wheezes. "Goodness, how could you forget your identification pass before leaving for the meeting?!"

“Oh!”

The sound of that voice—that bright, familiar voice—makes Xie Lian freeze, the color draining from his cheeks.

“I was in a hurry when I realized I was running late—so I forgot it,” the young god admits, scratching the back of his head with a laugh.

It’s...

‘Guoshi! Guoshi! Did you see me? Did I get it right this time?’

Oh.

It takes Xie Lian a moment to realize that the figure has twisted around to look at him, feeling the weight of someone’s gaze on his face, or, well—not just anyone.

The Martial God of the East: Lang Qianqiu. There’s a pause—but it’s a brief one.

Xie Lian raises one hand in greeting, a gentle smile on his face, his eyes shut as he greets his fellow Martial God.

“Hello, your highness the crown prince,” he murmurs graciously.

Lang Qianqiu stares for a moment, his eyes wide.

Taking in that face, one that he’s never seen before, but...

He grins widely, eyes shining as he waves back at the white robed god, waving his own hand in greeting.

“Hello!”

Xie Lian’s smile softens slightly with fondness.

He always was such a friendly child—even to people who were strangers to him. And, as far as Lang Qianqiu is concerned, Xie Lian might as well be a stranger.

The Deputy God beside Lang Qianqiu sighs, rubbing his temple. “Your highness, you’re already running late...”

“Alright, alight...” The martial god mutters, turning his head as his tiger continues the journey towards the grand martial hall, paws thudding softly against the ground.

Xie Lian stays there for a moment, listening to the whispers. Talking about how awkward this must be for him

Talking about how, as the prince of a kingdom that destroyed Xie Lian, Lang Qianqiu must be more powerful.

And how, if Lang Qianqiu were to fall as Xie Lian had—he would never lower himself in the same way.

Ah, those rumors still exist then, don't they? In any case...

Xie Lian ignores them.

"Your highness?"

Good Heavens, is there another member of royalty nearby that Xie Lian just so happened to—?

Ling Wen's voice draws closer, "You must be careful when you go into the Great Martial Hall later."

In her arms are several scrolls worth of evidence, ready to present, and she's flanked by two civil gods, each even more weighed down with material than she is.

"Pei Junior is likely to be exiled," she explains calmly. "So the General might have words with you."

"There are worse things than exile," Xie Lian replies calmly—and for once, Ling Wen seems a little chagrined, remembering who she's speaking to. "Has there been any progress on the search for the child from Mount Yu Jun?"

"...I'm afraid not, your highness," Ling Wen admits. "But we're doing our best, and will continue pursuing a thorough investigation."

Of course, Xie Lian believes her—and he can't doubt that an effort is being made. Ling Wen is audibly exhausted.

Even now, she's receiving memos, papers folded into the shapes of cranes fluttering around her head, a small storm of information and requests.

Xie Lian can't help but feel sympathy. "I'm sorry for troubling you."

"It's my job," Ling Wen replies simply. "I'll go on ahead."

Xie Lian isn't far behind her, ascending the steps of the Grand Martial Hall quietly, arms folded into the sleeves of his robes. He walks lightly, hoping to make his entrance as inoffensive as possible, but...

Inside, you could not hear a pin drop.

Even in a Heavenly Capital filled with golden palaces, the Grand Martial Hall easily dwarfs them all. With perfectly polished marble floors that almost look like black mirrors, wide pillars with dragons coiled around them.

The Dragon is Jun Wu's personal symbol, after all.

Engraved into the ceilings, above a throne so massive, it sits an entire meter above floor level.

The last time Xie Lian was in this room, it was for his own trial. And he—

"Xianle."

The prince stiffens, his shoulders straightening at the sound of that voice.

"You're here."

As if Xie Lian ever would have refused a summons, but...his stomach twists with uncertainty, trying to read the emperor's tone.

He sounds...happy to see Xie Lian, which is...

A relief, but surprising.

"I'm sure you also know why you've been summoned here."

The prince nods.

"I do," he bows, clasping his hands in front of him respectfully. "But I was under the impression that the matter had already been settled."

"That remains to be seen," A voice replies—deep and rumbling, echoing from behind him.

There's something undeniably attractive about the sound of it, and...familiar.

"Ming Guang." Jun Wu responds calmly, glancing the General over with a detached gaze. “I’m surprised to see you up and moving already.”

“It was against my orders,” Mu Qing grouses, his arms crossed.

Xie Lian raises an eyebrow, confused.

Is the General injured? How could that be?

“You thought I wouldn’t come?” Pei replies calmly, arching an eyebrow. “It involves my family, after all.”

And while Pei Ming is many things—he’s infamously protective over those close to him.

No one protests, but the figure standing the closest to Jun Wu’s throne watches him with a narrowed gaze, sapphire eyes flashing with frustration.

“Besides, I visited Pei Junior before coming here,” the General continues, stepping to the front of the crowd.

With one exception, every single Martial God wears armor—but for most, the protective gear favors form over purpose.

In the case of Ming Guang, however, it serves both. The heavenly metal gleams on his chest and shoulders, fastened to his robes with rubies.

Expensive—but battle worn—and unlike some martial gods who will return their gear to the heavenly armorers over the smallest of scratches, Pei Ming prefers to keep his.

Other than that on his left eye, he doesn’t have his battle scars anymore.

Gods have long memories, but in his experience, nothing teaches a better lesson than damage, forming a deep scar.

The throbbing pain in his side is a lesson he’s still in the process of learning.

And, as it happens—Pei Ming is the only god in the heavens that can look the heavenly emperor in the eye without being forced to lift his chin, given that they’re the same height.

“While Pei Xiu used a clone in the Crescent Moon Pass,” Pei explains, "it was still rather strong."

Xie Lian bites the inside of his cheek, not saying a word as the general continues, "Strong enough to handle most savage ghosts—but when he met the Prince in the Sinner's Pit, he encountered a young man dressed in red. One so powerful, Pei Junior couldn't even fight back."

That sends a rush of whispers throughout the room, but the Prince of Xianle doesn't react, his expression smooth.

"I apologize for my rudeness, your highness," Pei Ming turns back to Xie Lian, walking away from the throne.

Jun Wu remains silent, eyes slightly narrowed. "It's an honor to meet you again."

Xie Lian smiles politely, bowing his chin in acknowledgement. "The honor is all mine, General."

Pei's smile is infamously charming, and just from the sound of him and what Xie Lian can sense of his size alone...he's relieved not to see it.

And compared to the other martial gods in the martial hall—aside from the likes of Jun Wu, who's aura covers the entire capital—Pei Ming's is the brightest.

Shades of orange, red, and gold—reminiscent of the sunrises Xie Lian can hardly remember.

It's a pleasant sight, anyhow.

"I'm glad to hear it," Pei Ming muses—after all, while they haven't seen one another since Xie Lian was a teenager (and the prince can hardly remember that time)—there was never ill will between them.

After all—both men respect strength, and as such, each other.

"But I'm afraid I have to ask—that young man who was traveling with you," Pei lifts his chin, violet eyes surveying the hall, "...Which god is he?"

"..." Xie Lian clears his throat, then smiles.

"He approached my shrine as a normal young man several days ago, saying he had nowhere else to go. He was very kind and helpful, and when he offered to accompany me to the Crescent Moon, I allowed him to come along." The Crown Prince explains.

"He never did anything suspicious in my presence, and as far as I am aware, he isn't a god."

"...But your highness," Pei smiles, violet eyes watching Xie Lian's face intently, waiting for him to show any hint of dishonesty, "Pei Xiu told me the two of you were quite close."

Xie Lian stiffens with surprise. ...Did they?

"Far too familiar with one another to be simple strangers," the general of the north concludes. "How can that be?"

Xie Lian opens his mouth, then closes it, because...they really *did* only meet a few days ago, so...

"General Pei."

Xie Lian pauses when he hears a young man speak up in the crowd, his voice melodic, almost breezy in nature—but ringing clear.

"Your source is a man who has committed grave crimes, and is about to be exiled," the god points out, twirling a whisk between his fingers.

"Is he truly the most trustworthy source of information?"

The younger man steps forward, wearing robes of white, green, and gold. He's striking, with a delicately handsome face, emerald eyes, and long, dark waves of hair —and now, he's smiling at Pei Ming with veiled disdain.

"...Well," the general smiles back, eyes slightly narrowed, "That depends on Generals Nan Yang and Xuan Zhen."

The two men in question stiffen. They never mean to, but they always end up standing side by side at these things.

(Today, they were sitting in pointed silence.)

"If it's who I suspect, they should be able to recognize the wounds."

Before Xie Lian can question what he means, General Ming Guang snaps his fingers.

Crack!

A portal opens in the roof of the Great Martial Hall, allowing a figure to plummet forth.

WHOOSH!

The clone rushes down to the floor, coming to a sudden halt a few feet off of the ground, hovering.

Jun Wu glances to the two gods in question, sending each a nod to indicate that they should do as Pei Ming asks, leading both to step forward obediently.

The clone is empty now, just a limp, hollow shell, eyes staring up at the ceiling vacantly—but it's absolutely covered in lacerations. None of which seem meant to kill —

(Because if there had been the desire to, they would have.)

But the number of cuts is what's truly shocking.

After a moment, Feng Xin looks up with a nod, "It's him—"

"—it's the saber E'Ming," Mu Qing concludes the sentence for him with a nod.

There's an uproar among the other officials, and Pei Ming smiles, satisfied. "Thank you for confirming my suspicion, Generals."

He turns back to Jun Wu, clasping his hands before him before dropping his head in a shallow bow. "Please reconsider the matter, my lord. There's clearly much more to this than we currently understand."

"General," the young god from before speaks up again, his voice sharp.

"Are you trying to imply that the Crown Prince colluded with a Ghost King to frame Little Pei? And for what purpose would he do such a thing?"

Xie Lian doesn't recognize the young man, but he's defended Xie Lian twice now, which is two times more than what he's accustomed to.

"...I never said a thing about collusion," Pei mutters, rubbing his temple—and then he winces, pressing one palm against his side.

Xie Lian can't see how unusually pale the god is—but he can hear the slight strain to his breathing.

He is hurt then, isn't he?

"It's possible that Hua Cheng deceived him, after all," Pei Ming's eyes flicker back to Jun Wu, narrowing slightly, "the Crown Prince has been allowed to wander the Mortal Realm in a vulnerable state, despite his banishment being over."

Xie lian stiffens at that.

He can admit—he doesn't know why he still has his shackles either. But he isn't— He doesn't need Pei Ming's pity.

"In any case, it's not my place to question that," The General shrugs, not breaking eye contact with Jun Wu. "But it means Hua Cheng could have bewitched him."

"There were witnesses to Little Pei's confession," the younger god glares, crossing his arms. "Are you so blinded by family association that you would ignore that?"

Pei's eyes flash, and a new voice rings out, smoother than the others, Xie Lian notices —but stern.

"Enough."

Shi Wudu has stood near the front of the room, silent for the entire meeting—but now, he snaps his fan shut, sending his little brother a cold look, making Shi Qingxuan shrink just a little bit.

He pretends not to be bothered, of course, but no one enjoys a public scolding.

"You have made your point. If you want to squabble with the General for personal reasons, you won't waste the emperor's time while you do it."

Xie Lian has to admit—the tension between Pei and this young god does seem somewhat personal, doesn't it? Are they enemies?

In any case, he did speak up for Xie Lian several times, so the prince speaks up in return now.

"If you want to check for any trace of deceptive magic on my body now, Jun Wu is welcome to do so," he speaks out, lifting his chin. "And even if it was Hua Cheng in disguise..."

He can't see the way Mu Qing presses a palm to his forehead from behind him, exasperated.

“...He isn’t responsible for Pei Xiu’s actions. I witnessed his confession myself. Just because he’s a Ghost King—that doesn’t mean you can blame everything on him. That’s unreasonable.”

Pei Ming, Feng Xin, and Mu Qing stare at him, each wearing expressions of shocked confusion—all while Shi Qingxuan fans himself aggressively, clearly miffed from being publicly rebuked by his elder brother.

“Hear, hear!”

“You—?”

“The Water Master is correct,” Jun Wu stands up. “That’s enough. Pei Xiu has confessed, and his account matches that of Ke Mo. The issue is settled. Any further debate is unproductive.”

“...” Pei Ming glances at Shi Wudu, and Shi Qingxuan’s eyes narrow slightly, trying to understand the look shared between them.

“...Understood,” Pei mutters between clenched teeth, bowing his head in agreement. “But the matter of Hua Cheng’s involvement is concerning. Will there be an investigation?”

“Of course,” Jun Wu replies calmly. “But I understand there was another matter to be discussed.”

Xie Lian tilts his head to the side, confused—after all of that, he was convinced the meeting had been called because General Pei wanted to protest Pei Junior’s fate, but —

“I sent General Pei to deal with a series of attacks in Qinghe last week,” Jun Wu explains.

“I understand that, in the process of performing your investigation, you came across something rather serious that you wanted to report to the Heavenly Court.”

“...I did,” Pei agrees, reaching for something strapped to his hip. He lifts his chin, speaking loud enough for the entire room to hear. “The violence turned out to be the work of the local cultivation clan—unintentional,” he clarifies. “But in the process of resolving the issue, they dispersed an ancient local ghost, one who wasn’t involved.”

He steps forward once more, a crimson cloak fluttering gently behind his shoulders as he moves.

“When Quan Yizhen and I were watching the creature fade, it attempted to attack him with this,”

Now, he lifts the item up—the dagger gleaming in the air, black steel, wickedly sharp.

“When I defended him, I was the one that ended up getting stabbed,” the General explains, turning his gaze back to Jun Wu.

From the emperor’s side, the Water Master crosses his arms, his gaze turning tense. “And I haven’t been able to use spiritual power to heal the wound.”

That sends a worried murmur throughout the court, and now, Shi Qingxuan stops fanning himself, leaning over to whisper next to Xie Lian’s ear.

“It’s a knife, your highness. Or a dagger, I suppose. Is there a difference?”

“...” Xie Lian smiles, slightly endeared.

After all, it didn’t seem to occur to anyone else that he couldn’t see what was going on, so it was very considerate of the young man to say something.

“I figured that out when he mentioned the stabbing part,” the prince whispers back, “but thank you.”

Then, he adds—

“Daggers have two sharp edges. For a knife, only one side is sharpened.”

“Ah...” Shi Qingxuan murmurs, holding his fan up in front of their faces to muffle them, whispering, “It’s a dagger, then.”

Mu Qing’s eyebrow twitches. “Would you two keep it down?”

Just as he speaks, Jun Wu looks at him, arching an eyebrow. “Xuan Zhen. I understand you were the one who treated him upon his return?”

Mu Qing clears his throat, stepping away from the other two gods as he speaks, “Yes, my lord. General Ming Guang lost a considerable amount of blood, and even with the help of Nan Yang, Ling Wen, and the Water Master lending spiritual power, I wasn’t able to heal him.”

That doesn’t seem to set the room at ease, and even Xie Lian is slightly startled. After all—he doesn’t even have spiritual power, and his body recovers remarkably well from damage.

He would know.

How could a weapon harm a god—one as powerful as Pei at that—to that degree?

“...His blood is clotting, and the mortal medicine I performed on his body seemed to take,” Mu Qing explains. “The wound will heal—but at the same pace as it would if he was a human.”

Shi Wudu’s expression is calm, but he’s tapping his closed fan repeatedly against his wrist.

It’s a subtle gesture, one that could be mistaken for impatience, for anyone who doesn’t know him well. “So, what?” He questions flatly, sounding vaguely irritated. “Is the great General Ming Guang a mortal, now?”

“Oh, no.” Pei shakes his head, waving that notion off. “I stabbed myself with a normal weapon this morning to make sure—and that wound healed just as it should have.”

The Water Master’s eyes narrow.

“...You what?” He questions sharply, voice flat.

“I told him it was moronic,” Mu Qing mutters, rolling his eyes. “My deputy fainted.”

“But, we have our answer.” Pei shrugs, striding calmly towards the throne, holding the weapon out to Jun Wu, flipping it casually between his fingers, catching it lightly by the blade between his thumb and index finger, so the Emperor can grip it by the handle.

“He asked me to bring it to you, before the ghost dissipated completely,” the general shrugs. “I don’t know what his intentions were.”

Jun Wu grips the weapon, staring down at it for a moment in complete silence, and…

Pei watches his expression closely, seeing…

Fear.

Briefly. Only a flash of it before Jun Wu's gaze returns to its usual demeanor of eternal calm.

"…Well," the emperor mutters, not lifting his eyes from the weapon. "You, Ming Guang, are very lucky to be alive."

Pei shrugs, taking a step back from the throne—unimpressed.

"I've been told that before."

Jun Wu turns around, examining the blade more closely—allowing no one else to see his expression. "This weapon is older than even me," he murmurs, examining the characters on the hilt. "I'm assuming you couldn't read this?"

"…No," Pei Ming agrees with a frown. "Even Ling Wen couldn't."

"She's too young to know it," Jun Wu sighs, his knuckles white where they grip the hilt. "It's called the God Slayer."

Every official in the room falls silent with a hush, fear ringing in the air.

The…what?

"It renders Heavenly flesh mortal." The emperor continues, still facing away from the rest of the room, his head slightly bent. "If you had been hit in a vital point…"

The gravity of the matter hits Xie Lian, sending shivers down his spine. Ming Guang would have been slain.

And, despite being the potential victim—he seems calm about the matter. That much Xie Lian can understand.

A soldier has tempered nerves, after all.

"Are you familiar with the weapon, my lord?"

There's a long pause, one where Jun Wu does not speak.

It’s unlike him.

As a matter of fact, of all of the gods here—and, as the eldest aside from the Rain Master, Ming Guang has known him the longest—

He’s never seen Jun Wu seem shaken.

“...I know the stories,” the god mutters, slowly lifting his chin. “From the Heavenly Dynasty before mine.”

It’s well known that this isn’t the first Heavenly Dynasty, nor is Jun Wu the first Emperor. But his reign has gone on for so long, there isn’t anyone left to remember what came before.

Finally, he asks the room a question:

“Are any of you familiar with the name Zhao Beitong?”

Of course—no one replies.

Slowly, the Heavenly Emperor turns back around—his expression grim, but a mask of calm. “This was the blade she used to assassinate my predecessor,” he explains. “She plunged it into his heart, as the histories once said.”

...Assassinated?

Gods often die in battle, or fade away into obscurity, but...

Assassination? Of one as strong as a Heavenly Emperor?

“...Was she a goddess?” Shi Wudu questions, eyeing Jun Wu with veiled suspicion.

“No,” the emperor shakes his head. “Zhao Beitong was the world’s first Calamity.”

Another chill runs down Xie Lian’s spine as Jun Wu descends down the steps from his throne, dagger still in hand. “As the stories go, she lived over two millennia ago, in a long destroyed kingdom. A commoner, who captured the heart of a prince.”

It almost doesn’t sound real. More like a legend, than something that actually happened, but...

In Xie Lian’s experience, most legends are based in truth.

"But she wanted more," Jun Wu explains, rubbing his thumb over the snake on the hilt of the blade, his gaze unreadable.

"When their Kingdom fell into war, a god approached her with a choice: to save them from certain defeat," Jun Wu's eyes slide over the room, before finally settling on one set of eyes. "But at a terrible cost. And she would not know the price until it was paid."

Shi Wudu stares back at him, silent, his expression inexplicably pale.

"...And in the beginning, there was victory—seemingly at no cost, until..." Jun Wu trails off, keeping his eyes on the Water Master. "She lost the dearest thing in the world to her—her son."

Xie Ian feels slightly nauseous, listening to the emperor tell the tale, reaching up to grip the ring on his chest for comfort, stroking the metal as he listens.

"She found him in his crib, seemingly asleep—only to find that his soul had been taken," Jun Wu concludes grimly.

"It was a curse that followed her for the rest of her life. She was forced to give up her second child as a hostage in peace talks. And her third son..."

His eyes slide away from Shi Wudu, who seems eager for the opportunity to step back.

"...Fell to his death, tragically."

Xie Lian grips Hong'er tighter between his fingers, struggling to understand the depth of such grief.

Losing a child is a different kind of pain, and losing three? He...

"Her kingdom fell shortly after—and with no one else to blame..." Jun Wu sighs. "She turned to the Heavens."

A tragic choice, the prince supposes—but the poor woman must have been mad with grief.

"But instead of turning on the one god who offered her that choice in the beginning— she turned to the one thing she had left, her husband."

Jun Wu glances down at the dagger, staring at his reflection in the steel.

“She told him that she had been tricked. That the gods had conspired against him, jealous of his cultivation. After all—he was on the cusp of ascending as a god himself.”

“But then…his heart was filled only with hate. And as the stories say—Zhao Beitong was a blacksmith, by trade. She forged powerful weapons, all in the name of getting her husband to slaughter the gods she blamed for her children’s deaths.”

Jun Wu lifts his gaze from the dagger, and now—

Now, he turns his eyes on Xie Lian—who can’t see that he’s being stared at, but shrinks under Jun Wu’s gaze nonetheless.

“He did as she wanted—and in the end, Zhao Beitong was a calamity, and her husband, a Ghost King.”

The next words he says—while not explicitly so—are targeted.

“He became the White Clothed Calamity, Bai Wuxiang.”

The Prince goes completely still, fingers tightening around Hong’er until they ache.

She…what?

“Of course, I thought it was just a story, but now…”

Jun Wu sighs, “Seeing this dagger, one straight out of the legends…it would seem that it was true.”

Pei Ming frowns, watching as Jun Wu tucks the weapon into his sleeves. “But if that’s the case…why did that ghost have it? And why did he want me to bring it to you?”

The Heavenly Emperor shrugs, looking down at the empty shell of Pei Xiu’s clone. “Given what the blade was used for—I assume it was made as some sort of threat against me. And between Hua Cheng and Qi Rong, two prominent ghosts have been on the move in recent days…”

Xie Lian frowns, not wanting to see the blame cast on Hua Cheng once again. After all, he was with Xie Lian for the entire week—and confirmed to the prince that it was in fact his real body, not a clone. He couldn’t have been involved in the incident with the dagger.

“But he—”

But, to everyone's surprise—it's the Water Master who speaks up, interrupting the prince, speaking in a way that makes everyone—even Pei Ming—stare at him with surprise.

"This couldn't be Hua Cheng," Shi Wudu sneers, staring Jun Wu in the eye. "It's not his style."

Feng Xin frowns from Mu Qing's side, crossing his arms. "I think going after Heavenly Officials is exactly his style, with all due respect."

Shi Wudu doesn't even look at him, keeping his gaze on Jun Wu. "Crimson Rain Sought Flower isn't a coward," the Water God explains. "He's well known for sending very direct messages to those he wishes to fight. He doesn't need lies, threats, or manipulation to impress upon people that he's powerful."

Xie Lian agrees wholeheartedly. Hua Cheng did threaten Ke Mo in the Sinner's Pit, but...It was quite direct.

If Hua Cheng had wanted to threaten Jun Wu, he would have done so directly—and it would have been followed up with a swift follow through.

Not to mention the fact that Hua Cheng wouldn't use a weapon that nearly assured victory.

He loves a good fight far too much for that.

Jun Wu stares at Shi Wudu for a long moment, watching as the Water Master snaps his fan open, nonchalant, slowly fanning it towards him as they stare one another down.

And yes, there is anger lingering underneath that gaze. But it's directed toward the Water Master, and him alone. And It stops Pei from asking any more questions.

"...That's an excellent point, Shi Wudu—as always," Jun Wu replies calmly, showing no hint of tension in his posture or tone. "We'll have to conduct a thorough investigation of the matter in order to uncover the truth."

Xie Lian is honestly surprised that any god dares speak to Jun Wu so candidly. Not that the emperor has ever been anything but gracious or polite to other members of the Heavenly court, but...

It requires a certain level of audacity and pride.

Which, Xie Lian supposes makes sense—coming from the Infamous 'Water Tyrant' that San Lang described.

"...In any case," Jun Wu continues, looking back over the crowd. "There's nothing more to be done for more—and Ming Guang, you should return to bed rest. Meeting dismissed."

Everyone begins to make their way out of the Grand Martial Hall—with Xie Lian following close behind, lost in thought about everything that just happened, and what he should tell San Lang the next time he sees him—

"Xianle."

The Prince stops.

"We need to speak privately."

Xie Lian had hoped he could leave without incident—but he isn't surprised by Jun Wu's request. He nods, folding his hands inside the sleeves of his robes, waiting as the other gods filter out of the hall.

Shi Qingxuan stops beside him, looking like he wants to speak to him, but—

"Shi Qingxuan." Pei Ming stops beside him, one hand still pressed against his ribs, and Xie Lian sensed that he seemed irritated before, but...

Now, when he looks at the young god, the air around him seems tense with genuine anger.

"For your older brother's sake—you should think before making a scene like that."

The Wind Master stops, casting Pei Ming an irritated stare, eyes narrowing defensively. "General Pei, don't try to use my brother to intimidate me. I'm not scared of him."

That makes the General of the North pause, and when Shi Qingxuan looks into violet eyes, he sees something odd. Not the anger, no, or the protective frustration, but...

It doesn't seem to be about Pei Xiu. Not entirely.

"You're still such a child, aren't you?"

Shi Qingxuan startles, his grip tightening around his wrist. "I don't think—"

"No," Pei interrupts him. "You don't think. Not about how your actions impact him. You're four centuries old, that's old enough to know—"

"Don't involve yourself in family matters."

Green eyes, normally lighthearted and easy going, glare at Pei Ming with ever growing tension. "Gege despises people who get ahead of themselves."

It's always been just him and his brother, after all. That's the only family Shi Qingxuan has ever had.

Pei Ming has been a close friend and ally and friend of his brother since they arrived in the Heavens. And Shi Qingxuan never liked him. Never liked how easily he could capture Wudu's attention, taking it away from him.

But in the last century, things have been different.

Shi Qingxuan obviously isn't aware of the intimate details of his brother's personal life—but he does know that something has been wrong with him.

The nights in their palace are often pierced by the cries of nightmares. And he also knows that Pei has gotten closer in that time.

"...Even if I am ahead of myself," the general mutters, his voice low, "I'm not wrong. You're inconsiderate, ungrateful, and—"

"—And you're an arrogant, condescending—!"

"How about this," both men fall silent as the subject of their argument speaks up from behind them.

"You're being a brat," Shi Wudu directs the first criticism at his brother, pointing his fan at him with a sharp rebuke, making Shi Qingxuan flush slightly, and when Pei Ming (very maturely) snorts victoriously—

He ends up jabbed in his injured side with that very fan.

"Ai!" He cries, clutching his ribs, "Shit, what was that for?!"

“You stabbed yourself once today already,” the Water God replies coldly. “I presumed you must either not feel the pain, or you’re an imbecile. Clearly it’s the latter.”

Shi Qingxuan smirks. “HA! Gege, did you—hey!”

The Water Master grabs him by the scruff of the neck, bodily hauling him out of the Grand Martial Hall as he protests, flailing his whisk, “Gege, cut it out! This is so embarrassing—I’m not a kid anymore, you can’t just manhandle me whenever you want—!”

Pei Ming watches the Shi brothers for a moment.

In particular, he finds himself staring at how dark and smooth the elder’s hair is this afternoon, swaying behind him in a dark, lustrous curtain, pulled back with a clasp encrusted with sapphire and pearl.

“...I apologize.”

Xie Lian glances up, startled to realize that the General is speaking to him. “...Oh, please, the one who should be apologizing is—!”

“No,” Pei shakes his head, not allowing the prince to demure out of politeness. “You did nothing wrong. You just got...”

He doesn’t look back at the emperor, even if he can feel Jun Wu’s gaze on his back.

Pei is aware of the Emperor’s displeasure with him—but the reason behind it is a mystery to the general.

“...Caught up in the middle of something,” he concludes, shaking his head.

Before Xie Lian can really think about exactly what he means—the General strides out of the grand martial hall, and...

Xie Lian and Jun Wu are left alone, standing in the empty, cavernous space. “Xianle.”

The prince remains quiet, his arms folded as Jun Wu addresses him.

Jun Wu’s boots click softly across the floors as he approaches, “Crimson Rain Sought Flower...” He muses, watching the way Xie Lian’s shoulders tense, then slump. “The Scimitar E’Ming...tell me, what’s happened?”

They haven't spoken in eight centuries, and still… When Jun Wu says the word Xianle—

His first instinct is to feel shame.

"I'm sorry—"

Without even thinking, his knees start to buckle as he drops to his knees, head sinking low, but large, strong hands catch his elbows, gripping firmly as they lift the prince back to his feet.

"Do you know what you've done wrong?" Jun Wu questions softly, not letting him go, even now that Xie Lian is standing once more. His grip on the prince's elbows isn't painful—but it stops him from retreating.

"If so, tell me."

Xie Lian keeps his chin down, his stomach twisting with remorse and shame, because…even now, Jun Wu's tone is gentle. He isn't angry, or resentful. Just… concerned.

And Xie Lian had come here with every intention of lying to him, after all of Jun Wu's kindness.

It's shameful.

"…Never mind," the emperor sighs, turning away from Xie Lian as he walks towards the doors leading to the private chambers beyond the grand hall. "Come."

Xie Lian follows, pushing down any reluctance.

The first time he stood in this room, he was little more than a child.

Trailing behind Jun Wu like a lost little duckling, plucked from his palaces, his servants, his parents—even his Guoshi. He was so eager to charge forward, to be grown up, to impress the heavenly emperor, but…

In the end, Jun Wu became more of a parental figure than a peer.

When Xie Lian was a boy, this room was made from white marble, veins of gold running through, with pearls embedded into the ceiling, symbolizing the grand martial temples in the world below.

There were many, even back then—but Xie Lian imagines there must be a sea of them now.

It's a little different in other ways.

The chamber used to be completely closed off, but now the far wall has been opened up, marble pillars and steps leading down to a courtyard, the near entirety of it covered in a koi pond, lily pads floating across the surface.

After all, one has to adapt.

His wife taught him that, if you are going to lie—if you get caught, everything falls apart.

The Prince of Xianle taught him that it's easier to mold something when it's broken. He applied those lessons, going forward.

When he looked to pull someone under his control again, he didn't lie. Misled, manipulated, maybe—but never lied. Chose someone that was already fractured.

But Xianle also taught him the importance of never keeping too firm of a grip. Enticing was better than intimidation.

So, when he saw a young elemental god seeming forlorn, ill at ease within the enclosed walls of the Grand Martial Palace, he opened some of those barriers up. Allowed flowers to grow. Brought in a hint of life.

And for a time, it worked rather well.

Until there was outside interference, anyway.

Now, there's an opportunity to try again—and of course, there's...

Crimson Rain Sought Flower.

Jun Wu's eyes narrow for a moment, his brow creasing for a moment before becoming smooth once more.

"...If you're apologizing for what has happened in the past..." The emperor shakes his head. "Put it from your mind. It's behind you now."

Xie Lian pauses, struggling to think of a reply, his tongue dry, pressing to the roof his mouth anxiously.

He can't do that.

He can try and smile through it, or ignore it even. Xie Lian does that every single day.

But he can't put it out of his mind completely.

Eventually, he allows himself a small wince, muttering—

"...How could I ever forget?"

Jun Wu walks ahead of him, staring at the pond.

"...Then try to look forward," he shrugs. "You saw in the meeting—we're living in difficult times. You'll be needed."

Needed.

Xie Lian's fingers twitch slightly, folded inside his sleeves, and all he manages is a small, tired chuckle.

"Xianle is no more than a scrap god, now."

It's funny—he never usually refers to himself in the third person, but...when he's with someone with such a large presence, it's hard not to unconsciously mimic certain mannerisms.

"I just hope to not get in the way more than I already have." Jun Wu's eyes flicker back to him.

"Why so self-deprecating?" He questions—his tone sharp enough to make Xie Lian pause, startled.

There was a time when people thought he wasn't self deprecating enough, after all. "You've handled these last two situations rather well."

The prince bows his head, reluctant.

"...and yet," The emperor continues, watching a set of koi fish swirling in the water— one with blue scales along the body and red fins, the other neatly entirely white, with only a smattering of red scales around the crown, "...you encountered someone extraordinary."

Xie Lian stares into the darkness ahead, his fingers fidgeting slightly inside his sleeves. Logically, he knows he has no right to be dishonest with Jun Wu in any regard, but...

"I just ran into a very interesting young man as I was traveling, and we spent a few days together."

It would be one thing if it was only about risking Xie Lian's reputation, but after how kind Hua Cheng was to him...

The prince doesn't want to cause him any trouble. Not that he thinks Jun Wu would leap on the opportunity to punish either of them simply for associating, but...

"And that child just so happened to be a ghost king..." Jun Wu trails off, finally looking up from the koi pond.

"...Xianle," the emperor sighs, shaking his head. "You must be more careful with how you speak in front of the others. None of them would have believed that."

Xie Lian isn't surprised by that, not in the least—but then again, regardless of what he has ever said or done, the Heavenly Court has its own perception of things.

"In any case," Jun Wu shrugs, turning to face the prince, resting one palm on his shoulder.

It sits heavily.

"I know that you wouldn't collude with the ghostly realm," Jun Wu assumes him gently, watching as the Prince of Xianle's shoulders slump slightly with relief. "That isn't in your nature. But if the two of you have a good relationship..."

He trails off, watching Xie Lian's face.

It's more of an implication than a question, but...

Xie Lian is a pleaser, at his core. Dislikes lying or upsetting others. And, the longer Jun Wu lets it sit in the air, eventually—the younger god caves.

"I have a high opinion of him," Xie Lian admits. "He's been very kind."

After all—after how much Hua Cheng was accused of in that meeting, not saying anything about how well the Ghost King treated him would be wrong. And...

"Then I'll have to take your word for it," Jun Wu shrugs, lifting his head. “But it does complicate things.”

Xie Lian glances up, a little weary. “...It does? I don’t think he had anything to do with Pei Junior’s actions, or the knife—”

“No, no...” Jun Wu waves him off, glancing up at the ceiling, the pearls glimmering down. “It’s nothing like that. There’s an unrelated situation.”

Beyond what happened in the Crescent Moon Pass? How could that have happened in only a few hours—?

“I didn’t need to summon the entire Heavenly Court for just Pei Xiu’s trial,” Jun Wu shrugs, his footsteps clicking down the hall once more as Xie Lian moves to follow him.

“After all—making a show out of it displeased Ming Guang,” Jun Wu admits, seeming somewhat remorseful. “Trials are normally more private affairs.”

It’s odd, because Xie Lian doesn’t remember his own trial that way at all.

It felt incredibly public.

But then again...

It was over eight centuries ago now, and of course—it was a humiliating memory at the time. Xie Lian probably just remembers it less generously for that reason.

“...then why was everyone summoned?” He murmurs, keeping his head low. Jun Wu reaches into his sleeve.

The dagger is still there, weighing heavily against his skin. He grasps the handle for a moment, contemplative—then explains.

“During the night—somewhere deep in the Eastern Mountains, witnesses saw a dragon made of flames rush into the sky, remaining for two incense times.”

Xie Lian listens carefully, his chin tilted back as the emperor continues;

“Despite the size and force of the dragon’s appearance, no mortals were harmed. Does that sound familiar to you?”

Of course it does—and it's far more worrisome than what the prince would have expected.

"...It's a Heavenly Spell," Xie Lian mutters, scraping through his memories. A costly one. Not the sort of thing that a person would use if they had another choice. "A distress signal to be sent out as a last resort. Using it probably killed the official in question."

Jun Wu nods in confirmation, "Correct. I summoned all of you back here to check and see which officials were able to return, but..."

He frowns, his eyebrows knitting together. "Other than those who normally wouldn't answer such a summons to begin with, everyone has reported in."

Which makes the situation even more puzzling. After all—only a Heavenly Official could have used that spell. But if everyone has been accounted for...

"Could it have been someone retired?" Xie Lian questions, "Or in exile?'

"If that's the case, it'll be a difficult search."

Most retired Heavenly Officials (of which there aren't very many remaining) eventually lose contact with the Heavens, choosing to live private lives.

"...For someone to force an official to use that spell, they must have been powerful," Xie Lian admits with a frown.

A savage ghost at the very least—but far beyond the power of that of Ke Mo or Banyue. And if not one of them, then...

A Calamity.

Xie Lian's stomach sinks, remembering the fact that, given when this occurred, and how Hua Cheng left sometime during the night...it seems...

Still, it couldn't have been him.

Regardless of whether or not circumstances forbid it—Shi Wudu made a rather salient point, back in the Grand Martial Hall.

Hua Cheng hasn't hidden his conflicts with the Heavens before. If this was him—he would have publicly taken credit.

But even still—whoever did this—they must be a ghost of considerable strength.

“…is there a place where evil forces gather?” The prince questions thoughtfully. “That might be the best place to start.”

Jun Wu glances back at him, eyes flashing slightly.

“…There is,” The emperor replies, “and it’s rather close.”

Under the pale golden light filtering in through the window, small moving reflections cast from the surface of the koi pond outside—his eyes gleam a particular shade of silver.

“Have you ever heard of a place called Ghost City?” Xie Lian falls silent for a moment, thinking.

“…I have.”

The bridge between this life and the next, but a real, physical place. A prosperous gathering place for ghosts. A haven, or a house of horrors—all depending on who you ask.

Xie Lian has heard stories of lost travelers happening upon the place, thinking they’ve found a trading post to linger for the night, only to find the food served inedible, or their hosts wearing macabre masks.

But there are other stories, always given from children.

That if you follow red lanterns in the night, you’ll find safety on the other end of the road.

It almost makes him think of…

“I sent several officials to investigate the area after the spell was cast,” Jun Wu murmurs, “but by the time they arrived, the culprit had fled.”

“It’s likely that—seeing the officials coming—the creature was hidden within the walls of Ghost City. In order to get to the bottom of this, I’ll need to send someone covertly to search for clues.”

“…” The Prince bows his head, clasping his hands in front of him.

“Please,” he murmurs, “Give Xianle the order.”

Jun Wu doesn’t speak at first, watching the Prince of Xianle bow with a satisfied expression. And when he does respond—his voice is filled with polite concern.

“You were the first person I thought to ask,” the emperor admits.

“But this would place you in an awkward position.”

Xie Lian glances up, hands still clasped before him, “...Why?”

After all, wasn’t that why Jun Wu took him aside to begin with?

“Because,” the emperor’s tone turns delicate, but it still leaves him startled. “The east is ruled by Lang Qianqiu. You would need to coordinate with him.” Xie Lian doesn’t react immediately, hands unmoving, his expression smooth. Does Jun Wu...

The prince’s stomach roils, chest stinging from the aching memory of a stake. ...Does he know about that?

It’s not exactly shame that makes him feel so startled, no. Xie Lian knows that he would do the same thing now, if given that choice all over again.

It’s the fact that—

He prayed to Jun Wu back then, desperate and frightened—just as he had so many times before, and he didn’t...

“...Please don’t worry,” Xie Lian’s reply is delayed, but his voice is calm. “That isn’t a problem at all.”

After all—Lang Qianqiu doesn’t know who he is, and Xie Lian has no intention of harming the boy even more by forcing him to live with the truth.

That would be cruel.

“...That isn’t the only problem,” Jun Wu murmurs, shaking his head. “Do you know who rules the territory of Ghost City?”

Suddenly, he remembers what Jun Wu said in the beginning of this conversation—

“...It’s Hua Cheng, isn’t it?”

Jun Wu’s silence is answer enough.

“The two of you have a good relationship,” The emperor sighs. “I know that you don't say that you have a high opinion of someone lightly. If this is too awkward for you—"

Given how much Jun Wu has been willing to overlook for him—does Xie Lian even have a right to feel awkward?

"It's alright," the prince mutters, shaking his head.

He bites his lip, raising his fingertips to his chin.

The fingers that gripped him the night before were cold, but his wrist still burns.

'I swear—you won't find anyone on heaven and earth that is more sincere than me.'

Xie Lian saw what happened out there, in the Grand Martial Hall. How willing people were to throw Hua Cheng under suspicion with the slightest provocation, and little to no evidence.

If Xie Lian allows someone else to look into this matter...

Would they just ignore the facts and blame him anyway? If they did, the prince doesn't doubt Hua Cheng could protect himself, but...he won't have to, not if the prince makes sure the job is done fairly.

"I wish to investigate the matter personally."

"...I see."

Xie Lian can hear that Jun Wu sounds pleased—but what he cannot see, in that moment, is the vicious twist of his smile, eyes gleaming with satisfaction as he asks—

"Are there any officials you would like to see assigned to the mission with you?" Given the nature of the case...

"...Someone easy to get along with," Xie Lian mutters. "And I might need to borrow spiritual power—so someone powerful would be preferable."

Jun Wu thinks that over. "I suppose that eliminates Nan Yang and Xuan Zhen as options, then."

The prince laughs, surprised. "...I suppose so," he admits.

In any case, given the clear bias the two have against Hua Cheng—Xie

Lian wouldn't have requested their presence on this mission anyway.

"Have the three of you had a chance to speak?"

"…A little," Xie Lian shrugs.

Jun Wu quirks an eyebrow. "After eight centuries of no contact, you really have spoken so little? Come, now."

There's a slightly critical tone to his voice, and Xie Lian dips his chin, about to explain, when—

"When you were banished a second time, I did ask you to check in."

Xie Lian pauses, confused. "I…"

Didn't he, though? He—

He prayed to Jun Wu. Desperately. Countless times over that century, clawing against the dark. Did he—?

"But you chose to roll around in the dirt instead," Jun Wu sighs, somewhat exasperated.

…Did he really not hear?

That's the only explanation that makes sense, but—Xie Lian—

He swallows dryly, struggling to discern whether or not he's just…remembering it incorrectly?

After all, it was three hundred years ago, and he…wasn't in a clear mental state. It felt like someone heard him, but…

Jun Wu doesn't have a reason to be dishonest about it, and he…

There are other explanations, of course. The shackles. Xie Lian's own…emotional frailties at that time. Could he have even prayed coherently back then? What was he thinking, expecting anyone to be able to hear?

He bows his head again, taking a moment to collect himself, not wanting his voice to come out hoarse. "I apologize, my lord. Xianle was…"

He inhales slowly, evenly, eyes closed.

Not allowing himself to remember more than he has to, shutting those memories away.

“...Stubborn.”

“No need to apologize,” Jun Wu shakes his head. “And I suppose it makes sense that the three of you haven’t had the chance to speak, given the destruction when you arrived again...”

Xie Lian blanches slightly at the reminder, scratching his nose awkwardly. “Yes, well...”

“I paid them back already, so...Oh,” he blinks, “I never got the chance to thank you for assigning me to the Mount Yu Jun case. Otherwise, I never would have been able to make up for the merits...”

Jun Wu tilts his head, raising an eyebrow.

“Don’t thank me—thank Nan Yang.”

Xie Lian pauses, his own brows raising with confusion.

“Feng Xin? What does this have to do with him?”

“...He asked Ling Wen not to tell you,” Jun Wu warns, “but he was the one who asked her to waive the costs for reconstructing his palace.”

The prince stops following, startled

“He...really did that?” Xie Lian whispers, biting his lip once more.

The conversation has gradually left him feeling more and more off kilter, but that... remembering the last thing he said to Feng Xin, before all of this...

‘Then don’t follow me anymore.’

“Privately, but yes.”

And with the intention that Xie Lian would never know, which makes the prince feel guilty hearing it now, even if Jun Wu’s intentions were good, but...

There’s no statement in the world more useless than asking— *‘Don’t tell anyone.’*

Xie Lian learned that the hard way.

"In any case," Jun Wu continues, easily breezing through the topics, even as he watches the building distress in the set of Xie Lian's expression, "if Xuan Zhen and Nan Yang won't work—the Wind Master would be an excellent option."

Xie Lian snaps out of it then, surprised.

"Really? She would want to help me again so soon?"

After all—she certainly went out of her way in the Crescent Moon Pass situation, and Xie Lian already put her through enough trouble with Pei Xiu and Banyue...

"You made a good first impression," the emperor shrugs.

"Besides—as an elemental master, the Wind Master is strong, and well known for having a friendly personality. That should fulfill both of your requirements, yes?"

Xie Lian nods with a small smile, pleased to find that...well...any heavenly official has a good impression of him.

"If that's all, then you can go on to the Palace of Xianle, and I'll send the Wind Master to you, you remember where it is I'm assuming?"

"Ah..." the prince smiles awkwardly. "Before it was torn down, yes. But I'm afraid I don't have the merits to rebuild..."

"Nonsense."

Jun Wu turns around, placing a hand on the small of Xie Lian's back—startling the god as he guides him to walk back towards the grand marital hall.

"You can't be expected to cram into that small shrine all the time. I granted you another."

Xie Lian can't imagine he'll get much use out of it, but...

It was kind of Jun Wu to make such a gesture, nonetheless. He won't insult the emperor by refusing it.

"Thank you, my lord..." Xie Lian replies—and then he stops, standing just outside the doors to the grand hall.

Jun Wu watches him curiously, and after a moment of waiting, he asks—

“Is something wrong, Xianle?”

Xie Lian fiddles with his fingers inside of his sleeves for a moment, debating whether or not he should, but…

“I was just…confused about something.” Jun Wu stops behind him.

That hand is still on his back—and just like before, the emperor’s touch weighs heavily on him. Like a painful reminder of something, but Xie Lian has no idea what.

“What is it?”

The younger god swallows dryly.

“I just…when my first banishment ended…”

He almost considers not saying anything. After all, there must be a reason for it, but…

The question is already halfway out of his mouth, and Jun Wu is watching, expectant.

“…My shackle was released,” Xie Lian mumbles, finishing the sentence. “But this time…it wasn’t.”

At first, he thought maybe it was because of the chaos following his third ascension, or maybe the property damage.

The first time his shackle shattered, Jun Wu was present—and this time, Xie Lian hadn’t had the chance to see him until, well…now.

“And you’re wondering why?”

Xie Lian can’t bring himself to answer directly. Just like how he couldn’t bring himself to ask for the shackles to be removed outright.

Instead, he just waits, keeping his chin low, feeling the weight of Jun Wu’s gaze against the back of his head.

“…Xianle,” Jun Wu sighs, sounding…

Xie Lian’s stomach sinks sharply, his chest tightening.

“I’m not the one with the answer to that question.”

…Disappointed, despite the fact that he hasn’t accused the prince of doing something wrong.

Xie Lian swallows hard.

“I don’t…” He starts—then stops, startled by how small his own voice sounds. How unsure.

And there’s that overwhelming desire again. To seem strong. Grown up. Not like the child that he used to be.

Because Xie Lian isn’t a child anymore, and he doesn’t deserve pity.

He clears his throat, takes a deep breath, and when he speaks again—he’s calm. Poised. Trying not to be—

Disappointing.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t understand what that means,” he murmurs, not lifting his head.

It’s quiet, the silence only broken by the occasional breeze.

“Let me ask you this,” the emperor sighs, dropping his hand from Xie Lian’s back— but his presence still looms behind the prince. Unintentionally smothering, but it leaves him feeling almost claustrophobic.

“Do you think that you no longer deserve them?” Xie Lian grows still.

‘Deserve’ is a complicated question. One that has, in one way or another, always haunted him.

When Xie Lian was a child, he thought he deserved quite a few things. After all, he had been raised to believe that they were his birthright.

Back then, the world was simple by nature.

If he did a good thing, he was rewarded. If he did something wrong, he was punished. But—

Back then, when his parents would send him to his rooms after throwing a fit, or when he wouldn’t be allowed to play outside if he became cross with his tutors…

That was about learning.

About things like patience, self awareness, and consequences. And when he got older, and his mistakes became more serious—so did the punishments.

But Jun Wu—he didn't say, 'Do you think you still need the shackles?' He wasn't asking if the lesson had been learned.

(And it has. It was learned the moment Xie Lian lost Wu Ming, watching as that blank, smiling mask disappeared behind a cloud of smoke.)

He asked if Xie Lian still *deserved* them.

"You were the one who asked for them, after all." The emperor reminds him quietly. "If you tell me that you want them removed, that's all it will take."

And if Jun Wu had opened the conversation that way, Xie Lian might have been able to ask for that. Maybe with some difficulty or anxiety, but now...

'Do you think that you no longer deserve them?'

Xie Lian might be capable of moments of shamelessness, asking for things he knows he doesn't deserve, but—

"I'm sorry," he mutters, his voice hoarse. He can't lie. Not to Jun Wu. "Let's forget that I mentioned it."

In the end...

Xie Lian knows that he'll always deserve them.

Because no matter how many times he learns his lesson, the damage has already been done. The scars are already carved deep into his soul. There's no undoing it now.

And when a man is willing to accept so much blame—there's no punishment he won't endure.

But blame is a complicated beast. A dagger that can be turned inward, or hurled out towards one's enemies with blind abandon.

To blame someone, something, yourself or someone else—it's an action that lays on the knife's edge between rage and guilt.

Xie Lian lives there.

But the same cannot be said for others.

For some, blame is a sharpened, angry thing. A tool to be used against one’s enemies.

However, more often than not—it rarely hits the intended target.

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@Currant_bliss
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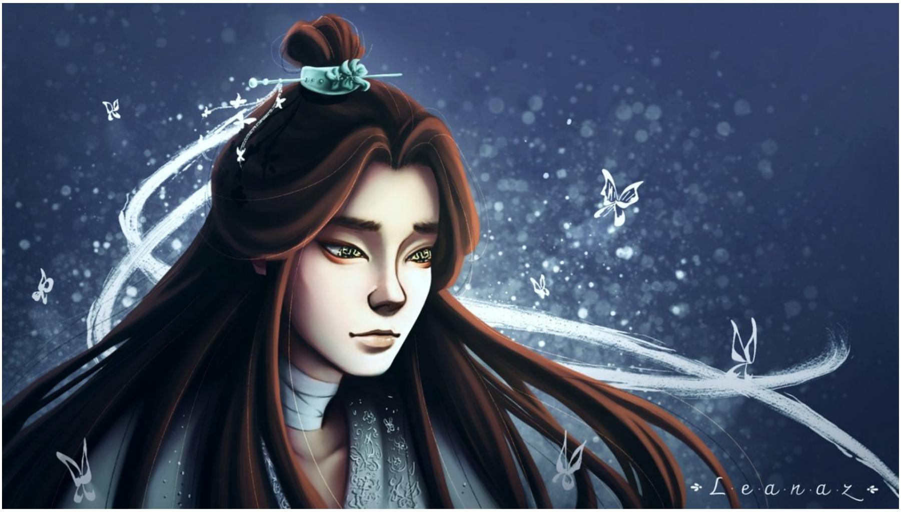
CREDIT: JUNKY

Xie Lian + The New Hair Accessory



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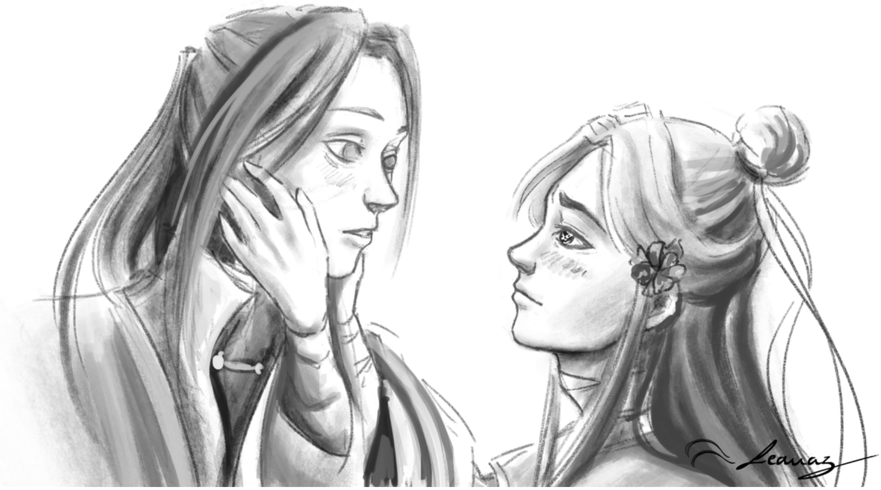

CREDIT: LEA

Zhao Beitong, "The God Slayer"

[image]

CREDIT: KRIS

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to Lea, Junky, and Kris for their beautiful work, and allowing me to share it!

xoxo, Evie

New Friends and Old Wounds

Chapter Summary

> Xie Lian smiles warmly, bowing his head in greeting.
>
> “Hello,” he murmurs, relieved that, if he has to bump into another official right now—at least it’s someone pleasant.
>
> The younger god comes to a stop beside him, catching his breath.
>
> “I’m sorry, I had some business to attend to,” he looks up with a quick smile, chestnut curls bouncing around his shoulders. “Ready to go?”
>
> “I’m...” Xie Lian pauses, eyebrows knitting with confusion. “I’m sorry, but I’m waiting for someone.”
>
> “Oh? Who?”
>
> “The Wind Master,” he explains politely, “the emperor has placed us on an assignment together.”
>
> “But...” Shi Qingxuan blinks, confused. “I am the Wind Master!”
>
> Xie Lian stares back at the other god blindly, just as confused as he is. “I...what?”
>
> “Don’t you recognize me?”

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

The walls are rattling.

The floor, too, stones quivering under the ghost’s feet.

They’ve never had to use this room before.

It’s cold, damp, craggy, characters burning red against the stone walls in the dim lighting.

A powerful array, meant for one purpose:

To seal something in. Someone, in this case.

And the rattling, well—

That’s from the roaring.

A figure sags, each hand chained to the wall over his head, dark hair hanging in front of his face. His chest and shoulders heave from ragged, enraged breaths.

Another ghost sits against the opposite wall, knees pulled against their chest.

They shift slightly, the heels of their boots scraping against the floor—and golden eyes snap up in their direction, burning in the dark with an outright feral sort of rage.

“You…” He Xuan snarls, the muscles in his arms straining as he pulls at the chains around his wrists. “What the HELL did you do?!”

Ren Song’s arms tighten around his knees, his mouth pressed against them, eyes peering out silently.

The water demon has been raging at him for the better part of an hour, ever since Hua Chengzhu dragged him here by the hair, locking him in.

Generally, Crimson Rain Sought Flower and Black Water Sinking Ships are reluctant allies. Each stays within their own sphere of influence, and boundaries are rarely crossed.

Well. Until now.

“Don’t blame him,” Hua Cheng’s voice is barely more than a hiss.

“He’s the only reason Ming Yi didn’t stumble into the Heavenly Capital while you were in the middle of…”

Well, he doesn’t exactly have to say it out loud—but they both know what He Xuan was doing.

He Xuan’s stare is venomous.

“I had it all UNDER CONTROL!”

He snarls, thrashing at the chains once more, iron digging into his wrists and throat, but it never breaks—after all, they were forged by a

Ghost King.

Hua Cheng barks out a laugh—cold, sharp with frustration. “You think THAT was control?!”

Blackwater bares his teeth, pupils narrowing as his struggles more violently. “I didn’t ASK the brat to help me!”

CRACK!

The slap rings through the chamber, Hua Cheng’s nails leaving two long, deep scratches in He Xuan’s cheek.

His fingers twist into the water demon’s hair, yanking until he’s forced to look up at Crimson Rain, his face a mess of cuts and bruises.

Ren Song watches as the ghost king’s bare their fangs to one another, snarling—like two predators caught in a duel to the death.

“You have lost focus,” Hua Cheng would say he’s always extended patience to He Xuan. More than he has to most. But now, he growls—one solitary eye gleaming down at him in the dark. “Along with any sense of priorities—”

“This IS my priority!”

The water demon tries to lunge forward, only to get slammed back against the wall, stones fracturing under his skull from the force of it.

“This has ALWAYS been my priority!”

“And what about ending up balls deep inside the Wind Master?” Hua Cheng questions flatly.

Hua Cheng has moments of crassness—but he chooses them with intent.

Now, he does it with the express intention of watching fury broil inside He Xuan’s gaze.

“Was that part of the plan? Or did you just trip?” Blackwater’s claws slice into his palms, blood pouring down.

“Don’t bring him into this.” The water demon hisses, and Crimson Rain’s laugh returns once again—even sharper now, filled with bitterness.

"Well, now isn't that hypocritical? Aren't you the one who dragged him into the center of it all?"

He Xuan shakes his head vehemently, hair whipping around him as he does.

It's been a long time since either of them—since anyone—has seen the Water Demon's true form. Far larger, far more imposing than the earth master's skin.

"His BROTHER did that, not me!"

Hua Cheng glares into those eyes, dark and endless, filled with a bottomless pit of rage.

Crimson Rain Sought Flower understands that kind of fury. Feels it every time he remembers pained screams. His god, begging for death.

A sneering smirk.

'Your story could have been so boring...but look at you now.'

That rage pushed him forward. Forged him through fire into something stronger. Something more hateful.

But the rage in Blackwater's eyes isn't something that fuels him. Not anymore.

It's consuming him.

Like a dying star, on the edge of collapse.

"...Have you ever considered what's left of you, after?" Hua Cheng's voice still crackles with rage, but the words on their own aren't hateful.

They ring with concern, voiced from a man who has always claimed not to care.

And in the end, if He Xuan is set on becoming that sort of creature, Hua Cheng isn't sure that he does care. Not beyond the fact that he needs the Water Demon for his own ends.

"What does that mean?!"

The ghost king snarls, repeatedly trying to shift forms, but the chains around his wrists and throat snap him back into place—and it's fruitless.

They’re in Hua Cheng’s territory, and his power within this space is absolute.

“When your enemies are dead, and there is no one else left to blame,” Crimson Rain’s fingers are still knotted tight in his hair, forcing He Xuan to meet his gaze—even if he doesn’t want to.

“What’s left of you, He Sheng?”

“...” Amber eyes glimmer back at him hatefully.

“You don’t get to call me that,” he whispers, clawed fingertips trembling with rage.

“My mother gave me that name.”

Ren Song shrinks further back against the wall, watching as the only authority figures he’s ever known rip at one another, all snarled words and sharp teeth.

“You don’t...” He Xuan’s words are shattering, aching with a pain that runs deep, warping and twisting into hate as they plummet from his lips, like rain turning to hail before it comes crashing down.

“You don’t get to ask for mercy for her murderer...and then CALL ME THAT NAME!”

The roar of it is so loud, the stone walls of the room shudder once more.

“I didn’t ask for mercy,” Hua Cheng glares, letting him go as he takes a step back. “But that boy didn’t hurt your family, Blackwater. You know that.”

The Water Demon hangs his head, shoulders trembling.

Maybe not.

“That doesn’t matter.”

After all—his bastard of a brother didn’t care about that when he destroyed so many other lives. He only cared about saving one.

A-Zhong, Qin Meirong, his parents, He Xuan himself...

They were all just an unintended consequence.

And in the end, it only makes sense.

He and Shi Qingxuan have always been two overlapping creatures, ever since the beginning.

Sharing birthdays, fates, a name.

It makes sense, now, that they would both become collateral damage.

And Hua Cheng could ask him the obvious: why not just kill the Water Master, and leave the matter at that.

Because simply dying isn't particularly painful. They've both been through that. It's having something you love taken from you that hurts far, far more.

"Oh, but it does." Hua Cheng sighs heavily, anger and exhaustion warring inside of him, the emotions tugging at him so viciously, he feels half pulled apart. "You speak like I don't know you."

But he does.

They've both seen all there is to see of one another.

Every single memory of the beginning of their lives has been shared. The pain, the loss, each injustice.

And as such, Hua Cheng knows He Xuan's greatest secret.

"Like I don't know exactly why you took the Wind Master into your bed."

It wasn't out of hatred. Or vengeance.

It was a mistake.

A very selfish, very human mistake. One that he can't take back now—

And one that he'll regret.

Because he's—

"...Shut up," He Xuan whispers, his voice trembling, unable to lift his head.

"Shut up."

His heart died long ago, and still—aches.

'You're a…good man, H-He Xuan…'

"SHUT UP!" He screams, covering his face with his hands, claws ripping into his flesh.

He isn't. He wasn't. He never was—

Green eyes flash before his eyes. Laughing, full of life, warmth, and hope. All of the things that He Xuan cannot be.

Everything that was stolen from him.

He Sheng was a weak man. And he lost everything.

He Xuan isn't a good man. He's hateful, vindictive, and vengeful.

He's become something monstrous, and he knows it.

But it's so much better than being helpless.

"Stop acting like you're BETTER!" He Xuan screams, wrists bleeding from how hard he thrashes against his bonds. "AT LEAST I ACCEPT WHAT I AM!"

After all, they're both soaked in blood.

Love might seem like a better justification for violence—

But Hua Cheng is a killer himself.

"…" Crimson Rain kneels down in front of him, staring He Xuan down, his rage fading from a burning fire, down into something dark and cold.

"I know exactly what I am," the eldest ghost king replies evenly, one eye gleaming back into his. "And that I'm far worse than you."

Hua Cheng used to be an expert in the concept of self pity.

He was born into a world that despised him. Viewed him as a warped, twisted thing. The only exception being his mother.

And the world, being the cruel, twisted, stupid thing that it is— It tore her apart.

That memory is buried deep, deep inside. So far down, even Zhao Beitong never said a word of it, when she saw. And when He Xuan witnessed it—he endeavored to forget.

Hua Cheng doesn't have such a luxury. His memory is long, and he rarely forgets a single moment.

And god, it made him hate the world.

Made him despise every beautiful thing. Every act of kindness. Because it always felt like a lie.

He wanted to destroy everything, and everyone. Then, to destroy himself. Xie Lian didn't make that hatred disappear, it's still there.

But—

'If you can't find a meaning in life, allow me to be that meaning.'

Worshipping his god, loving him—it was so much better than having nothing. Than loathing the world for what it had taken from him.

And—

'This world is his future.'

Hua Cheng knows. And if he hadn't accepted that, there would still be so many things about himself that he wouldn't know.

That he likes drinking. How satisfying it can be, learning something new. How fiercely he enjoys a good fight. That sunsets are beautiful. And…

His eyes flicker back, watching Shuo's small, uncharacteristically meek form, shrunk against the far wall—like a stray cat, watching two dogs tear one another apart in a back alley.

He wouldn't have learned that gamblers, even the unlucky ones, can be steadfast friends.

How fast children can grow, when you aren't paying attention.

And that, while nothing could ever come close to what he feels for his god—Hua Cheng isn't incapable of caring about others, or forming attachments.

He simply never learned that lesson until he lost them.

But He Xuan isn't wrong.

Hua Cheng is a human. A man who loves fiercely, and lives selfishly.

But Hua Cheng is also Crimson Rain Sought Flower. The bane of the Heavens. A ghost king.

And he is a monster, he knows that well.

He's slaughtered countless, over the centuries.

In some cases, for something so minor as merely insulting the love of his life. He doesn't regret that.

When he looks up at He Xuan now, though—he sees a man torn between those two sides.

The man and the monster, unable to resolve one to the other.

"I know exactly what I am," Hua Cheng repeats his words, watching redness gather at the corners of He Xuan's eyes.

Calamities, in their true forms—they don't shed human tears. Their sins are far too great for that.

Their tears are the blood that they have spilled.

They run in two crimson lines down He Xuan's cheeks, dripping down his cheeks.

"But unlike you," Hua Cheng rises to his feet, "I know what my priorities are."

And there's the very real fear that—by the time Blackwater begins to see his desires clearly—

It will be too late.

He turns away, looking to Shuo, "Stay long enough to make sure he doesn't rip his own throat out. If something else comes up—contact me."

The savage ghost nods, not saying a word as he watches Blackwater struggle. "I don't warrant any more of your time?!" The water demon sneers

Hua Cheng pulls a set of dice out of his pocket, rattling them against his palm.

Clack!

Clack!

“I have to go and make sure Shuo isn’t hunted down like a dog for cleaning up your mess,” Crimson Rain replies coldly. “So no, you don’t.”

The door opens—and then, he’s gone.

Ren Song watches him go, eyes carefully blank before they return to Blackwater once more.

“...” He Xuan sinks down, arms bound above his head, glaring at the other ghost vengefully. “I didn’t ask for your help.”

Their positions almost mirror one another now. “I know.”

Ren Song’s cheek presses against his knee, lingering baby fat smushing slightly, making him look young.

So, so young.

“Then why did you?”

His arms tighten around his knees.

“I tried to get you to deal with it, but you didn’t answer.” He mutters.

“...and how did you know Ming Yi escaped?”

“You think gege feeds your weird little pets himself?” Ren Song questions dryly. “I do. And when I got there, he was already halfway back to the Heavens.”

He Xuan grimaces.

“Why do you call him that?”

“...Call who what?”

“He’s not your brother.”

He Xuan mutters the words carelessly, uncaring—only realizing what a painful reminder they are when he sees Ren Song's eyes go wide.

Still, he doesn't take them back.

"You think he gives a shit about you? About me?" The water demon rolls his eyes.

"He saved my life because I made myself useful." He Xuan watches him, looking for some sort of reaction. "I'm sure he keeps you around for the same reason. The only one he cares about is—"

"Xie Lian." Ren Song cuts him off, his voice calm. Blackwater's eyes widen, surprised. "I know."

Even if he looks young now, there's a gravity to him. Something that only comes with hard learned lessons.

"I know my place, and I don't care."

It baffles He Xuan, because Shuo...he's disobedient, mischievous, and stubborn.

But not with Hua Cheng. Never him.

He Xuan is quite sure that, If it ever became necessary—Shuo would die for Crimson Rain without hesitation.

He already took that risk today, for He Xuan.

And he doesn't understand. It—

Why stick his neck out for them? It doesn't make sense. It's pathetic.

"Do you really?"

Blackwater glares, his throat feeling tight whenever he looks at the boy. Loathing that loyalty. Hating the way it hurts.

Remembering what happens to younger siblings who idolize their brothers. Where it leaves them in the end.

He's just relieved that Ren Song isn't wearing their female form anymore. When she does, she looks too much like A-Zhong, and it makes him feel sick.

"Because sometimes, it's like you think we're a happy little family," The calamity sneers. "Don't be naive, kid."

Ren Song finally lifts his head, staring He Xuan down with that uneven, multicolored gaze of his.

“I’m four centuries older than you,” The ghost reminds him flatly. “At the moment, you’re the one who seems like a child to me.”

It’s easy to forget, most of the time.

After all—Shuo never got the chance to grow up. That was stolen from him. Along with so many other things.

Technically, he’s not much younger than Hua Cheng.

Technically, he’s ancient.

But in many ways, he can’t grow as much as he wants to.

He’s been in love before, but never been loved back. Never known what it was like to grow old.

He’ll never have a wife, or a husband. Never have a family of his own.

He tries, and he tries, and he tries, but it’s everyone else who moves on.

It’s never him. He’s still here.

“…You don’t know how I died, do you?” Shuo questions softly, watching He Xuan with a tired expression. “It’s not like you ever bothered to ask.”

And maybe he doesn’t particularly care to know now, but… It’s not like he’s going anywhere, anyway.

“I was born at the end of the war,” Shuo explains, “everyone always talked about what it was like before. My dad fought in it, and he—”

The ghost smiles, bitter—but the reason is subversive.

“He used to talk about what an honor it was, to fight for the crown prince of Xianle.”

Shuo can’t remember a time when the prince wasn’t tainted, but oh—his parents used to look back with such an ache. Remembering what their lives were like before.

“I was the youngest of six. Five big brothers,” the ghost mutters, tracing imaginary patterns in the air.

“Two of them died in the war, I don’t remember them. But Bao—he was only a couple of years older, and we were always together.”

And most boys that age—that get annoyed, always having to look after a younger sibling.

But never Bao. He took being a big brother so seriously.

Always made Shuo hold his hand, when they went to the market. A boy wouldn’t stop pulling at his hair once, and he broke his nose.

“But most people didn’t die in the war, they never do.”

He Xuan’s expression turns grim.

“...It was human face disease, wasn’t it?”

Ren Song’s fingers pause in the air, long, manicured nails gleaming in the candle light, painted black.

“...It killed my mother,” he agrees. “And all of my brothers. It killed Bao, too.” But there’s one person left off of that list.

And He Xuan—he’s reluctantly curious.

“...But not you?”

Ren Song curls his fingers in, nails biting against his palm.

“I was the only child in my village who didn’t catch it,” he murmurs, his eyes far away. “I have no idea why.”

None of the adult men caught it—but nearly all of the women and children did. “But my father—he was furious.”

Ren Song remembers, day in and day out. Watching as the man who raised him, who claimed to love him unconditionally, began to watch him with resentment.

“He lost his wife. Five sons. All he had left was me.”

And Shuo was the least valuable.

“That’s better than nothing.” He Xuan mutters, irritated with that reasoning—

"Not when you're a girl."

The water demon stiffens with surprise, and Shuo smiles tiredly.

It's not exactly something he advertises. Hua Cheng is the only one left who knows.

"I wasn't born like this."

He spent his entire human life desperate to be someone else. Wishing his body was different. And back then, he thought it was because his father never wanted a daughter.

But then he died, and his spirit came back...

In a way that felt right.

Bao recognized him—and given the fact that they were dead, trapped in a battlefield of ghosts, and being hunted by a demented psychopath that hung spirits from trees, well—

Shuo's gender was the least confusing part, and he accepted it. He Xuan is surprised, but not baffled.

That happens sometimes, with ghosts. The shell of a soul doesn't always match it's character—but in death, such barriers drop away.

He's had ample reason to suspect that Shi Qingxuan is the same way, even if he's never said so explicitly.

"...The day Bao died," Shuo continues, his tone even, "It was just me and my father. It was so quiet, and the house felt so lonely."

So empty.

"But he told me I should sleep," he murmurs. "And that everything would be better in the morning. I believed him."

Because he was his father, and he was all Shuo had left.

"...But I never woke up."

He Xuan stays quiet now, taking that in.

Ren Song reaches for the collar of his robes, unclasping them, pulling them aside to reveal his chest.

There's just one scar there, over his heart.

He can erase every imperfection on his body if he wants to—but he can't hide the blow that killed him.

He Xuan's eyes linger there, the emotions…complex.

The ghost pulls his collar back up, snapping the clasps back into place.

"All because you were a girl?"

Ren Song shrugs, "I was a mouth to feed. And he wanted to start over."

He never told Bao. His older brother saw the scar one day, figuring it out for himself.

"…And he did," he concludes, his tone bitter. "We went back to find him later. He was already dead by then, but…"

His lips quirk up into a tired, heart sick little smile.

"He married again. Had three more sons. Died of old age. And when he died…"

Finally, there's a small tremble in his voice.

"He got to Rest In Peace."

There was no ghost. No lingering spirit to take vengeance on.

And that hurt the most. Because Shuo—he knew his father didn't love him that much. Knew that he was the last one his father would have chosen to survive, but—

He at least thought the man would have felt guilty enough to linger on.

But he didn't care enough to feel remorse

Of course, Shuo was a stronger spirit than Yanlin and Bao.

Because he started his life feeling so hurt, so angry, and so worthless.

"So, if you're trying to tell me someone I care about doesn't give a shit about me," Shuo smiles, his voice wobbly. "I'm pretty used to it."

And it’s not that he thinks Hua Cheng doesn’t care at all, Shuo knows that there’s some degree of attachment there. He couldn’t get away with so much otherwise, but…

He Xuan wasn’t wrong either.

Shuo is useful.

Useful enough to keep around, sure.

But the moment Bao’s spirit dispersed, Shuo knew he was alone. That he would never be someone’s priority again, and whatever existence he had left…

He would always be the second choice. A pawn, maybe.

And that’s fine. He’s made his peace with it, even if it aches.

He found other things to live for.

“…and he was right, you know.”

He Xuan stares at Ren Song, feeling that twisting, jarring pain rattling through his chest.

Now, it’s so hard not to look at him and see A-Zhong. And he doesn’t want to think about her.

Doesn’t want to contemplate what she would think, if she saw what he was doing now.

“Right about what?”

“Asking what will be left of you, when it’s finished.” Ren Song mutters, rising to his feet. “Didn’t you ever wonder why I haven’t dispersed Qi Rong?”

He has wondered.

After all, it’s not a question of ability. Ren Song is far more powerful than he seems, and Qi Rong’s bark is far worse than his bite.

“I always assumed you thought torture was worse than death.”

“Maybe.” The savage ghost agrees. “But it’s also because I don’t have anything else,” he admits quietly.

And if he did disperse Qi Rong, there's a very good chance that Shuo wouldn't have enough resentment, enough purpose left to carry on. That he might disappear.

"...and he already killed my brother," Shuo concludes, looking He Xuan over with a mixture of emotions. "He doesn't get to kill me, too."

Before, he thought keeping Hua Cheng company might be reason enough, but... He's found his god now, he doesn't need that anymore.

No one needs him. He's nobody's first choice. And—

Qi Rong might be a shitty thing to keep him going, but he hasn't found something better. Not yet.

He lifts the dice out of his pocket, and before he rolls them, He Xuan repeats his question from the beginning:

"Why did you try to help me?"

Ren Song stops, dice clutched in his hand, glancing back over his shoulder.

"...Because if you got caught, the emperor might have dispersed you then and there," he mutters, like it's obvious.

"So?" Blackwater mutters, hanging his head. "Why does that matter to you?"

Ren Song stares, knuckles white, briefly biting his lip—and then he sighs.

"...Because I would miss you," he admits, watching as the water demon's eyes widen with shock.

"Family or not, naive or not—if you were gone, I'd be sad."

He Xuan doesn't respond—doesn't know what to say—and Shuo doesn't give him the chance, rattling his dice.

Clack!

Clack!

He steps through the door, leaving behind the darkness of He Xuan's cell for the red, over-saturated light of Paradise Manor.

It’s quiet.

“…” He kneels down in the hallway, alone, his head clutched between his hands. ‘Why do you call him that?’

He knows.

‘You think he cares?’

He knows, he knows, he knows.

But it’s lonely, and it hurts, filling him up with an ache that he’d rather leave as a void.

He’d rather feel nothing, than feel so worthless.

When Yin Yu rounds the corner, he sees a small figure kneeling alone on the floor, arms wrapped around their head, shoulders trembling.

And he sighs, because he thought his babysitting days were done, but…

Big eyes stare up at him, one green like the leaves in the trees, the other burning like a forest fire, lips wobbling.

Shuo holds his arms up, expectant—and the Ghost Officer sighs, lifting him up in his arms.

“Tired?”

He leans his head against Yin Yu’s shoulder, and he nods.

There are moments when Shuo wants to grow up so badly—but others when he just… Wants to feel safe again.

Yin Yu looks after him with a grim sense of obligation, so it isn’t ideal, but—

He reads the stories, and he does the voices.

Sometimes, that’s enough.

When Xie Lian first returned to the heavens—he thought the crowds made him feel out of place. That the bright, overbearing light all around was what made him feel so uncomfortable.

But all of that pales in comparison to standing in front of his own palace. It hardly suits him.

Xie Lian doesn't need to see the red glass walls to know that it's exactly as it was before—and while that was very well and good for a prince, it…

Feels far more like someone else's residence than his own. He'd feel like a joke, sitting alone in a large, elegant palace.

Instead of going in to wait, as Jun Wu suggested—he finds himself loitering outside, twiddling his thumbs, wishing he could have just waited in the grand martial palace. Or better yet, he could have descended down to his shrine and awaited the Wind Master there.

Really, that would have been better than—

"Your highness!" A voice calls out pleasantly—and Xie Lian can hear the sounds of boots clicking sharply against the pavement as someone hurries over.

The prince recognizes him immediately as the young god who spoke in his defense. Shi Qingxuan, wasn't it?

Xie Lian smiles warmly, bowing his head in greeting.

"Hello," he murmurs, relieved that, if he has to bump into another official right now—at least it's someone pleasant.

The younger god comes to a stop beside him, catching his breath.

"I'm sorry, I had some business to attend to," he looks up with a quick smile, chestnut curls bouncing around his shoulders. "Ready to go?"

"I'm…" Xie Lian pauses, eyebrows knitting with confusion. "I'm sorry, but I'm waiting for someone."

"Oh? Who?"

"The Wind Master," he explains politely, "the emperor has placed us on an assignment together."

"But…" Shi Qingxuan blinks, confused. "I am the Wind Master!"

Xie Lian stares back at the other god blindly, just as confused as he is. "I…what?"

"Don't you recognize me?"

"Um…" Xie Lian tilts his head, trying to decide whether or not he's being teased, and Shi Qingxuan's eyes widen apologetically.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, I guess my voice is too different, I didn't realize!" But now that Xie Lian is paying attention…the is rather familiar.

The aura around him is a bright, inviting shade of green, fluttering at the edges, like leaves in the wind…

"Oh," the prince concludes, trying not to be rude. "But before…was there a reason for —?"

"Me appearing as a woman?" The Wind Master finishes for him.

Xie Lian manages an awkward nod, and Shi Qingxuan responds with an easygoing smile.

"Did I sound cute?"

"…" Xie Lian scratches his ear, slightly off kilter due to the topic. "I suppose you did."

"Well, I looked cute too, take my word for it!" He beams.

"Do I need another reason?"

Xie Lian never thought of it that way before. But there doesn't seem to be any harm in it—and is it really so different from Hua Cheng changing skins?

"No, I suppose you don't," he agrees.

It's the easiest acceptance Shi Qingxuan has ever received.

His eyes brighten and his smile widens as he reaches for Xie Lian's arm, grasping his hand firmly. "Let's get going then!"

He drags Xie Lian towards the gates of the heavenly capital, the older god stumbling in tow.

"I—ah, hold on—!"

Xie Lian protests weakly, a little sheepish to admit it, but—

“I don’t have the best luck with descending, you might want to stand clear—!” Shi Qingxuan laughs brightly, still holding onto his hand.

“Don’t worry your highness, I’ve got it!“

“I don’t think..!”

“Just get a running head start,” The wind master assures him, “I promise it’s fun! Even Ming Yi and gege like descending with me, and they’re both the biggest sticks in the mud EVER!”

Well…

What’s the worst that can happen, besides knocking into a few more clouds?

“…Okay,” he mutters, allowing himself to be dragged all the way to the gates, and once there—he sucks in a deep breath, taking a running jump off of the edge.

Shi Qingxuan beams, hands on his hips. It’s so satisfying, getting people to take that leap of faith—

Oh. Oh right!

He has to jump after him!

The wind master charges, fan in hand, cackling with delight as he leaps off of the edge with a dramatic little twirl, swooping his arms around him.

For a moment, as Xie Lian plummets, it feels like a pretty terrible idea.

He’s in a rapid free fall, even less controlled than his last two attempts, preparing for the inevitable moment when a cloud smacks into him, but…

That moment never comes.

Instead, just when he’s starting to panic—the wind catches him, swooping him up in a current of air.

At first, it’s disorienting—sort of like when he was swooped up in the desert before, worried about where San Lang was, if he was alright, but now—

Now, when he allows his body to stop struggling, it—

Xie Lian can't describe it in any way other than saying it feels like flying.

It takes him a moment to feel comfortable with it, the way the wind occasionally swoops him higher before letting him glide down, his stomach flipping pleasantly with the pull of gravity, but once he does...

It actually is...

A cautious smile spreads across Xie Lian's face.

It's fun.

His hair whips around him as he drops again, and this time—he lets out a surprised laugh, arms spread out around him, gasping as he coasts again.

It's—

"See what I mean?" Shi Qingxuan calls over, a few meters above—much more poised, but that's to be expected.

"Y...Yes!" Xie Lian agrees breathlessly, "It's—It's really niIIIICE!"

The wind swoops him up out of nowhere, flipping him playfully before letting him drop again, and this time—Xie Lian actually squeals with surprise and delight, almost like—

Almost like being a child again.

When he was small, his father used to toss him up into the air, watching the little prince squeal and laugh as he came back down, catching him every time. Just...just like this.

Shi Qingxuan is laughing with him now, enjoying the sight of the ever calm, always thoughtful Crown Prince of Xianle devolving into happy, breathless laughter.

He looks so young when he does, and it's easy to imagine the happy, carefree prince that he once was.

Shi Qingxuan has heard the occasional story. Granted, most of them were rather critical, or often mocking—

But sometimes, they would describe someone of such incredible talent and beauty, beloved by the entire world.

Now, with Xie Lian smiling and laughing, not a single line of worry or concern left in his face—it's easy to imagine that.

When they finally do land, it's gentle—with the Wind Master resting on the balls of his feet, and Xie Lian coming down lightly on his knees in the grass.

"See?" Shi Qingxuan beams, shaking his hair out, earrings tinkling as he looks around, rather satisfied. "There's nothing to be worried abou—!"

He turns to look at Xie Lian, then stops, clapping his hands over his mouth to hold back a laugh.

"...Is something wrong?"

"No!" Shi Qingxuan squeaks between his fingers, using one hand to gesture frantically. "No, no no! Absolutely not, I just...your hair...!"

He hunches over, his ribs aching from the urge to keep quiet, and Xie Lian reaches up to check, eyes wide.

"...Oh my..."

"It's okay!" The Wind Master assures him, snapping his fan open once more, "I've got it! Just stay still, your highness!"

Of course—Xie Lian does, squeezing his eyes shut as another gale of wind sweeps past his face, whipping around him for a moment before going still.

"...There!"

Shi Qingxuan places his hands on his hips, looking over his work.

Well—it's still a little windswept, but definitely not the tangled mess it was before, and that's an improvement!

Besides, it's not like the Prince of Xianle ever looks bad, so it's fine!

The prince rises to his feet slowly, brushing his robes off, checking for the hairpiece on his head, and the chain around his neck.

After confirming everything is in place, he turns to the Wind Master once more, “Do you know the way to Ghost City from here?”

“Sure do!” Shi Qingxuan grins, spinning his scroll between his fingertips, similar to the one Xie Lian was given by Jun Wu before leaving the palace. “Shall we?”

He offers the Prince of Xianle his arm, and, after a moment, Xie Lian takes it. And this feels…almost familiar.

It feels like being seventeen years old again, with his friends on each arm, pointedly talking and laughing over them in order to end another petty argument.

That’s what this is.

It feels like friendship.

And it’s been a long, long time since Xie Lian had a friend.

Which also forces him to confront the fact that, while he called San Lang a friend, and he treated him as such—Xie Lian didn’t actually see him that way.

But what else could he be? What other word is there for the connection they had? More than strangers. Fond of one another.

It was just…Friendship. It must have been a different form of friendship. Xie Lian can’t think of another word to describe it.

“Your highness? Are you alright?”

Xie Lian grasps at the chain around his neck for a moment, biting his lip. “…I’m fine,” he mutters. “Lead the way.”

Friendship is important. But more so than having enough friends—it’s about choosing the right friends.

Pei Ming knows that better than anyone—he’s chosen wrong plenty of times before. But now, in what is objectively not his best moment—they’re the ones beside him.

Metaphorically speaking. Ling Wen is standing over Mu Qing’s shoulder, watching as the martial god reapplies the bandages on the

General’s torso.

“Will the sutures hold?”

“As long as he doesn’t stab himself again,” Mu Qing replies flatly, seeming irritated by the hovering.

“To be fair,” Pei holds up one finger, correcting him, “I stabbed myself in the chest, not the stomach—”

“Don’t justify it.” Shi Wudu cuts him off flatly. He’s standing in front of the window, his arms crossed—expression hidden from view “It doesn’t make you sound less idiotic.”

Pei Ming snaps his mouth shut, huffing out a pouty little sigh, and Mu Qing straightens, bag in hand. “By mortal standards—it should be healed before the Mid- Autumn festival.”

Ling Wen arches an eyebrow. “Should?”

“He’s a god suffering from a wound delivered by an ancient cursed tool,” Mu Qing replies dryly. “It’s not an exact science.”

“He’s sturdy, Ling Wen.” Shi Wudu shrugs, staring down to the streets of Heaven below. “He’ll be fine. Leave Xuan Zhen to his business.”

The Civil Goddess crosses her arms with a shrug, watching as Mu Qing leaves the room—and thus, the three friends are left alone.

Pei isn’t blind to the tension in the air, and he lets out a heavy sigh. “Look, it’s not like I had a way of knowing beforehand.”

“Was there anything about this ghost in the brief?” Shi Wudu questions, his arms tightening around himself. “Do we know anything about him?”

“...No,” Ling Wen admits. “There’s barely more than a brief historical record of him.”

“How is that possible for a ghost that ancient?”

“I don’t know,” she isn’t accustomed to saying those words—and clearly doesn’t enjoy it. “Jun Wu would be more likely to know that than me, and he didn’t indicate any knowledge.”

“That doesn't mean that he doesn’t know,” Shi Wudu mutters, his expression turning dark.

Pei Ming's eyebrows raise at that as he sits up, bracing his arm against his stitches as he does. "Is there anything you'd like to add to that statement?"

The Water Master is still facing away from him, arms crossed.

"It wasn't a statement," he mutters. "Just an obvious fact."

"...It's possible he didn't want to divulge sensitive information to the entire heavenly court," Lin Wen agrees, her tone somewhat conciliatory. "But that's not the primary issue at hand."

"I don't see how it isn't," Pei sighs heavily.

"Whatever that ghost's intentions were—it essentially sent a tool for assassination to the largest pool of possible victims. It was a malicious move."

"Yes," Ling Wen agrees. "I plan on discussing that with the emperor in our next meeting. But you were almost killed, Pei."

"I think that's a little dramatic," the general starts—and Shi Wudu finally turns his gaze, his eyes sharp.

"You're lucky it didn't hit you any higher, or else mortal medicine would have been useless," the water master mutters flatly. "Don't call her dramatic."

The tension between the two is clear, and Ling Wen—she sighs, sliding her hands over the sides of her head to smooth her hair.

"You're both missing the point—Pei Ming, your survival impacts more than just you. Do you understand that?"

The Martial God blinks, raising an eyebrow.

"Ling Wen, if this is your way of saying you've FINALLY developed an emotional attachment to me—"

"Hardly." The civil goddess cuts him off coldly. "It's well known that, aside from his highness the emperor, power and influence in the heavenly court is divided between you two."

Pei Ming, the strongest of the martial gods—and Shi Wudu, the strongest of all of the elemental masters. And even if he isn't classified as a martial god—

Very few would be willing to take the Water Master in hand to hand, nonetheless.

“Your point being?” Wudu mutters.

“If either one of you is displaced, the balance in the Heavenly Court could shift dramatically,” she holds a hand up to stop Pei before he can start, “and before you go on about not wanting Jun Wu’s position—I know that. Everyone knows that.”

Except perhaps the emperor himself.

“But if something unforeseen ever happened to the emperor, everyone would look to you. That’s no small thing, Pei.” Ling Wen warns him, her gaze stern. “You should take it more seriously.”

There was a time when the general did, but—

He’s so tired now. He hides it well, but…

Those closest to him can see it clearly.

Pei Ming never would have been injured to begin with if he had been operating at full capacity.

“And I don’t know what you were thinking, contradicting the emperor in public.” Ling Wen turns her gaze to the Water Master. “I didn’t realize you were such a fan of Crimson Rain Sought Flower.”

“Oh,” Shi Wudu rolls his eyes, “Give me a break. I’ve never even met the creature.”

“Then why risk Jun Wu’s ire by defending him?”

“His ire?” Cerulean eyes drift towards her, turning snide. “Is his ego that fucking fragile?”

The Civil Goddess stares back at him, silent—and they both know his question might as well be rhetorical.

Pei watches the two, and finally—he breaks the tension. “It seems like there’s something else you want to ask, Ling Wen.”

“…Are you two hiding anything that I should know about?” She questions, mirroring Shi Wudu’s posture, her arms wrapped tightly around her middle. “Because I can’t plan for things without proper information.”

Pei thinks it over, and Shi Wudu turns his gaze back to the window.

“It would be impossible for me to spare every detail of my life—public or private,” the general murmurs. “But I can’t think of anything relevant that I’ve been hiding.”

Ling Wen’s gaze drifts to the Water Master, who has his back turned to both of them.

“And what about you?”

Shi Wudu glances back at her, startled. “What?”

Ling Wen watches him closely. “Is there anything you’ve been keeping to yourself that either one of us should know?”

“...” The younger god looks away, shaking his head.

He can’t say it.

If he did, they might try to do something.

And if they did, it would present the very risk that Ling Wen is trying to mitigate now.

Still—the Civil Goddess has her own suspicions behind the Emperor’s targeting of Pei, so she asks another question—this one far more blunt.

“And are the two of you still involved?”

Of course, she’s aware of the ongoing affair between the two. Has been since the Mid- Autumn festival forty years before.

But Pei doesn’t keep lovers for long, and she used the word ‘involved,’ which implies intimacy.

And, just as Shi Wudu opens his mouth to deny it—

“We are.”

Shi Wudu’s gaze snaps over to him, sharp, the tips of his ears turning slightly pink, and Pei Shrugs, holding his hands up in a neutral gesture.

“What? As of six days ago, anyway—we were quite involved.”

He didn't have to use the word 'quite' for Ling Wen to get the point.

And it leaves the Water Master entirely unsure of how to respond, his throat tight.

"...As involved as someone like Pei is capable of being, anyway." He replies flatly, turning away from them both once more. "Does that answer your question?"

Ling Wen watches, silent. "...I suppose," She agrees softly. "Pei, you should return to your palace and rest—"

"He can stay here," Shi Wudu mutters, arms still crossed, his shoulders stiff. "God knows what he'll do, left to his own devices."

It's a fair point, even if it barely veils his intentions.

Ling Wen sighs, shaking her head as she walks out the door. "We'll discuss this more later."

Obviously. Both men know that she isn't easily put off of a burning question, particularly one as serious as this.

When the door shuts behind her, Pei opens his mouth to whine. "Your brother is going to throw a fit—"

"Shi Qingxuan isn't here," The Water Master cuts him off crisply, his tone cool. "The emperor sent him on an assignment with the Crown Prince of Xianle."

"Oh," the older man arches an eyebrow. "They'll make an interesting pair."

Shi Wudu doesn't reply, still facing away from him, and Pei Ming sighs, fatigue sinking deep into him, wishing, rather childishly, that the younger god wasn't standing so far away.

"What—?"

"Take off your clothes."

The General snaps his mouth shut—surprised, but not upset.

"...What was that?"

"I said," Shi Wudu turns around, not sparing Pei Ming a look as he strides from the room, fan still clutched between his fingers, "take off your clothes.”

Of all of the Palaces in the Heavenly Capital—that of the Water and Wind Masters is by far the finest.

To be expected, given that the former is the deity of mortal wealth—but his tastes are also more subtle than that of the heavenly emperor.

Instead of being outright ostentatious, every inch of the place rings with subtle quality, from the floorboards to the furnishings.

Pei is rarely ever here, and when he is—he’s fighting off verbal barbs from Shi Qingxuan with a club, so he rarely gets the chance to enjoy the luxury.

Tonight, however, he’s allowed to indulge in one of the finest amenities the palace has to offer—

The baths, of course.

Hot Springs located behind the palace in a set of private courtyards, steaming with warmth, framed by smooth stones and red leaved maples.

It’s peaceful—beautiful.

Pei Ming watches the smooth, toned skin of Shi Wudu’s back from where he stands on the other side of the pool.

Heartbreakingly beautiful. That’s what this place is.

“You’re angry.” He sighs, bracing his arms against the rocks as he leans back against an underwater ledge.

Shi Wudu doesn’t spare him a glance, rinsing soap from his hair.

“Why would I be angry?”

“There are two options.”

“Oh?” Shi Wudu turns his chin just a hair, giving Pei a glimpse of the curve of his jaw, eyelashes brushing against his cheek. “Do tell.”

“...” The general swallows dryly, the pit of his stomach heating with want. “First, I was ‘idiotic.’”

“You were,” The Water God agrees. “And why else would I be angry?”

“...Because of what I said to Ling Wen,” Pei theorizes quietly, “though I don’t understand why that would make you angry. She already knew about us.”

But that implies that either one of them knows what ‘us’ means—which they do not.

And Shi Wudu is far more reluctant to question that now, when he’s been recently reminded of the fate of Xuan Ji.

What Pei does to those who get attached. Never cruel, never unfair. Nonetheless, it’s frightening—and so confusing.

Because everyone who wants to justify Pei’s liaisons—the hearts that he’s broken— they all say the same thing:

That he was always incredibly clear, right from the beginning, about what he wanted. But he’s never made such specifications to the Water Master at all.

And Shi Wudu couldn’t say if that was out of some genuine measure of affection—or simply because he’s a long term associate of Pei’s, and should already know what he’s like.

“Well,” the god murmurs, “those are both rather good theories.”

It’s a precarious position to be in.

“Are you going to tell me if one of them was right?” Pei questions, watching with a keen eye.

His lover doesn’t respond immediately, squeezing the last of the water out of his hair. “I think I’ll leave you in suspense.”

He’s not that angry, then—not if he’s being playful.

Still—he finally turns around now, the water moving easily around his waist as he makes his way to the other side of the pond, where Pei Ming is sitting.

“Did you mean it before?”

Pei has to force himself to look away from the beads of water slipping down Shi Wudu’s throat, arms, and chest. “Mean what?”

The Water God stops in front of him, watching Pei Ming’s expression, his own gaze unreadable. “When you said that you weren’t hiding anything."

Pei stares back at him curiously, arching an eyebrow. "Yes. I'd have to be stupid, to hide something from you."

Shi Wudu rolls his eyes, not in the mood to be sweet talked. "And why is that?"

Pei Ming reaches out, grasping his chin gently.

"Because you'd gut me like a fish."

The Water Master stares back at him, not seeming particularly satisfied with that explanation, but...

Pei looks honest, at the very least.

Which is more than Shi Wudu can be when the same question is sent back at him: "And what about you? Are you hiding anything?"

The younger god casts his gaze to the side, and he doesn't answer, not outright.

He's hiding many things.

What he's done. What's been done to him. What he feels, when Pei says the word 'us.'

He's not sure which secrets are worth telling, or if he'd rather be consumed by them.

Instead of answering verbally, he reaches out—fingertips brushing against the stitches in his side. They haven't gotten wet, despite the general being in the pool— Shi Wudu hasn't allowed it.

His expression is calm, eyes distant and guarded. But his fingertips tremble.

"..." Pei catches the water god by the wrist, not to push his hand away—but simply to hold it there.

"Were you worried?"

The corners of Shi Wudu's mouth tug downward, tired.

What an idiotic question.

Of course, he was worried.

No—he was terrified, when he heard.

“Hey…”

Pei tilts his chin forward, until their foreheads are pressed together.

Shi Wudu is proud. Fiercely so. Won’t admit fear or weakness easily. Not unless he feels…

“Talk to me.”

Not unless he feels like the person listening won’t judge him.

The water god bites his lip.

He runs through the secrets he has, from smallest to biggest. Tries to prioritize which ones are forgivable, and which ones would leave him abandoned.

He settles for the least offensive of them all—and the one that’s making his fingers tremble now, sitting on his chest.

“…It feels like it was my fault,” he mutters, wishing he could hide his expression—but in this position, it isn’t possible.

“Your fault?” Pei Ming questions softly, bringing one hand up to cup the back of Shi Wudu’s hair. “How could it be your fault?”

Still, the younger man doesn’t answer. Can’t seem to bring himself to, averting his eyes to the side.

“…If you’re worried about distracting me or something like that, don’t be.”

Pei’s smile turns sly, and Shi Wudu is already groaning in anticipation of whatever line he has in mind—

“You’ve been on my mind for centuries now, I’m used to it.”

A surprised little laugh slips out of the Water Master’s throat. “Is that so?”

“What’s so funny?” The martial god smiles, leaning forward to press his face into the side of Shi Wudu’s neck, earning a small, pleasured sigh when his lips find the younger man’s pulse. “I’m being serious.”

“Oh,” He rolls his eyes, shivering as he tilts his head to the side. “I believe you.”

Such words have never been uttered with so much sarcasm.

“I’m always being honest around you, you know,” Pei whispers against his skin, fingers bunching in the Water Master’s hair.

It curls when it’s wet, not so different from that of his little brother’s.

“Right…”

“So,” Pei continues, one arm wrapping around the small of Shi Wudu’s back, guiding the god forward until he’s straddling Pei Ming where he sits on the underwater ledge, “when I say that I missed you, you know that I mean it.”

The Water God’s heart skips a beat.

‘Missed you.’

Does he—?

Pei Ming has many talents—but first among them has always been making the person in his arms feel like the most important thing in the world, at that point in time.

“So?” He prompts gently, looking up into Shi Wudu’s eyes. “Did you miss me too?”

Yes.

Yes, yes, yes.

Being around Pei Ming aches, in a way that is both addictive and unbearable, and Shi Wudu feels moronic for becoming dependent on it.

But yes—yes, he did miss him.

He always misses him, hiding behind snark, sarcasm, and pride. But he doesn’t say that.

Pei makes a soft sound of surprise when hands press against his cheeks, pulling him in. There’s stubble there. His body has a tendency to start growing a beard, when he forgets to magic the new growth away.

But the Water Master appreciates the roughness against his palms. And he doesn't answer. Doesn't say the words out loud.

But Pei has never been kissed like this before. It's hungry—they always are—but with such a delicate yearning.

The kind of kiss that makes him shudder, fingertips digging bruises into Shi Wudu's back as he holds him closer.

He has him like that. There, squirming in his lap, arms wrapped around the Water Master's back as he arches, panting, crying out his name.

And the words 'Pei Ming' sound sweeter on the Shi Wudu's lips than any mortal prayer the general has ever received.

Even when it's done—and with General Pei, that always takes quite some time—they don't pull apart, remaining connected in nearly every way as their breaths and heartbeats begin to slow.

The martial god combs his fingers through wet, tangled curls, and the water master drifts his hands over Pei's shoulders, fingertips glowing with magic as he soothes the aches in his muscles.

A surprisingly tender gesture, from a man who won't say that he missed him.

"...I'm sorry about Pei Junior," he eventually comments, pressing in at the joint of his shoulder blade until Pei lets out a relieved sigh, his gaze suddenly far away. "Did he really never tell you?"

"No," the general responds, slightly irritable. "And I've got no idea why."

"...Maybe he didn't want to disappoint you," Shi Wudu shrugs, sliding one palm up the side of Pei Ming's bicep. "You're an idol to the boy, after all."

And he threw it all away for some dead girl that Pei has never met. "Disappoint me?" The martial god questions in disbelief.

"That would be ridiculous."

Sapphire eyes don't meet his gaze, focusing instead on the planes of Pei Ming's chest, thinking of the scars that must have once painted a very different picture, in his mortal life. "Is it?"

“My hands are covered in more sins than anyone’s.”

Most martial gods are dubbed ‘General,’ after all—but Pei Ming is one of the few who ever truly lived that title in his mortal life.

And wars aren’t glorious things. They’re bloody, desperate, and cruel.

“Maybe it was that famous honor of yours that intimidated him.”

After all, it’s a difficult thing to live up to.

Pei, the general who broke his sword. The man with all of the power in the world—but who refused to take it.

For all of his flaws, there’s a goodness in him. One that’s difficult to stand beside without feeling a shadow.

“...Honor is a matter of perspective, beautiful.” Pei Ming sighs, reaching up to trail a finger down the side of Shi Wudu’s throat.

It’s always been one of his most attractive features. The most satisfying place to leave a mark.

“And perspective changes.” That it does.

He’s been thinking lately, about visiting his Grand Temple. The one that was liberated only recently by the Crown Prince of Xianle.

He’ll be injured for a while. Jun Wu won’t be able to send him on missions for weeks.

And Pei Ming thinks Shi Wudu would like Gusu.

It’s peaceful there. A good place to forget one’s worries.

And the Water Master seems weighed down by something, more and more with each passing day.

But before he can say a word, Shi Wudu speaks first.

“Can you promise me something?” He murmurs, grasping Pei’s chin.

“If I asked you, would you swear it?”

After all, Pei is many things—but never an oath breaker. If he gives his word, it’s as good as stone.

And of course the general looks up into those eyes, haunted by the array of color, and he replies—

“Anything.”

Anything he liked.

He has hopes it might be for something more romantic, but—

“My brother.”

Those hopes are quickly dashed.

“...What about him?” Pei mumbles—no, nearly grumbles, not wanting to think about Shi Qingxuan at this very moment.

“If something happens to me...swear you’ll protect him?”

Shi Wudu’s voice turns small, however briefly—

And those eyes, those beautiful, spellbinding eyes, the same gaze that left General Ming Guang trapped the moment he saw them—

They seem almost frightened.

“...If something happens to you?” Pei questions, his eyes narrowing. “Has someone threatened you?”

And even if someone had, who could pose a threat to him?

“No,” Lies come easily to the water master, flowing from his lips like anything else. “What Ling Wen said earlier...it just made me worry.” He mumbles, leaning his chin against Pei’s shoulder.

“Promise me?”

Pei is reluctant, of course—but if only to set the Water God’s mind at ease—he swears.

Knowing that promise will never come to fruition—because even if someone could bring Shi Wudu harm, General Pei would never allow it.

But when they’re in bed later, he wonders.

Wonders about the pain in his side. The man in his arms, and the layers of hurt he always seems to be hiding underneath.

But more than anything, he wonders about that dagger, and what it means. After all—it didn’t live up to it’s name, Pei Ming survived.

But it won’t be long now, before that blade kisses the skin of another god. When it does—it will cut far deeper than before, cutting out lives, fates, and promises.

When that blood is spilled—it will stain the hands of many.

And a dragon will rear its head once again.

The Gambler's Den

Chapter Summary

> “...I’m sorry, but what sort of establishment is this?”
>
> It sounds rather loud inside after all—full of shouting and laughter. Some sort of pub, perhaps?
>
> “...” The young man glances up at the sign above the door, and when he speaks—it’s bittersweet.
>
> “...Money over life, and gains over shame,” he mutters under his breath, his throat suddenly tight.
>
> “...” Xie Lian tilts his head to the side, confused—to which the ghost just smiles, shaking his head.
>
> “It’s a gambler’s den, Mr. Hua. Everyone important in the city is in there.”

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

The path is long, though not so terrible when you have company. The Wind Master has even been so kind as to use his fan to blast them a few miles down the road here and there, much to Xie Lian’s delight—and now, it looms ahead, crimson aura gleaming in the twilight:

Ghost City.

“Have you ever been here before?”

Xie Lian has learned quite a bit about the Wind Master on their journey to the underworld. In part from sneaking his fingers over his scroll, and the rest can be blamed on the fact that the younger god never really stops talking.

“Oh, no—not really,” Shi Qingxuan shakes his head. “I’ve been trying to get Ming Yi to sneak down here with me—I’ve been horribly curious, you know—but he’s been dragging his feet on it...”

Ming Yi, Xie Lian has learned, would be the Earth Master.

Who also happens to be Shi Qingxuan's closest companion in the Heavenly Court— aside from his elder brother—and (presumably) the woman who was accompanying him in the Crescent Moon Kingdom.

And speaking of his brother…

"It's pretty amazing that two siblings from the same family both ascended as gods," Xie Lian comments, "your parents must have been incredibly proud."

As a matter of fact—he doesn't think he's ever heard of such a phenomenon up until now.

"You think so?"

Shi Qingxuan shrugs. "I wouldn't know—I never knew our parents."

Then, he stops to think.

"Well, I guess I knew them when I was a baby, but I definitely don't remember them."

"Oh," Xie Lian frowns, apologetic for bringing the matter up, "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Don't be!" The Wind Master's smile is as bright as ever—and from the sound of his tone, he genuinely doesn't seem bothered. "It's always been me and gege. He was my mother, father, brother, the whole thing. And he was very proud when I faced my own heavenly calamity, so you weren't wrong!"

It's a little jarring now, listening to the way that Shi Qingxuan speaks about his brother, the Water Master—because it contradicts so sharply with San Lang's description: the Water Tyrant.

The Ghost King described a cold, detached deity. A prideful creature.

And The Wind Master is describing a devoted elder brother. Xie Lian supposes both could be true—after all, people have many different sides to them, he knows that well.

Still, it's contradictory.

"And the way you spoke to General Ming Guang before, in the Grand Martial Hall…"

Xie Lian tilts his head, concerned. "He seems to have a friendship with your brother. You don't think that'll cause problems?"

That only draws a disbelieving snort as the Wind Master crosses his arms, flicking his hair over his shoulder irritably.

"If it did, that would be a relief—but no, gege knows I can't stand Pei. I wish he would stop hanging around with him. Honestly, the 'Three Tumors' thing hasn't helped with his reputation..."

So—he's aware of the 'Water Tyrant' title, then?

Xie Lian's eyebrows raise.

"...The three tumors?"

Shi Qingxuan blows a tuft of bangs from his forehead irritably, "I guess you haven't heard of them either, huh?"

But unlike nearly everyone else in the Heavenly Court—he doesn't sound critical when he says it.

"Well—the three most powerful gods in the Heavens—they aren't really popular, but they're each close friends with one another. Ming Guang, Ling Wen, and my brother. I don't actually know why everyone has an issue with Ling Wen, not other than stupid rumors anyway..."

Xie Lian lifts his chin curiously, "Rumors?"

He's found Ling Wen pleasant enough in the interactions they've had. A little cold at times perhaps—but always helpful, and never outright rude.

"Oh, just the usual bullshit when a woman does well," Shi Qingxuan rolls his eyes. "That she slept around to get her position, stuff like that. Which is ridiculous— everyone knows she only got promoted after the last head civil god imploded. People even say she's intimate with Pei and my brother..." He makes a sound of disgust. "It's a bold faced lie."

Xie Lian grimaces with silent sympathy. After all—it's a plight that he understands rather well. Whether he'd like to or not, but...

"And Pei Ming—he's as arrogant and self important as they come. Not to mention how many issues he's caused by sleeping around."

And there's no need to explain why Shi Wudu would be included in the three—his personality is reason enough to make him unpopular with the other officials.

“Oh—we’re about to enter the city now. Should I go ahead and give you some spiritual power? Just in case?”

It’s prudent, so Xie Lian nods in agreement, reaching his hand out, “I shouldn’t need too much, so there’s no need to overdo—”

He stops, startled to find that the hand underneath his own is much smaller than it was before, when Shi Qingxuan was dragging him out of the Heavens.

“...Did you change forms again, Lord Wind Master?” He questions politely. A distinctly female voice replies—

“Truth be told, I’m usually worshipped as a goddess, so I’m more powerful in this form!” She sighs.

Similar to Ling Wen, who is near exclusively worshipped as a god.

“Besides, women have stronger auras of yin,” she explains, robes swishing around her ankles as she walks. “So it’s better to travel in the ghost realm disguised as a woman. Really, you should try it!”

“Oh...” The Crown Prince smiles awkwardly, shaking his head. “I don’t think—”

“You aren’t worshipped as a god or a goddess anyway,” Shi Qingxuan points out, “so it won’t impact you—no offense,” she adds, realizing that might have been slightly hurtful—but Xie Lian doesn’t seem to mind.

“None taken, that’s correct.”

“And,” Shi Qingxuan rubs her chin thoughtfully, “if that boy who was with you before is really Crimson Rain Sought Flower—doesn’t he already know what you look like?”

Well—Xie Lian can’t argue that point.

“I don’t think I need to hide from San Lang...” The god replies, hesitant.

“We’re friends. I don’t think he would be upset if I chose to visit.”

“Certainly not,” Shi Qingxuan agrees, “but we’re not visiting—we’re investigating his territory. It might make things a little awkward…"

Xie Lian frowns, squirming a little with discomfort.

He's never used a spell to transform his body before—never needed to. And for gods and goddesses—it's not the same as a ghost shifting into a different skin, or using a clone. The actual spiritual body and form changes, and—

Well, what if Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan got separated?

If he ran out of spiritual power and didn't have a means of getting more, he'd be stuck in that form—which would be rather embarrassing, but…

…It could make things awkward for San Lang, if he learned that Xie Lian was here, and his purpose…

"Do you not know how?"

"I know how."

Shi Qingxuan jumps at the sound of her companion's voice, turning her head to see— that—well—

It's already been done.

"Ah!" She claps her hands over her cheeks, bouncing on the balls of her feet. "Your highness!"

"…Did I do it incorrectly?"

"No! You look amazing, jiejie!"

The princess grimaces, fiddling with her hair—that much, at least, feels the same.

Jiejie is a new one.

She must be shorter now, she can feel that from the way her robes feel a little too long, dragging slightly on the ground behind her.

They're also looser in the shoulders now, and tighter in the chest—forcing her to adjust her belt slightly to keep the sleeves from slipping off to one shoulder.

"Do I look different enough?"

Shi Qingxuan stops, rubbing her chin in thought as she looks Xie Lian over.

In truth—the prince wasn't a hulking, hyper masculine figure to begin with, so the transformation isn't entirely unrecognizable.

She's smaller, her features slightly more delicate. Heart shaped face, fuller lips and all of that—not to mention the changes to her figure.

Shi Qingxuan probably wouldn't have recognized her if she hadn't transformed right in front of her. And honestly, unless someone was obsessed enough to have Xie Lian's form completely memorized—they wouldn't recognize her either.

So, it's fine!

"Absolutely!"

Well, if she sounds so sure—then there probably isn't much to worry about, is there?

Xie Lian reaches back, finding the hood of her robes, flicking it up and over her head, covering her eyes.

It's not long before they find a crowd of female ghosts to slip in behind, listening in as they chatter on about facials, finding new funeral garb for the change in season, and so on.

"I'm so glad Ghost City is open again!"

"Oh? Was it closed?" One of the ghosts questions. "I hadn't heard a thing about that."

"Oh, yes," her companion agrees rather seriously, shaking her head. "It was just after the Ghost Festival—though I am surprised, my friend said Hua Chengzhu returned last night in quite a state."

Xie Lian perks up, lifting her chin.

...Hua Chengzhu? It makes sense, after all—this is his territory, of course he'd be the lord of the city.

And yet, hearing him referred to that way makes her fingertips tingle with nervous energy.

Because of the task at hand, naturally. "A state?"

“Oh, yes—he was absolutely furious,” the ghost sighs, rubbing at her cheeks. “But no one knows what happened.”

“Who does, with that man?”

Xie Lian bites her lip.

Was he really that angry? Even if he has nothing to do with the missing official… Did Xie Lian offend him?

She can’t recall having done anything that offensive the night before, except, well… She did get a little short with San Lang just before falling asleep, thrown off by…

‘You’ll never find anyone in heaven and earth more sincere than me.’

But Hua Cheng didn’t seem so petty as to be upset over something like that, really…

Xie Lian doesn’t realize that she’s been leaning closer—all under the premise of being able to hear the conversation a little better—until one of the ghosts looks back with a start.

“Say—who are those two? They didn’t leave the burial ground with us.”

Xie Lian leans back, tugging her hood down a little further over her face with a nervous laugh, “Ah, well…”

“We came from a different burial mound,” Shi Qingxuan interrupts with an easy smile. “Greetings!’

Xie Lian is relieved in that moment to have the Wind Master with her—she has a relaxed way of speaking that makes her easy to believe whereas Xie Lian, well…she’s infamously terrible at lying.

And the other ghosts seem to accept that well enough, until…

“Say, meimei…” One of the ghosts leans close, examining Shi Qingxuan’s face rather closely. “That’s a nice complexion you have there…who does your facials?”

“Oh, I…ah…hahaha…” The Wind Master giggles, leaning back with a slightly strained smile. “I do them myself!”

It’s the wrong answer.

“What?!”

“Do mine!”

“No!” Another ghost huffs, grabbing Shi Qingxuan by the arm and yanking. “Me first!”

“Wait your turn!”

Xie Lian extends a hand helplessly, wanting to help, but at a loss for what to say; and…

Before she knows it, Shi Qingxuan has been dragged off.

Leaving Xie Lian alone on the streets of Ghost City, slightly dazed as she glances around underneath the hood, trying to get her bearings.

There’s just one problem—

There are far too many ghosts around, and the number of different pockets of resentful energy is…disorienting.

Not to mention how loud it is—with so many voices inhuman and otherwise barking out into the air.

How on earth is she supposed to look? And then, there are other problems.

“Hey, miss!” A shopkeeper grins, fangs gleaming as he leers over her. “Looking for a new tongue?”

Xie Lian starts, clapping one hand over her mouth nervously. Is a tongue something that a person can buy…?

“I like mine the way it is, thank you,” she squeaks awkwardly, hurrying past.

“Hungry, little lady? Fancy some chicken soup?”

“Oh, no, I’m fine—!”

“Hello, gorgeous!”

One stall owner goes so far as to grab her by the wrist, “Those boots look too big for you, what do you say to trying on some of my slippers? They’ll look amazing on that figure!”

"…" Xie Lian forces a smile, yanking her wrist out of his grip. "No, thank you! I'm in a hurry!"

But each time she wrestles herself free from one ghost, she just stumbles into another —and not only does it leave her exasperated, but—

How is she supposed to investigate like this? Her original form certainly wouldn't have drawn this much attention.

"Well look here…"

She backs up sharply when a voice echoes near her ear, hitting the wall of a nearby store, lips twisting into a grimace.

"Don't be nervous, little lady…" the ghost smirks, leaning in curiously. "I don't bite… much," he tacks on that little correction at the end, and she frowns.

Well, that's no way to talk to a lady, even if he doesn't know that Xie Lian isn't one. Still, handling this with fists would make quite a scene, and she…

"I'm just…looking for my husband, excuse me—"

"Husband!" The ghost barks out a laugh. "A young thing like you? Married?"

"She's trying to let you down easy, asshole." A voice barks out—this one feminine, but older, graveled—like someone who has spent a few centuries shouting at people. "Now leave her be."

Xie Lian let's put a low breath of relief, moving closer to the woman speaking.

"Oi, Lan Chang, who do ya think you're talking to?" One of the other ghosts grouses, taking a step towards her. "Everyone knows you run this block, running off a little competition is just pathetic…"

Xie Lian blinks owlishly under her hood.

Competition?

The ghost—Lan Chang, it would seem—rolls her eyes, and Xie Lian feels heavy, manicured hands land on her shoulder. "She's not selling anything, worm. Am I gonna have to ask you to leave her be again?" She hisses, baring her fangs. "You know I don't like asking twice."

While the two ghosts face off with one another, Xie Lian mumbles a few rushed words of thanks before ducking down, slipping out from under Lan Chang's hands and making her way down the alleyway.

Once out of sight, the princess clutches her head with a groan. This isn't working.

She can't work like this—and she wasn't expecting to be nearly so reliant on Shi Qingxuan, but, with this place being as disorienting as it is...

She lets out a sigh, fumbling for her spiritual power—what remains of it, anyway— going through the process to change back—

"Wait, you're a MAN?!"

Xie Lian freezes—and, mortifyingly enough—his first instinct is to press both palms against his chest to check.

And indeed, he is.

"Wait, Lan Chang, you're in with a cut sleeve?!"

"Am NOT!" She sputters, "How was I supposed to know it was a disguise?!"

"I don't know, don't women have a way of sensing one another?!"

"What the hell are you talking about now?!" She squawks. And when Xie Lian tries to inch away from the argument, he feels that same manicured hand from before grab him by the back of his robes.

"And just where do you think you're going?!" Lan Chang snaps. She's surprisingly strong, to Xie Lian's dismay, and though he can't see her glare—he knows that it must be formidable. "What are you doing, walking around like that?! Are you up to something—?"

Xie Lian opens his mouth, scrambling to think of an appropriate explanation, but all that comes out is—

"...Was I cute?" He asks in a small voice, feeling utterly ridiculous.

Lan Chang stops, looking at the ghost that was harassing Xie Lian before, both staring in confusion.

"...I mean...yes," the man agrees, scratching the side of his head—and when Lan Chang glares, he throws his hands up. "Well, what do you expect me to do, woman?! Lie?!"

"Then that's...reason enough!" Xie Lian mutters, his face getting hotter and hotter by the moment.

He can't exactly sell it the way that Shi Qingxuan can, but he's made an effort.

"That's..." Lan Chang starts, her eyes narrowed—

"Do we have a problem here?"

Oh great, another arrival.

Xie Lian doesn't know whether to laugh or cry.

The newcomer sounds young—maybe a teenager.

Probably male, though it's hard to tell exactly—

"N-No, sir..." The ghost who was bothering Xie Lian before shakes his head, bowing nervously, "None at all!"

Sir? A male, then, but also—

Xie Lian's stomach lurches hopefully as he peeks through his hood, but...

It isn't crimson.

Well—everything is crimson here, actually—Hua Cheng's aura covers the entire city.

Comforting, in a strange way, but nonetheless—there isn't the silver core that he's used to seeing at the center of it.

Still, the aura before him is strong.

For a moment, it's almost reminiscent of Shi Qingxuan's—a vibrant shade of green— but this is far brighter, far more powerful—and far less mobile, with sharp curves and edges.

And at it the center is a flickering core, almost like a flame—shades of orange and red shifting.

"Lan Chang," the young man questions calmly, "do you make a habit of harassing travelers these days?"

“Oh, no—” Xie Lian speaks up with a frown, surprising the female ghost when he takes up in her defense, “She was trying to help me at first, then she saw I was disguised…”

“Disguised?” The newcomer murmurs, arching an eyebrow. “For what purpose?”

“Probably to trick unsuspecting ladies!” Lan Chang grumbles, crossing her arms. “I was completely fooled!”

The younger ghost sends her a cold look.

“Lan Chang, are you trying to say the only reason someone might change their form is to prey upon women?”

She stops, her mouth frozen in a perfect ‘o,’ realizing how her statement sounded, her expression going slightly pale under a thick layer of makeup.

“Well…no…”

“But it’s still pretty weird that he was in disguise,” the male ghost from before grumbles.

“Half of the city wears mask,” the most powerful of the three responds flatly. “Did he give a reason?”

“…He said it was…just because he looked cute…”

Xie Lian has finished the debate between laughing and crying—deciding on the latter, if only his tear ducts would obey him.

“And did he?”

Xie Lian goes still, and Lan Chang sputters. “Hah?!”

“Did he look cute?”

“I-I guess! Why does it—?!”

“Then leave him alone.”

“But—!”

“I’m sorry,” Xie Lian listens to the young man closely, and despite the different aura, something about him seems…familiar, “did I stutter, or have you gone collectively deaf?”

Definitely—very familiar.

“We—!”

“Get lost, before I get annoyed.” The young man hisses.

The other two ghosts give each other wounded looks before scrambling off, and Xie Lian is left standing in the alleyway, pulling his hood a little lower before offering an awkward bow of thanks.

“Thank you, young man, it was kind of you to intercede on my behalf...”

The young ghost glances him over with a raised eyebrow, crossing his arms. “It’s fine. What’s your name, mister?”

He really does sound very young, barely a young adult. And he was able to intimidate those other two ghosts that easily?

Then again, in the ghost realm—looks are often deceiving.

Unfortunately, the most recent alias Xie Lian was using is the one that falls from his lips—force of habit.

“Oh—it’s Hua Lian,” he starts with a friendly smile, then stops, realizing how...given whose territory he’s in...

The immediate response he receives is a surprised giggle, and his shoulders slump slightly, realizing how it must sound. “Ah...I—”

“Don’t worry about it,” the young man snickers, offering a polite bow in response. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Hua.”

Xie Lian’s ears are burning so much, he half expects steam to start coming out of them.

“Are you looking for something? You seem pretty out of it...” Then, the ghost examines him a little more closely, making Xie Lian shrink away instinctively, fidgeting with the hem of his hood—

“...Mr. Hua,” the young man repeats, this time his voice much more gentle, “can you not see very well?”

It’s a delicate way of asking—far more polite than what Xie Lian is used to—and he forces a shallow nod, offering a self deprecating smile.

"…I'm afraid I can't, no."

The air becomes slightly tense—but not in the way that Xie Lian is used to. It doesn't feel like the young man is bracing to attack him, or angry with him…

He seems a little anxious.

But before Xie Lian can ask what's wrong—

"Tell me what you're looking for, I'll show you."

There's no hint of malice in his tone at all—and while that does set Xie Lian at ease, he…

Doesn't exactly know how to explain what he's looking for without completely blowing his cover. He was the one who asked for this mission, after all—he can't mess it up so soon.

"…I'm looking for a friend of mine," Xie Lian explains. "They might be hurt, and they might have come here to hide until help could come, so…"

"…And would that person be your husband?"

Oh heavens, he heard that?

"…No…" Xie Lian croaks, wishing the hood covered his cheeks. "No, just a friend…"

"I see," the young man muses. "Well, I haven't heard about anyone injured showing up here. But I know the best place to look for people who have."

"…You do?"

"Yep," the young man spins on his heel, pinching Xie Lian's sleeve. "I'll show you."

He isn't overfamiliar, grabbing Xie Lian by the arm or anything like that, the way most people do when they figure out he can't see. His grip on Xie Lian's sleeve is surprisingly delicate, just deftly tugging the god in the direction he wants him to go.

Finally, he stops in front of a set of steps, tugging Xie Lian's sleeve until the god places his hand on a railing before letting go. "It's thirteen steps, the doors are already open."

Xie Lian nods gratefully, grasping the railing a little more firmly before he asks—

"...I'm sorry, but what sort of establishment is this?"

It sounds rather loud inside after all—full of shouting and laughter. Some sort of pub, perhaps?

"..." The young man glances up at the sign above the door, and when he speaks—it's bittersweet.

"...Money over life, and gains over shame," he mutters under his breath, his throat suddenly tight.

"..." Xie Lian tilts his head to the side, confused—to which the ghost just smiles, shaking his head.

"It's a gambler's den, Mr. Hua. Everyone important in the city is in there."

He steps down, turning around, shoving his hands in his pockets—and Xie Lian can't help but be curious. After all, he's the most powerful ghost that the god has come across in the city so far—

"But not you?"

The younger man stops, scratching his head sheepishly.

"Well..."

Of all the answers Xie Lian may have expected—
"I'm...technically...kinda...grounded right now."

—that...was not it.

"You—?" Before Xie Lian can ask more, he hears the sound of something clicking—

Clack!

Clack!

And then that aura is gone, and the boy with it.

"..." Xie Lian stares off in the direction he disappeared from, curious.

Just what sort of child was that? So powerful, but apparently…grounded? Can ghosts even be grounded? Is that an option?

Before he can contemplate the matter further, there's more boisterous laughter.

All echoing from inside the gambler's den, filled with more echoing shouts, screams, and brouhahas than Xie Lian can keep count of and…

There doesn't seem to be a better place to investigate, it's true.

He climbs the steps, carefully counting thirteen—then walks inside.

A large chamber looms before him, filled with countless different tables, each one packed with gamblers rolling sets of dice, pushing their luck over and over again, screaming with elation or meaning with defeat as they fall.

"Welcome, sir," an attendant smiles from beside him. "Would you like to be placed at a table?"

Is that how gambling works? Xie Lian's never tried it. The closest he ever came was betting with Feng Xin on how many books he could balance on his head, but—

"I'm afraid I don't have any money," the prince smiles apologetically. "Could I just watch instead?"

Normally, that's the sort of thing that would get a person laughed out the door—but the attendant seems easy going enough, laughing softly.

"Oh, we rarely bet with money, sir," she smiles. "But you can watch as much as you like."

…What kind of gambler's den doesn't bet with money? What on earth could they be using instead—?

It isn't long, however, before Xie Lian hears the answer to his question.

"Ah—I bet my arm!" A man at the front table declares, slamming his fists down for emphasis.

No one else nearby seems particularly thrilled by his presence — though a few seem to find his persistent wailing amusing.

"You're better off paying out…"

“No!” The man exclaims. “Just give me another roll!”

“You think anyone wants your worthless arm?” A voice drawls.

Xie Lian stops, his eyes widening—because he knows that voice.

It’s a couple of octaves deeper than it was before—and it’s tone is warmer, all the more alluring for it, but—

...San Lang?

“But you’ve been letting other people bet their limbs all night!” The merchant protests.

“Those were athletes and master swordsmen,” another gambler snorts derisively. “You think that arm of yours is good enough to bet on?”

The man pauses, eyes bulging with frustration under his mask.

“FINE!” He rasps, “that’s FINE! What about ten years of my daughter’s life?!”

Xie Lian’s expression twists with disgust. What kind of father could offer such a thing? But—

“As you wish,” Hua Cheng’s voice drawls once again—and from the sound of it, he’s further from the rest of the crowd, elevated on a dais.

“You’re lucky, sir,” the attendant by Xie Lian’s side smiles, “our lord is playing tonight.”

Their lord...?

“Odds or evens?”

“O-Odds!”

But as Xie Lian recalls, Hua Cheng’s luck is powerful—doesn’t that mean he’ll automatically win? And if so, the man’s daughter will be —?

“HA!” The merchant screeches when he flips over his cup, holding up the dice for all to see. “I’ve won!! I’ve WON!”

Xie Lian let’s out a shallow breath of relief without meaning to, placing one hand over his chest. At least that’s over—

“I want to play another round!”

“You’ve already done enough to turn your business around,” one of the ghosts at the table grumbles. “What more do you want?”

“I want...all of my competitors to drop dead!” The man declares, slamming his palms on the table again. “Give me another roll!”

“That’ll cost you more than ten years...” another man grumbles. “And why make a bet like that? There are other—!”

“I know what I want!” The human snaps. “How about twenty years, then?! And her fate in marriage!”

Xie Lian feels horrified—but the ghosts laugh and jeer.

“The human’s desperate—did you hear him?”

“Betting his own daughter’s future! HA! What a sight!”

“Alright,” one of the attendants agrees, gesturing for the man to continue. “Have at it, then.”

Xie Lian bites his lip, hands balling into fists. Should he say something? He—

That’s when a voice speaks up beside him, this time familiar; “Best not to interfere.”

Xie Lian sighs with relief, fumbling blindly for Shi Qingxuan’s arm, grasping him by the elbow. It’s not something he would normally do—but the Wind Master has a way of setting him at ease.

“You changed back?”

“As soon as I got away from those women,” he groans. “I had to make something up as I went along—and when it didn’t do anything, they kept on asking, ‘Why didn’t it work meimei?’ And ‘were you lying to us, meimei?’ Meimei, meimei, meimei!”

Shi Qingxuan huffs, stamping his foot quietly with irritation. “So...I sort of lost my temper and said it wasn’t my fault, they were just ugly...” He admits with a sheepish pout, and Xie Lian can’t help but snort, covering his mouth politely. “Don’t laugh, your highness!”

“I’m not, I’m not...” Xie Lian clears his throat, keeping one hand on his friend’s elbow. “How did you know to find me here, anyway?”

Had he run into that interesting young ghost as well?

"Oh," the Wind Master blinks, his eyes wide. "No—this is just the most popular landmark in Ghost City. It's where I told Lang Qianqiu to meet us."

Xie Lian's eyes widen sharply under his hood, and he grips the windmaster's elbow just a little tighter. "...Pardon?"

"Lang Qianqiu?" Shi Qingxuan repeats, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh—I guess you probably haven't heard of him either!"

Xie Lian, once again, doesn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"He's General Tai Hua, Warden of the East. Since this falls within his territory, I had him meet us here so he could assist. He's usually pretty helpful."

But in this situation?

"Does he...?" Xie Lian starts to speak, but then—

BOOM!

Oh—oh dear.

A fist comes down on the gambling table—crushing not only the cup of dice, but the hand of the merchant holding it.

"What kind of bastard are you?!"

Xie Lian cringes.

A young man stands over the gambling table, sharp eyebrows pinched into a severe glare, "What father would bet his own daughter's life?!"

The prince can't manage to lift his face from his hands. "Did you...warn him about keeping a low profile?"

"I..." Shi Qingxuan goes pale. "I mean, I did, but..."

When it comes to Tai Hua, certain things go in one ear, and out the other. Xie Lian knows that perfectly well.

And now, he's already caused a scene. But before Xie Lian or Shi Qingxuan can hurry forward to stop him—

There's a familiar chuckle from above—one that makes Xie Lian's stomach flip, in spite of the situation.

"You must have nerves of steel, causing trouble in my territory."

'My territory.'

That's when Xie Lian remembers what Hua Cheng told him the night before—

That ghosts are at their most powerful inside their own lairs. Which, in Hua Cheng's case, would be ghost city. He could probably obliterate a martial god in a weakened state—but here?

It wouldn't even be a fight.

"...Are you the owner of this place?"

Hisses echo all around.

"He comes here and insults us, and he doesn't even even know our master?"

"Stupid asshole!" Another ghost sneers. "The entire city is his!"

Shi Qingxuan goes pale. "Please don't tell me that's..."

Xie Lian isn't frightened, but his expression is grim. "It is."

"Y-you're sure?"

"Positive." Even if it's slightly different, he'd know that voice anywhere—and when he looks in that direction—

He can see that silver core there, warm and bright. In spite of everything, his gaze softens.

"We're dead," Shi Qingxuan mutters. "We're so, so dead..."

"No," Xie Lian shakes his head, reaching over to squeeze his arm reassuringly. "It'll be alright, as long as he doesn't—"

"What kind of establishment is this?!" Lang Qianqiu glares around the room, hands on his hips. "It's like none of you have any human decency!"

"Well of course we don't!" One of the ghosts snaps as the entire crowd starts to boo at the heavenly official. “We ain’t human!”

“Who does he think he is?! I oughta—!”

“You have the option to go to Heaven,” Hua Cheng’s voice is soft, but it carries throughout the entire room.

“But instead you’re in hell, with me.”

‘Oh dear,’ Xie Lian thinks to himself fretfully. *‘He knows exactly what Lang Qianqiu is, doesn’t he?’*

“And if you want to walk away alive—you’ll play by my rules, boy.”

Shi Qingxuan winces this time, clutching his fan tightly between his fingers as he watches the look on Lang Qianqiu’s face.

He’s always been rash, righteous by nature, and...

“Who are you calling a boy?!” He snarls, slamming his fist onto the table once more.

He doesn’t like being spoken down to.

(Though, to be fair—as someone five centuries older, Hua Cheng has every right to call him a child.)

This time, when he smashes his hand down on the long, heavy gambling table—it sends the entire thing flying in the Ghost King’s path.

It never lands.

Without breaking his relaxed posture—legs crossed, one elbow leaned against the arm of his throne-like chair—Hua Cheng raises one palm, making the table freeze in midair.

Then, with a flick of his fingers, it hurls itself back at Lang Qianqiu.

The Martial God tries to stop it with one hand, several veins popping in his forehead as he does so.

Behind the curtain, the Wind Master catches Hua Cheng cracking a small smirk as General Tai Hua is forced to use two, his feet sliding back across the wood as he’s forced back.

Then, those long, menacing fingers curl into a fist, and the table shatters into countless splinters, leaving his opponent staggering, spitting out sawdust.

“You—!”

Before he can say another word, Hua Cheng’s finger’s come together again, this time in a—

Snap!

And with just one crisp click of his fingers, there’s a metallic rattle as silver chains— seemingly coming out of thin air—descend from the sealing, each one catching the young god by the wrists and ankles, hoisting him up into the air, leaving him splayed helplessly.

Still, the god thrashes with all of his might, his form sparking with spiritual power, “P-Put me DOWN!” He snarls, limbs flailing.

Xie Lian watches those sparks of spiritual energy fretfully, worrying that he might do something stupid and reveal his true form, but—

“HA! The cultivator thinks he can use his magic!” One of the ghosts sneers, giggling at the sight. “Those chains are hellforged by our master himself! Nothing can escape once it’s locked in!”

Hellforged...?

Hua Cheng made them himself?

And just as the ghosts claimed—Lang Qianqiu’s spiritual powers are tightly sealed. Almost reminiscent to the cursed iron shackles Xie Lian came across in Gusu, but this...this seems far more refined.

Back then, when Xie Lian had been trapped under the grip of the cursed iron—it had been an agonizing experience. But Lang Qianqiu doesn’t seem to be in pain at the moment—not counting his wounded pride, at any rate.

“PUT—PUT ME DOWN!” “My, my...” Hua Cheng muses.

“What an interesting thing I’ve caught...”

Clack, clack, clack, clack!

The chains rattle as they flip Lang Qianqiu around, like a puppet on a set of strings, hovering him over the crowd as they cackle and jeer.

“What should we do with you, hmm?”

The ghosts below are gleeful as they throw out suggestions.

“Skin him!”

“Take his head!”

“Drink his blood!”

Heavens, what kind of suggestions are those?

Hua Cheng, however, seems rather amused. “How about this—whoever wins the next round can take it home and eat it.”

“It?!” The god rages, “I’m not an it—!” He’s cut off when the chains twist him again, this time dangling him upside down. “S...STOP DOING THAT!”

“...This is going to be a problem,” Xie Lian mutters, leaning close to Shi Qingxuan, keeping his voice low. “How is your luck?”

“Ah...” The Wind Master shrugs helplessly, “Like anyone else’s? Sometimes good, sometimes bad...and what about yours?”

“Terrible.” Xie Lian replies morosely, leading to the younger god laughing nervously. “Hahaha...I’m sure it can’t be that bad, your highness!”

“The highest I’ve ever rolled is snake eyes...” Xie Lian tries not to be self pitying, but— that’s hard not to do when the truth actually is rather pitiful.

“Oh...well...we could work that to our advantage, actually!” Shi Qingxuan offers, eyes widening hopefully.

“...We could?”

“Consistency is always useful!” His companion beams, hands on his hips. “Just bet on rolling the lowest number!”

Well...

“...That’s not a bad idea,” Xie Lian mumbles, rubbing his chin. “Alright—I’ll try it.”

“Oh!” Before he can walk away, the Wind Master catches him by the arm. “When you place your bet—put something really serious up as collateral, alright?”

“Oh…” Xie Lian tilts his head, thinking. “Why?”

“Just trust me!”

He supposes Shi Qingxuan has earned that much, so he agrees with little protest, approaching one of the gambling tables.

“Excuse me?” He leans over to one of the croupiers with a polite smile, “Could I play a round?”

“…Of course, sir,” the employee smiles, bowing deeply. To everyone else, their manner seems rather callous and rude—but to the prince, the workers are exceptionally courteous.

“Please, take a seat.”

The croupier pulls out a stool for him, and as Xie Lian sits, he asks—“Could I bet on the lowest numbers, or does it have to be odds and evens?”

“You can bet however you wish, sir,” the ghost replies. “What’s your stake?”

“Ah…” Xie Lian thinks on it.

Something serious? He doesn’t have any wealth to bet, nor would betting years of his life do any good. He’s immortal, after all. And he certainly isn’t willing to risk someone else…And if he offered a limb, that wouldn’t work either…

In his experience (unfortunately, he has quite a bit of it) when one cuts off the limb of a heavenly official, it’ll just disintegrate over time, and regrow on the original owner’s body.

But, in order to win a substantial prize, he has to bet something useful…

Finally, he comes to a conclusion, and in his defense—

“…My body,” Xie Lian replies quickly, not seeing the way that the croupier, undead, somehow grows even more pale. “Is that enough?”

—he means it in the most innocent way possible. Like physical labor. He’s good at that!

There's a slight, nearly imperceptible shift in the atmosphere, and from the crowd behind him—Shi Qingxuan chokes, using his fan to cover his face, flicking it back and forth nervously.

"...Of course!" The croupier replies with a nervous laugh. "B-by all means, sir, go ahead..."

Xie Lian nods, taking the smooth, polished black dice cup in his hands, and really—he knows he shouldn't be nervous, he's never rolled higher than snake eyes in all his—

Clack!

Clack!

"What'd I get?"

The croupier swallows dryly, leaning over. "...Two sixes, sir."

"..." Xie Lian sits there, staring down at the dice blindly, muttering, "That figures." From behind him, Shi Qingxuan drops his face into his hands miserably.

"...Can I roll agai—?"

"Ah, I'm sorry to interrupt sir—but our master has offered to play a round with you himself!"

Xie Lian's eyes flicker up in Hua Cheng's direction underneath his hood, somewhat wary, but...

It was foolish, to think the Ghost King wouldn't notice his presence. Is he going to be angry that Xie Lian created such a disruption? Even if it wasn't technically his fault...

"...Alright," he agrees, starting to shake the cup again, but before he can actually roll, the attendant stops him.

"Our master says that you're shaking the dice improperly," the ghost explains, "he's offered to teach you."

Xie Lian stops, raising an eyebrow.

It's not like he has a lot of gambling experience—or, well, any gambling experience, but—

"...Oh, really?"

"Yes, he says you can go on up."

To where he's seated, in a curtained lounge above the rest of the players—always watching, but none dare to approach.

Even if he wanted to—Xie Lian is hardly in a position to refuse.

"Alright," he murmurs, keeping his cup in hand as he moves over to where he assumes the steps are, and...

Just as he starts to feel for them with his feet, the staircase starts to glow with silver spiritual power.

"..." The god can't help but smile, making his way up. San Lang really is always so considerate, isn't he?

When he reaches the top step, the figure that has been watching since he arrived steps to the edge of the curtains, reaching out and parting them with one hand.

One slips underneath Xie Lian's where it's holding the dice cup—larger than it was before, and he can't help but be reminded of the first time they met, in the bridal sedan, realizing...

That red thread is still wrapped around Hua Cheng's third finger, tied into an affinity knot.

His skin is far colder to the touch now than it was before—but not unpleasantly so— and when his other hand comes to rest around Xie Lian's where it grasps the cup, it completely envelops his fingers.

'Next time, I'll meet you in my true form.'

Xie Lian's ears burn.

Is this...?

"Would you like to bet on the highest number, or the lowest?" Hua Cheng asks, his tone low and gentle—as it always is, with him—but it seems to startle the ghosts below.

"...Have we been rolling the dice wrong this entire time?"

"Is there really a right way to do it?!"

Xie Lian clears his throat, swallowing hard.

"Ah...the highest," he mutters, considering that was what he rolled last.

"Alright," Hua Cheng agrees easily, his lips turning up into a soft smile. "I'll go first, then."

Xie Lian nods wordlessly as the ghost king shakes the dice.

Once, twice—and when the cup is lifted and the dice land against his palm, Xie Lian can feel from the carved grooves which numbers came up—a five and a six.

"...What on EARTH kind of luck is that?!" Lang Qianqiu glares, slowly revolving over head like a demented ceiling ornament.

Xie Lian doesn't pay him any mind, taking the cup on his own, trying to mimic Hua Cheng's movements as best as he can, but—

"No," the Ghost King shakes his head, covering Xie Lian's hands with his own, "not like that—let me show you."

"Ah..." Xie Lian's tongue feels almost like it's gotten stuck to the roof of his mouth from the nerves—even though he has no idea why. It's—

It's just San Lang, it's fine.

"Okay..." he mumbles, dipping his chin down as the Ghost King shakes the cup between his hands, unhurried.

Of course—he's utterly focused on what he's doing, focused on the way Hua Cheng's hands move, the rattling of the dice inside the cup.

But the calamity—he's just watching Xie Lian's face with soft eyes, his smile warm. "See? Just like that."

Xie Lian lifts the cup, and really, he should be disappointed, but...rolling two threes in this situation is far better than what he could have hoped for.

Still—he looks up at Hua Cheng, slightly sheepish, "I'm sorry, I lost..." His cheeks tingle when the ghost king leans close—

"Don't be sorry—that was just practice." He murmurs, fangs flashing between his lips as he speaks. "I'm teaching you right now."

Well—that's very patient of him. Xie Lian doesn't think he'd mind if Hua Cheng wanted to teach him other things—

"Are practice rounds an option?!"

The ghosts below seem baffled—annoyed, even—by the exceptions being made for the prince, but Xie Lian doesn't pay any mind to that.

"The master must be in a real good mood today..."

Hadn't those women before said something about Hua Cheng being in an awful mood? What changed?

One eye flickers up, staring down at the crowd sharply.

"Quiet," he murmurs—and to Xie Lian, he sounds calm, but—

The prince can't see the gleam of the Ghost King's fangs, intimidating the entire room into silence.

"Now," he looks back down at Xie Lian, gentle as ever— "Would you like to try again?"

"..." He nods—a little more quickly than he means to in his nervousness, and the ghost king's smile widens as he guides him to shake the cup once more.

This time, it's lifted to reveal two fours. "See? You did even better this time."

Xie Lian nods slowly, watching his increasing luck with growing surprise. Is he actually learning the trick? Honestly, he's just letting Hua Cheng move his hands however he wants, but...

There are some knowing giggles in the crowd, and Xie Lian can't help but wonder if he's being teased.

"San Lang..." he murmurs, his cheeks slightly flushed, and the ghost king shushes him softly, giving his hands a gentle squeeze.

"Don't worry about them—roll again."

Of course, he doesn't dare refuse him—and when he does, two fives appear in his hand.

Lang Qianqiu, who just so happens to have been slowly revolving into the angle to be able to see, huffs. "Don't fall for it! He's clearly cheating somehow!"

That draws offended shouts from the crowd.

“Shut up, our lord would never cheat!”

“He’s being generous, showing the newcomer a secret technique!”

“It’s been working, aren’t you paying attention?!”

Xie Lian can’t help but smile. The ghost king really is beloved, isn’t he?

Ignoring all of the chatter, Hua Cheng continues, “I think you’re ready to play for real —but gege, I have a question for you.”

Xie Lian doesn’t see the way Shi Qingxuan and Lang Qianqiu start at the familiarity in The Ghost King’s time. He just looks up, raising an eyebrow. “What is it?”

“When you mentioned your stake earlier…”

The god blinks innocently underneath his hood, “You mean my body?”

He can hear the smile in the calamity’s voice when he replies. “Yes—do you mind explaining what you meant by that?”

“Oh…” Xie Lian frowns, his brow creasing with thought. “Well—if you need any chores done, or something like that, I’m pretty good with my hands…”

There’s another round of giggling from below, and Hua Cheng sounds like he’s biting back a chuckle himself. “That’s what I thought you meant.”

Xie Lian frowns. What’s so funny…? Before he can wonder too much, the ghost king continues.

“But I’m afraid I don’t have much of a need for manual labor…”

Xie Lian grimaces. Of course—that’s obvious. He probably has countless servants for that sort of thing. “I’m sorry to say that I really don’t have anything else to offer…”

Hua Cheng thinks it over.

“Oh, I don’t know…” His eye gleams softly in the light. “I can think of a thing or two.”

He sounds almost devious, and Xie Lian can’t help but feel a prick of curiosity. “Oh? Like what?”

The answer he receives nearly blows the god’s mind completely out of the water.

“A kiss would be plenty.”

The prince starts, his eyes widening. A…really—?

From overhead, Lang Qianqiu manages to overhear that much, and he scowls. “What kind of SCOUNDREL—!”

Hua Cheng snaps his fingers, eyes never leaving Xie Lian’s face, and General Tai Hua falls silent, suddenly gagged.

“I…” Xie Lian clears his throat, his cheeks burning up. “That’s…ah…”

As he struggles through his answer, Hua Cheng’s tone turns gentle, lowering to the point where others cannot overhear. “Don’t worry, dianxia—you can change the stake if you’d like.”

“T-that’s allowed?”

“Not usually,” the Ghost King admits. “But I’m aware of his highness’s cultivation method. I wouldn’t ask anything of him that he was uncomfortable with.”

Oh. He—

He’s presuming that, because of Xie Lian’s cultivation method, he’s mortified by intimacy.

Which he is. But he doesn’t particularly enjoy the fact that everyone he encounters either presumes the opposite based on unsavory rumors, or treats him like a child. He’s eight centuries old, after all.

And, to Hua Cheng’s surprise—the crown prince of Xianle looks slightly…

…Offended.

“I’ll have you know,” he whispers, his cheeks turning a shade of bright pink, “I’m not completely inexperienced, San Lang.”

The Ghost King’s eyebrows shoot up sharply, “Forgive me, dianxia,” he murmurs, “I had no idea.”

“Yes, well…I-I’ve kissed someone before.”

Hua Cheng’s tone turns to that of amused surprise, “Really?”

Xie Lian takes that amusement for thinking that the Ghost King doesn’t believe him—

(Just the opposite, in fact—Hua Cheng believes him wholeheartedly.)

—and he can admit, coming from him, it doesn’t sound particularly believable.

“Really,” he mumbles, speaking very quietly, but intently. “…With a man,” he adds emphatically. A detail he would normally be too uncomfortable to add, but, well—

Hua Cheng is the one asking for a kiss, so he’s obviously, as one of Xie Lian’s former students would phrase it, ‘open minded.’

“Heavens, dianxia, you’re making me blush…”

He’s saying that, but Xie Lian is the one turning so red, he feels like he might faint. “Stop teasing me, San Lang, I’m being serious…” he grumbles.

“I’m not teasing,” the ghost king promises—but the barely restrained laughter in his tone makes Xie Lian prickle slightly. “But his highness doesn’t have to push himself —”

Between Hua Cheng and Jun Wu, honestly.

“I’m not some sheltered princess that’s never left home before,” the god mutters, lips turning down into a frown, or, well—

No, honestly—with the way his lower lip is jutting out—it’s a pout. (Xie Lian hasn’t pouted since he was 16.)

“I’ve already told you, I’ve done it before—and it was very i…intimate, so…” he tries to tack on that last part with confidence, but his voice wobbles slightly, sheepish, and he’s left even more embarrassed and off kilter than he was before.

If Hua Cheng was smiling any wider, his face might break. “Intimate? Goodness…”

“San Lang…”

“If dianxia really wants to keep the original stakes, I won’t deny him.”

Xie Lian feels a little lightheaded.

Was that what his protests sounded like?!

“I just...don’t want San Lang changing the rules on my account,” the prince mumbles, dipping his chin—even though they weren’t making eye contact to begin with. “That isn’t fair to everyone else.”

“Hmmm...” The ghost king thinks it over. “I suppose you have a point. Can I ask one dianxia one more question?”

Xie Lian nods, stiffening slightly when Crimson Rain Sought Flower leans in rather close, to the point where his lips are beside the god’s ear—

“You’ve only ever kissed one person?”

Well. Only one of them was willing, and it’s the only one that Xie Lian is willing to count.

“...Yes,” he mumbles, unsure as to why Hua Cheng would ask, other than to tease him —

Then he hears a low, distinctly pleased chuckle, and he can’t explain why, but... He shivers.

“He sounds like a lucky man.”

Thud.

Xie Lian’s heart jumps unsteadily, and his head starts to spin, and—

Hua Cheng must be teasing him, right?

“San—?”

“Well,” the ghost king returns to normal speaking volume, “now that we’ve settled the stakes—go ahead and roll, dianxia.”

Lang Qianqiu struggles valiantly under his bonds—likely because he doesn’t want Xie Lian ‘sullying his honor’ for the martial god’s freedom, but...well...it’s already settled.

The prince nods, swallowing hard as he shakes the cup, Hua Cheng’s hands still covering his own.

The cup rattles three times—and instead of trying to mimic the ghost king's movements, Xie Lian simply allows Hua Cheng's hands to guide him completely.

Clack!

Clack!

Clack!

He doesn't dare lift the cup himself to check, but Hua Cheng does—Revealing two sixes.

Xie Lian's jaw drops in shocked confusion. He...won?

Conversely, Hua Cheng clicks his tongue in dismay—but it's very clearly for show.

"Well, would you look at that..." He muses, raising his eyebrows. "I lost..."

Now, it seems a little painfully clear that he had every intention of just calling them 'practice rounds' until Xie Lian won—and the prince can't help but wonder—

If that was really what Hua Cheng intended, why tease Xie Lian so much over the stakes?

Still—a deal is a deal.

With a flick of the ghost king's wrist, Lang Qianqiu is sent crashing to the ground, swearing upon landing.

(To Xie Lian's embarrassment, he honestly forgot that's what he was originally betting over.)

Giving Hua Cheng a grateful nod, he walks back down the steps to check on the younger god, kneeling down beside him, "Are you alright?"

"...Thanks to you," Lang Qianqiu grumbles, rubbing his head. "Good thing you won! That man clearly had nefarious intentions..."

If he actually had such intentions, Xie Lian couldn't have won Lang Qianqiu back, no matter how hard he tried...

Clink!

The familiar tinkling of bells cuts through Xie Lian's train of thought—and as Hua Cheng steps out of the curtains, he hears an array of gasps.

"That skin is mighty fine!"

"It's killing me! Did he have to pick something so delectable?"

"So tall!"

The ghosts crow among themselves, and Xie Lian—he can't help but feel more and more curious, because...after the promise Hua Cheng made to him the last time they spoke...

He's the only one in the room who knows that this is Crimson Rain Sought Flower's true form.

And, ironically enough, he's also the only one in the room that can't actually see it. But for the first time in a while—Xie Lian is slightly frustrated by that fact.

All the while, Lang Qianqiu is grumbling about his treatment, likely to say something more to offend the ghosts around him—and Xie Lian sighs, helping the prince to his feet. "Best not to say anything more, your highness—let's go..."

They make their way back to Shi Qingxuan, but before they can leave the gambling hall entirely, a voice calls after them—

"Hold it."

The three stop immediately. Shi Qingxuan and Lang Qianqiu out of wariness—and Xie Lian out of curiosity.

All around them, ghosts are calling out that it's best if Hua Cheng doesn't let them leave. After all, who knows what secrets these newcomers are hiding? What if they're spies?

But, in spite of Xie Lian's growing anxiety—the ghost king sounds fairly laid back.

"Aren't you going to pay out as well?" When Xie Lian only stares in blank confusion, the ghost king reminds him, "You lost a round gege, remember?"

The god frowns, his brow furrowed. "I thought you said those were practice?"

“They were,” Hua Cheng agrees easily. “But you lost a bet before that at the long table, remember?”

Oh.

Xie Lian had completely forgotten, but…he supposes he did. Does that mean he really intends to—?

“He’s clearly changing the rules to suit his needs…” Lang Qianqiu grumbles, crossing his arms.

“You don’t have to listen to him, your highness! We can fight our way out of this! I won’t get captured again…”

Even if Hua Cheng has changed the rules—it’s only been to Xie Lian's own benefit.

“No…” The god shakes his head, placing a hand on the younger prince’s shoulder. “I already made an agreement, I won’t go back on my word.”

Lang Qianqiu can’t argue with his reasoning—offering it begrudging respect as the ghost king walks towards them, the bells on his boots tinkling gently with every step.

Clink!

Clink!

Clink!

With each sound of the bells, Xie Lian feels his own heart speeding up in response, listening as the ghost king draws closer and closer. And as he does, he finds himself wondering if Hua Cheng might do the gentlemanly thing and kiss him on the hand, or the cheek, but…

Then there are long, cool fingers delicately grasping his chin, and all thoughts of the ghost king demurring for Xie Lian’s sake disappear.

And even though Hua Cheng’s touch is distinctly cold—Xie Lian finds himself burning up, struggling to get enough air into his lungs.

A thumb slides over his lower lip, and the prince can’t help but part them, his face flushed, eyes wide as they can be underneath his hood, filled with nervousness, and… anticipation, if he’s being honest, as the ghost king leans in.

But those lips don't land on his. No, they remain barely more of a hair's-width away from his own, whispering—

"But I think I'd rather save my prize for when we don't have an audience," he murmurs—and for a moment, Xie Lian is too dazed to understand what he's saying.

"Is that alright with you, dianxia?"

Xie Lian takes a moment to respond, his knees wobbling—and to his embarrassment, Hua Cheng actually has to grasp his elbow with his other hand to steady him.

When the prince finally does answer—his voice is rather hoarse. "T...that's fine..."

Hua Cheng smiles, his fingertips lingering on the god's chin for a moment, and while he doesn't need to take in air, Xie Lian still feels the ghost king's cool breath against his lips before he leans back, letting him go.

And while Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan both seem stunned to the point of speechlessness—Lang Qianqiu is no such thing, crossing his arms and glaring.

"If he was going to let us go, did he really have to make a scene? What's the point?"

The prince fights the urge to smack his forehead in exasperation, wishing that the ghost king had left the prince of Yong'an gagged when he released him from the chains...

A few ghosts around them hiss defensively, ready to defend the lord of their city—but there's no need.

Hua Cheng glances back over his shoulder, eye flashing dangerously as he raises one hand, making the surrounding ghosts fall silent in an easy show of obedience.

"I think you'll find that I'm fair," the ghost king murmurs, hands clasped behind his back, his shoulders squared, "but when someone encroaches on what's mine..." His fangs peek through again, glinting under the lantern light.

"I become a rather unreasonable man."

And considering what they had done—coming into the ghost king's territory—his place of business, no less—and causing a scene…Xie Lian doesn't think Hua Cheng's reaction was unfair at all.

Of course—any subtext in that statement is lost on him.

It's only when they leave the gambler's den that he finds himself able to think clearly, taking in deep breaths of the open air as they make their way down the street, and once they're a few dozen meters away, Xie Lian hears the Wind Master mutter—

"…What the fuck?"

Xie Lian turns his head, his eyebrows raising, wondering what could have the younger god sounding so…scandalized isn't the right word, but certainly shocked. "What do you—?"

He can't finish the question before there's a commotion coming from down the street —

Screaming.

Which is a somewhat common sound in ghost city, but…

"HELP ME!" A small child cries, "GET IT AWAY!"

"T-that can't be what I think it is—!"

Xie Lian listens closer, curious, and then—

"LOOK AT ITS FACE!"

The god pales, his knees going weak for an entirely different reason.

"…Oh no," he mutters, hurrying in that direction, pushing through the crowd.

"Your highness?" Shi Qingxuan attempts to follow after him. "What is it?"

"A—!"

"HE REALLY DOESN'T WANT US TAKING OFF THOSE BANDAGES, DOES HE?"

It has to be him, doesn't it?

“A personal matter!”

Xie Lian mutters, pushing through the ghosts even more desperately. “You two keep investigating! I’ll meet up with you later!”

“But—! Your highness!” Lang Qianqiu frowns. “Won’t you have a hard time, separated? Let—let us go with you!”

The prince’s heart squeezes.

Even after all this time, he really is a kind boy, isn’t he?

“I’ll be fine!”

After all, this is Hua Cheng’s territory, and the Ghost King knows that he’s here. Xie Lian doubts any serious harm will come to him.

“Just stay with the Wind Master!”

Hopefully, Shi Qingxuan can stop him from getting into any more trouble.

And just like that—the god disappears into the crowd, leaving Lang Qianqiu and Shi Qingxuan standing there, baffled.

“...well,” the Wind Master sighs. “He’ll be fine—we need to figure out our next move.”

They move to the side, the streets around them bustling loudly. Ghost City is an objectively beautiful place—filled with brightly colored stalls and lanterns, a full moon hanging overhead.

But it’s also chaotic—and for someone who can’t see— Lang Qianqiu worries.

“...What next move?” He mutters, crossing his arms as he surveys the ghosts around them, “Shouldn’t we just wait for him to finish his business and meet up again?”

“That would be a waste of time, we don’t want to be idle in a place like this for long,” Shi Qingxuan frowns.

Ming-Xiong has spoken to him about ghost city in the past. Apparently he visited once or twice when he was still alive—and he never seemed particularly interested in visiting when Shi Qingxuan suggested it, but —

He did warn the Wind Master that this place could be dangerous. Especially for someone with something to hide.

As a matter of fact—he's probably going to be furious when he finds out that Shi Qingxuan was here.

He tries to pretend that he doesn't care, but honestly—he's just as bad as gege. Overprotective, treating Shi Qingxuan like a child

And if that was true, would the Heavenly Emperor be sending him on an important mission like this?

No, he doesn't think so.

Though Shi Qingxuan suspects he must know something, because he didn't respond when the Wind Master said good morning in their private array.

To be fair—he never used to answer at first. But now, the Wind Master has become accustomed to receiving at least a noncommittal grunt.

But even if he is mad—forget him! That's totally unfair, Shi Qingxuan is four centuries old! He can—!

"...Lord Wind Master?"

Right. The plan.

"Well," he rubs his forehead. "Thanks to you, our identities have already been exposed—and given the seriousness of the situation, and the fact that Crimson Rain already knows we're with his highness..."

(Not to mention the fact that he's already seen Shi Qingxuan as a woman.)

"There's not much of a point in leaving and trying to re-enter with different disguises." The Wind Master mutters. "We're better off figuring out where Crimson Rain is, then having his highness go there and try to mine him for information directly when we reunite—"

"We can't!"

Shi Qingxuan pauses, sending him an annoyed glance. "And why is that?"

"Well—regardless of how you or I feel about it, those two are clearly friends," Lang Qianqiu explains, eyes wide.

… *'Friends'* is one way to put it…

"We can't ask his highness to be insincere to a friend!"

Well.

Lang Qianqiu might be sincere to a fault, but at least he doesn't pick and choose who those morals apply to.

Shi Qingxuan pinches the bridge of his nose with a sigh, and, in spite of the situation —he wishes Ming-Xiong was here.

He's always been better at making plans.

Xie Lian stumbles, glancing around, disoriented again by the maze of lights and colors, all of them blending together, but—

No matter how hard he listens, he can't hear anyone screaming about the child anymore.

Now, it's just a crowd of ghosts shouting at him. "What do you think you're doing?!"

"He just tore through the entire street!"

"MY SOUP STAND!" An oversized ghost with the head and torso of a chicken squawks, grabbing the prince by the collar. "HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO MAKE A LIVING NOW?!"

"I…ah…"

Xie Lian smiles apologetically, feet dangling. "I'm sorry, I forgot my own strength—!"

He's dislodged when a larger ghost, this one nine feet tall, half man, half pig, gives the chicken ghost a shove.

"GET IN LINE! HE DESTROYED MY MERCHANDISE FIRST!"

"WELL, I'm THE ONE WHO CAUGHT HIM!"

"And no one wants your disgusting bathwater ANYWAY!" The pig sneers, earning an irritated cry from his avian counterpart.

“I OUGHTA MAKE YOU INTO A ROAST!”

“ExCUSE ME?!”

Xie Lian finds himself being yanked back and forth between the two ghosts like an oversized chew toy, just as a voice cuts through the din;

“Settle down—let him go.”

Immediately, all of the ghosts around fall silent in a hush, and Xie Lian finds himself glum.

Probably just another, even more powerful ghost whose property he’s destroyed accidentally in his Wild goose chase. Like a tiger. Or a bear. Poor San Lang, he really has caused such a mess—

“It’s the Waning Moon Officer, careful now...”

...The what?

Both ghosts set Xie Lian down, and when he finally musters the nerve to peek out between his eyelids, he catches sight of a deep, purple aura standing before him— distinctly different from the rest of the crowd—

Because it isn’t that of a ghost, or a human. No—it’s that of a...

...Heavenly Official?

But it’s constrained, with a tight, burning black band around the middle—one that Xie Lian is painfully familiar with. It’s one of the only parts of himself that he can see, whenever he looks down at his own ankle.

A cursed shackle.

But...what is an exiled heavenly official doing here?

Before Xie Lian can wonder much more, the officer bows his head politely, “Excuse me, sir—the lord of the city has requested your presence in Paradise Manor.”

...He means San Lang?

“...Paradise Manor?” The god questions.

“Hua Chengzhu’s private residence,” the officer explains. He’s entirely in black, hair pulled into a neat, simple ponytail, wearing a horned, crying mask that obscures his face. “Please, follow me.”

And in this case—Xie Lian doesn’t have a reason not to.

After all—his attempts at looking for the boy were clearly futile, and if he stays out here, he has a better chance of ending up in a brawl...

As such, he makes his way after this ‘half moon officer,’ sticking close in his shadow as they make their way through ghost city.

And even if Xie Lian can’t see Paradise Manor…

It’s Beautiful.

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Xie Lian Jiejie + Shi Qingxuan Memei

[image]

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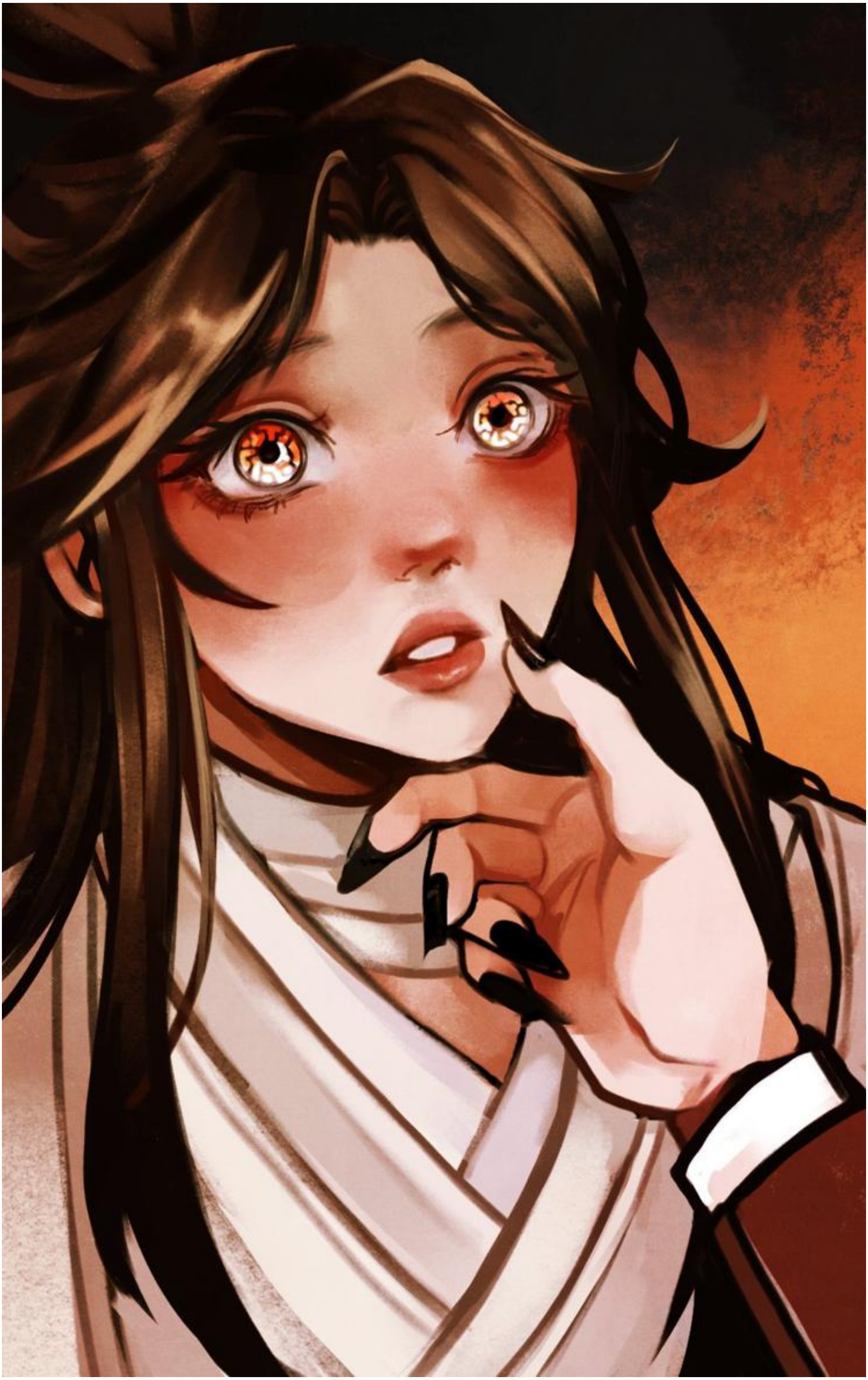

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Paradise Manor

Chapter Summary

> Xie Lian would be lying if he said that he wasn't glad to see him.
>
> "...You have a lovely home," he offers, meaning that sincerely until Hua Cheng replies:
>
> "It's a residence, not a home."
>
> The prince arches an eyebrow. "Is there a difference?"
>
> "A home is a place you share with family." Hua Cheng replies with a shrug, hands clasped behind his back. "Anywhere else is simply a place to rest one's head."

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There must be gardens, because the pleasant, floral aroma is already wafting in his direction, a contrast from the city, which smells of soot, alcohol, and cooking meat.

Now, Xie Lian smells lotus, roses, and Zhi Zhi shrubs—and he can't help but smile, remembering the meaning behind Hua Cheng's name —

City of flowers.

And for the first time in so many centuries, Xie Lian remembers... Back in Xianle—the Royal Gardens smelled the same way.

The gardens where he used to run and play with his friends as a child. Chasing butterflies. Laying back and looking up at the stars, promising not to let go of the grass.

He showed them to Hong'er, once. When the boy was still injured from being dragged behind Qi Rong's carriage

He wasn't there for very long, but Xie Lian still remembers how awestruck the boy seemed, staring at the beauty all around him. Like he'd never seen anything like it before.

When they step through the gates, the rest of the noise from the city seems to fall away.

There's only a gentle breeze, soft chimes echoing through the air—like the bells on Hua Cheng's boots, but slightly deeper in tone.

Long reflection pools bracket the courtyard, ghost fires floating gently overheat, illuminating the lotus blossoms underneath in a soft glow.

Xie Lian smiles at the sight of the little flames, his heart aching as he remembers...

The prince swallows hard, reaching up to push his hair behind his ears, remembering the flower Wu Ming tucked there, all those years ago.

Xie Lian kept it until it turned to dust, but...

It hurts, sometimes, that he doesn't have anything to remember Wu Ming by. Not even Fangxin, he lost that when...

"...The ghost fires...is Hua Cheng keeping them here, or—?"

"No, sir." The ghost officer replies calmly. "They're waiting."

"Oh," the prince frowns, confused. "...Waiting for what?"

"Safe passage," the mysterious official has a pleasant voice, Xie Lian decides. Soft, patient—unimposing. He'd probably make a rather good tutor, or maybe a librarian. "Given and taken."

Xie Lian waits for him to explain more—but he doesn't.

When they reach the steps to the manor, Xie Lian has to stop himself and remember that this isn't a meeting hall or some grand palace, even if it feels like one—this is someone's home.

As such, he kneels down, trying to do the polite thing by taking off his boots, but pauses.

When he was walking here with Yin Yu, many of the ghosts were marveling over the fact that Hua Cheng was inviting a guest inside. Apparently—he never has any visitors. Would he have something for guests—?

"If his highness would like to leave his boots on, my lord wouldn't mind."

"No, no…" Xie Lian shakes his head. "I would never want to be rude, I just wasn't sure if…"

Well, he supposes he could just go barefoot, couldn't he?

"There are slippers for guests if his highness would like them," the officer murmurs, reaching out to offer them.

…Oh.

Well, that solves that. "Thank you," he murmurs.

He slips out of his own boots carefully, setting them by the door, and while the officer told Xie Lian that the slippers were for 'guests' somehow—

They seem to fit the prince like a glove. It really is an odd coincidence!

When he makes his way through the hallways of paradise manor, following Yin Yu's lead, he can't help but marvel over how smooth the floors are—not so much so that one has to worry about slipping, but polished to perfection.

Even the acoustics are elegant, his footsteps echoing.

Xie Lian has never been to such a place where every element seems designed to appeal to every sense—not just sight alone, and the thought makes him smile.

He likes it here. If Hua Cheng wouldn't think it too much of a bother—Xie Lian thinks he might visit him again soon.

Finally, he's led into what certainly feels like a throne room. It must be, after all—it's meant for a king.

And after the hustle and bustle of dozens of servants passes through, Xie Lian hears a soft clap—and they all fall silent.

"Gege," there's that voice again—pleased.

"Welcome." He smiles, rising up from a black jade divan that could likely seat a dozen people, rather than just him. He sounds pleasantly surprised—though Xie Lian isn't quite sure how he could be. "We didn't get the chance to speak openly, before."

Not because Xie Lian didn't want to.

"Yes, well..." He shifts slightly with awkwardness, trying not to focus on...everything else that happened in the gambler's den, particularly towards the end, "you were acting like you didn't know who I was..."

"I hope I didn't offend you,"

In that sense, he sounds completely sincere. "Tai Hua was with his highness, and I thought revealing our prior connection might cause trouble for him."

Xie Lian doesn't know which to focus on—the words 'prior connection,' or the fact that Hua Cheng did a terrible job hiding it.

"And you had this," Xie Lian doesn't realize how close the ghost king has gotten until his fingertips toy with the hem of the God's hood, still covering half of his face. "So, I thought you might be trying to be discreet."

"Well..." Xie Lian bites his lip. "I was, but not from San Lang."

Of course, it doesn't even take him a minute to realize how that sounds.

"Because—well—you would recognize me anyway—" He stumbles, hearing a soft chuckle in response.

"His highness is right—I would know his likeness anywhere."

Xie Lian pauses, lips parting slightly, because—

He's certainly heard that before, but...

The prince squeezes his eyes shut, clearing his throat. "I wanted to thank you for…leaving this for me," he mumbles, reaching up to touch the hairpiece carefully.

Hua Cheng's gaze softens

"Though I wasn't sure what I had done to deserve such a gift—"

"I simply thought dianxia would look lovely wearing it," the ghost king replies, casually stopping Xie Lian's heart in the process. "Of course, I was correct."

Normally, Xie Lian isn’t particularly impacted by compliments to his appearance. Really, there’s only one time that someone called him beautiful that he looks back on fondly, and that was a long time ago.

That being said—Hua Cheng… Coming from him, it feels so…

“And what brings gege to Ghost City?”

It takes the prince a moment to answer—no, it takes him a moment to understand what Hua Cheng actually said, and when he does, it takes him even longer to answer.

He doesn’t want to lie to him—but can Xie Lian really just come out and say that he’s here on the emperor’s business? Even if his intentions were to protect Hua Cheng from suspicion, it still sounds…

“…Even if it wasn't just to see me,” the ghost king adds, “I’m glad.”

Well—even if it wasn’t…

Xie Lian would be lying if he said that he wasn’t glad to see him.

“…You have a lovely home,” he offers, meaning that sincerely until Hua Cheng replies:

“It’s a residence, not a home.”

The prince arches an eyebrow. “Is there a difference?”

“A home is a place you share with family.” Hua Cheng replies with a shrug, hands clasped behind his back. “Anywhere else is simply a place to rest one’s head.”

By that standard, Xie Lian really hasn’t had much of a home since Hong’er lived with him in Puqi shrine.

Technically, he was with his parents for a few months after that, but…Xie Lian was so grief stricken, he hardly took the chances to enjoy their company.

“Do you live here alone, San Lang?”

He certainly does seem like the lone wolf type, but…

“Not…exactly.”

When Xie Lian sends the ghost king a curious look, he simply shrugs.

“There used to be others who lived here, but…more often than not, it’s just me.”

Well—the prince can understand that predicament, but he certainly wouldn’t wish it upon Hua Cheng.

“Well then…”

The offer must seem a little ridiculous, and Xie Lian knows that—but he makes it anyway. “It definitely isn’t as elegant as this, but if you ever want to visit, the doors of Puqi shrine are always open to you.”

He doesn’t see the way Hua Cheng’s face utterly lights up.

“You’ll need to be careful, making offers like that—it won’t take me long to make a nuisance of myself.”

Xie Lian can’t help but smile, shaking his head. “San Lang could never be a nuisance…” Then he stops, remembering. “…San Lang?”

The ghost king hums contently in reply, “Hmm?”

Taking one cautious step forward, he asks, “This is your true form, correct?”

However briefly, the ghost king stiffens—almost as if he’s waiting for a reaction, and Xie Lian simply states;

“Do you mind if I…see? In my own way.”

Xie Lian doesn’t know why he feels so nervous about asking—it’s not as though Hua Cheng has ever denied him before. Then again—the prince has never asked him for much, so maybe he simply hasn’t seen the need to.

Surely, there must be a limit to how far he’s willing to go to indulge him—no one is that generous.

Still, even now, he grants Xie Lian’s request without a single word of protest—though not by illuminating himself with spiritual power as he did the last time they met.

He seems to glean exactly what Xie Lian meant by ‘my own way,’ simply leaning forward slightly, hands clasped behind his back, replying—

“His highness is welcome to examine anything he likes, there’s no need to ask for my permission."

"..." Xie Lian's lips curve up into a small smile as he reaches up, surprised to find it's further than he thought, rocking up onto the balls of his toes until Hua Cheng leans further down.

The ghosts in the gambler's den weren't exaggerating—he is rather tall, isn't he?

"...Thank you," he murmurs, sliding his palms over Hua Cheng's cheeks, finding that his skin isn't quite as cool as it was before—but Xie Lian has the sneaking suspicion that change is purely for his own benefit.

The calamity simply hums softly in response, a soft rumble under Xie Lian's touch that leaves him momentarily distracted before he moves on, and...

In truth, the difference isn't drastic. His jaw is sharper, slightly more squared. His nose is perfectly straight, slightly pointed.

His mouth—one that Xie Lian knows to be capable of being rather wicked, depending on the audience—is soft under his touch. And when the ghost king's lips turn up—

Xie Lian can feel that dimple is still there, cutting into his right cheek—and the prince can't help but smile back.

There's also a slightly sharp point at the corner of his mouth, one that retreats the moment the god's thumb brushes over it—and he raises an eyebrow.

"...San Lang, did you change your form a little bit just now?"

Hua Cheng shakes his head underneath Xie Lian's hands.

"No, your highness—this is my true form, unaltered."

"...I see," Xie Lian murmurs, his eyebrows knitting together. "I just thought I felt..."

"They're retractable."

He— Oh.

After a dazed moment of contemplation, Xie Lian realizes that Hua Cheng must be referring to...

"...I didn't know ghosts had those," he mumbles, feeling a little silly. "Well—human ones, I mean."

Naturally the ghost of a bear or a wolf would half them, or snakes and the like—Wen Jiao probably had them as well, but he was a demon—

Then again, isn't Hua Cheng also demonic—?

"Weaker ones don't," the calamity murmurs in response—and Xie Lian supposes that makes sense. After all, it's not like ghosts often use spiritual tools in the way that gods do. More often than not, their physical forms are the actual weapons.

(Like Xuan Ji's claws, for example.)

The thought of that makes him reach down to grasp one of Hua Cheng's hands thoughtlessly, just to check his fingertips—finding them smooth, just like any normal man's—

(Though his hands are noticeably larger than before, callouses more noticeable.)

And when Xie Lian feels the ghost king smirking under his other palm, his ears grow warm.

"Those are retractable as well, dianxia," he murmurs, clearly reading the god's intentions.

"...If San Lang is worried about making me uncomfortable, please don't," Xie Lian mumbles.

"Of course," San Lang agrees. "But this is what they're like, normally."

"Really?"

"Well," there's a hint of amusement in his voice. "Most people don't walk around with their tongues sticking out, do they?"

Well—Xie Lian supposes not.

"But if you'd like to see them—?"

"It's fine," the god mumbles, releasing Hua Cheng's hand when he realizes how long he's been holding it, turning his attention back to the ghost's face, "I don't want San Lang to be uncomfortable just to sate my curiosity..."

There's immediate assurance—

"It isn't uncomfortable, and his highness's curiosity is a more than worthy cause."

Xie Lian has already come to terms with the fact that Hua Cheng is somewhat of a shameless flirt—he's dealt with those before.

He wishes the ghost wouldn't do that while Xie Lian's hands are all over his face. It makes it harder and harder to think straight, from what the prince can only assume must be embarrassment.

In any case, his hands roam slightly higher.

There, he finds the delicate shape of a closed eyelid, framed by dark, thick lashes— sharp brows—

And the shape of a leather eyepatch. Well maintained under his touch, though slightly worn from the passage of time.

"...San Lang?"

"Hmm?"

"Before..." Xie Lian bites his lip, wondering if this is the best time—or the best way— to bring up the subject, but... "When you first introduced yourself to me, and you were talking about how Crimson Rain Sought Flower lost his eye..."

'Doing something stupid, probably.'

After a pause, Hua Cheng replies—

"If gege wants to know the story, I don't mind telling it—though now probably isn't the best time."

Xie Lian doesn't mind that answer—after all, Hua Cheng said the same thing when Xie Lian asked him about his true form.

And, just as he promised, he showed it to the prince shortly after.

Finally, his fingers draw far up enough to reach Hua Cheng's hairline, finding dark, silky locks forming into a widow's peak. Not only that—it's almost completely loose around his shoulders.

The only exception being a single braid with something smooth near the bottom, a bead of some sort—one that Xie Lian has often heard the ghost rolling between his fingertips.

His other hand is still pressed to Hua Cheng's cheek, feeling the movement when he speaks—

"Well?"

It's only then that Xie Lian seems to notice the fact that the ghost king's hands landed on his waist at some point during his examination—lightly, but still present—

And now he's waiting, somewhat expectantly. But also, even if he sounds confident…

There's an underlying note of anxiety there. As if—underneath all of the shameless flirting—he's actually worried that Xie Lian might think…

The prince's heart squeezes a little, his thumb unconsciously stroking over Hua Cheng's cheek.

The word falls out of him effortlessly.

"Hand—"

And then he stops, catching himself before the second syllable can come out, his expression contorting slightly as he looks away.

What was he…?

He's only known Hua Cheng for the span of two weeks, and he almost called him…

"…Dianxia?"

He's only ever called one person that before. And he still remembers that face so well. The curve of his mouth. Every scar. The slightly crooked angle of his nose.

"…San Lang had nothing to be nervous about," Xie Lian mumbles.

Hong'er feels so heavy against his chest now.

"I like his true form—very much."

Actually—the prince feels guilty for the goosebumps on the back of his neck. Each skip of his heartbeat—it feels like a betrayal, somehow.

“...Like?” the ghost king replies—and he’s quiet. Quiet enough for Xie Lian to worry.

Because even if he’s someone who has always taken his own beauty for granted—Xie Lian has long since known what it was like to feel a sort of hideousness.

Maybe not in his skin, but certainly in his bones. He’s felt grotesque. Tainted. Unworthy.

Xie Lian doesn’t want anyone to think he sees them that way—and certainly not someone that he—

Not someone that he respects.

“It’s perfect,” he mumbles, his palm still resting against Hua Cheng’s cheek, “I wouldn’t want San Lang to change a thing. So—you don’t have to wear a mask around me, not unless you want to.”

There’s a silence that lasts for several moments, and—

Xie Lian can’t see the look on the Ghost King’s face. How full his expression is— brimming with an open sort of adoration, struck with awe.

And honestly, what else could Hua Cheng be but awestruck, when the only thing in this world that he’s ever found to be truly beautiful deigns to call him perfect with such sincerity?

He’s quiet for so long, Xie Lian almost asks if he’s said something wrong, but—

“...Even the retractable features?”

He’s teasing, but with little sharpness—and Xie Lian cracks a breathless smile in response, a shaky laugh slipping from his throat as he nods.

“Of course!”

Still, they don’t part—and it’s only now that Xie Lian starts to notice something else

The position they’re in—with Hua Cheng’s hands on his waist, and Xie Lian’s on his face, standing so close like this....it’s...

It reminds him of what was said before, in the Gambler’s den. About the Ghost King's 'prize.'

And...of the fact that they're quite alone at the moment.

Hua Cheng raises an eyebrow, still holding himself perfectly still for Xie Lian's benefit, bent over to meet him halfway—but there's a small, amused smile on his face. "Your highness, is something on your mind?"

"...Um..." Xie Lian swallows dryly, his eyes wide. "...There's something I need San Lang's help with," he blurts out, clawing for anything less embarrassing than what he was actually thinking of. "If it's not too much trouble—"

"On the contrary, this one is delighted that gege would ask." He sounds pointedly sincere about that.

"...There's a boy," the prince mumbles, "one I suspect might be from my own kingdom, long ago. He has scars from Human Face Disease."

He can't see the way the ghost king's eyes narrow, but he can feel the way those hands tighten slightly on his waist. "How peculiar."

Xie Lian nods, because it is—he hasn't encountered any of the citizens from Xianle, ghost or otherwise, since he was rather young. "I'm afraid I didn't handle it particularly well when I first came across him, so he ran from me—but I have reason to think he's here in Ghost City."

There's a pause, and Xie Lian finds himself wondering if it was rude of him to ask— after all, even Ling Wen has struggled with tracking the boy down—

"But really, if it's too much trouble—"

"Not at all," Hua Cheng replies. "He shouldn't be difficult to find—there are ghosts here old enough to remember the plague."

That strikes Xie Lian's curiosity.

"Are you? Old enough to remember what it looks like, I mean." He mumbles.

"...I am," The ghost king agrees.

His tone sounds slightly...off.

Before Xie Lian can express any worry about that, however, the ghost king has a question of his own.

"Lang Qianqiu—was he left alone in the city?"

The prince shakes his head—even though the reminder of the trouble his former student caused makes him wince.

"No," Xie Lian assures him quickly, "Lord Wind Master is with him—we got separated while I was looking for the boy...I'm sorry that he caused such a scene back there—"

"Dianxia had nothing to do with that," Hua Cheng shakes his head. "There's no need for an apology."

Still, he can't help but feel somewhat responsible...

"I'll go ahead and clear his debt," the calamity carries on with a shrug. "So long as he stays out of my sight, we won't have any more problems."

That...is easier said than done, but— "My lord?"

The two men start—with Xie Lian taking a step back when he realizes how close they're still standing to one another, Hua Cheng's hands dropping from his waist.

"What is it?"

"The boy, we've found him." Xie Lian's eyebrows arch sharply.

Well—that was rather quick.

Given what a struggle it's been to track the child down—Xie Lian wasn't expecting the task to be completed so soon.

The man from before—the Waning Moon Officer, the ghosts in the market called him —leads the boy in by the arm. Not unkind, but firm in his grip.

"Well, there we are," Hua Cheng smiles, clasping his hands behind his back. "What would dianxia like us to do with him, then?"

It seems to shock the servants in the hall, listening to Crimson Rain treating anyone with such deference—but Xie Lian doesn't notice.

"Oh, don't worry San Lang," he murmurs, walking closer to the boy. "I can handle the rest from here, you've done more than enough."

That draws a frown, but the ghost king says little more, watching as Xie Lian kneels beside the young man, tilting his head back with a warm smile.

"Hello," he murmurs, not reaching out, hoping not to startle him. "Do you remember me? I'm sorry we didn't get off to a good start, before."

The boy trembles in the Ghost Officer's grip, his head hanging low—but he nods. Not that Xie Lian can see—but he senses the movement.

The prince turns his head in the officer's direction. "I think you can let him go now, he won't run. Is he hurt at all?"

"...No, sir," the dark clothed man replies softly, "His bandages are a bit dirty, but otherwise he's alright."

"Well," Xie Lian offers the child a wry smile, reaching into the pockets of his robes. "I always happen to have extras."

Given that his throat and wrists are covered in the wrappings—that makes the boy let out a cautious little laugh.

"Your highness..." Hua Cheng frowns.

"There's no need to trouble yourself, I can—"

"It's alright, San Lang." Xie Lian assures him firmly. "I'd rather do it myself." After all—he did promise to look after him, when Xiao Ying passed.

He's quick about it—after all, he has quite a bit of experience with such things.

The child is still, not trying so hard to get away from him, now—and when it's finished, Hua Cheng intercedes again, "He's probably tired, after all of that commotion. Let us take him to one of the guest rooms so he can rest."

This time, Xie Lian sees no reason to protest.

When he's taken away, he expects to speak to Hua Cheng more, maybe to try and ask him outright if he's seen any injured officials in the area, but...

"Apologies, gege," the ghost king murmurs. "Something has been brought to my attention that needs to be dealt with.”

“Oh,” Xie Lian frowns, his expression tinged with concern. “Is everything alright?”

“It’s nothing that gege needs to concern himself with.” Hua Cheng steps forward, taking the prince’s hand so that he can lead him to the divan where the ghost king was resting when he arrived.

“Feel free to wait here until I return, the servants will fetch you anything you’d like, if you call.”

“San Lang, that’s really too much—”

“It’s nothing, gege—really.”

He strides from the room, leaving Xie Lian sitting there, contemplative.

The divan is surprisingly plush—and huge. Even when Xie Lian leans his back against the cushions as it’s intended, his feet dangle above the floor. It seems like it must be a rather ridiculous sight in his mind’s eye, so he pulls them back up, curling his legs underneath him.

Something about this is oddly familiar—yet alien at the same time.

No one waits on him anymore, and hasn’t in centuries. But still, the old habit is still there.

Xie Lian finds himself raising one hand—not with a request in mind, but just remembering how a simple gesture like that could send an entire flurry of servants rushing his way, asking about anything and everything he could possibly need.

It’s been a long time since he thought about that. In part because it’s been decades since he missed it.

Xie Lian misses his loved ones now, not the wealth, the privilege, or the titles. Those things matter very little, when one stares nearly a millennia in the face.

But it’s also been centuries since he was inside a palace—or even something close to it. The last time he was in a palace, he...

Xie Lian’s fingertips rise up to his face, lightly brushing over the bridge of his nose— remembering the golden mask that once sat there.

Something stirs him from his thoughts, then—the sound of a laugh. No, that's not the right word—it's more like a giggle, that of a child.

"..." The prince raises an eyebrow, shackles gleaming as he peers around, looking for signs of a ghost nearby. "...Hello? Is someone there?"

No one answers—and Xie Lian supposes none of the servants Hua Cheng left behind would, not unless he made a specific request. Most of them seemed petrified by the idea of being a nuisance.

But then he hears the sound of feet on marble, like someone is hurrying down the corridor.

"..." Xie Lian braces his palms against the divan, pushing until his feet finally return to the floor, listening closely.

He doubts it could be the child he was looking for—he might have been slightly more relaxed this time around, but he certainly wasn't the playful type either.

Paradise Manor is a beautiful place. Mysterious, enticing. Not so different from the man who built it.

But, just the same, it leaves the Prince of Xianle full of questions.

Why does it feel familiar? And what were the ghost fires out in the front courtyard waiting for?

'Safe passage, given and taken.'

That was what the Ghost Officer said—but what on earth does that mean? And why does Hua Cheng have an exiled official working under him to begin with? And—

There's another giggle, echoing down the hall, drawing him forward.

...Hua Cheng was the one who said that more often than not, he was the only one who lived in this place. But why does Xie Lian get the distinct feeling that statement may not have been entirely true?

He opens his mouth to call out again when he rounds the corner—but then he stops

There's an aura at the end of the hallway—familiar to him now. Not only for the deep purple shade—but for the fact that it doesn't seem to belong.

It’s that of the half moon officer.

Xie Lian assumes that the man must not have seen him, as he doesn’t acknowledge him.

And instead of calling over to him, Xie Lian finds himself shrinking back, effectively hiding himself around the corner. After all—he doesn’t want to seem like he was snooping, he wasn’t, but—

Isn’t hiding more suspicious in that case?

Before he can come down on a particular answer, Xie Lian hears the now familiar rattling of dice.

Clack!

Clack!

When they land—it’s with a metallic thud, like they’re landing in some sort of dish.

Ding!

...Who throws dice in the middle of a corridor?

But then—something strange happens.

In the span of less than a second—the Ghost Officer’s aura disappears in tandem with the sound of a slamming door.

That hasn’t happened before, not since Xie Lian’s shackle was damaged.

If that was something as simple as the officer disappearing behind a closed door, Xie Lian would still be able to see him—spiritual power has to be much further away before it disappears from his sight, so...

Where did he go?

The prince makes his way down the hall, curious.

When he reaches the point where the officer disappeared, he reaches out cautiously with his fingertips—finding what seems to be an ordinary door at first. Not even locked, because when Xie Lian pulls it open, there’s only an empty room on the other side.

What on earth...?

But when he feels around the door frame, his palm sliding against the wall—Xie Lian finds something else.

A statue of a woman, hewn from marble—finely dressed, and from the feel of it, she must have been a historical figure or a former goddess, though not one that he recognizes.

Her robes are detailed, and he can feel a headpiece that certainly seems to be that of royalty—but there are two details that catch his attention.

First—the butterflies carved into her sleeves, so similar in feel to Hua Cheng's. And second—there's a sword at her waist.

Which makes it hard to discern who this statue could be depicting.

It's rare for a monarch to be portrayed holding a sword. Figures like Xie Lian are somewhat different. He was never crowned, and his training in martial arts and cultivation was a rarity for royalty.

It seems unlikely that she would be a queen, then—and this does feel somewhat reminiscent of a divine statue. Rather similar in style to the one San Lang carved in his shrine, actually, but...

Only martial gods are depicted with weaponry or armor of any sort. And in all of Xie Lian's time—he's never heard of a martial goddess.

But before he can wonder any more about that—he finds what she's holding between her palms: a tray. Not like a serving tray, but thick and rounded steel.

That's when he realizes—it must have been where the dice landed before. There's nothing on the tray when the prince checks for it now —and it would seem that the dice disappeared at the same time as the Ghost Officer.

Which really only leaves one possibility:

That there's some sort of travel array set up, and the dice are the key to using it. Which means it's utterly useless to Xie Lian—because no matter what he rolled, it probably wouldn't be the proper number combination to begin with.

Then, a voice rings out, making him jump.

"Gege!"

It's a familiar name—but it's not coming from Hua Cheng, and—

A child rushes past him now, so quickly that the breeze stirs Xie Lian's robes.

—the call wasn't directed at him.

"Gege, you're too fast!"

His curiosity is only spurned further when another voice answers.

"Sorry, sorry…"

The ghost that ran past Xie Lian first was rather weak, her aura barely more than that of a ghost fire, but the slightly older child that reappears around the corner—

Xie Lian saw that aura before, in town.

Vividly green, with a burning, flickering core.

When he appeared before, he was in the form of a young teenager—but now, he seems to be barely more than nine years old, judging by the sound of his voice.

He drifts back down the hallway now, meeting the little girl halfway and taking her by the hand.

"What were you wandering off for?" The words sound slightly scolding, but he's gentle, leading her off to a room on the other side of the corridor. "You'll get lost that way."

"…I got lonely," she admits. "Is it going to be much longer?"

"No," the older boy promises. "Just waiting for a few others. Go ahead and sleep, okay?"

There's the sound of a door shutting, and while the little girl may have gone—Xie Lian knows that he isn't alone.

"…I didn't get your name before." He comments quietly, folding his arms inside his sleeves.

There's nervous silence on the other side of the hall, and the prince smiles awkwardly, trying not to be too 'intimidating,' though he doubts many would see him that way anymore as it is.

He tries asking another question, ever so gently, “Do you live here?”

It remains quiet.

It takes so long—Xie Lian isn’t exactly sure if he should try again, or just leave the child to his business, but—

“Shuo.” The reply is soft, near incoherent, until he repeats himself. “My name is Shuo, and I live here sometimes.”

He doesn’t sound so sure about the last part.

There’s a cautious hesitance to him, like a kitten that’s just a little too nervous to approach a friendly human, an air that makes Xie Lian’s heart ache in a way that he can’t initially explain.

“And the little one who was with you?”

“...She’s just passing through,” he mumbles.

When Xie Lian raises an eyebrow, he grips one wrist behind his back, shuffling his feet. “...Some ghosts can’t move on by themselves,” he mutters, “especially the little ones.”

The prince has never heard of such things before—but he supposes it makes sense.

“And they stay here?” Xie Lian questions, turning his head in the direction where Shuo led the little girl off, and the boy shakes his head.

“Not for long. Hua Chengzhu guides them along. The ghost fires that get stuck around here too.”

Ah—Xie Lian blinks slowly, understanding.

That’s what the officer meant before, referring to ‘safe passage,’ and now—

Now he remembers a story that he heard a long, long time ago. One that he had forgotten over the centuries.

About a new ghost king, one who would guide wayward children if they waited in the night, a red lantern in hand.

Now, Xie Lian realizes—that must have been Hua Cheng. It’s no wonder then, that he would have remembered the outbreak of Human

Face Disease.

After all—the prince was beginning to hear stories about him less than forty years into his second banishment.

And that makes him wonder—if they had waited that night, when he was with Kuo's little brother and his friends in the woods—would Xie Lian have met Hua Cheng back then?

How different would things have been if he had? Then again, Xie Lian was...

Back then? In perfect honesty, he was immature, spoiled, and recovering. He doubts Hua Cheng would have wanted his friendship back then, so maybe the fact that they didn't meet was for the best.

"And you...help him?" He questions, trying to understand where the young ghost factors into the situation. After all—he seems to hold some authority in the city, and to take on some responsibility here.

Still, Shuo remains quiet—and Xie Lian tries another question.

"...You were older before," he comments quietly. It isn't exactly a question, but he allows it to hang in the air—and after a moment, Shuo replies—

"Adults frighten them, sometimes. It's easier if you're closer to their age."

Xie Lian suspected as much.

"...Are you—?" He starts, wondering how much he could ask the young man. After all, he seems to know quite a bit more than he's saying, but whether or not he'll answer is a different matter all together—

"Dianxia, there you are."

It would seem that the Ghost King has returned.

Xie Lian glances back in his direction, lips turning up nearly unconsciously at the sound of his voice. "Oh, I'm sorry—I went to look for the child while you were gone, and I'm afraid...I got a bit lost."

He nods towards Shuo, adding—

"This young man was helping me find my way."

Hua Cheng’s gaze flickers over to Shuo—and when he arches one eyebrow, curious, the boy simply shrugs, mumbling—

“Mr. Hua and I were just about to head back to the throne room,” he agrees—and Xie Lian finds the tips of his ears growing hot.

That name was obviously an alias.

Did he really have to mention it in front of—?

Now, Hua Cheng’s other eyebrow rises to join it’s counterpart, and his lips spread into a slow smile. “Mr. Hua?” He murmurs, sounding utterly amused.

“We—” Xie Lian starts, then bites his tongue, stopping himself.

At first, he was going to say that he hadn’t realized that Shuo was an associate of Hua Cheng’s when he introduced himself before, but then he remembers what Shuo said, standing outside the gambler’s den—

That he was ‘grounded,’ technically speaking.

So, he can’t explain that.

Not without potentially getting the boy in trouble.

Shuo, however, seems to have no such reservations. And when Hua Cheng is around, he’s suddenly far less quiet.

“...It’s Mr. Hua Lian, isn’t it?” He repeats, his eyes wide. “I apologize if I misheard.”

“...”

He definitely knows he didn’t mishear, Xie Lian can tell as much from the ever so subtle undertone to his voice—that of mischievousness.

“Did his highness tell you that when you snuck out, before?”

Ah.

Xie Lian sags, feeling like the living equivalent of a deflated balloon.

So, Hua Cheng already figured that out. Xie Lian didn’t necessarily have to fall on that sword. That’s—

That’s fine. His face feels like it’s burning up, but that’s fine.

Shuo seems properly chagrined now, suddenly focused on examining his shoes. “Who told you about that?”

“Your favorite person decided to send a few beasts to stir up trouble,” the mere mention of that makes the younger ghost hiss, lips pulling back to bare his teeth.

Xie Lian can’t help but wonder whether or not he has fangs too—and if so, whether they’re retractable.

“While I was in the city, a few people mentioned seeing you.” Well, at least he knows Xie Lian wasn’t the one who—

Shuo crosses his arms, still staring at his shoes, “I only went because there was a commotion,” he mumbles.

Hua Cheng glances in the prince’s direction. “...A commotion?” He repeats.

Suddenly, like he’s watching a crash in slow motion, Xie Lian realizes where the conversation is going, and his heart stutters.

“I—!”

“One of the stall owners was bothering a young woman who said she was looking for her husband.” Shuo mumbles. “Lan Chang stepped in to help her, but...”

That’s when he trails off, seeming to realize that the story doesn’t sound...particularly flattering to the god in question.

“...This altercation somehow led to you two running into one another?” The ghost king arches an eyebrow—and Xie Lian feels almost lightheaded with embarrassment, but—

“It was me,” he mumbles, wishing it was possible for him to just sink into the floor and disappear.

There’s a long beat of silence—and Xie Lian comes to the conclusion that he’s already in the metaphorical hole, if you will—so he might as well keep on digging.

“I was in disguise,” he croaks, regretting a multitude of decisions over the last twenty four hours.

“And I got caught turning back, which caused a bit of a scene...Shuo helped me, and showed me the way to the Gambler’s Den.”

“Disguise,” Hua Cheng repeats, uncharacteristically quiet—and Xie Lian can’t help but wonder if the Ghost King is offended by his sneaking around.

“…Yes,” he mumbles, nodding his head miserably. “Before Lang Qianqiu’s outburst, we were trying to keep a low profile. But I ended up attracting too much attention anyway, so…”

“Disguised as a woman,” the calamity murmurs—not upset, but Xie Lian buries his face in his hands.

“It was the Wind Master’s idea, not mine…” He mumbles, his voice rising an octave.

“A woman looking for her husband.”

Honestly, Xie Lian feels even more sorry about that. Obviously, a female cultivator could be in Ghost City for other reasons than looking for a spouse.

But he had been panicking, and it was just the first thing that came to mind—

“Going by the name Hua.”

Oh.

Finally, XIe Lian starts to understand what the Ghost King has been getting at—and so does Shuo, covering his mouth with both hands to stop himself from laughing.

Oh no.

“…I…” Xie Lian starts to lift his head, his mouth hanging open. “I didn’t mean—oh, you don’t think—?”

It may have, to some outside observers, seemed like Xie Lian was trying to pose as… …Crimson Rain Sought Flower’s wife.

The prince doesn’t know whether to laugh, or cry.

And the worst part is—Xie Lian is slowly beginning to realize that some people are in fact going to connect that incident to his interaction with Hua Cheng in the gambler’s hall.

Meaning they’ll have seen the prince—theoretically—posing as Hua Cheng’s bride, and then…

He went on to wager a kiss with the Ghost King, whether or not it was his idea, in front of an entire crowd of ghosts.

Which might make it seem less like Xie Lian is posing as Hua Cheng's wife, and more like he actually is his, well…

…Oh, heavens, what has he done?

"I…" He whispers between his fingers, "I didn't mean—!"

"Of course," Hua Cheng is quick to agree. "It's alright."

"…Hua Lian was the name I was using in Gusu, before we met," Xie Lian croaks, "It was just the first thing I thought of."

"Understandable," he's nodding with every word Xie Lian says, but it's hard to tell whether or not Hua Cheng is simply trying to make him feel better.

"…I just used the surname Hua a lot because…Flower Crowned…Martial God and everything…" Xie Lian mumbles, wishing he could make himself stop talking.

"That makes perfect sense, dianxia, it's alright."

How could it be alright, when Xie Lian has made such a fuss?

He couldn't have made more of a scene without setting the entire place on fire, to be honest.

Shuo glances back and forth between the two, his eyes wide—in part, trying to hold back laughter, but also…

He's never seen Hua Cheng look quite so off kilter up until now.

Hua Cheng seems similarly aware of that fact, murmuring, "You've had a long day, you should rest."

Of course—he isn't wrong, it's been a rather eventful twenty four hours for the younger ghost.

But he's also asking to spare himself from the audience during this conversation.

"…" Shuo glances back and forth between the two of them once more, and he shrugs— making his way back down the hallway. "If you say so."

Xie Lian rubs his cheeks, struggling with his embarrassment, and the best distraction seems to be changing the subject.

“...That child seems fairly familiar with you,” Xie Lian mutters, his voice slightly hoarse.

“Well,” by comparison, Hua Cheng seems relatively unaffected, and Xie Lian finds himself envying his stoicism. “We’ve known each other for quite some time.”

Yes—but there was an ease between the two that Hua Cheng didn’t seem to share with the other ghosts in the city.

Shuo seemed respectful of Hua Cheng, but not quite so reverential as everyone else. “Is he one of your subordinates?”

Hua Cheng thinks on that, offering the prince his arm. Xie Lian reaches out and takes it without thinking, walking alongside him as the ghost king makes his way back down the hall.

“He does perform tasks for me,” he murmurs, “But I wouldn’t call him an employee.”

The prince grows quiet for a moment, thinking on that, eventually asking—

“...Are you his father, San Lang?”

That actually seems to punch through the ghost king’s composure, drawing a surprised snort.

“Pardon, dianxia?”

“I just mean...well...”

Stories like that were rather common, when Xie Lian was a child.

Hua Cheng never mentioned anything about having been married at any point in time—and he certainly doesn’t act like he is now—but it’s not unheard of for illegitimate children to be raised as apprentices.

It even happens in the heavens, with some martial gods appointing their own unclaimed children as deputies.

Xie Lian wouldn’t judge Hua Cheng for that at all—it seems rather human to him. “...You two just seemed almost like family,” he explains, “that’s why I asked.”

“...I’m not offended,” Hua Cheng clarifies, making him sigh with relief, “but I haven’t fathered any children as of yet, your highness.”

That’s a shame—from the way Xie Lian saw him handle Banyue, and later Shuo— Hua Cheng seems like he would make a rather good father.

And now that he’s dead—or undead, as it were—Xie Lian supposes he never will.

“But I did take Shuo in when he was very young, along with his older brother,” the ghost king explains, “and he’s been somewhat like...a ward of mine ever since. So, you weren’t entirely wrong.”

The prince understands what Hua Cheng means then, when he implies that Shuo is somewhat neither here nor there. Wards are complicated in that sense, after all.

“Is his brother still here as well?”

There’s a moment’s hesitation.

“...He was dispersed a century ago, dianxia.”

Xie Lian’s eyes widen with sympathy.

“...Oh, San Lang...” he murmurs, squeezing the ghost king’s arm. “I’m so sorry.”

For a moment—Hua Cheng isn’t sure of how to react. Many comforted Shuo in the time after—as they should have, the child was a shell of himself for years.

But no one ever said such a thing to Hua Cheng—and he never expected them to.

After all—he wasn’t Bao’s father, nor his brother. He was a guardian—and one who failed to protect him at that.

However, hearing it from his god now—the ghost king can’t say that he isn’t comforted.

“...It’s quite alright, your highness,” he replies quietly. “It’s been many years now.”

But that doesn’t always mean that the pain has gotten easier—Xie Lian knows that better than anyone.

They come to a halt now, in front of a different door.

“There was actually a place I had been meaning to show you,” Hua Cheng murmurs. “I thought his highness might enjoy it.”

Xie Lian’s eyebrows arch curiously, and he smiles. “Then by all means...” he murmurs.

Two steel tigers stand before the door, locked in makeshift battle.

With a flick of Hua Cheng’s wrist, however, they part in a quiet screech of metal—and when the door opens, the first thing Xie Lian recognizes is the distinctive smell of metal and leather.

He reaches out carefully—at Hua Cheng’s encouragement—and he finds rows upon rows of weaponry.

The prince’s eyes widen slightly when they find the hilt of a sword—then an ax, a polearm, and a shield—every type of blade he can imagine, and it seems to be here.

Hua Cheng watches him closely, trying to discern whether or not the prince is pleased from the look on his face—

And after a moment, Xie Lian smiles so widely that it’s near painful. “San Lang! Are all of these really yours?”

“They are,” the ghost king smiles in return, watching as the prince takes in the weapons one by one, “are any of them to dianxia’s liking?”

Xie Lian almost snorts, finding the idea that any of them could be considered ‘sub- par’ near laughable. “All of them! They’re amazing!”

The quality and durability of each blade alone is outstanding...and there's something else about them that catches the god's attention;

They're the same quality of what he would expect of a Heavenly weapon. Better in some cases, really.

"...Can I ask how you came to have them?"

"Of course," Hua Cheng smiles, not seeming particularly secretive about the matter. "I made them myself."

Xie Lian's eyebrows couldn't raise any higher at this point as he carefully takes a rapier into his hands, light, perfectly balanced, but incredibly strong.

"...You did?"

Hua Cheng nods, looking over Xie Lian's shoulder, examining the particular blade that he's holding. "Every single one."

The prince finds himself remembering what Hua Cheng said during their journey to the crescent moon kingdom.

"...Was your mother really a bladesmith, then?"

After a moment, the ghost king replies--but his tone is somewhat distant, "...She didn't give birth to me," he admits. "She was more of a Guoshi, but I have long considered her a mother."

Even curiouser–Xie Lian has rarely heard of female Guoshis, particularly in the past.

"And your birth mother?" He questions, knowing the question might bring painful memories with it--but Hua Cheng doesn't seem particularly bothered when he answers.

"I lost her when I was very young, dianxia. I don't remember much. But she was a good woman, I know that."

Xie Lian supposes he can somewhat understand what Hua Cheng is surprising. He had a difficult relationship with his own father. Not because they didn't love one another, but because they rarely saw eye to eye on most matters.

Still--Mei Nianqing was a father to him as well.

To some extent, he could even say the same thing about Jun Wu. Both taught him so much about what it meant to become a god, and a man...

So, all three were like fathers to him–though not all for the same reasons, or to the same degree of success.

“And your mother...she taught you how to make all of this?” He murmurs, not even bothering to disguise the awe in his voice.

“I’m not quite to her skill level,” Hua Cheng admits with a shrug. “But she did.” Xie Lian can’t imagine that.

Any one of the weapons here surpasses most of the arms in the heavens, but still—he lets the matter rest.

Instead, he inquires about each and every one of them—the method behind making them, their use. Hua Cheng is patient, answering each question in detail.

There are blades of white jade—some that turn elastic and change shapes under Xie Lian's touch—

One object catches his eye, surprising him—because it doesn't seem like a weapon at all, but rather a ring, sitting on a velvet cushion.

"...San Lang," he arches an eyebrow. "Is this a weapon as well?"

The ghost king leans over his shoulder, somewhat amused. "Why doesn't his highness put it on and see?"

It's a silver ring, from the feel of the metal—with a gem set into the face—and when Xie Lian slips it onto his finger, it's the perfect size.

Xie Lian is starting to think that Hua Cheng must design objects that automatically adjust to the size of the person wearing them—otherwise, it wouldn't make much sense that both the slippers—and now the ring—fit him so perfectly.

But he doesn't have much time to focus on that question

The moment the ring has settled around his finger, it begins to change—stretching and coiling around his hand like a snake—but Xie Lian doesn't panic, simply watching until he feels a handle form against his palm.

And when he gives his wrist a cautious flick—

CRACK!

A...whip?

But even the crack of it doesn't sound like that of a normal weapon—it sparks and crackles with power, purple sparks of spiritual energy flying before his eyes.

"...I've never seen a weapon like this," he murmurs, curious. "I didn't know San Lang fought with a whip."

"I don't fight with one," the ghost king disagrees, admiring the way the weapon looks in Xie Lian's grip—then again, just about anything looks elegant under his hands.

The prince notices something odd about the phrasing, but can't put his finger on why.

"This was actually built as part of a deal with a cultivation clan in Yunmeng fifty years ago," he murmurs, watching the way the whip crackles in the air. "But they failed to keep their end of the bargain with me, so I took Zidian back."

Xie Lian can't fault him—that's fair.

"It's called Zidian?" Hua Cheng hums in agreement, and Xie Lian smiles.

'Purple lightning.'

It's fitting—and a rather lovely name.

"I've never seen a weapon quite like it," he admits. "Really—it's been ages since I saw a blade as fine as anything here, San Lang."

The ghost king seems genuinely pleased by that, going so far as to offer— "If you see anything you like here, it's yours dianxia."

"Oh..." Xie Lian laughs softly, a little awkward as he loosens his grip on the whip, causing it to retract back into a simple ring.

"I like everything here, San Lang, really..." he mumbles, slipping the ring off of his finger and settling it back onto it's cushion. "It's kind of you to—"

"Then it's all yours."

The prince pauses, his eyebrows knitting together. He isn't actually serious, is he?

"...I couldn't..." He mumbles, opting to politely decline. "I haven't used a weapon in years, and even so...I wouldn't have anywhere to store all of this. San Lang is very kind, but—"

"That's easy enough then," Hua Cheng shrugs. "You can store them here—consider the armory yours."

Xie Lian pauses, waiting for the moment the ghost king will burst out laughing and say that it's a joke. He's often just a little too quick to believe what people say, so he's cautious now, but...

Hua Cheng seems completely serious. “I…well…” he swallows hard.

“…I wouldn’t have a way of maintaining them,” he mumbles, after all—back when he had such weapons, servants handled that. And with his current condition, it would be difficult—

“Then I suppose I’ll do maintenance from time to time,” Hua Cheng shrugs. “It’s no problem.”

Xie Lian stares at him blankly, starting to realize…

…Just how many weapons must this man have, to be willing to give the prince an entire room of them on a whim? It’s generous either way, but now it seems like Hua Cheng might have enough to arm an entire military.

“…San Lang has already done so much,” Xie Lian mumbles. “I couldn’t ask him to do chores for me as well…”

“You aren’t asking,” Hua Cheng smiles softly. “I’m offering. Are you hungry, dianxia?”

Of course, he tries valiantly to deny it—but his growling stomach gives him away.

“We can discuss the details later—come.”

Ah yes, the details of Xie Lian owning his priceless armory while Hua Cheng stores and maintains it for him, it’s all rather casual—

But Xie Lian remembers something else as they make their way back, something Jun Wu said before.

“…San Lang—all of those weapons back there—were any of them E’Ming?”

The ruthless scimitar everyone described—the weapon that made Pei Xiu’s clone into a mere child’s toy—Xie Lian can’t recall having felt anything resembling that inside the armory.

“Oh, no,” Hua Cheng replies. “E’Ming is always on my person—or somewhere nearby.”

As he says this, Xie Lian hears an odd metallic rumbling—to which the ghost king places a hand over the hilt at his hip, murmuring—

“No.”

“...I’m sorry?”

“Not you, dianxia—it wants your attention, and I’m telling it no.”

“My attention?” Xie Lian murmurs, taking a step closer. Normally he wouldn’t be so presumptuous about someone’s personal space—but Hua Cheng seems rather comfortable with being close to one another.

He reaches for the scabbard, placing his palm over it. “This is E’Ming, then?”

The sword rattles excitedly under his palm—and Xie Lian can’t see it, but a red eye spins quickly in it’s pommel, widening sharply.

“...Is it always like that?” He questions, raising an eyebrow.

“No,” Hua Cheng admits, biting back a smile. “It just likes you.”

Xie Lian tilts his head, surprised.

E’Ming, the supposedly menacing blade of a ghost king, feared by the heavens—and it shakes like an excited puppy under his touch.

“Well, I’m flattered,” he muses, stroking his thumb over the handle.

“Did you build E’Ming yourself as well, San Lang?”

“...I did,” he agrees evenly. “He was the first weapon I ever crafted, actually.”

And he was able to make something so powerful on his first try? That leaves Xie Lian curious. Not only about that—there seems to be more to it.

Just from the way Hua Cheng speaks of it, there seems to be something held back in his tone. And while Xie Lian finds himself rather curious, he can’t ask much more about it before they return to...

...What seems very much like a feast.

“...San Lang...” Xie Lian mumbles.

“Hmm?”

“You really didn’t need to go to all of this trouble on my account...” he mumbles, feeling somewhat remorseful.

After all, he doubts Hua Cheng would be so generous if he knew why Xie Lian was actually here.

To be fair...Xie Lian himself has forgotten his actual purpose for being here several times over the course of the night–but that doesn't mean that he didn't show up with an ulterior motive.

And even if his intentions are good, he's still investigating Hua Cheng's home.

"Who says I don't just throw feasts like this every night?" The Ghost King counters with a sly grin.

And while Xie Lian's own issues with self-worth can make him explain quite a bit of the Ghost King's odd behavior–that one doesn't pull off quite as well.

"...How often do you have people in Paradise Manor that actually need to eat?" Xie Lian counters dryly.

After all, ghosts won't starve.

Hua Cheng actually pauses, his lips forming into a perfect 'o' of surprise. In part, because he's not often contradicted. And also...

It's not that he forgot that Xie Lian was clever–it's that he isn't used to hearing the prince speak...

The way that Hong'er used to.

The moments are rare, but every now and again, he sees the clear influence of his younger self in the god that he so admires.

It aches as much as it soothes.

"...I'm sure you must have heard from the other ghosts before you arrived," Hua Cheng murmurs, carefully holding Xie Lian's elbow as he leads him to a seat at the head of the table, "but I don't have guests very often."

That's true--it was really all that anyone could talk about, when they saw that Hua Cheng had ordered the Ghost Officer to bring someone to the manor.

"Which means I don't get the chance to show hospitality often," the ghost king shrugs. "Please, do me the honor?"

Xie Lian can’t argue with that, not when Hua Cheng says it so hopefully, practically pleading.

Somehow, he makes Xie Lian allowing him to throw the god a feast sound like he’s doing Hua Cheng a favor.

“Alright…” He murmurs, sitting in the chair the ghost king pulls out for him

The only ones seated at the table are Xie Lian, Hua Cheng, Shuo—who sits on the other end of the table, examining his food with faint, passing interest—and the young boy, sitting at Xie Lian’s side.

He’s a little too cautious to eat anything until Xie Lian pushes it his way.

But when he does begin to eat, he does so ravenously, cramming every bit of food he can get his hands on down his throat.

Hua Cheng and Shuo both watch the boy rather closely—and neither one seems particularly friendly.

And Xie Lian can’t recall the last time he had such a meal.

Every bite is divine—to the point where he struggles with forgetting his own manners, fighting back the urge to shovel down every piece of pork on his plate.

Instead, he forces himself to chew slowly, commenting—

“I suppose I assumed but…are there ghosts who need to eat?”

After all—the boy beside him is practically inhaling his meal, and Hua Cheng shrugs.

“It really depends. Weaker spirits tend to mimic human processes out of habit. More often than not, they struggle with remembering that they’re dead.”

He explains, still watching the child.

“But stronger spirits don’t necessarily need to eat. Sometimes they will in order to fortify their forms before a fight—or they’ll simply have a meal for the experience itself. But they don’t need it, no.”

Shuo listens, taking a bite of a steamed bun, chewing thoughtfully.

Clearly, he and Hua Cheng fall into the latter category, but as for the child...That doesn't seem quite as black and white to Xie Lian, who has been bent on trying to get at least some answers out of him, however minor they might be.

He's only given one answer so far:

That he was born in the Kingdom of Yong'an. But—in order to be suffering from the Human Face Disease, he must have been alive very early on in the country's history.

"You don't even remember your name?"

The child shakes his head, wide eyed.

"In that case..."

Xie Lian thinks on it. "The official surname of the Kingdom of Yong'an was Lang..." he recalls. "Can you think of anything you would prefer as a given name?"

After a pause, the child replies—

"Ying."

Xie Lian doesn't react—but Hua Cheng and Shuo noticeably stiffen.

Lang Ying.

Of course, that makes sense—he's likely trying to honor Xiao Ying in some way, the girl was such an important figure in his life—

But even Xie Lian can admit, while there's no way the child could know—it's an unfortunate coincidence.

It's hard to hear that name without remembering...a very different time in his life. Even harder for Hua Cheng and Shuo for that matter.

Lang Ying glances in Shuo's direction, seemingly drawn to someone else near his age. The savage ghost bares his teeth at him in response.

Lang Ying flinches away, hiding his face against Xie Lian's arm. The prince frowns, having not seen the little exchange between the two, but he strokes the child's hair nonetheless.

"It's alright, nothing will harm you while you're with me, understand?" Shuo looks at Hua Cheng.

The Ghost King takes a long sip from his glass of whine, not looking away from the scene for a moment, clearly thinking something over rather intently. When he finally meets Shuo's gaze, the younger ghost mouths the words;

'Can I eat him, gege?'

The Ghost King actually takes a moment to think about it, leaving the boy hopeful, but–

'No.'

That answer comes through the private array, and Shuo sits back with a huff, pushing his half eaten bun around his plate sulkily.

'Why not? Something's wrong with him.'

Hua Cheng doesn't disagree with him there, watching the child with a distrustful eye. ' *Maybe so. But until we know what that is, dianxia is attached to him.'*

And while Shuo is still adjusting to the prince's newfound presence in their lives, he does understand one thing:

Xie Lian's word may as well be law, as far as Hua Cheng is concerned.

'I don't like it.'

'Keep an eye on him, then.'

Xie Lian might have noticed the long bout of silence from the other two--but he has his own private conversation to be distracted by.

'Your highness?'

Xie Lian jumps at the sound of Shi Qingxuan's voice–that of her female form, to boot–echoing in his mind.

'...Lady Wind Master?'

He hears a gasp of relief in response.

'Oh , thank god! We should have exchanged passwords beforehand. I had to ask Ling Wen to set up a new private array just for us so I could get in contact with you. It's not like I could visually signal...'

'Visually?' Xie Lian blinks, sitting a little straighter *'Are you here?* '

'I was hoping you might see my aura–but your highness has been pretty distracted,' Xie Lian's cheeks burn at that, but she isn't wrong. *'I'm the one who poured your wine just now.'*

As he's currently in the middle of a sip, Xie Lian chokes. "Is the wine not to your liking?"

Hua Cheng's tone is that of concern, and Xie Lian is quick in his attempt to reassure him.

"Oh, no, it's wonderful..." He smiles, setting the glass down carefully. Now that he's paying attention–he can in fact see the Wind Master's aura, flickering in the corner of his eye.

"I just forgot that my cultivation method forbids heavy drinking," he mutters, setting the glass down and pushing it away. "Pure of mind and body, and all that..."

Hua Cheng frowns. "Apologies, your highness, I didn't realize."

"Don't be sorry!" Xie Lian shakes his head. "I was the one who never mentioned it, it's my fault, really!"

Shuo makes a face, trying not to seem to grossed out by the fact that Hua Cheng seems genuinely annoyed by the latter part of the requirements of Xie Lian's cultivation method, but—

Neither are particularly subtle.

Still—he's too distracted by the boy across the table to pay too close attention to the way the god and the ghost king keep glancing at one another, quietly making conversation.

And he certainly doesn't notice that one of the waitresses is entirely unfamiliar.

He watches Lan Ying closely, listening for the tell tale signs of some sort of clone. But the food and drink doesn't ring hollow when it lands in his stomach. There's no flaw in his disguise, if that's what it is.

It's bothersome, and it sets his teeth on edge.

And when the dinner is over, and both guests in paradise manor are settled into their rooms for the evening, he raises his concerns, falling into step beside Hua Cheng, "If he's wearing a disguise, and we can't see through it..."

Shuo trails off, his tone wary.

“If it was a disguise, then he would be a calamity,” Hua Cheng replies calmly, “and all of those have been accounted for.”

One long dead, another chained in the dungeon, and the other is standing before him.

In which case, it can’t be a disguise, but…

Something is off.

That much they both know. Still, the child hasn’t done anything to pose himself as an immediate thread, and—

He’s under the Prince of Xianle’s protection, meaning—until there’s proof of their suspicions—their hands are tied.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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The 'mysterious statue' of the martial goddess Xie Lian comes across

[image]

CREDIT: **BANANA SCOUTS**

[image]

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to banana scouts for their beautiful artwork, and allowing me to share it!

xoxo, Evie

Up in Flames

Chapter Summary

> "Here goes nothing..." He mutters, rolling the dice in his palm—and trying to mimic Hua Cheng's posture from before, just in case—
>
> Clack, clack!
>
> There's a beat of nervous silence afterwards.
>
> "...What'd I get?" Xie Lian mumbles, resting the urge to bite his nails.
>
> "Two Sixes," the Wind Master mutters, watching the tile beneath them. "It doesn't seem to be anything that bad this time."
>
> "Does iIIIIIIIIT—!"
>
> And, of course, they're falling again.

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE
>
> this chapter contains: cute animal pics

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Said prince, at that very moment, is laying back on the bed in the room Hua Cheng was kind enough to give him for the night, trying to decide what to do.

After all—he's no closer to answers than he was this morning. In part because he keeps getting distracted, but still.

It isn't long before there's a knock at his door—and before he can answer, Shi Qingxuan flings herself inside, shutting it behind her before dropping down onto the floor with a groan, shifting once again.

"God, I can't breathe..." he moans, tugging at his dress. "Too tight!"

“Can’t you just change back into what you were wearing before?” Xie Lian questions, sitting up and glancing in his direction.

“I’d stick out more if I did that…” the Wind Master replies, one sleeve slipping off of his shoulder as he rolls over with a huff. “Learn anything?”

“…Nothing particularly helpful to our case,” Xie Lian admits, rubbing the side of his neck. “I’m sorry about that. Where’s Lang Qianqiu?”

“There’s no need to worry about him,” Shi Qingxuan pulls himself up to plop down on the bed beside the prince.

“I pulled rank and ordered him to stay put,” he explains, kicking off one heeled shoe and flexing his toes. “He’s somewhat of a moron, but he’s pretty respectful of the chain of authority.”

Xie Lian isn’t surprised to find that much about him hasn’t changed.

Once, when Lang Qianqiu was just a twelve year old boy, his Guoshi had ordered him to practice meditation in the courtyard until he felt his mind become clear.

Of course, Xie Lian hadn’t been expecting the child to sit outside for a full twelve hours as a result.

When he eventually came to find him, Lang Qianqiu was apologetic, admitting that he hadn’t been able to clear his mind, as Xie Lian had commanded.

At the time, Xie Lian found it vexing—but adorable. In this situation, he finds that obedience to be a relief.

“You certainly got off luckier than we did, though,” Shi Qingxuan points out. “He’s out there trying not to get hung upside down by any more ghosts, I’m serving drinks, and you—you’re wining and dining with Crimson Rain himself.”

Xie Lian winces, because, well—it’s true.

To be fair—it wasn’t like Shi Qingxuan didn’t know about his friendship with Hua Cheng beforehand, but Xie Lian is still sorry that he’s had such a difficult time of it since arriving in the city.

“So…you haven’t found anything strange? No clues?” The Wind Master grumbles.

Xie Lian gives the matter some thought—and after a moment, replies.

“There was one thing…it seemed a little odd.”

“Oh?” Shi Qingxuan sits up quickly, hair bouncing around his shoulders. “What?”

“I’m fairly sure they have something like a distance shortening array.”

“That’s not inherently strange,” he curls his legs up underneath him, rubbing his sore feet, and Xie Lian nods.

“I know, but…this one felt different.”

He explains the story about the dice, as well as the statue he came across—and the Wind Master listens carefully.

“…That sounds like it could be one of two things,” he muses, tapping his thumb against his chin. “A lock, or an interchange.”

Xie Lian casts him a surprised look, and the Wind Master holds his hands up with a snort.

“I’m no expert—but Ming-Xiong is, and I listen to him. Sometimes. Enough to put bits and pieces of it together when I need to, anyway.” He shrugs. “Either way, it sounds promising. What did the statue look like?”

Xie Lian gives the description, brow furrowing as he recalls—

“…It might sound a little odd, but it looked like…a martial goddess of some sort,” he murmurs with a frown, expecting Shi Qingxuan to have no idea what he’s talking about, but—

“Actually, I saw a statue like that on my way in—maybe there’s more than one? Let’s take a look!”

He leaps to his feet, grabbing Xie Lian’s hand, pulling the prince along with him. Of course, it’s a slightly more stealthy affair than the way they went charging out of the heavens before, walking lightly down hallways, speaking in a private array rather than out loud.

‘Where did you see the second statue, exactly?’ Xie Lian questions, nearly slipping past a corner, only to be pulled back by Shi Qingxuan’s arm around his waist, keeping silent as a pair of servants walk past.

‘Outside, in the gardens. They’re rather lovely, you know.’

Xie Lian did know that—even if he couldn't see them, the sound and smell alone was enough to remind him of their gardens back in Xianle. And while their childhoods are separated by miles and centuries, Shi Qingxuan seems to feel the same sentiment.

'You know, we always had a garden growing up, no matter what,' he comments, letting Xie Lian lean against his arm as they walk down the steps leaning outside . *'Even when it wasn't the most practical.'*

Xie Lian almost asks if that was his parents preference—but then he remembers what Shi Qingxuan said the last time the prince asked about his family, that it's only ever been him and his brother.

'Was that your brother's doing?' The younger god nods amiably.

'When I was a kid—there was a time when I couldn't really go outside as much as everyone else my age. Big, elaborate courtyards and gardens were a way of getting to have…a semblance of normalcy, I guess.'

Xie Lian finds himself wondering at what could have placed him in that sort of position—but before he can think of a polite way to ask, the Wind Master pulls him to a stop.

"Ah, here it is!" He exclaims, "The statue I saw earlier," he stands before it, holding Xie Lian's hand.

"Now, how do you think we work it…"

"Well," Xie Lian tilts his head to the side, deep in thought. "Throwing the dice was clearly part of the process…"

"That probably means that different combinations lead to different locations," Shi Qingxuan muses.

"Do you think it has to be a particular set of dice, or would any work?"

"There's only one way to find out," the Wind Master shrugs, rummaging around, looking for pockets, then realizing he doesn't have any—

Xie Lian stands aside awkwardly as Shi Qingxuan shoves his hands into the front of his dress, feeling around, then shifts into her female form, feeling again—but this time underneath her cleavage—

"A-HA!" He beams, holding a set up in his hands. Xie Lian scratches his head.

“…Why…keep dice stored there?”

“I swiped them from the gambler’s hall—and these dresses don’t have any pockets, you know,” he shrugs, as though that explains everything. “Do you think you still have enough luck from earlier, or should I give it a shot?”

“…Luck?”

Xie Lian frowns. “I already explained, I don’t have any—”

“Oh, I know,” Shi Qingxuan leans over the statue, examining the tray. “But that’s what Hua Cheng was doing earlier—lending you luck.”

Xie Lian’s eyes widen slightly.

“Did you really think it was a secret technique?”

The god falls silent, his ears warming up.

He figured that San Lang was probably teasing him, but that doesn’t make Shi Qingxuan referencing the fact openly any easier to deal with.

He had no idea that luck was something that could be shared like currency—but that’s helpful.

“…There’s a decent chance that whatever luck he gave me has already run out then,” Xie Lian mutters, clearing his throat—opting not to address the elephant in the room. “Better to use yours.”

Shi Qingxuan nods, rattling the dice in his hands.

“There’s a symbol on the ground under our feet—that must be the activator for the array…” he mutters, throwing the dice down on the tray. “Here goes nothing.”

Clack! Clack!

Xie Lian waits, listening. “…Is something happening?”

“Well…” The Wind Master glances at their feet

“Oh! The symbol changed!” He exclaims, resting one hand on his hip. “Before, it was just something like a lantern, and now…”

Xie Lian raises an eyebrow. “Now…what?”

“Well,” Shi Qingxuan bends over slightly to get a better look. “It’s some sort of bug, I think…”

Xie Lian goes from being flushed by the earlier comment about Hua Cheng’s ‘secret dice rolling techniques,’ to suddenly going a little pale. “How many legs?”

“What?” Shi Qingxuan glances up. “Oh—eight, I suppose. Think it’s a spider?”

“I…Is it an actual…or—?”

“Just the symbol,” Shi Qingxuan explains, noticing the way the prince visibly shrinks with relief. “Is your highness scared of—?”

Before he can finish asking his question, the square of glass underneath them begins to glow brightly—then drops out, making them plummet.

“AHHHH!”

Xie Lian doesn’t know how far they fall—but it’s a full three seconds before they hit the ground again, Xie Lian face down, with Shi Qingxuan landing on top of his back.

THUD!

“Ow…” The Wind Master groans, clutching his ribs as he rolls off. “What kind of array…?!”

“I don’t know…” Xie Lian mumbles, brushing the dust off of his robes as he sits up. “What can you see?”

“It’s some sort of tunnel…” Shi Qingxuan stands, reaching over to help the prince to his feet. “Think we should follow it?”

“I suppose it couldn’t hurt…”

They start making their way down the path—and here, the only light Xie Lian has is Shi Qingxuan’s spiritual aura, so he sticks close to it, blinking and squinting awkwardly against the darkness.

“Still think it could be a lock?”

“No…” the Wind Master shakes his head. “If it was, I don’t think regular dice would have worked."

That makes sense—after all, a lock is no good if everyone has the key.

"Which means it's probably an interchange. And with two dice that have six possible outcomes…that's 36 available combinations, or destinations."

And with Xie Lian's luck, even if Shi Qingxuan is the one rolling—those aren't fantastic odds.

"And with 1 in 36…The probability of getting the right roll…" The Wind Master scrunches his nose up thoughtfully. "…Is around 2.75 percent…still, even with average luck…"

He stops when he notices the way Xie Lian is staring at him, quietly surprised—and for once, Shi Qingxuan rubs the side of his neck, seeming rather sheepish.

"I'm not really much of a books person, but I'm good at math," the Wind Master explains. "Always have been."

Xie Lian offers a small, encouraging smile, "I can't say the same for myself. That's rather impressive."

The younger god smiles back, but before either can say more, they both hear something.

Rustling, like something is moving in the far end of the tunnel, or—no. It would be better described as…

Scuttling.

All of the blood begins to drain from the martial god's face.

"…Lord Wind Master?"

Shi Qingxuan is slowly backing up, and Xie Lian is beginning to learn that he's prone to laughing when nervous.

"Haha…hahahaha…y-yes?"

"I…" Xie Lian swallows hard, fighting the urge to begin hyperventilating. "Is that…?"

"A-A giant spider?" Shi Qingxuan swallows hard, still stumbling backwards. "I…it would seem so, hahaha…w-wh…haha…what an adventure! R...hahahaha..right?!"

As a fairly eccentric person himself, it takes a lot to catch the Wind Master by surprise.

But...nothing could have prepared him for the prince's reaction. He's always so calm, even toned. Never shaken.

The rustling gets just a little bit closer, and—

"...eeeAAAAAAAAAK!"

The blood curdling shriek that breaks through the air is so sharp, so startling, he almost thinks it's the monster, but—

Then the crown prince throws his hands over his head, turns around, and goes charging back down the tunnel at top speeds, leaving Shi Qingxuan frozen in shock

"D...DON'T LEAVE ME?!" He cries, turning on heel and chasing after him, but when he reaches the dead end of the tunnel where they started, that just ends with Xie Lian leaping into his arms, wrapping his limbs around Shi Qingxuan's torso, using one trembling finger to point—

"KILL IT!"

"I..." Shi Qingxuan doesn't struggle under Xie Lian's weight—he's a god, after all—but he's not exactly used to carrying a grown man like a toddler either, so he staggers. "I'M NOT EXACTLY A WARRIOR, YOUR HIGHNESS! YOU KILL IT!"

Xie Lian, normally polite to a fault, screams, "DOES IT LOOK LIKE I'M ARMED TO YOU?!"

"I—!" The spider rounds the curve, screeching towards them, pinchers gleaming in the dim light. "JUST PUNCH IT OR SOMETHING! YOU'RE A MARTIAL GOD!"

"ABSOLUTELY NOT!"

Shi Qingxuan reaches into the collar of his dress, pulling out a fan, then—

"But—haha, your highness, if I use my powers, I could end up bringing the whole tunnel down, hahaha!"

Xie Lian is clinging to his back now, legs hitched around Shi Qingxuan's ribs. "...I can live with that."

The Wind Master's smile is frozen in place as the clicking grows closer.

"H-HAH?!"

"I'VE BEEN THROUGH IT BEFORE!" Xie Lian trembles as it closes in "I CAN DO IT AGAIN!"

"BEEN THROUGH WHAT?! YOUR HIGHNESS...HAHA! STOP—COVERING MY FACE, HAHAHAHA!"

In his desperation, Xie Lian's hands have taken to gripping the Wind Master's head, leaving Shi Qingxuan fumbling blindly.

"WE DON'T HAVE ANY MORE TIME, JUST DO IT!"

"IN WHAT UNIVERSE IS BEING BURIED ALIVE WORSE THAN PUNCHING A SPIDER?!" The younger god wails.

"I DON'T SEE YOU PUNCHING IT!"

Shi Qingxuan stumbles back another step with Xie Lian in his grip, and this time, his back against an earthen wall—he feels a stone tile under his feet, his eyes widening.

"...OH!"

"I SWEAR IF THAT THING GETS ME BEFORE YOU KILL IT, I'LL—!"

Clack, clack!

The tile underneath them glows again—and then, they go tumbling.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

CRASH!

THUD!

Xie Lian pokes his head up, hair flipping around him as he spits some of it out of his mouth.

"Lord Wind Master?" He questions, looking for his aura.

He doesn't see anything around him, just hears the rustling of wind through leaves, and birds cawing in what sounds like...

A jungle?

"I'm not sure, your highness..." The Wind Master replies, his voice slightly muffled— coming from underneath him.

That's when Xie Lian realizes...

they seem to have fallen into a hollow tree, with Xie Lian's arms and head sticking out of the top, and Shi Qingxuan beneath him, having fallen head first, his feet poking precariously against the prince's backside.

"Working with you is...a little too exciting, sometimes..."

"..." Xie Lian can't help but let out a small snort, pulling himself up and out of the trunk, landing on the ground a little hard before turning around and punching a hole in the side, using that to pull the Wind Master out.

"Better?"

The Wind Master nods, coughing up a mouthful of dirty and dust, looking somewhat disgusted. "Somehow, yes..."

Xie Lian clears his throat, feeling more than a little awkward—and certainly very apologetic. "I'm...sorry for how I handled that..." he mutters.

"I...It's...fine...hahaha..."

Shi Qingxuan coughs again, this time seeming to expel the rest of it. He reaches for a flask in his pocket, using it to wet his throat before offering it to the prince.

He takes it gratefully, wincing a little at the burn of the wine, but grateful for something to drink.

He hands it back over, mumbling, "I haven't really talked to anyone about it..."

(Not since Xianle, anyway.)

"But I...have a bit of a phobia, when it comes to spiders."

Shi Qingxuan takes another sip from his flask.

“...Oh, don’t worry your highness—I’m sure no one’s noticed.”

It takes Xie Lian a moment to recognize the sarcasm in his tone, and for a moment, the two simply stare at one another, expressions frozen, each of them rumpled, covered in dust—

And then Shi Qingxuan explodes into roaring laughter, doubling over, and Xie Lian...

...He can’t help but join in, because—

It’s ridiculous. It really, really is ridiculous.

To the point where both gods are cackling, tears running down the Wind Master’s face, Xie Lian clutching his ribs as they roll on the ground.

“I-I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU T-TOLD ME TO—AHAHAHA!” “I-I just...” Xie Lian snorts, shoulders shaking, “I panicked!”

“You...TOLD ME TO BURY US ALIVE!” Shi Qingxuan rolls backwards, kicking his feet.

“I’m—I’m sorry about that!”

“D-Don’t be! Hahaha...it was so...SO FUCKING...F...FUNNY!”

He wheezes, wiping at his cheeks. “Ah, well...as l-long as we don’t get trapped in any more spider infested tunnels...we—we should be fine! After all—that was just an impractical space for my magic.”

Xie Lian’s chuckles start to ease as he nods in agreement, rubbing his side.

“We would have been better off with the earth or fire masters, in that situation...”

“Hmmm, Ming-Xiong would have come in handy,” Shi Qingxuan agrees. “But the Heavens doesn’t have a fire master. Hasn’t for as long as anyone can remember.”

“...Really?” Xie Lian frowns.

He can remember that there was a fire master before his own first ascension—but that the official was rather old, and chose to retire...

But it's been nearly a thousand years since then. Have they really not replaced him yet?

Before Xie Lian can question more, There's noise.

Rustling in the bushes and the trees nearby, and then...

His expression falls, leaving Shi Qingxuan to look around in a mild panic. "Don't worry, your highness—I don't see any more spiders around!"

"No, no..." Xie Lian frowns. "It's not that..."

"Then what?!"

Now, when he quiets down—he can hear it.

Speaking in the trees—in a language he himself doesn't understand.

"...I'm not particularly familiar with the area," Xie Lian mutters, rising to his feet. "But it doesn't seem like they're used to strangers around here."

The cries grow louder, and when a few of the locals appear from the brush, Shi Qingxuan's own expression finally falls, matching his.

"...Oh dear," he whispers.

"What?"

"...It looks like we might have interrupted a wedding."

Not only that–they just saw two strange men—one blind, the other scantily dressed in women's clothes—fall from the sky and start speaking in a strange language.

"Well," Xie Lian's expression turns even more grim. "That's not good."

"...So?"

A rock hits the side of Xie Lian's head—sharp enough to draw blood—before thunking off and landing on the ground. He doesn't wince, doesn't even flinch, actually—but his expression turns rather grim.

"They'll throw rocks first, ask questions later."

"Oh," Shi Qingxuan frowns.

"That's—"

Then, it's showering down rocks, and it's all either one of them can do to manage not to get hit, scrambling back.

"Should we try to go—? Ah!" The Wind Master stops in mid sentence, reaching up to touch his cheek.

There's a small cut there, blood running down his chin.

Xie Lian stops, clutching his hands to his chest, eyes widening as he listens to the Wind Master's voice drop three octaves, his eyes glowing green, all the way from iris to the edge of his cornea.

"Who got my face?"

See, that's his 'god voice,' and Xie Lian is all too familiar with that—when a Heavenly Official becomes so irritated, their power starts to poke through their human form.

For obvious reasons, Xie Lian hasn't had a 'god voice' to use in about...eight centuries.

"L-Lord Wind Master—"

"THAT'S RIGHT!" He stands up, hands balled into fists, "I AM THE LORD SHI QINGXUAN, GOD OF THE THREE REALMS, MASTER OF THE WIND!"

It all sounds rather impressive, coming from a man wearing a dress that hugs his hips somewhat salaciously.

"Hold on—!"

"WHICH ONE OF YOU *DARED* TO CUT MY BEAUTIFUL, PERFECT FACE?!" "They're still mortals—!"

And they also aren't underground anymore, so Shi Qingxuan has no qualms about taking his fan out, sweeping it around to form powerful gusts of wind, flinging the humans up into the trees.

"...They'll be fine," he mutters, turning around and smoothing his hair. "No one could blame me for that anyway—it was completely provoked."

Xie Lian isn't sure that the response was proportional, but... "...Right, sure..."

“Either way, you’re doing the next dice roll.”

“...Me?”

Xie Lian shakes his head quickly, “No, no, I don’t think that’s a good idea...my luck is terrible—”

“And my luck got us thrown in a spider cave, and then we were nearly stoned to death,” Shi Qingxuan replies dryly.

Xie Lian thinks ‘stoned to death’ is a dramatic description...

“You might have some left over luck from the Gambler’s Den—and even if you don’t, something tells me that your lo—your friend’s demented traveling array is going to be friendlier to you than it is to me.”

“...” Xie Lian rubs his chin. “...I suppose that makes sense,” he mutters.

The prince takes the dice when Shi Qingxuan hands them over, moving—with the Wind Master’s guidance—to stand on another stone tile. “But remember— considering my luck, it might be something worse.”

“Worse than a giant spider?” The younger man questions wryly.

Well. Xie Lian supposes it really can’t get worse than that, so he has a point.

“Here goes nothing...” He mutters, rolling the dice in his palm—and trying to mimic Hua Cheng’s posture from before, just in case—

Clack, clack!

There’s a beat of nervous silence afterwards.

“...What’d I get?” Xie Lian mumbles, resting the urge to bite his nails.

“Two Sixes,” the Wind Master mutters, watching the tile beneath them. “It doesn’t seem to be anything that bad this time.”

“Does iIIIIIIIIT—!”

And, of course, they’re falling again.

CRASH!

This time, Xie Lian gets somewhat of a cushy landing, coming down on top of a couch set just beside the exit, a little wind swept, but otherwise fine.

Shi Qingxuan, however, ends up landing face down against the flagstones once again with a groan.

“I HATE this thing!”

“Are you alright?” Xie Lian frowns, concerned as he brushes off his robes. “Nothing’s broken?”

There’s a little more blood on his chin now when he sits up—but for the most part, he’s only battered and bruised.

“Right...well,” he looks around. “This seems promising.”

After all—there’s no sound of menacing approaching arachnids. No terrified locals throwing rocks at them, but...

When Xie Lian breathes in, he smells something that makes him go still.

“What is it now?!” Shi Qingxuan groans, seeing the look on his face.

“...Blood.” Xie Lian mutters, leaping from the couch, peering down the hall, shackle glowing in the dark. “Someone’s hurt.”

And while ghosts are capable of bleeding—it doesn’t smell like that.

Shi Qingxuan pales, turning and heading in that direction. “Then we should hurry!”

Xie Lian doesn’t disagree—the possibility of someone being injured is a time crunch in itself—

And there are others who can access this place: with far more accuracy than them.

He follows the wind master down the passageway, leading to an open, stone chamber.

Shi Qingxuan goes still for a moment, eyeing the room.

“...What is this place?” He whispers, shivering, rubbing bare his arms to soothe them from the cold.

Xie Lian's expression turns grim.

"It's a cell," he mutters, taking in the cursed energy around them.

There's a soft clink in the corner—but not that of wraith butterflies or silver bells. No, Xie Lian is familiar with the sound of chains by now.

Shi Qingxuan's eyes follow the sound, finding a figure chained to the wall, hands shackled over his head.

Dark hair hides his face, but when he tilts his chin, some of it falls aside, revealing one eye, burning like dark sea ice under the dim lighting of the torches.

Xie Lian isn't expecting the sound that rips from Shi Qingxuan's throat.

A worried, frightened cry.

"...Ming-Xiong!"

He rushes over, pushing the man's hair from his face, carefully tucking it behind his ears.

He's got blood on his face, bruises—and clear signs of injuries to his abdomen, but nothing that seems to be fatal.

"I had no idea you had been captured!"

The wind master cries, pressing his hands against the prisoner's cheeks, looking him in the eye, "Why didn't you call for help?!"

The god doesn't answer, looking him over with a tired, confused expression.

"...What the fuck are you wearing?" He rasps, blood staining his teeth.

"Well—"

"Lord Wind Master?" Xie Lian questions, glancing between them. "You two know each other?"

"We sure do!"

"Never seen him before in my life."

They both answer at the tame time, and Shi Qingxuan gasps, offended.

"Ming-Xiong! I'm your best friend!"

"I wouldn't be best friends with someone who dresses like that…" he mutters, and when Xie Lian squints at that aura—

There's something familiar about it. "…Have we met before?"

"Yes!"

"No."

Shi Qingxuan gives him an annoyed look, even as he's hugging him fiercely. "This is Earth Master Ming Yi, I've already told you about him."

Xie Lian's lips form into a perfect 'O,' eyes widening. "…Ah."

The woman who beat Feng Xin senseless, then.

Well, not a woman at the moment, but—

While he's lost in thought, Ming Yi's nose bumps against Shi Qingxuan's cheek. "What happened here?"

The annoyed expression in the Wind Master's eyes quickly fades. "You never let anything cut your face."

"…I went through a lot, trying to rescue you," he pouts. "I was chased by a giant spider—"

"That part was awful," Xie Lian agrees morosely, and Shi Qingxuan nods vehemently, happy to be vindicated.

"And then we ended up in some jungle, and the locals threw rocks at us, and they cut my face! Plus I fell at least a dozen times—!"

More like three times, but Xie Lian doesn't correct him.

Ming Yi, however, snorts, bumping his nose against the Wind Master's cheek once more. "You didn't even know I was the one you were rescuing, crybaby."

Xie Lian can't see the way that name, which should be an insult, makes Shi Qingxuan smile widely, leaning his cheek into Ming Yi's touch until he's practically nuzzling him.

"Ungrateful…" He huffs, sneaking a chaste, quiet kiss, taking advantage of the fact that no one can see.

When he pulls back, Ming Yi's eyes are somewhat annoyed—but he smiles, sharpened canines flashing in the dark.

"...Are you badly hurt?" Xie Lian questions from behind them, stepping closer.

"I'll recover," the earth master replies calmly.

"Was it you who used the dragon spell?"

There's a brief pause, but when he agrees, he sounds emphatic.

"Yes, it was me."

That explains the seriousness of his injuries, at least.

Xie Lian draws close to his side, reaching up to examine the chains locking him in place. "Lord Wind Master, could you lend me some power?"

The elemental god nods, leaning over to take Xie Lian's hand. Once he feels the power flowing through him, he grasps the chains over Ming Yi's head, squeezing until they fracture into rubble under his touch.

"There," he mutters. "Can you stand?" "I can manage, your highness."

Shi Qingxuan is quick to help, pulling the earth master's arm around his shoulders— that way Ming Yi can lean against him as they make their way back down the hall.

Xie Lian walks ahead, thinking.

"...Lord Earth Master," he mumbles, "what quarrel do you have with Hua Cheng?"

Ming Yi doesn't respond, which doesn't seem to be an odd move for him, considering Shi Qingxuan's constant complaints about the god's antisocial tendencies.

Either way, Xie Lian supposes it's a matter he can discuss with the emperor once they get back.

"Should I roll again?"

"Obviously!" Shi Qingxuan grumbles, hugging one arm around Ming

Yi’s waist. “I’m not touching those things again until we’re back where we’re supposed to be!”

Xie Lian supposes that’s fair, he just hopes he has enough luck left.

He gives his hands a shake—

Clack, clack!

The prince has no way of knowing what he rolled this time—but instead of a trap door opening under him, he hears a passage creaking open ahead.

Ah, much better.

He takes a step forward, turning his head to tell the other two to hang on a moment while he gets his bearings—

But his foot goes straight into a void, and Xie Lian’s expression cracks for a moment, becoming a look of pure, resigned annoyance.

Ah, so it was another trap door after all. It was just slightly to the left, instead.

And this time, all the more tragically—

It opens directly over the armory.

Where Hua Cheng happens to be sitting—on a throne of sorts, thoughtfully polishing E’Ming.

Well, until he hears someone plummeting towards him with a surprised yelp.

Xie Lian is familiar enough with these arms by now, when he lands—he knows exactly where he is. Though it is a little more embarrassing, given that this time—

He’s being cradled in the Ghost King’s lap, E’Ming quickly set aside.

“My,” his voice rumbles in his chest, against Xie Lian’s cheek—one palm resting against his back, the other curled around the dip of the prince’s knee. Xie Lian would have expected him to be irritated, having someone drop out of the sky like that, but—

To the contrary.

He sounds absolutely delighted.

His hands tighten ever so slightly where they rest on his body, gripping the prince more firmly, and it's almost like Xie Lian can't breathe.

"Hello, your highness," he muses, surveying that mortified, delicately flushed face. "Dropping in?"

And Xie Lian, he—

The prince can only manage a wooden nod, both hands flying up to cover his mouth, struggling to reply.

"...Hello, San Lang..." He croaks.

Part of him desperately hopes that the situation won't get even more difficult to explain, but...

CRASH!

Clearly, the other two didn't see where the trap door was either—but they don't land in such a pleasant place as Xie Lian did.

No, instead—they wind up on the floor in a heap.

Xie Lian can't help but wince in sympathy for both of them.

One has already fallen several times in the last hour, the other gravely injured.

Hua Cheng tilts his head, his thumb stroking the side of his knee with his thumb—a casual touch that leaves the prince feeling like he could crawl out of his own skin to escape the heat it brings.

"...Dianxia," he murmurs, turning to look Xie Lian in the face once more. "Would you mind explaining the situation?"

Xie Lian stares up at him blindly, his face becoming more and more flushed with blood by the second, one hand clutched over his mouth, the other over his chest.

And at first, his mind is running through a dozen different lies—but the prince already knows they're no good.

Xie Lian isn't much of a liar, and it's even worse when it's someone he respects. "...I'm sorry!"

Hua Cheng raises an eyebrow as the prince leaps from his lap.

“Your highness?”

“I’m sorry! I’m so, so sorry, San Lang,” he rambles, stumbling back towards his fellow gods. “I should have explained sooner, I—I really didn’t mean to cause you any trouble!”

Shi Qingxuan sits up, blowing his hair out of his face irritably.

“Why are you apologizing to him?!” He cries, holding Ming Yi against his side, glaring in Hua Cheng’s direction. “Look what he did to Ming-Xiong! He should be the one apologizing, wining and dining you, all while he had your fellow official locked in his DEMENTED MAGICAL ATTIC!”

“Actually,” Hua Cheng speaks up, holding up a single finger. “The word you are looking for would be dungeon.”

Shi Qingxuan stops, his eyebrows knitting together as Ming Yi sends the calamity a glare. “...Oh...” He mumbles. “Sorry, your—WHY WAS MING-XIONG IN YOUR DUNGEON?!”

Hua Cheng’s eyes slowly rake over the Wind Master before he answers, taking in his form—which was scantily clad to begin with, but now, in his male body, it’s even tighter—and ripped in many places. “Do you work for me? That uniform is familiar.”

“I—not exactly...”

“Were you at dinner before?” Hua Cheng muses, tapping his chin. “I almost recognize you...”

Xie Lian opens his mouth to tell Shi Qingxuan to, for once, stay still—but the god needs little provocation to shift at any point in time.

“Oh, that’s because I looked like this!”

She shifts quite easily, which leads to problems of its own.

The dress is less suffocating than it was before, but...due to the newfound rips, it...

Leaves the chest heavily exposed. Not something Shi Qingxuan minds, after all, she goes shirtless in her male form, but—

Hua Cheng, who has never been one to look at any woman, stares at her breasts rather pointedly now, a slow smirk spreading across his face as Ming Yi's eyes narrow sharply.

"Ah, Lady Wind Master," his eyes slowly rise to her face, "it's good to see you again— and a surprise."

Shi Qingxuan flushes. Not because of her indecent exposure, she hasn't noticed or cared about that fact at all—but more so because now, Crimson Rain Sought Flower is familiar with both of her forms.

Ming Yi, however, seems highly irritated for a rather obvious reason.

"You idiot," he snarls, ripping at his outer robes before throwing the garment around her shoulders, effectively covering her up, "if you're going to stay in that form, shift into your actual robes!"

"What?!"

"What kind of lady leaves everything hanging out like that?!"

"Wha—? Oh..." Shi Qingxuan's eyes widen as she pulls the outer robe a little closer around her shoulders, glancing over to Hua Cheng, realizing what he was doing.

The reasoning seems rather baffling, as he obviously isn't attracted to her, but—

(Ming Yi knows exactly why.)

"Wait," Xie Lian speaks up, sounding even more mortified, "Lady Wind Master, were you exposed just now...?"

"Well," Shi Qingxuan scratches the side of her head. "Kinda...not...entirely..."

"Don't worry, gege," Hua Cheng assures him, "The Earth Master is a gentleman. He helped."

Ming Yi is so infuriated, he opens his mouth, pulling his lips back over his teeth—

And then he stops, glaring at Hua Cheng wrathfully.

"Would you *shut up?!*"

Xie Lian glances around, overwhelmed—but that certainly doesn't sound like a wounded prisoner speaking to their captor.

Hua Cheng’s eye flashes slightly in warning.

“Careful, earth master,” he murmurs—and he says that title with a sneer. “You forget where you’re standing.”

Right.

In Hua Cheng’s territory.

Shi Qingxuan’s eyes flash as she pulls Ming Yi behind her.

“Crimson Rain,” she glares—and Hua Cheng will give the Wind Master one thing—

“You might be the friend of a friend, but If you want to hurt Earth Master Ming Yi, you’ll go through me first!”

She looks fearless, protecting a loved one.

Hua Cheng stares back at her coldly.

Finally, his gaze drifts to He Xuan, who refuses to look him in the eye.

So—he is capable of feeling some amount of shame, then.

Good.

“Ming Yi?” Hua Cheng muses, watching the creature tense in Shi Qingxuan’s hold. “Is that what you call the traitor?”

...Traitor?

The earth master tenses, remaining quiet as Xie Lian looks to Hua Cheng, curious.

“I know this creature as a subordinate of mine, he’s served me for the last ten years.” The ghost king explains flatly. “I realized the truth when I saw him in the Crescent Moon Kingdom.”

Which would make Ming Yi...

A spy from the Heavens, sent to watch Hua Cheng.

Which also means that Jun Wu likely knew exactly which official was missing, and why—and he sent Xie Lian, a known friend of Hua Cheng’s, under the assumption he could get close safely.

It makes sense, and Xie Lian doesn't blame Jun Wu for using him in such a way, particularly when it was to save another god's life—

He just wishes that Jun Wu would have told him first, before the prince ended up in an awkward situation like this.

"San Lang..."

Xie Lian starts, slowly shifting himself between the ghost king and his fellow Heavenly Officials—it isn't until he notices a quiet, frightened cry that he realizes that Lang Ying is in the room as well, hiding behind him with the others.

"I...can explain all of this..."

Hua Cheng crosses his arms, raising both eyebrows. "Alright, I'm waiting." Xie Lian opens his mouth to continue, but, well—

There's really no good explanation. Not one that doesn't make him look like a terrible, ungrateful friend.

"...The emperor assigned us to find an official he thought might be injured in the area," Xie Lian explains, biting his lip. "So, I'll be expected to return him to the heavens. I hope...you can let us go?"

The Ghost King is quiet, looking from Xie Lian to the Earth Master.

"...Your highness, you must know I have no ill intentions towards you," he murmurs, and Xie Lian's chest warms, swelling with hope.

"Of course I do, San Lang."

"...But I must warn you, it's better not to over-involve yourself in matters like this," the calamity sighs. "There's no good end to them."

Xie Lian doesn't understand what he means—nor could he.

The show—one that Hua Cheng would very much like to keep him away from—hasn't begun. Not yet.

"San Lang—"

Before he can finish, Shi Qingxuan interrupts them both.

"WIIIIINNND! COME TO ME!"

The moment he says it, strong gales begin whipping throughout the room, stirring the air around them.

“Lord Wind Master!” Xie Lian cries, reaching back to steady Lang Ying, his other hand clutching at the chain around his neck, “We were still talking it out!”

“Neither of you were going to make a move against one another, so it was just going to go on forever!” Shi Qingxuan cries, pulling her fan out of her dress, sweeping it around her until the winds reach a brutal force.

Ming Yi holds on, by wrapping his arms around her from behind—and in doing so, keeps her shredded dress and haphazardly tied outer robe from flying away.

And his eyes remain on Hua Cheng, watching long, raven tresses and blood red robes whip around in the hurricane force gales.

At first, Xie Lian can’t understand what the Wind Master is trying to do, until he realizes—there’s no exit that Hua Cheng couldn’t block them from, so, she’s simply decided on the simplest route:

Creating a new exit through the roof.

Hua Cheng seems to have deduced the plan as well, but he isn’t particularly bothered.

“Ah, that’s an interesting little fan you have,” he raises the volume of his voice to be heard over the howling of the wind. “Coincidentally, so do I.”

Saying this, he lifts a fan from the shelf beside him. This one is made from what looks like solid gold in the spine and webbing, bound by red and black silk.

And while the gusts of wind from Shi Qingxuan are strong, when Hua Cheng waves his fan—

There’s no comparison.

The blast nearly knocks Shi Qingxuan off her feet—actually, it would have, if not for Ming Yi’s broad frame brazing her from behind.

She grits her teeth, hooking one ankle around his leg to brace herself as she sweeps her fan again—

But it doesn’t stop with the wind.

With each sweep of Hua Cheng's fan—which he moves easily, like an extension of his arm—several gold foils rip forth, like the kind that Xie Lian used to play with as a boy, building golden palaces, but...

These cut flesh, and leave cracks in the walls when they land.

Of course, absolutely none of them get even close to Xie Lian—and in turn, none of them threaten Lang Ying, who is still cowering behind him.

The brunt of it, at the moment, is aimed at the Earth and Wind Masters. The latter of whom is dealing with it as best as can be expected.

Still—forget defeating Hua Cheng or escaping, right now, it's all she can do to make sure they don't get blown away or sliced to bits.

'You've done well,' Ming Yi speaks into their private array, *'but you can't overpower him. Not here.'*

Not anywhere, really.

But especially not in Hua Cheng's territory.

Shi Qingxuan grits her teeth, lobbing another barrage of wind gusts his way.

'I know that!' She replies sharply. *'I'm not trying to beat him!'*

That draws the Earth Master's curiosity.

'...Then what are you doing?'

While they're having this conversation, Xie Lian finds himself in a small pocket of the room that isn't disturbed by the wind, somehow—like he's caught in the eye of the storm—

And he feels Hua Cheng's fingers brush against the side of his head, probing.

"Who did this?"

Xie Lian is startled and confused for a moment, not knowing what he means—then—

Then he realizes that, in the middle of all of this chaos, the Ghost King is worried about a small cut on the side of Xie Lian's head.

"...I'm not sure," he replies honestly, "I don't remember."

Just as he says this, in their private array, Shi Qingxuan explains—*'I'm stalling.'*

Stalling.

Ming Yi raises an eyebrow, glancing over at the other two, who seem completely lost in their own world, Hua Cheng pushing a lock of hair behind the prince's ear with a frown.

"You should be more careful with yourself, dianxia."

A rare admonition, coming from him—and while he might seem distracted, he's still controlling a wild force of wind within the room, sending countless projectiles flying.

'Stalling for...?'

THUD!

Hua Cheng looks up.

THUD!

The floor rumbles under their feet, and in spite of the raging wind storm, even more dust is somehow loosened from the ceiling, falling down around them.

THUD!

THUD!

THUD! THUD! THUD! THUDTHUDTHUD—!

"What on EARTH is THAT—?!"

"LORD WIND MASTER!"

The door to the armory bursts open—no, actually—it shatters, the wood splintering into pieces as a figure comes tumbling through it, rolling head over heels until it comes to a halt at Shi Qingxuan's feet.

Lang Qianqiu sits up, hair sticking up in every direction.

Honestly—he looks like he's already been through quite a trial. Covered in dust, scratches on his face, clothes ripped—and once he takes in Shi Qingxuan’s appearance, he adjusts his language.

“I mean—LADY WIND MASTER—!”

“Oh, Lang Qianqiu—for once, you have great timing—!”

However, before she can explain the plan fully, Lang Qianqiu interrupts her.

“I’M SORRY, I SAW THE COMMOTION AND THOUGHT YOU NEEDED A HAND —!”

“No, you were right about that part—!”

The next sentence out of his mouth makes her gawk.

“DID YOU KNOW THEY HAVE A BEAR?!”

Even Xie Lian starts with surprise, and Shi Qingxuan frowns.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN?!”

“IT…”

(There’s distant roaring, somewhere down the hallway—likely from said animal.)

“IT LOOKS LIKE IT WOULD BE FRIENDLY…” The Prince screams over the wind, “BUT…IT IS NOT!”

“Oh,” Hua Cheng muses, that golden death trap of a fan still dangling between his fingers, “he must be speaking about Dian Dian.”

Xie Lian sends him a curious look, because that’s a surprisingly adorable name for a supposedly menacing beast, and the ghost king shrugs.

“It’s not my bear.”

The way he says it implies that it certainly does belong to someone—and is that something ghosts do? Keep dangerous beasts as pets?

Is it a live bear? Or is it a ghost bear?

Are there ghost bears—?

“WHY WERE YOU PLAYING WITH THE BEAR?!” Shi Qingxuan cries.

“I WASN’T PLAYING WITH IT!” Lang Qianqiu shakes his head vehemently, lifting one leg to show that his pants have been halfway shredded. “IT NEARLY TOOK MY LEG OFF!”

Hua Cheng smiles, muttering under his breath, “Good bear.”

Xie Lian’s tone is somewhat scolding, “San Lang…”

The roaring and the rumbling gets closer, and The Ghost King reaches up to rub his temples—and even he’s irritated by all of the noise.

Poor Xie Lian feels the beginnings of a migraine. “WHO HAS A BEAR IN A PALACE ANYWAY?!”

“Manor, not a palace,” Hua Cheng mutters. “And technically speaking, Dian Dian is a Panda.”

Lang Qianqiu stops, the naturally severe shape of his eyebrows becoming even more exaggerated when they crease with confusion. “Oh…” He mutters, “Sorry…”

“Why are you apologizing?!” Ming Yi snaps, his eye twitching. “Pandas are bears, you dumbass!”

Right. RIGHT.

“WHO HAS A PANDA IN THEIR MANOR?!”

Hua Cheng gives him the most bizarre look, as though the Crown Prince of Yong’an asked him the rudest question possible, replying

“He lives here.”

Xie Lian doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

“JUST—!” Shi Qingxuan flails with her fan, barely managing to avoid getting smacked in the face with another golden foil. “COULD YOU HELP US BEFORE DIAN DIAN THE PANDA GETS HERE?!”

“OH!” Lang Qianqiu nods, leaping to his feet, drawing his sword, “GOT IT!”

And this is where things become slightly problematic for Hua Cheng—because this spiritual weapon—

He frowns when the blade comes into sight, his eyes narrowing. “Oh,” he mutters, “that’s actually a good one.”

If Xie Lian wasn't so entirely distracted by the chaos going on around him, he might have wondered how Hua Cheng recognized a Heavenly weapon immediately, just from glancing at it—

But really, he's more focused on the rapidly unfolding situation.

Like most high level weapons, Lang Qianqiu's sword has it's own set of abilities—and in this case, one of them is magnetism.

Powerful enough to draw in the golden foils from around the room, fusing them against the blade itself, making it stronger with each piece added.

Meaning now, Hua Cheng using the Golden Fan is to his own detriment.

Which doesn't seem to particularly bother the calamity. He simply shrugs, tossing the priceless weapon back on the shelf without a care—and the moment his hand is empty, E'Ming returns to his side.

"Alright, hold on..." Xie Lian tries to speak up, but the two are already moving towards one another, all while Shi Qingxuan is still trying to find a way out, and there's still the distant roaring. "We—We can still talk this out—!"

But the die is already cast.

Each has already launched their attack on the other—and while Xie Lian has very little worry for Hua Cheng...

It can't possibly end well for Lang Qianqiu. Which really only leaves him with one choice.

CLANG!

There's a flash of white light, filling the expanse of the room.

Lang Qianqiu's blade is blown back, nearly flying out of his grip—E'Ming by contrast is merely flicked somewhat to the right—but still, the overall effect of separating the two is achieved.

And while everyone else is blinded, Xie Lian cries out once again—"I'M REALLY SORRY!"

This time, he gathers up the remaining spiritual power he has left from Shi Qingxuan in his right palm, sending a moderately sized flame out and into the air, striking the roof, punching open a sizable hole.

With a low whistle, Ruoye finally slithers to life—almost sulking, now, that Xie Lian took so long to call for it's help—but it still binds the five of them together, and he cries out—

"LADY WIND MASTER! LIFT US OUT OF HERE!"

Which seems like a good idea, initially, and Shi Qingxuan obeys, swooping her fan around her until they're yanked up and through the hole in the ceiling, up into the sky above.

There's just one thing Xie Lian didn't consider: What wind does to a fire, in certain scenarios.

"Lord Wind Master!" He cries, trying to be heard over the howling, "Could you ease off on the fanning now?! You're going to burn the entire place to the ground!"

"Fine, fine!" Shi Qingxuan grumbles, and he does stop the fan, allowing it to grow still.

But Xie Lian can already feel the heat coming from the surface, followed by the shocked cries of may ghosts in the city—and he isn't optimistic.

Still that doesn't stop Shi Qingxuan from glancing down alongside him commenting —"Well, what do you know—there really is a panda."

The prince has one hand over his face, groaning. "Is the panda OKAY?!"

"Well," the Wind Master frowns as they rise further and further in the air, "it's hard to tell from up here—"

"The panda will be FINE!" Ming Yi grumbles. "Just get us back!"

And Shi Qingxuan does, sweeping his fan out, spinning it through the air until they're swooped back up towards the heavens.

The entire time, Xie Lian finds himself staring back down at Paradise Manor blindly, his stomach churning with guilt.

Whether or not Hua Cheng truly considered it a home, it was still his —and after all of his hospitality…Xie Lian turned around and destroyed it. Unintentionally, but…

What about the child spirits he saw before? And the ghost fires? Would they be alright?

What has he done?

From the ground below, Hua Cheng watches the group disappear into the stars, his expression dark, unreadable.

Frightened and confused screams echo from the ghosts all around him, no doubt due to the flames.

Crack!

With a simple snap of his fingers, the raging fires are reduced to smoldering embers in an instant—and what remains is doused by the crimson rain pouring down.

“Ah! Hua Chengzhu, thank goodness!”

“Look! He saved us from those Heavenly Officials!”

He snaps open his umbrella, lifting it over his head as the citizens of Ghost City shield themselves from the blood rain, hiding under outcroppings of stalls.

“Who do they think they are?! We mind our own business here, why come and start trouble?!”

“Arrogant bastards!”

Hua Cheng does not speak. Has not found the composure to do so.

At his side, E’Ming trembles with regret.

“Ah! Thank god, Ren Song is here!”

Behind him, wearing his true form, Shuo presses his palm to one of the charred pillars of the Manor.

It groans and creaks, shifting.

With the smoke and flames sparking out, the holes in the walls and ceilings of the structure begin to knit back together, new growths of wood stretching over the foundation, patching the manor until it’s largely back to it’s original condition.

In need of a fresh coat of paint—but that’s Yin Yu’s job.

A large beast rumbles across the front courtyard, coming to a stop by the Ghost King’s side. It huffs out a breath, letting out a soft bark.

It sounds almost apologetic.

“...It’s alright, Dian Dian.” Hua Cheng mutters.

He reaches out, fingers landing in the Giant Panda’s fur, stroking—removing any damage from the fire and the tussle with the martial god beforehand.

“You’re the only one who did your job today.”

The Crimson Rain pours down even harder, painting Ghost City red against the night.

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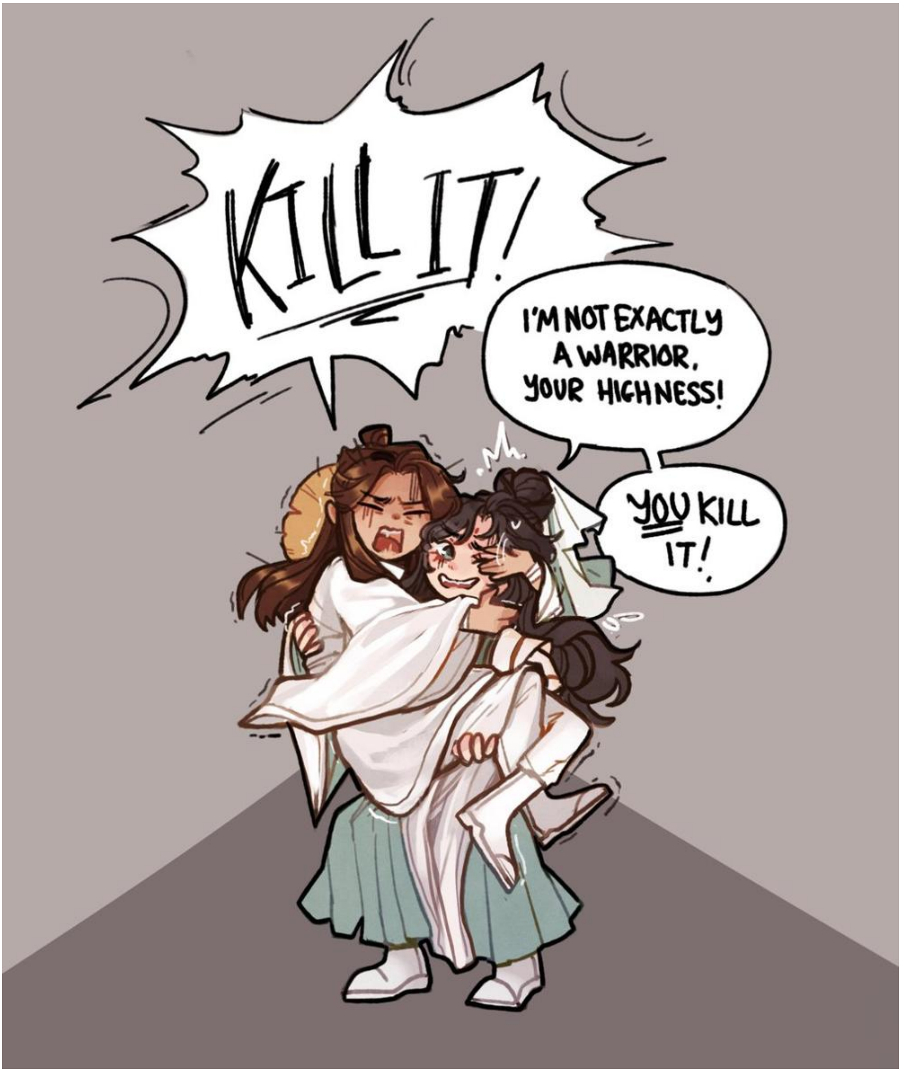
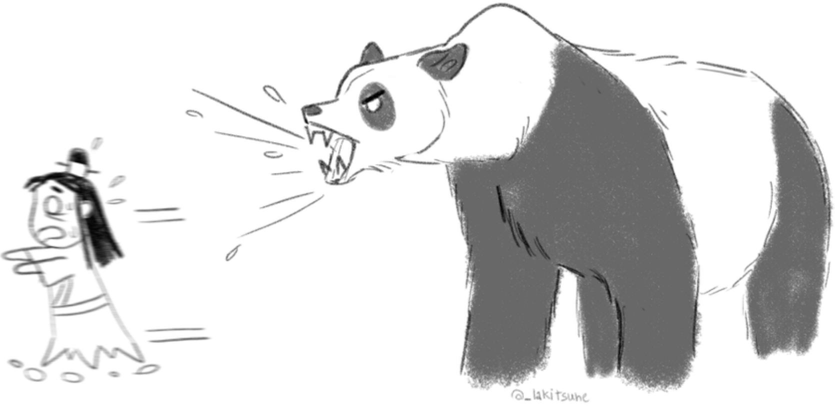

KILL IT!
I'M NOT EXACTLY A WARRIOR, YOUR HIGHNESS!
YOU KILL IT!

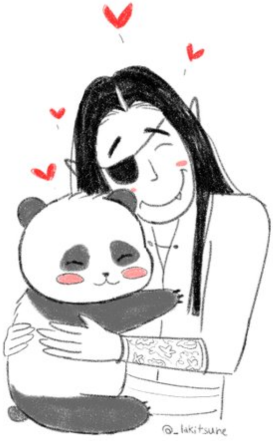
CREDIT: REN

Hua Cheng + Dian Dian

Dian Dian
and
Lang Qianqiu:

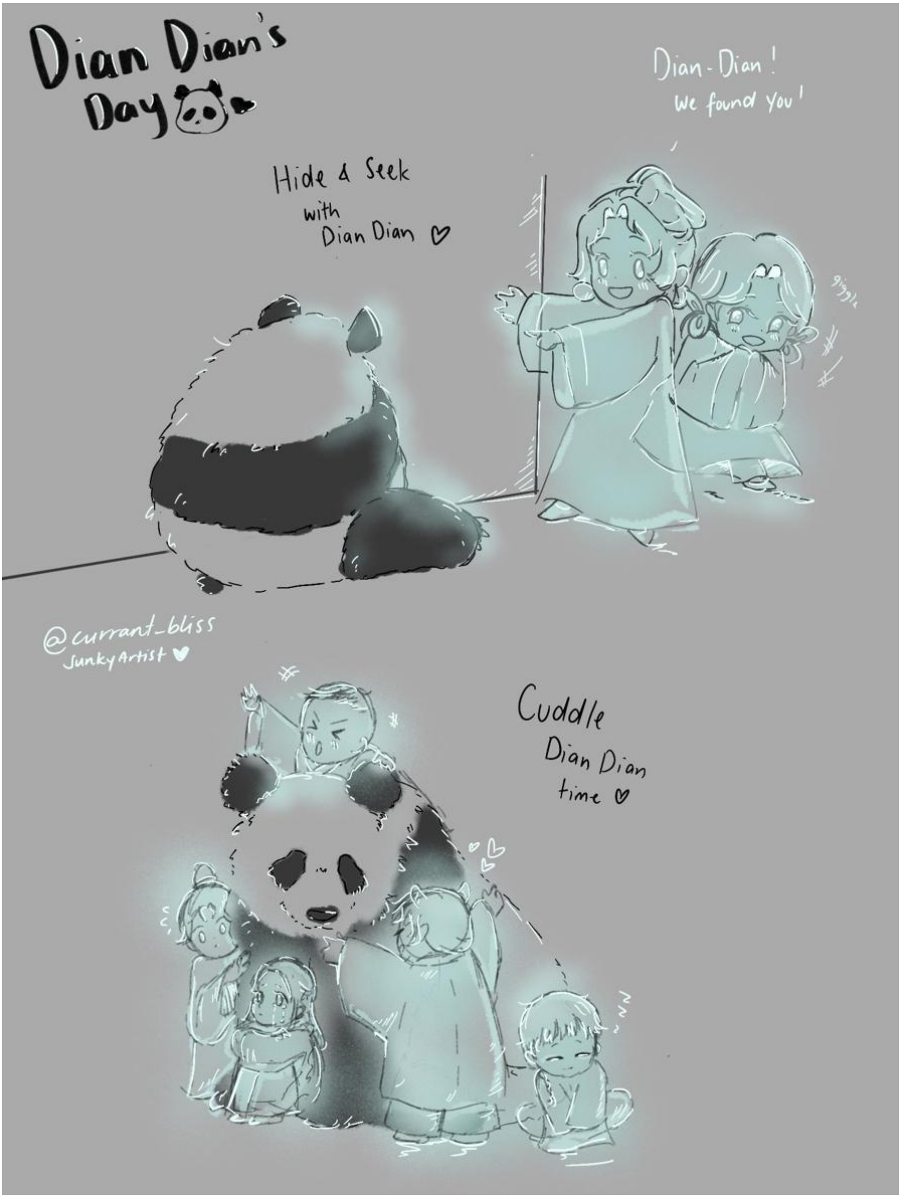


Dian Dian
and
Hua Cheng:



CREDIT: LAKI

Dian Dian playing with the children in Ghost City


Dian Dian's Day
Hide & Seek with Dian Dian ♡
Dian-Dian! We found you!
giggle
@currant_bliss JunkyArtist ♥
Cuddle Dian Dian time ♡

CREDIT: JUNKY

Chapter End Notes

thank you to Ren, Laki, and Junky for allowing me to share your work, and for making such amazing art based on my story! i'm so grateful!

xoxo, Evie

The Return of Guoshi Fangxin

Chapter Summary

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>
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>
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>
> "So," Lang Qianqiu sounds younger now.
>
> To most people, he sounds thoughtless and naive. But Xie Lian could tell from the moment they met again that he had matured.
>
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>
> And lingering, warped affection.
>
> "…This is what you actually look like."

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE
>
> content warning: this chapter contains disturbing imagery relating to violence, gore, and suicide. proceed with caution!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the Heavenly Capitol above, the group of officials (and the ghost child in tow) collapse onto the street as Ruoye unravels from around them.

"Ah, Ming-Xiong, hold onto me," Shi Qingxuan mutters, sitting up, readying himself to call for help.

But the sight of Xie Lian makes him pause. "…Your highness!" He cries, horrified. "What happened?!"

The prince blinks owlishly, patting his right hand around to try and see if something is amiss. “What is it?”

“Y-YOUR ARM!”

Oh.

His left arm dangles uselessly by his side.

“...It’s alright,” Xie Lian shrugs, attempting to wave off any concern. “It doesn’t hurt.”

In truth, the only reason he notices the injury is because he can’t move the limb at all.

“How did that happen?!”

“Well...”

“He blocked Hua Cheng and Lang Qianqiu’s blows.”

Ming Yi explains it, exhausted and irritated. “He absorbed the force of both.”

Lang Qianqiu’s wasn’t an issue—that would have left him bruised, but his sword was far more damaged than Xie Lian would have been.

The severity of the wound was due to E’Ming.

The force was so extreme, every bone in the limb was shattered, nearly ripping Xie Lian’s limb from his body in the process.

And of course, it is a hindrance, and he’s sorry that the Wind Master had to be disturbed by the sight of the gore, but—

The prince is rather impressed. What an incredible blow...

Shi Qingxuan can see as much, from the way Xie Lian doesn’t seem pained, simply intrigued. “...That was truly incredible, your highness—but how—?”

Xie Lian shrugs, hugging his arm against his side as he stands. “I’m a swordsman by trade, remember?”

The Wind Master nods, finally seeming to remember his original purpose as he ushers them into the grand martial hall, calling out—

“We need medical assistance! We have two injured officials here! Hurry!”

“I’m alright,” Xie Lian shakes his head, “have them focus on the Earth Master, please...”

It isn’t long before other officials arrive—the foremost among them Mu Qing, ordering two of his deputies to load Ming Yi onto a stretcher. “What’s going on here?”

“Well...”

Shi Qingxuan starts, pulling Ming Yi’s robes tighter around himself, “We...got into a little trouble in Ghost City, but! We completed our mission, thanks to the Crown Prince of Xianle!”

“...” Mu Qing crosses his arms, raising an eyebrow. “You—?”

“What on EARTH are you wearing?!”

Shi Qingxuan flinches, his smile becoming somewhat nervous, “Gege! Hahaha...I thought...you were busy?”

Shi Wudu bodily shoves a deputy god out of his way, sending him flying as he reaches his brother’s side, carefully examining his bruises, “Did Crimson Rain do this?”

“Uh...” The Wind Master blinks, shaking his head. “Not exactly...how...was Gusu? I thought you were going there for a few —?”

“I obviously came back when I heard you showed up injured!” His brother snaps. “Just what have you gotten into? And don’t make me ask about that dress again!”

Honestly, Shi Qingxuan is the furthest from hurt of them all, but he accepts the fussing, allowing his brother to heal his cuts and bruises with spiritual energy. “I had to sneak into Paradise Manor, so I pretended to be a waitress.” He admits, a little sheepish.

“I was in a pretty exposed state before, so Ming-Xiong gave me his outer robes, at least...”

The Water Master glances over at his brother’s counterpart, distracted. “...I see, that’s good. At least one of you has common sense.” He mutters.

Ming Yi doesn't reply, watching closely.

Mu Qing stands over him, forming a few hand seals, palms glowing with spiritual energy as he begins to work on the wounds covering the earth master's abdomen. "One of you tend to his highness until I can finish up here," he mutters. "The injury to his arm seems somewhat serious."

Xie Lian shrugs, amiable. "I'm alright, there's no need to worry about that. It'll heal on its own soon enough."

He's more familiar with how quickly this body heals than most gods would be—after all, few have had the opportunity to learn.

Shi Qingxuan frowns in his direction for a moment, visibly concerned, but... Then, he notices something else. Something rather odd.

"Lang Qianqiu," he mutters, looking over at the Martial God, "Are you alright? I've never seen you so quiet."

Xie Lian doesn't see the stormy expression on the younger god's face—only hears further silence, and his own heart squeezes with worry.

"Did I hurt you, before?" He questions, reaching for the younger man's face with his good hand. "I'm sorry, I was trying to stop the—"

Xie Lian stops when a hand grasps his wrist rather tightly—stopping him before it ever reaches his face, holding it there.

"...Your highness?" He questions softly, his expression pinched with confusion, until —

"You could never hurt me."

Xie Lian feels his blood run cold.

Lang Qianqiu's voice is quiet, but it trembles with emotion.

"That was what you told me, back then."

Xie Lian's own lips quiver as he hangs his head, everyone else looking on in confusion.

"Xie Lian?" Feng Xin's voice rings out, signaling his arrival in the grand martial hall. "What's going on? Why is he hurt?!"

Xie Lian doesn't answer. Doesn't lift his hand. Doesn't try to pull his wrist from Lang Qianqiu's grasp.

Now more gods are arriving, but as far as they are concerned, it's just the two of them.

"I…" Xie Lian whispers, heart in his throat. "I don't…"

Even still, while the prince's grip is like iron, it isn't harsh.

He isn't trying to hurt him, even as he glares at the crown prince, fingers reaching out to delicately brush under his chin, making him look up—all while the crowd watches in confusion.

"So," Lang Qianqiu sounds younger now.

To most people, he sounds thoughtless and naive. But Xie Lian could tell from the moment they met again that he had matured.

Now; however—his voice is wavering, filled with childhood pains, loss…

And lingering, warped affection.

"…This is what you actually look like."

Lang Qianqiu has spent so many years trying to convince himself that a monster had lain beneath that mask.

That the one who shattered his world was just as hideous as the damage he left behind.

But he isn't.

He's incomparable, a kind of beautiful that strains against one's heart until it aches. He's beautiful, and he's tired—

And he's in pain.

Lang Qianqiu loathes himself for feeling concern.

"…I suppose that explains why you wore the mask," he mutters.

He means the shackle, of course, gleaming against Xie Lian's eye lashes. The mark of his shame. Of what he truly was.

The hideousness that he always told his pupil lurked beneath, but the prince never believed it.

Even now, hard as he tries, he can’t seem to find it ugly.

Silence fills the room, and Xie Lian’s fingers dangle loosely from where Lang Qianqiu grips him, trembling.

“Your highness,” he whispers again, not knowing what he wants to say—what he can say—and he only bites his lip, falling silent again.

“...Is someone going to explain what’s going on?!” Mu Qing grumbles, looking up from where he’s been treating Ming Yi.

Shi Wudu glares at the scene before him, holding his brother against his side—

But he sees the one thing that the others in the Grand Martial hall do not.

Jun Wu has arrived, standing beside his throne, one hand resting on the arm.

And unlike the others in the room, he doesn’t seem confused. Hell, he doesn’t even seem surprised.

But when Shi Wudu sees the gleam in his eye, he knows—pulling Shi Qingxuan even closer behind him.

Whatever is happening, the Emperor knows the nature behind it.

And he’s pleased.

“...Yes,” Lang Qianqiu mutters, “I think it’s time you explained.”

Xie Lian grimaces, and the prince continues to speak through clenched teeth— “Isn’t that right, Guoshi?”

Silence falls over the room like a heavy blanket, confusion twisting many expressions —but slowly, it cracks, whispers echoing throughout.

‘What is he talking about?’

‘The laughingstock of the three realms? Someone’s Guoshi? Don’t make me laugh!’ ‘But they do seem familiar...’

Xie Lian doesn’t lift his head, doesn’t reply to Lang Qianqiu’s question — Can’t seem to bring himself to.

Feng Xin, however, has no such qualms—and unlike the others—

“Lang Qianqiu, don’t be rash.”

Xie Lian whips his head around to stare in his former guard’s direction. He…

Xie Lian’s jaw goes slack, remembering his conversation with Nan Feng on Mount Yu Jun—what seems like a lifetime ago, even if it’s only been a matter of weeks—

Feng Xin knows.

And Lang Qianqiu seems to have come to the same conclusion.

“You knew the entire time, didn’t you?” He mutters—not letting go of Xie Lian, but glaring in Feng Xin’s direction. “You knew he was the Crown Prince of Xianle, and you didn’t say a word when he ascended!”

Xie Lian’s heart sinks, and the pain is bittersweet.

Of course he didn’t, because Feng Xin was doing what he’s always done:

Protecting Xie Lian.

Jun Wu’s voice rings out now, and the entire room falls silent.

“What’s the meaning of this?”

It takes a moment for Lang Qianqiu to respond, his voice trembling.

“…The man who stands before the lot of you is my former Guoshi, Fangxin.”

Startled gasps echo throughout the room at such an accusation.

After all, the crimes of the Gilded Banquet are so cruel, so wicked, that name has been cursed for the last three centuries.

Xie Lian doesn’t respond, doesn’t defend himself—but there is one voice that cries out with indignation.

“Lang Qianqiu!” Shi Qingxuan cries, “How could you say such a thing, after he saved your life from Crimson Rain Sought Flower! Twice, no less!”

The Water Master glances between the two, his expression grim. “Quiet.”

“And if it WAS him, why are you only recognizing him now?! It makes no sense! You —!”

His elder brother’s grip tightens on his shoulders to the point where Shi Qingxuan winces.

Shi Wudu has never once raised a hand to his younger brother—and while he’s always been stern, he’s never been cruel or unfair.

But now, he holds him in a vice grip, snarling in his ear—

“Be quiet, or I’ll make you.”

The younger falls silent, startled.

His brother has never spoken to him like that before. Not once. And he’s certainly never gripped him like this, to the point where it became painful.

Does he have some sort of grudge against Xie Lian? Why would he stop Shi Qingxuan from speaking out on the prince’s behalf?

In the corner, just behind Mu Qing, Ming Yi sits up slightly in his stretcher, one arm thrown across his torso as he surveys the scene.

Watches the way the Water Tyrant snatches his brother out of the confrontation, dark eyes briefly flashing before going still once more.

But he isn’t the only one watching.

Shi Wudu’s eyes flicker to the emperor, only to find the man already staring at them both—and they quickly lower to the floor as he pulls his younger brother behind him.

Still, Lang Qianqiu answers the Wind Master’s question.

“He was the one who trained me in sword fighting. You think I don’t know him the moment he strikes?”

He would be mad if he didn’t—for five years, day in and day out, they trained together. His personality is certainly different now, but his abilities betray him completely.

Now, a new voice speaks up for him—one that Xie Lian couldn’t have expected.

“...But you didn’t recognize him by his face? Or even his voice?” Mu Qing questions softly. “His highness and I trained under the same masters, as did several others. Our styles are similar.”

Xie Lian doesn’t look in Mu Qing’s direction—but his shoulders are stiff with shock.

“He wore a mask the entire time I knew him,” Lang Qianqiu mutters. “He was absolutely insistent on never showing his face—now, it seems he did that in order to hide his cursed shackle.”

It’s an admittedly logical conclusion.

The prince’s hand tightens slightly around Xie Lian’s wrist before he continues;

“His voice was familiar from the beginning,” Lang Qianqiu admits, shaking his head. “But that wasn’t enough to convince me. Not until...”

Until he saw the Prince use a technique only his Guoshi knew.

How to deflect two blades in one strike, absorbing the force of both. Lang Qianqiu begged his master to teach him, but Fangxin always refused.

It was a dangerous technique, he would insist.

Not suited to a prince.

“Still, that’s not enough evidence to presume he’s guilty of such a heinous crime,” Feng Xin steps forward, his hands balled into fists. “The prince and I have known each other since we were children, he would never do such a thing.”

Xie Lian hangs his head even lower. “...But you didn’t.”

Up until he spoke, Xie Lian had no way of knowing that General Ming Guang was even present—and his words seem to draw irritation from Xie Lian’s former companions.

“General Pei, what are you trying to say?”

“You haven’t known him all that time.”

Mu Qing casts him an irritated look, “I met the prince when we were nearly thirteen years old. I’ve known him practically his entire life.”

“And when I met him, we were seven.” Feng Xin adds. “Are you trying to say our word when it comes to his character doesn’t hold any water?”

“But from my understanding, you didn’t have any contact with him during his second banishment,” Pei counters with a frown, crossing his arms. He doesn’t seem cross or hostile in saying this—

And his point is fair.

“A banishment that was over eight centuries long, as I recall.”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing pale slightly at the reminder of that fact, something the two of them were obviously aware of, but—

“And if we were to put the time you knew him in the perspective of human years...it would be like...”

General Ming Guang glances in Shi Qingxuan’s direction.

The Wind Master grimaces, not wanting to say anything that could worsen Xie Lian’s defense, but—

He can’t resist answering the question, not when it’s been put to him.

“It would be as though General Nan Yang knew him for four months and five days... when he was six months old.”

Shi Qingxuan grimaces slightly, adding—

“Two months, one week, and six days in General Xuan Zhen’s case.”

Pei Ming shrugs, having made his point rather clearly. “Few gods are as old as the three of you. Even fewer are as old as me. How much have you changed, since you were that age?”

Not very much, if Xie Lian is being honest. Well—not exactly.

Mu Qing does seem to have changed—certainly matured—since the last time they spoke. Even if he prefers to hide that maturity behind a condescending, combative veneer.

Feng Xin, though? He hasn’t changed at all.

But Xie Lian doesn't completely agree with Pei Ming's point.

After all, in those terms—Xie Lian's time with Hong'er was absolutely minuscule by comparison. As though he was snatched from Xie Lian's life barely more than a couple of chapters into his story.

But it doesn't feel that way. Not for him.

He loves Hong'er just as much today as he did eighty decades ago. There are some things that don't change.

He grips the chain around his neck with his free hand, lips trembling. "...Still," Feng Xin mumbles, grasping at straws.

"You can't condemn the man before he's been given a chance to deny it—"

"I don't deny it."

For the first time since Lang Qianqiu called him his Guoshi, Xie Lian speaks out—and his voice sounds very different.

Cold. Detached.

The Crown Prince of Yong'an grits his teeth.

"...You admit it then, that you're Guoshi Fangxin?"

Xie Lian still doesn't lift his head, feeling countless eyes on him as he replies—

"I am."

Surprised gasps echo, and Jun Wu frowns.

"Then I would like to hear your account of what happened the night of the Gilded Banquet."

"..." Lang Qianqiu's fingertips have been pressed underneath his chin this entire time— and finally, Xie Lian shrinks away from them. "It's exactly as the prince said. No need to dig up old wounds any further."

His former student trembles.

"Guoshi, you—!"

Xie Lian pulls out of his grip entirely, turning away from him.

Even with one arm dangling limply at his side, he seems graceful, approaching the throne, his head held high.

"Your majesty," he murmurs. "I know it's presumptuous of me, but I would like to ask a favor."

Jun Wu raises an eyebrow—after all, it is a bit gutsy, given the situation—but he doesn't seem offended. "What is it?"

Standing at the foot of his throne—Xie Lian drops heavily to his knees, bowing his head low.

"...Xianle prays that his lord will banish him once more."

Every eye in the room is locked on the prince—so no one sees the way Mu Qing suddenly turns away, one hand over his mouth, head bent forward. He isn't touching Feng Xin, but he's practically hiding his face in the man's shoulder from that angle.

"...And that he will give Xianle another cursed shackle for his crimes." Horrified whispers fill the room.

Feng Xin doesn't protest Mu Qing's closeness—only grits his teeth, glaring at the floor, his hands balled into fists.

'...Can a god even survive four cursed shackles?'

'Wouldn't execution be a more human solution, at that point?'

'It's the same thing as a slow death sentence...'

"...That would be an extreme response," Jun Wu replies quietly. "I've already sealed your powers, your luck, and your sight, Xianle. What is left to take?"

"..." Xie Lian takes a deep breath, "You could seal my voice."

Lang Qianqiu can't look at him—and his friends can't bring themselves to do so either.

But one gaze lingers on him, from the back of the room. Sapphire eyes wide, filled with a slow, nauseating realization.

No one else seems to understand it. Unable to grasp what would cause a man to volunteer to be banished—powerless, blind, and mute, without even an ounce of luck to spare him from misfortune.

Even Jun Wu seems unable to fathom it. “Why would Xianle ask me for such a thing?”

The prince’s lips tremble, and he lowers his head.

“The last time we spoke, I didn’t understand why I still had these shackles,” he whispers.

There were many things Xie Lian didn’t understand, the last time they spoke.

He couldn’t figure out why he felt so alone, here in the heavens. Why he felt so miserable, standing before the rebuilt palace of Xianle. He knew that he wasn’t used to them anymore, that he felt out of place, but—

“I have them, because I destroyed countless lives, and caused so much pain,” the prince lifts his chin, blindly staring up at Jun Wu’s face.

Xie Lian doesn’t deserve to be here.

“I don’t know why I ascended a third time,” he whispers, “but I know that I deserve to be punished.”

The emperor is silent, his face tilted down so he can look at Xie Lian more clearly, his hair slipping over his shoulders, shrouding his expression.

As such, no one can see something rather strange—

That Jun Wu is smiling.

“...Even if he was banished again, he could still ascend once more,” Lang Qianqiu shakes his head. “I don’t want him banished, I just want a proper explanation, or a duel—”

“I agree.” Jun Wu replies, rising to his feet. “Xianle, your request is denied.”

Those words feel like a kick in the gut, leaving him quietly shaken, his shoulders trembling. Jun Wu’s voice is close, but somehow, it feels rather far away.

“There are details that you aren’t sharing. I can’t administer justice without all of the facts.”

“...But...I—”

“Ming Guang,” Jun Wu speaks over him, “escort the prince to the Palace of Xianle and have him imprisoned there.” He rises to his feet, leaving Xie Lian kneeling and deflated on the floor. “I’ll interrogate him myself, later. We’ll get to the bottom of the matter.”

He turns, whispering something in Ling Wen’s ear—then exits the Grand Martial Hall.

General Pei doesn’t question the order, but when he steps forward, he doesn’t drag Xie Lian from the room roughly, like a prisoner.

He kneels beside the prince, offering a hand to help him up.

Once Xie Lian is on his feet, the general lowers his voice to speak next to his ear.

“I get the feeling that you would tell me you could walk under any circumstances—but you seem seriously injured.”

Xie Lian shrugs, not seeming to care about that in the least. “My legs are fine, general. I can walk.”

Pei doesn’t protest that point, keeping one hand on his elbow as they exit the Grand Martial Hall—but once they’re out of view of the other gods, he snaps his fingers, causing a stretcher to appear.

“General Pei, it isn’t necessary—”

Before Xie Lian can protest any further, the stretcher sweeps underneath him, taking him off his feet and forcing the prince to lay down.

“You know, in spite of being a shit liar,” Pei comments, walking beside the stretcher, “your poker face isn’t terrible.”

Xie Lian stares up at the sky blindly, his bad arm pressed against his side. “I’m not sure what you mean, general.”

“Even if your pain tolerance is that high—and I believe it might be—you aren’t a fool.” Pei shrugs, his cloak streaming in the breeze. “Which means you must know walking around like that will only make your body take longer to heal. It’s impractical.”

Xie Lian does know that, and the reminder is enough to make him grimace. “I’m not sure what that has to do with having a poker face.”

“…Because you have everyone convinced that you aren’t proud,” the martial god of the north replies softly, watching as the Crown Prince of Xianle stiffens with surprise. “Maybe you’ve even convinced yourself.”

After a day like this—Xie Lian finds the idea of that laughable.

“...I really don’t know what I would have to be proud of, General.” He mutters, shaking his head.

He was proud, once. When he was young. Cripplingly so.

“Humans are complicated creatures, your highness.” Pei’s boots crunch softly against the stones underfoot. “We are constantly trying to justify our own existence. That’s what pride is for.”

Xie Lian rolls onto his uninjured side, biting his lip.

And what if he just doesn’t deserve to exist? What then?

“In most cases, it’s more like bargaining with our own flaws.”

Of which Xie Lian has many.

“People will tell themselves all sorts of things. They commit crimes, but then point at the good they did. Or they’ll be cruel to the world, but treasure their families. Win wars, and claim that the result of peace justified the violence.”

Xie Lian’s mouth tightens at the corners, his good hand balling into a fist beside his head.

“...Then what am I bargaining for?” He croaks, curling in on himself. “What good could pride do me?”

Pei is quiet for a moment, watching as they draw close to the Palace of Xianle.

“...I think you take pride in your ability to endure suffering.” He replies, his voice quiet. “That’s the only way someone could come to terms with a lifetime of being punished.”

What a strange pair they make.

Pei Ming, who has stood at the Emperor’s side longer than any other. Heaven’s strongest soldier.

Xie Lian, who has fallen further than any—Heaven’s greatest disappointment. And yet, in this moment—

It feels like Pei might be oddly close to understanding him. Seeing Xie Lian in a way that he is no longer accustomed to.

Without a veil of judgment, or pity.

Xie Lian doesn't reply to his assertions. Not out of anger, or denial—but simply because he has no idea how to respond to them.

Pei Ming seems to understand as much. After all, he's got quite a bit of experience when it comes to pride.

His own pride is subversive. He's proud of his strength. Of his ability to make people fall for the carefree, exuberant personality that he presents to the world. And no one can damage that pride, because they believe that Pei doesn't care.

But he certainly does.

And he has experience with the overbearing, more obvious types of pride. The kind that puts people at a distance. The kind that becomes self destructive.

Pei Ming has loved many things, many people.

But he's rarely ever been in love—and both times, it was with someone prideful.

Viciously so.

In the end, it was that pride that made him lose the first.

And while he has no way of knowing it—it's the same pride that will make him lose the last.

Xie Lian protests no further as he's delivered to the palace of Xianle, left to rest, and await Jun Wu.

The layout of the place is exactly as it was when he first ascended. Polished floors and marble walls.

Xie Lian drops onto the bed, his head heavy as he lays down, closing his eyes.

"...Hong'er," he mumbles, reaching up to grasp at the ring beneath his robes, holding on tight.

"…I don't think I know what to do anymore," he rolls onto his side, curling his legs up until he's in a tiny little ball on top of the bedsheets.

It's been such a long day—his eyes feel heavy, but his chest is tight with misery. "I can't stop breaking things," he whispers.

His friends. Paradise Manor. Lang Qianqiu.

No matter what he does, things always end up like…

Sleep comes for him—but it's fitful.

'Guoshi! Did you see me?'

His face should be smooth with slumber, but it contorts.

'Gege, did you see?'

He squirms, mumbling soundlessly.

'I won't let anyone hurt you—not ever again.'

'I'm not like you, your highness—I'm not beautiful.'

'…What if I'm ugly on the inside?'

The darkness of sleep feels suffocating. Enclosing.

'I didn't want to do that…'

Xie Lian chokes, desperately gasping for air.

'Why did you make me do that?!'

He can't move. Why—why can't he move?!

'GUOSHI!'

'Your highness, come back…'

He tries to lift his shoulders, but they won't move—and the air feels stale.

'Believe me, your highness.'

I do.

He wants to say that.

I believe you.

'I'm forever your most devoted believer.'

Xie Lian can't ever seem to cry when he's awake, but in his sleep, he weeps.

And the words he wants to say never fall out of his mouth.

"I don't—" He chokes, pressing his palms up, desperate to get away, "I don't believe you!"

But his hands don't push free.

They find hard, unforgiving wood.

'Dianxia…'

The roof of a coffin.

'What do we do, when faced with the wicked?'

"No…" He moans, kicking out with his feet. "No, no no—"

There's a trembling voice, whispering in the dark—

'You aren't wicked.'

Tears pour down his cheeks, and he fights.

He kicks, and he punches, and he writhes—until suddenly, the coffin shatters, leaving him plunging down into the darkness.

When Xie Lian lands, he hits the ground hard, struggling to push himself up. And when he does—

He can see.

The cobblestones under his hands. The houses in the city around him.

The sun sinking low over Lang-er Bay. This was the last thing he ever saw.

'…Your highness…'

The voice echoes in his mind like a whisper, and Xie Lian swallows thickly, whipping his head around.

Standing alone in the street, black saber in hand, is a young soldier. Tall and slender, dressed in black.

A white mask on his face.

Not the mask that Xie Lian learned to fear, no—

This one is only smiling.

"...Wu Ming?" The prince whispers, trembling like a leaf.

'Handsome .'

That was what he thought back then, with such finality. Even if he never saw the face underneath that mask.

Xie Lian knew—he must have been handsome. And it hurts so much more now...

Because he knows what comes next.

"...Don't," Xie Lian whimpers.

He lurches to his feet, running across the pavement.

"DON'T!"

In the memory, he never got close. Was forced to watch as that mask disappeared beneath the shrouds of screams and darkness.

In his dream, they collide, with Xie Lian throwing his arms around the young man— desperate.

"Don't leave me," he gasps, pressing his face into Wu Ming's shoulder, holding on as tightly as he can.

Those arms wrap around him in return, hugging him close—holding him so tight, it makes Xie Lian cry even harder.

Because he doesn't want it to end.

"It...It was so hard, after I lost you..." He chokes, weeping as the cold, black scales of the ghost's armor press against his cheek. "Don't leave me!"

Then, a frantic thought occurs to him.

The kiss.

Xie Lian—

He never paid Wu Ming back for the kiss, that day.

“I…I still have to pay you back,” he leans back, looking up at that mask, his lips trembling. “Wu Ming—you have to stay, I have to pay you back—!”

The mask tilts forward until it’s pressed against his skin, cool to the touch. Almost like the ghost is kissing his forehead.

“Don’t worry, your highness.” Xie Lian’s eyes well with tears as he tries to hold on tighter. “You can pay me back next time.”

A choked sob rips from his throat.

“There isn’t a next time, Wu Ming,” he whispers. “You never came back.”

His reply brings Xie Lian’s world to a halt

“Don’t be afraid, your highness.”

Xie Lian’s tears begin to slow as he stares into that mask, eyes widening.

“I’ll always come back.”

The prince’s lips tremble as he reaches up, pressing his palms against that mask. That voice…is so familiar.

“…It’s you?” He whispers.

His fingers curl underneath the edges of the white, clay surface of Wu Ming’s mask, and for just a moment—

He feels one of his fingertips brush over something like leather.

An eyepatch.

Xie Lian’s hard beats in his throat.

“San—?”

CRASH!

Then, everything shatters.

There’s black smoke all around them—and then, there’s no them.

No Wu Ming.

Just Xie Lian—and he’s falling.

Far and fast, clawing and flailing for something to hold onto—but eventually, something does.

Creak…

His feet dangle, twitching underneath him.

Creak…

There’s something around his neck in a vice grip, blocking his airway—but he doesn’t suffocate.

He won’t, he already knows that.

Xie Lian’s hands reach up, clawing uselessly at his throat. “…Ruoye,” he croaks, listening to that awful, wooden sound. *Creak…*

Creak…

“H…hel—”

“Go.”

Xie Lian didn’t say that.

But the bandage around his neck coils tighter, hoisting him higher, and higher—

“NO!”

His voice doesn’t sound like his own.

“Not like this—” he cries, building into a scream, “NOT LIKE THIS!”

When he opens his eyes, looking down—

Xie Lian sees himself.

Wearing long sleeved mourning robes, cursed shackles burning up at him in the dark.

“No one will even mourn you,” he sneers hatefully, blood dripping from the sword in his hand.

He knows.

Xie Lian knows that.

He turns his head, finding Wu Ming sitting there, in the corner—holding a lantern with a ghost fire against his chest, watching the scene.

A broken man, avenging a murderer. But…

Creak…

His lungs burn.

Xie Lian is the murderer now, dangling over his own crime scene.

And when he stares down at his younger self now, his heart twists with shame. He doesn’t—

Xie Lian’s fingers claw at Ruoye a little more desperately, trying to break free. He doesn’t want to be that person anymore.

The prince squeezes his eyes shut.

He doesn’t—

CRACK!

There’s a snap, followed by a thud, then—

CRACK!

Then, another.

Xie Lian opens his eyes, and when he does—

His parents are there, dangling in front of him. Eyes wide and unseeing.

Xie Lian never actually saw them, before.

H-how is he…?

“...No,” he moans, writhing. “NO!”

CRACK!

This time, Ruoye snaps from around his neck—and he’s falling again.

Plummeting through the dark.

But this time, when he’s caught—it isn’t by his throat, but by his wrists—arms yanked up and over his head.

Clink...

Clink...

Not the sound of wraith butterflies.

Clink...

Not silver bells, either.

Clink...

Xie Lian is all too familiar with the sound of chains.

And when he opens his eyes this time, he finds himself on an altar.

There’s no noose around his neck now, but the god still can’t breathe.

All around him, it’s a temple.

It’s a cold unlike anything else he’s ever known. Rushing through his lungs, piercing him to the bone.

“...Let me go,” he whispers, his wrists straining against his bonds. “WHY WON’T YOU LET ME GO?!”

Finally, that voice answers.

The one he never wanted to hear again.

“I’ve already told you so many times, my prince.” His voice echoes against the walls without a form, but Xie Lian can hear it.

Heavy footsteps, and a metallic scrape across the floor.

That of a sword being dragged against the marble.

“Have you forgotten so easily?”

Now, that voice whispers next to his ear, and Xie Lian tries to cringe away, only for a hand to lock around his hip, holding him in place.

“I will never leave you,” he croons, breath fanning over the prince’s neck as he struggles, terrified whimpers ripping from his throat.

“I’m the only one who will never leave you.”

Xie Lian feels lips press against his hair, nausea building in his throat—along with this overwhelming sense of helplessness and despair.

Because it’s true.

He hollowed something out inside of Xie Lian, long ago.

Stole something.

As hard as he tries, Xie Lian has never been able to take that back.

And in that empty space inside of him, something dark lurks there. Something he would slice himself to pieces to remove, if it wouldn’t always come back.

Like a parasite refusing to leave its host.

He doesn’t flinch when the sword slides into him. Doesn’t scream, when he feels it go all the way through.

It hurts, but it always does.

Blood drips from his chin, and fingers reach out to brush it away, delicately patting over his lip.

“You know…”

Xie Lian goes still.

Slowly, he lifts his chin, and standing between his legs—

He’s there.

Holding Xie Lian by the chin, raven and silver streaked hair blowing gently in the breeze from the ruined temple.

A mask stares back at him. Half smiling, half crying.

"...You have always had the most beautiful eyes."

Finally, Xie Lian screams.

Blood curdling, ripping from him over and over again, rattling against the walls.

And he can't stop.

Fighting to get away, blood pouring down, listening—

Listening to that horrible laugh.

"H-Help—!" He chokes, "HELP ME! S-SOMEONE, HELP ME—!"

There's another stab, this time in his left arm, sinking in, twisting until he can't take it, screaming over and over.

"HELP, GOD—PLEASE, JUST—LET ME DIE! SOMEONE—IT HURTS!" He sobs, "IT HURTS, IT—!"

He sits up.

"IT HURTS!"

Now—it's dark.

No temple, no screaming, no laughing—

And no masks.

Xie Lian struggles to catch his breath, trembling—and he hears a shocked voice from beside him say—

"I would have helped before, but you told me to look after Ming Yi first."

The god blinks, breathing hard.

"...Mu Qing?" He whispers, his voice trembling and unsure. "Is that you?"

The Martial God nods, watching the prince with a frown. He's gone completely pale, trembling like a leaf. "...Yeah," he mutters. "Are you alright? Has the pain gotten worse?"

After all, he just sat up shrieking, 'IT HURTS' at the top of his lungs, so Mu Qing would assume that it has.

“…No,” Xie Lian mutters, struggling to regain control over his breathing. “It’s…I…” He falls silent, taking long, slow breaths, eyes squeezed shut.

Mu Qing stares at him, his expression pinched with concern as he watches all of the anxiety and terror fade from the prince’s face, returning to a calm mask.

There’s also faint rumbling in the distance, but he’s too distracted to focus on that now—

“I’m sorry about that.” Xie Lian’s voice is completely even—back to it’s usual, tranquil tone. “I was having a bit of a nightmare. I hope I didn’t scare you.”

Mu Qing stares, trying not to look at him like he has a second head, though he supposes it doesn’t really matter if he does or not.

“No,” he mutters. “You didn’t. Do you…have dreams like that often?”

“…Yes,” Xie Lian agrees quietly. “But I’ve already forgotten it—so it’s no harm, no foul.”

Mu Qing finds himself struggling to agree, but still—he goes back to attending the prince’s arm.

“…Did Crimson Rain really do this to you?” He questions, his hands glowing with spiritual energy as he works on mending bone and sinew.

“It wasn’t his fault, he wouldn’t have harmed me intentionally,” Xie Lian mutters, quick to defend him—and then, he notices they aren’t alone.

Feng Xin is leaning against the wall, his arms crossed—his eyes fixed on the prince.

There’s a lot on his mind, leaving him strained—the same could be said for both of Xie Lian’s friends.

A cloud hangs over them both.

At first, Xie Lian assumes it’s because of what Pei said.

After all, it clearly seemed to bother the two of them, but—

“Lang Qianqiu told me everything that happened, when you sent him to me.” Feng Xin mutters, his voice tense.

Xie Lian’s chest sinks.

“...I’m sorry for placing such a burden on you, Feng Xin.” He hangs his head. “When I told him that, I had no idea what was going to happen.”

“...” Mu Qing snorts, sending the prince an annoyed look.

But there’s fondness underneath it.

“Fool,” he sighs, shaking his head. “You realize when you say it like that, it’s obvious that it wasn’t your doing?”

Xie Lian doesn’t respond to that, biting his lip. He never thought he could attempt to lie about what happened, not to his old friends.

Regardless of Pei’s point from before—they never would have believed it.

But that point was never up for debate, and Feng Xin doesn’t care.

“How long were you in there?”

Mu Qing tenses, his hand sign faltering, making his spiritual energy flicker—and Xie Lian frowns.

“I don’t—?”

“Lang Qianqiu told me everything, when he came to me. About what happened, and what he did.” Feng Xin repeats firmly.

Xie Lian’s stomach sinks.

“How long were you in there?”

Now, there’s no avoiding it. He knows exactly what Feng Xin is asking about. The Coffin.

He hangs his head, and his voice goes quiet. “...Not too long,” he mutters. “I don’t like talking about it.”

Feng Xin crosses his arms, waiting—and when Xie Lian shrinks under the weight of his gaze, Mu Qing frowns.

"He just said that he doesn't want to talk about it—"

"And I'm sure you'd be happy if you didn't," Feng Xin hisses, "since you refused to help me look for him."

It was the worst fight they ever had. They didn't speak for nearly a hundred years, afterwards.

"...Because it sounded fucking CRAZY!" Mu Qing snaps, lowering his hands from Xie Lian's arm. "And you never found him, so why does it matter that I didn't agree?!"

He sounds defensive, his lips pulling back into a sneer—but Xie Lian can hear what Feng Xin can't.

Just how fast Mu Qing's heart is beating.

"Well, let's check and see how crazy it is now, alright?" Feng Xin snarls. "Your highness, did Lang Qianqiu lock you in a coffin?"

"Uh..." Xie Lian tries to twiddle his thumbs, but his right arm is still limp—so he's left scratching the side of his head, somewhat awkward. "Well...I don't know if he locked it, per-say...More like...gravity did most of the work...keeping the lid down..."

"Ah."

Feng Xin sounds so deeply frustrated, like this has been building up inside of him for so long with Mu Qing belittling his concerns, Xie Lian can't find it in himself to blame him for this outburst—

...But he really wishes it had come up at a better time.

"So, he buried him in the coffin." He mutters flatly, glaring at Mu Qing. "I'm two for two."

"..." Mu Qing crosses his arms, and when he speaks up, he does so in the driest tone Xie Lian has ever heard.

"Would you be less pissed at me if it had been a Mausoleum situation?"

Xie Lian actually lets out a small snort, clapping his hands over his mouth, and Feng Xin glances over at him, appalled.

"How could you LAUGH about that?!"

"Maybe he's coping!" Mu Qing snaps. "Either way, he doesn't want to talk about it, so MOVE ON!"

"He probably doesn't want to talk about it because it makes YOU look like a piece of shit!" Feng Xin pushes off of the wall.

"Once AGAIN!" Mu Qing throws his hands up. "You didn't find him either! So, why does it MATTER if I helped or not?!"

"Because you're SMARTER than me!" Feng Xin's hands are trembling at his sides, balled up into fists. "If you had helped me look—maybe we would have—!"

"Well, it couldn't have been THAT long!" Mu Qing stands up, his chair screeching across the floor. "He would have prayed for help if it was!"

The look on Feng Xin's face turns absolutely venomous. "You're so fucking determined that nothing is ever your fault, you'll just try to deny the situation?!"

Mu Qing barks out a laugh, shaking his head.

"And YOU are so hellbent proving that I'm a piece of shit, you'll actually ADMIT that you're a DUMBASS!"

"I—both of you—"

"HOW LONG WAS IT?!" Feng Xin sounds like he might be on the verge of having a stroke, and Xie Lian is startled enough to reply.

"...A...little while..."

He mumbles in a small voice, and it becomes clear to both of the men listening—

'A little while' means a length of time. It doesn't sound brief.

"W-Well..." Mu Qing swallows hard, and Xie Lian hears his heart pounding even faster. "He still would have prayed if he needed help!"

"Maybe he didn't think he COULD because of the circumstances!"

"Oh, of COURSE he could have prayed to you," Mu Qing sneers, "his most loyal, self righteous, JUDGMENTAL—" He pauses, eyes widening with fake shock as he taps his chin. "Oh, you know what? I'm seeing your point."

"YOU—!"

"Oh, but don't worry!" The martial god shakes his head, "I NEVER was under any impression that he would EVER ask for my help, or pray to me. AND YOU'RE WONDERING WHY I DIDN'T HELP YOU LOOK?!"

Xie Lian and Feng Xin stop, staring.

Mu Qing's voice is shaking.

"I DIDN'T THINK HE WOULD WANT ME TO FIND HIM!"

"..." Feng Xin presses his hands to his temples, wracked with regret.

The argument was so long ago, and Feng Xin was so young back then. So hurt, and lost, and desperate for someone to blame—

But Mu Qing doesn't forget anything.

And it doesn't matter, if Feng Xin wishes he could take it back.

Xie Lian swallows hard, trying to think of something, anything to make him feel better, and unwittingly—

"...I did pray to you, Mu Qing."

—it's the worst thing he could have possibly said.

Feng Xin and Mu Qing are frozen in place, their eyes blown eye—one accusatory, infuriated—

(Briefly assuming that Mu Qing had heard Xie Lian's prayers all that time and said nothing.)

—and the other confused, horrified.

"...What?" Mu Qing croaks, and he—

He sounds undone.

"I—I didn't—"

"It was before all of that," Xie Lian explains quickly—and all he wants is to make Mu Qing see that he wasn't despised. "Early in my first banishment, I went to one of your temples, and I started to pray, but..."

The prince bites his lip.

"...I didn't think you would want to hear from me," he whispers, wrapping one arm around himself.

He isn't used to being around other people like this, after waking up from a nightmare.

The only one who ever used to deal with that was Hong'er—and he—

He would just hold him.

Even when he was still smaller than Xie Lian, he would hold the prince tightly in his arms, whispering—

'It was just a dream, dianxia. You're alright now.'

And it made him feel safe.

Now, surrounded by tension, chaos, and yelling—

He just feels raw, shaken, and exposed.

There's a long beat of silence, and now—Feng Xin sounds like he's calmed down, more focused on Xie Lian's visible distress.

"...Your highness, of course we—"

SMACK!

The sound is so resounding, even Xie Lian winces, and Feng Xin—

He's been kicked before. Punched. Bitten. Scratched. That's part of being in combat, and that's where he's been all his life.

But he's never been backhanded so hard, that he feels his eyes rattling around inside their sockets. So hard, that it makes him stumble backwards.

"...What..." He winces, spitting out blood as he rubs his jaw, feeling somewhat concussed. "...What the fuck?!"

"You..." Mu Qing snarls, and Xie Lian—

He's heard his friend angry before, but Mu Qing typically has a cold, antagonistic anger.

Not like this.

“You fucking ASSHOLE!”

Mu Qing sounds utterly incensed, leaping on the man, punching him so hard, Feng Xin’s head leaves a dent in the wall.

“WHAT THE—?!”

“YOU HAD ME CONVINCED…FOR CENTURIES…THAT HE WOULD NEVER WANT TO TALK TO ME!”

“Feng Xin, Mu Qing, don’t—”

“I’M SORRY!” Feng Xin glares, struggling to wrestle him off as they roll around on the floor. “IT WAS A SHITTY THING TO SAY, AND I’M SORRY! WHEN HAVE YOU EVER SAID THAT?!”

“WHY SHOULD I APOLOGIZE TO SOMEONE WHO DOESN’T RESPECT ME?!” Mu Qing thrashes, fighting to get a punch in.

“WHEN DID I EVER SAY I DIDN’T RESPECT YOU?!”

Xie Lian curls up against the wall, pressing his knees to his chest. He can cover his ear with one hand—the other he presses against the inside of his knee. “Please, just—”

“YOU DON’T!” Mu Qing snarls, abandoning every bit of training he’s ever received. Normally, they’re equal in combat skills—but right now, he’s too upset to think, just blindly clawing at him. “YOU WOULDN’T TREAT ME LIKE THAT IF YOU RESPECTED ME!”

“WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?!”

Xie Lian would honestly like to know the same thing, because it feels like he’s missing a lot. Still, it’s so loud, and his teeth are chattering—

“IN CASE YOU DIDN’T NOTICE, YOU’RE NO SAINT YOURSELF—!”

“BUT YOU’RE PATIENT WITH EVERYONE ELSE!” Mu Qing cries. “AND YOU LISTEN! AND YOU WORRY ABOUT THEM—AND YOU GIVE THEM THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT!”

Well, not everyone else, but—

The prince is starting to understand.

Xie Lian.

Feng Xin is all of those things—when it comes to him.

They must be fighting pretty hard—because it feels like the ground is rattling from the force of it.

But all Xie Lian can focus on is the fact that...

“YOU GIVE EVERYONE ELSE YOUR BEST!”

...Mu Qing sounds genuinely hurt.

“But...But never ME!”

His following punch doesn’t have as much energy as it did before—but Feng Xin doesn’t even try to stop it, letting it land on his cheek.

The two stare at one another, breathing hard, a little lost, and—

Clink!

Xie Lian jumps, turning his head, and—

There’s a butterfly.

Sitting on his shoulder, it’s body tilted back to look up at him, wings flapping gently. And there’s another, hovering in the air just a few inches from his face.

Eyes wide, he instinctively reaches out, and, well—

He can’t see that the butterfly is hovering inside a portal.

But the moment the butterfly lands on his finger, he hears both of his friends launch themselves to their feet, struggling to get to him.

“YOUR HIGHNESS—DON’T TOUCH THAT—!”

Xie Lian frowns, wanting to tell them that there’s nothing to worry about, but—

Something has already grasped his wrist, pulling him in—and with that, he sees countless wraith butterflies flooding past him, firing into the Palace of Xianle, knocking his friends back before they can get to him.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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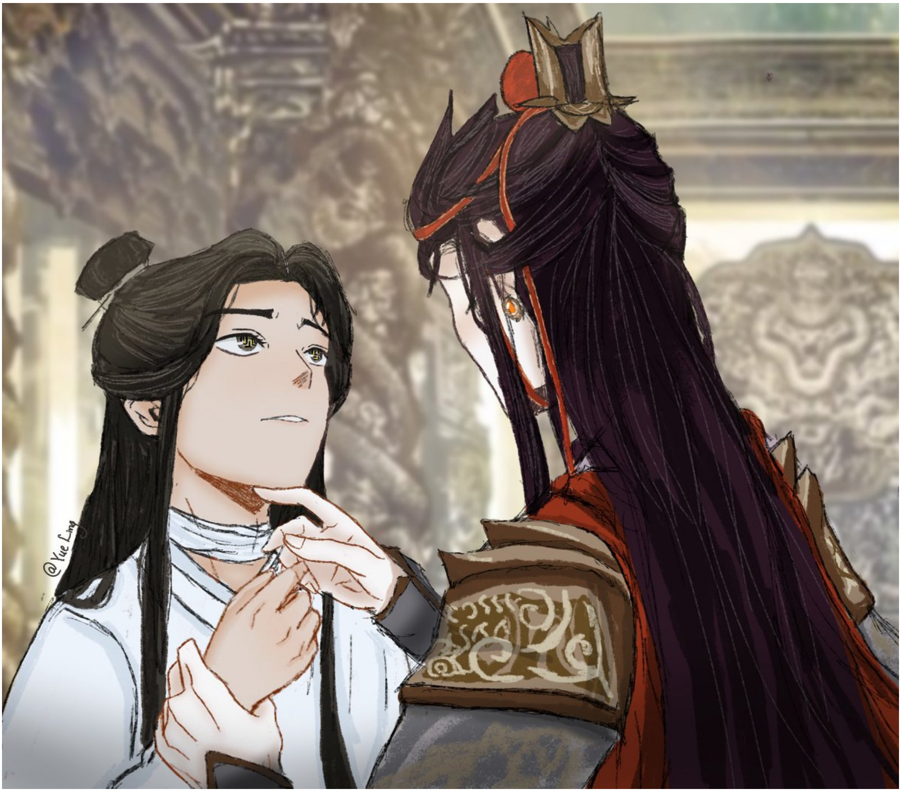

CREDIT: **YUE LING**

Chapter End Notes

> thank you to Yue Ling for your beautiful work, and allowing me to share it!

xoxo, Evie

Broken Things

Chapter Summary

> “I—really, I’m okay, I promise—”
>
> “Dianxia?” The ghost king interrupts him.
>
> “…Yes?”
>
> “Come here, please.”

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“…CRIMSON RAIN!” Feng Xin cries. “YOU HAVE A LOT OF NERVE, BREAKING INTO THE HEAVENS LIKE THIS!”

“…Funny,” Hua Cheng’s voice rings out from beside him, and—

Xie Lian would be lying if he said his heart didn’t swell.

“That was exactly what I was telling a few Heavenly Officials last night—in my territory.”

He has a fair point there, but Mu Qing still struggles, batting away butterflies as he fumbles for his saber. “THE EMPEROR IS IN THE CITY!” He shouts over the shrieking of the butterflies. “YOU WON’T GET AWAY WITH THIS!”

It’s no small threat, but… Hua Cheng laughs.

“You people really are unbelievable…” He mutters, shaking his head. “If his majesty has a problem—he knows where to find me.”

When Hua Cheng says, ‘your highness’ or ‘dianxia’ in reference to Xie Lian—it’s always with the highest level of respect.

(And, if Xie Lian was honest enough with himself to admit it—something else.)

But when he says ‘your majesty?’

The title drops from his lips like an insult.

And just like that, the portal snaps shut—leaving the Heavens, and everything with it behind.

It takes Xie Lian a moment to realize that they're in a tunnel—much like the ones that he and Shi Qingxuan were stumbling through the night before, but...

Admittedly, probably more stable—since Hua Cheng is the intended user of the array. It...even reaches inside the Heavens?

"Dianxia," the sound of Hua Cheng's voice startles him out of his thoughts. And he sounds...bothered. "Are you alright?"

Is that...really what he's asking right now? Xie Lian's stomach twists with remorse. After everything he...

"..." The prince shakes his head.

Hua Cheng's expression darkens, but before he can say more— "I'm so, so sorry San Lang..." Xie Lian croaks, hanging his head.

The Ghost King takes a step back, staring down at him with disbelief. "...What should you be sorry for?"

"Your—Paradise Manor, I...I never meant to..."

"...Of course you didn't," Hua Cheng agrees quietly. "I know that."

Xie Lian lets out a shuddering breath that he never realized he was holding, and...

He can't remember the last time someone just...believed that he had good intentions.

"I'm the one who should be apologizing."

The god pauses, startled by just how...bitter Hua Cheng sounds.

How self loathing.

"...What?" He blinks, "I, uh...I don't think that's how these situations work."

What's he supposed to say?

'Dianxia, I am SO sorry that you lied to me, spied on me, and burned down my house!'

'I'll do better next time! I'll let you mount my panda's head on the wall too!'

Speaking of—

"Is Dian Dian okay?" He blurts out, his lips trembling with worry, and —

Hua Cheng lets out a tired chuckle shaking his head—and the way he looks at Xie Lian...

They might be in the middle of a dark tunnel, but judging by the look on Hua Cheng's face alone—it's like he has the entire world set within his gaze.

"Dian Dian is fine," he mutters. "Paradise Manor is fine. No harm done."

"...Really?" Xie Lian's voice is small, unsteady.

"Really," Hua Cheng assures him, only faltering when his eye reaches Xie Lian's shoulder, his expression falling back into open self loathing. "...I wish I could say the same for you."

"Oh—this?" Xie Lian shrugs, waving it off. "I'm the one who jumped in the middle."

And chose to use a technique that would hurt himself, rather than the two involved. Really, it's entirely his own fault.

"Besides, this really isn't that bad," he smiles, using his good arm to lift up the bad one, trying to wave it off like normal. "I get worse all the time!"

Somehow, that doesn't seem to make Hua Cheng feel better.

"I—really, I'm okay, I promise—"

"Dianxia?" The ghost king interrupts him.

"...Yes?"

"Come here, please."

“...” Xie Lian isn’t sure why he wants him to do that, but he steps closer, all the same.

Hua Cheng reaches out, taking his good hand—and, much to Xie Lian’s confusion, he feels himself being guided to sit down on the tunnel floor, with the Ghost King kneeling before him.

“Do you trust me?”

“I do.” Xie Lian replies immediately, blinking up at him. “But why...?”

Hua Cheng takes his other hand, the injured one, grasping it so carefully—even if Xie Lian were sensitive to pain—he doubts it would hurt anyway.

“We don’t have much time,” he explains softly. “It’s the fastest method.”

Method for what—?

Then, Xie Lian feels lips against his knuckles—and his face rapidly begins to heat up.

...Oh.

There’s a tingling that shoots into his skin—different from the kind he’s felt the other times that Hua Cheng has touched him—this time it feels...warm.

Powerful.

And with it, he can feel the bones in his hand—which Mu Qing didn’t get very far into healing before Feng Xin’s interruption—begin knitting back together, cracking into place.

At first, he’s still confused.

It was considerate of Hua Cheng to ask if Xie Lian was comfortable—but he’s kissed the prince’s hand before, and he didn’t ask back then. So, why now—?

Then, he feels the sleeve of his robe being pushed up, ever so gently, and—

Hua Cheng’s mouth is on the inside of his wrist.

And with that, Xie Lian feels the bones and sinew there moving back into place.

T-that would be why, then.

“You…” His voice cracks slightly, and he stops, embarrassed, clearing his throat before trying again, “You really don’t have to—”

“Is this making dianxia uncomfortable?”

“Um…” Xie Lian swallows hard, shaking his head. “No, I trust you, it’s just…you don’t have to go through the…”

Hua Cheng’s lips brush his forearm, and he shudders, biting his lip so hard, it throbs under his teeth.

“S-San Lang, I—”

‘YOUR HIGHNESS!’

Xie Lian nearly jumps out of his skin when Feng Xin’s voice roars through the general communication array.

‘ *WHERE ARE YOU?!’*

‘What’s going on?’

‘The prince has escaped!’

‘Escaped?! HE HASN’T ESCAPED, YOU IDIOTS! CRIMSON RAIN SOUGHT FLOWER KIDNAPPED HIM!’

Well. Xie Lian thinks that’s a rather ungenerous way of describing it. Yanked into a magical portal or not, if Hua Cheng had asked him, he would have gone willingly.

“Is everything alright, your highness?”

“…Yes,” Xie Lian mumbles, a little strained. “There’s just a bit of a commotion in the communication arr—oh—”

He gasps softly when he’s pulled forward, until he’s—well—

Sitting astride the ghost king’s lap on the tunnel floor, his heart pounding in his throat.

“W-What are you—?”

Cool fingertips press against his temple. Then, speaking through Xie Lian—

'Long time, no see,' Hua Cheng's voice comes through the general array in a low, arrogant drawl, not louder than the overwhelming din of voices, but still— ' *How is everyone doing?'*

Everyone stops to listen in outraged silence.

The ghost king strokes the inside of Xie Lian's wrist with a slight smile, his fingers brushing against the God's ear as he continues;

'I don't know if you guys missed me—but I haven't thought about any of you at all. '

It's not a very subtle threat.

Talking to the Heavenly Court like they're mere ants to him. And in all honesty—most of them are.

Come and catch me, if you dare.

That's the message.

And if they do, Hua Cheng will devour them.

In retrospect, Xie Lian probably should feel concerned about that.

In theory.

But he meant what he said before—he trusts Hua Cheng. Whatever his reasons for snatching Xie Lian up from the heavens were...he's certain that the Ghost King means him no harm.

While all of the other officials have gone quiet in the array, Feng Xin and Mu Qing are still trying.

'There has to be a way to follow them, right? ' Feng Xin huffs. *'It's just a traveling array, right? Can't Ming Yi find us a way in?!'*

'He's sleeping off his injuries,' Mu Qing replies. The two are stiff, but with the prince in danger, they're begrudgingly working together. *'He'd be no good to us right now anyway.'*

Now, Shi Qingxuan's voice cuts in eagerly.

' *Oh, oh, I know! Me! Me!'*

‘ *...What is it, Lord Wind Master?’* Mu Qing questions flatly.

‘You have to roll the dice and get the right combination! ...Here! You two try it!’

...Oh boy.

Xie Lian has half a mind to warn them, but...

Clack!

Clack!

Before he gets the chance, they’re already in action.

‘What’d you get?’ Mu Qing mutters, and Feng Xin replies—

‘Two fours.’

Xie Lian’s stomach sinks as he looks to HUa Cheng.

“Isn’t that the spider room?”

The Ghost King raises an eyebrow. “...The what?”

“Two fours,” Xie Lian explains quickly, trying to keep up with what’s happening in the array at the same time. “Doesn’t that take you to the hallway with the spiders?”

“Oh,” Hua Cheng shakes his head. “It’ll just show whatever one person in the group of travelers fears the most.”

Well.

Xie Lian grimaces.

That certainly explains a lot.

And Just as he thinks that, Mu Qing’s voice breaks the silence, and he sounds...

Somewhere between amusement and utter irritation.

‘You have GOT to be kidding!’

‘Xuan Zhen?!’ Shi Qingxuan calls out into the array, clearly concerned, ‘ *Are the two of you alright?!’*

'We're IN A WOMAN'S BATH HOUSE!'

Feng Xin's voice echoes throughout, panicked, *'I-I APOLOGIZE MA'AM —COULD YOU PLEASE—PUT THAT AWAY—!'*

'GIVE ME THE DICE!' Mu Qing screams, and there's a brief bout of wrestling, until—

Clack, Clack!

Xie Lian waits, hoping they lucked out and just ended up back in Paradise Manor, or something like that, but—

'OH, GREAT, NOW THERE'S CROCODILES!'

'AT LEAST IT ISN'T INDECENT!'

Hua Cheng's fingertips brush over his temple again, and the communication array goes quiet. The prince pauses, looking up—and he explains—

"I'll bring it back later. It was too loud." The Ghost King murmurs.

Xie Lian lets out a shaky sigh, nodding with relief.

It's a short lived easing of tension, because as soon as the prince relaxes, there's lips at the bend of his elbow, pressing against sensitive skin, making his breath hitch.

"San Lang...I'm...I'm okay," he mumbles, finding the close contact even more embarrassing when they're...

Well—sitting like this, with Xie Lian straddling the Ghost King's lap.

"You're not," the calamity replies, his voice burning with regret. "But if dianxia tells me to stop, I will."

"..."

Xie Lian has the feeling that if he stops Hua Cheng before he's completely healed, the ghost king will be miserable. So...

"...I guess you might as well finish, since you started..." He mumbles, breathing in through his nose, out through his mouth, trying to steady his heartbeat.

Hua Cheng smiles against his elbow, and Xie Lian struggles to distract himself from the intimacy of it all. After all, that isn't Hua Cheng's intention, he's just trying to be helpful.

"So, um..." He bites his lip, shivering. "Is...rolling snake eyes the way to get to you?"

"Hmm?" Hua Cheng questions, his mouth still pressed against the bones of the prince's elbow, and Xie Lian explains—

"Before, when I fell into the armory...I'm pretty sure I rolled snake eyes," he explains. "Is that what I would have to roll again to make you appear?"

"No."

Hua Cheng's eye flashes as he looks up at him through his lashes, and Xie Lian can see his spiritual power twinkling in the dark.

"...I see. I thought—"

"It doesn't matter what you roll," he explains, lifting his mouth from Xie Lian's arm. "If you call for me, I will come."

Oh.

Xie Lian clears his throat, his heart stuttering. "I...but back in the Heavenly Capitol, I didn't...call..."

As a matter of fact, he didn't even roll the dice.

Hua Cheng lifts his head, sitting back up until they're eye level.

For once, it's a relief to him that Xie Lian can't see the look on his face. The pain in his eyes.

Because even if he asked, Hua Cheng wouldn't be able to explain it to him.

"...Yes, you did." He whispers.

Xie Lian stares, blinking with confusion, his shackle gleaming.

"But—?"

Before he can ask what Hua Cheng means, he feels his robes being shifted to the side —ever so carefully—until his left bicep and shoulder are exposed to the open air, making him shiver.

"Are you—? Oh!"

The ghost's mouth presses against his upper arm in a featherlight kiss.

Now, Xie Lian feels his face growing completely red, burning so hot that he has to fight the urge to fan himself.

He—

The bones and muscle in his upper arm begin to reassemble, pulling back together, and the prince's nostrils flare.

Hua Cheng is helping.

This. Is. Medical.

He tries to remind himself of that, over and over again as Hua Cheng's mouth creeps higher over his muscle, and when it reaches the top of his arm—

A small noise slips out of Xie Lian's mouth, his good hand coming up to clutch at Hua Cheng's shoulder.

"Dianxia?"

Xie Lian swallows hard, his eyelashes fluttering.

"Are you alright?" The ghost king whispers against his skin, drawing another shiver, and if Xie Lian didn't know any better—

He would say that Hua Cheng was smiling.

"...I'm fine," he croaks, biting his lip. "Just...um..."

Xie Lian knows that Hua Cheng must be aware that he's...unsettled. After all, his heart is pounding, and he can barely breathe—

"I—uh, I was numb before," Xie Lian fumbles through an explanation, praying that he doesn't sound insane. "But, uh...now I'm, um..."

"...It hurts?" Hua Cheng inquires, his voice impossibly gentle, and Xie Lian shivers, his fingers clutching the ghost king's shoulder a little tighter.

"Uh..." he swallows hard, bobbing his head quickly. "A...A little..."

(It's a really bad attempt at a lie—his voice cracks.)

And that crack turns into a mortifying squeak when Hua Cheng's arm wraps around his waist, pulling him in even closer, until Xie Lian is completely sitting on top of him, and—

That kiss isn't exactly featherlight anymore, it's— It's heavy, and Xie Lian's breath leaves him.

"I'll be quick then, your highness," the Ghost King whispers against his skin. "Just hold on a little longer."

True to his word, Xie Lian feels power surging into his skin—a daunting amount—and with it, his shoulder cracking into place, left arm no longer limp.

Xie Lian tilts his head to the side, his breaths coming faster, fingers trembling and digging into Hua Cheng's shoulder slightly, struggling to string his thoughts together.

He...this...

There's a warm pit in his stomach, nearly unfamiliar. But where has he felt that before?

It's not unpleasant, not exactly—just this weird...stirring sensation, like his muscles are tensing, but not because he told them to—and when he thinks back on it, he must have been a teenager—

Oh.

Oh no.

A high pitched noise escapes Xie Lian's throat, his eyes wide.

Ethics sutra. Ethics sutra. He needs the—

"Does it still hurt?" Where Hua Cheng's mouth sits on his shoulder—it makes his breath hit the side of Xie Lian's neck in a way that makes him shiver.

"It—It's much better—!" Xie Lian mutters, fighting to keep his voice composed.

He's chanting in his head quickly, anxiety building in his chest. It's— It's not like anyone could tell at the moment, but if he doesn't get those feelings under control, it would be...visible, and he—

Hua Cheng is just trying to help, what's wrong with him?

Why is he reacting like this? If the ghost knew what Xie Lian was thinking, he would probably be horrified—

There's one frantic moment where, probably due to how much time he's spent with Shi Qingxuan in the last couple of days, he considers changing into a female form.

After all, if he did that, no one would be able to tell, right?

But how would he explain that? He isn't worshiped in male or female forms, as Shi Qingxuan so kindly pointed out before, he doesn't have an excuse to change! What would Hua Cheng even think?!

And he feels some of Hua Cheng's power pulsing through him from the healing process, but most of that is going towards putting Xie Lian's arm back together. Would he even have enough—?

"Does dianxia need me to—?"

Of course, there's a hazard of speaking against someone's skin, particularly when you're Hua Cheng, and it's something that they both seem to learn about at the same time, when his canine, ever so slightly, brushes against Xie Lian's skin.

"Oh..."

Xie Lian's mouth drops open, and the way he says that—it's not like he was talking. Or whispering, really. It was—kind of like—

Possibly a moan. But it definitely didn't hurt, so—

Is the tunnel spinning, or is he just...?

"...Did I hurt you?"

Unlike before, which, if Xie Lian was being completely honest, he'd have to admit that Hua Cheng was being a little playful—

Now, he sounds genuinely concerned.

"No!" Xie Lian shakes his head, "Not at all, I was just—s-surprised!"

The ghost lets out a soft sigh of relief, and since it's still right up against his skin, Xie Lian can't resist another shiver, knees unconsciously tightening around Hua Cheng's hips, still holding onto his shoulder, and he feels the Ghost King start to stiffen against him.

"Your—?"

Hua Cheng is interrupted, but not by Xie Lian. "...GUOSHI?!"

Xie Lian's skin can't seem to decide whether or not it wants to be flushed with embarrassment, or pale from the stress. It settles for splotchy.

Oh.

Oh— *no* .

It would seem that Lang Qianqiu rolled the dice himself.

Stumbling into the tunnel, to find his Guoshi in Crimson Rain Sought Flower's lap, flushed, his robes pulled aside so the Ghost King can kiss his bare shoulder, the two of them intertwined in...

What can only be taken for an embrace.

"I—I can explain!"

Xie Lian stammers, leaning back to look at him—but Hua Cheng's arm is still firm around his waist, stopping him from retreating that far.

...Which doesn't particularly help Xie Lian's case.

"He was healing my arm!" The prince explains, lifting it up as evidence. "See?"

Lang Qianqiu glances as he's indicated, finding that his Guoshi's arm does, in fact, look good as new. Even the robes, which were bloodied and ripped before, have been completely repaired.

"...I don't think that's standard medical procedure," the martial god mutters, glaring.

"Well..." Xie Lian clears his throat, pulling his robes back up over his shoulder—and Hua Cheng, ever so helpful, assists, even going so far as to adjust Xie Lian's belt, which had been slightly loosened by the...chaos. "I don't think it is either, but it was definitely faster!"

After all, it would probably have taken Xie Lian's body a couple of days or so to heal on its own, or Mu Qing a couple of hours—and Hua Cheng was able to leave him as good as new in a matter of minutes.

"...Guoshi, I don't think that man is a trained physician..."

"I…" Xie Lian clears his throat, "I mean—no, he isn't, but clearly he knows a thing or two, and…ghost medicinal techniques…could be different from ours, we…don't know!"

Lang Qianqiu's eyebrows knit together, struggling with that explanation.

"…Well, he's healed now," the martial god mutters, lifting his sword. "Let him go!"

Hua Cheng raises an eyebrow, his eye flashing in the dark.

Instead of replying to Lang Qianqiu's request, his arm suddenly tightens, making Xie Lian fall against his chest with surprise.

"San Lang—?"

He stops when Hua Cheng presses a kiss against the side of his head, never breaking eye contact with General Tai Hua as he does so, his gaze narrowed.

That's when Xie Lian remembers the cut on the side of his head, the one Hua Cheng noticed in Paradise Manor.

'Who did this?'

The wound had already scabbed over—but now, it's completely gone.

Finally, Hua Cheng leans back, and his grip on Xie Lian loosens.

"Now he's healed." The Ghost King agrees. "Dianxia, would you like me to deal with this brat for you?"

"Deal with me?!" Lang Qianqiu glares. "You're the one in the middle of kidnapping him, and you get the nerve—? This has nothing to do with you!"

Hua Cheng's lips start to pull back over his teeth with a hiss—but Xie Lian gently placed a hand over his shoulder.

"Don't," the god murmurs. "He deserves the chance to speak with me, if that's what he wants."

After all, Lang Qianqiu isn't a stranger, Xie Lian…he's keenly aware of his place in the young God's life. How much he mattered to him.

He rises to his feet, and Hua Cheng follows with a glare.

"You owe him nothing, your highness."

"Actually," Lang Qianqiu cuts him off with a heated glare, "he does. You clearly aren't aware, but we were involved."

Xie Lian grimaces, pressing his palm to forehead.

"Your highness..." he groans, "Don't go assuming things on your own..."

"...Don't talk to me like that," Lang Qianqiu mutters, shaking his head.

Xie Lian glances up, startled. "I don't—"

"You were so distant," The prince of Yong'an shakes his head. "I was always honest with you, but you were lying the entire time. Treating me like a child."

Xie Lian falls silent, biting the inside of his cheek. He can't deny that he did treat Lang Qianqiu like he was younger than he was, but that was only because he wanted to...

"I deserved..." The martial god grits his teeth, his hands clenched into fists. "I deserved the truth."

He did. But—

Sometimes, lies are better. Xie Lian learned that the hard way.

Glancing back and forth between the two of them, uncaring for Lang Qianqiu's visible distress, Hua Cheng speaks up, his voice flat—

"You're the only one who seems to think you were involved."

Xie Lian winces, rubbing the side of his neck. "I mean..." He trails off, "Things were a little...muddled, towards the end..."

"Muddled?" Lang Qianqiu questions, raising an eyebrow sharply. "Well–then let me 'un-meddle' it for you," the younger prince shakes his head. "I was in love with you."

Xie Lian sighs heavily, rubbing his temples. He had been in denial back then. Had assumed it was a childish infatuation, one that would fade with time. That he would become a bad memory, and nothing more.

But three centuries later, it doesn't sound that way.

"I proposed, and you disappeared without answering." He continues, his hand trembling where it grips his sword.

"...So, you really were..." Xie Lian mumbles, grimacing. He tried to convince himself it was something a little less serious, but...

Hua Cheng doesn't seem amused.

"And then, the next time I see you, you're pulling a sword out of my father's chest," He turns to look at Hua Cheng, and the Ghost King will give him one thing—

Lang Qianqiu isn't frightened, and he isn't going to back down. Guoshi Fangxin's disciple is strong.

"So, yes," he glares, "he does owe me an explanation. And if you want to stop me, you're going to have to kill me."

"That can be easily arranged," Hua Cheng replies coldly, but—

Xie Lian's palm presses against his chest, pushing him back.

"Don't," the prince repeats quietly. "I don't want him harmed."

The ghost king's teeth come together with a click, but he says little more—stepping back and crossing his arms over his chest.

"...Okay, Lang Qianqiu," Xie Lian sighs. "I'm listening. I'll probably be banished soon, if that's what you want—"

"It isn't," the prince shakes his head. "And you know that."

Xie Lian falls silent once more, and then—he hangs his head with a sigh, feeling somewhat hopeless.

"Then what do you need from me, your highness?"

"...I need to know whether or not I'm the villain in this story."

There's an ache, an underlying horror in his tone, one that makes his Guoshi's eyes widen.

"...How could you be?" He whispers. "You didn't do anything wrong —"

"When I put you in that coffin," Lan Qianqiu spits out the words, looking vaguely nauseous, "I didn't know you were..."

The mere mention of it makes Xie Lian grimace. “Of course, you didn’t—”

“…And I know you were in there for a long time,” Lang Qianqiu mutters, his voice hoarse, “because I visited. For years.”

“…” Xie Lian wraps his arms around himself.

He knows.

He heard.

He kept quiet. No matter how miserable and afraid he was, Xie Lian forced himself to remain silent.

Because if Lang Qianqiu knew what he had done, he would have hated himself. And because Xie Lian deserved to be there,

He deserved to be alone.

But…

…Lang Qianqiu found out anyway. He’s hurting anyway.

“And…” The prince of Yong’an takes a deep breath. “If you actually did those things, then I’m not sorry.” He says the words evenly.

Xie Lian isn’t surprised.

Yong’an was a country born from war and strife. Pei Xiu tried to claim differently in the Sinner’s Pit, but…

It was an empire. All great nations are baptized in blood.

Yong’an was a warrior culture, one with a very black and white, brutal sense of Justice.

Xianle was no different.

Xie Lian was no different, when he sought his own vengeance.

‘What do we do, when we are faced with the wicked?’

He isn’t better than Lang Qianqiu, he only enjoys the benefits of past failures and hindsight.

“But if you didn’t…” His student trembles.

He closes his eyes, breathing deeply, and Xie Lian can feel the pain radiating off of him in waves, making his own heart ache.

"...Then I will be making it up to you for the rest of my life," the martial god mutters, and Xie Lian—

He places a hand over his mouth, silent.

Because—

In all honesty, the god forgot how good Lang Qianqiu could be. Honorable to a fault.

And he forgot the way that he felt about the boy, all those years ago.

"...You say that as though you've already decided I didn't do it," Xie Lian mutters. "But I've never denied it."

"..." Lang Qianqiu shakes his head, taking a deep breath. "You get a little lost in your own head sometimes, Guoshi. Remember what you used to tell me?"

Xie Lian's eyes widen. "...To pay closer attention," he murmurs.

The prince of Yong'an shrugs.

"I paid attention to you." He takes a step closer. "I know that you thought of me as an oblivious, carefree kid— but when it came to you, I was serious."

On some level, Xie Lian knew that.

"And I obviously didn't know your secrets..." Lang Qianqiu mutters. "But that doesn't mean I knew nothing about you."

Xie Lian forgets that, sometimes.

That while there are parts of him that people can never reach, it doesn't mean that he's impossible to get to know.

"I know how much you think about things," the prince stares into his face, taking it in. "I know that it might take you a long time to make a decision, but when you do, it's final."

That's just stubbornness, but it's kind of Lang Qianqiu to make him sound so decisive.

"You avoid things that you don't know how to deal with," he points out.

Less generous, but still true.

"...And I know that you knew me, Guoshi," Xie Lian's heart twists once more. "You knew me inside out."

Of course he did.

Understanding Lang Qianqiu was the easiest thing in the world. Like looking at his own life in reverse.

"...You knew how I felt," the prince stops in front of him, only a foot or so from his Guoshi, "probably for a very long time."

Hua Cheng watches Xie Lian closely, and the god doesn't reply. Because he hasn't told a lie so far.

Xie Lian is a master of denial, and he isn't always the most honest narrator of his own thoughts.

He knew, but he didn't acknowledge it, because—

"And you know—I never would have forced my feelings on you," Lang Qianqiu mutters hoarsely. "If they became a burden, I would have—"

"I know," Xie Lian whispers, one hand still covering his mouth. Slowly, he lowers it. "I knew that."

Lang Qianqiu nods woodenly. He figured as much.

"...And I also know you never would have led me on," he looks his Guoshi in the eyes, taking in the sight of the shackle inside. "Or allowed me to make a fool of myself."

Xie Lian swallows hard.

Still, his student hadn't been wrong.

"You just avoided the subject all together, which means..." Xie Lian looks away, clutching the chain around his neck. "...you hadn't decided what your answer was."

The prince of Xianle squeezes his eyes shut.

Because it's true.

Back then, when he was so lonely, and so…

There was someone offering themselves so earnestly. A kind, open hearted boy.

One who gave him flowers.

Xie Lian grips Hong’er a little tighter, his lips trembling.

“…Why are you doing this?” He mutters, feeling the irritation from Hua Cheng behind him, rolling off of the Ghost King in waves.

And Xie Lian understands, it must be rather awkward, being forced to witness a personal situation like this one.

“…Because I’m not seventeen anymore, Guoshi,” Lang Qianqiu sighs. “I know—even if you did feel something for me, you were mourning your husband. You were lonely.”

Behind him, Hua Cheng arches an eyebrow, and Xie Lian’s heart leaps into his throat.

“I…”

“I understand, you didn’t feel the way as I did.” The prince shakes his head. “I might be a fool, and I might rush into things—but I’ve had three centuries,” he watches the conflict in Xie Lian’s expression. “And I’ve spent all of them thinking about you.”

Hua Cheng’s nostrils flare as he leans back, twisting his braid as he glares at the ceiling.

“…Or, there’s a scenario where none of that is true, and you’re the best actor I’ve ever met,” Lang Qianqiu mutters. “And you—you lost everything, and you wanted me to feel the same.”

“…And if that was true?” Xie Lian questions softly. “What would you do?”

“…” Lang Qianqiu reaches behind him, pulling something from his back, holding it out to him.

Xie Lian hesitates before finally reaching out to take it, hands trembling when they feel the hilt.

Fangxin.

Xie Lian stops, shaking his head when he realizes what Lang Qianqiu means. "No," he mutters, taking a step back. "I won't do that. I swore long ago—I wouldn't kill with a sword again."

Of course, Wen Jiao was an exception—but he was also a demon. Not a person.

"...If you aren't willing to say that it wasn't you," Lang Qianqiu shakes his head, resolved. "Then you're going to have to duel me."

"No." Xie Lian shakes his head. "I won't." His hand shoots out to stop Hua Cheng from approaching once again from behind. "And you won't either!"

"I'm only accepting one of two outcomes," his student locks his jaw stubbornly. "Either you fight me, or you tell me the truth. It's your choice, but you have to make it."

Hua Cheng actually growls with annoyance that anyone would dare dictate to Xie Lian, but...

There's another matter at hand, and for that, he quietly reaches into a private communication array.

"...Lang Qianqi, if I fight you with a sword..." Xie Lian sighs, gripping Fangxin tighter. "You'll definitely die."

"And if you weren't a liar, then you wouldn't care!"

Xie Lian drops his chin, gritting his teeth.

"...There is no explanation I could give that would make you feel better," he mutters, shaking his head. "So, you want to fight? Fine. We can fight."

Before Lang Qianqiu says a word, he's knocked to the ground, bound, unable to move.

"And there," Xie Lian mutters, turning around, Fangxin gripped tightly in his hand. "You lost. You can tell everyone else that I fled like a coward."

"That's—!" Lang Qianqiu thrashes under Ruoye's grip, "NOT WHAT I WANTED!"

"I know."

“Typical—just AVOIDING the problem!”

Xie Lian grits his teeth, beginning to walk away. “If that’s what you want to think.”

“You aren’t PROTECTING me from anything!” The prince glares, struggling, trying to get to his feet. “I don’t have to TELL anyone that you fled like a coward! That’s WHAT YOU’RE DOING!”

His Guoshi doesn’t respond, reaching for Hua Cheng’s hand, pulling. “San Lang, let’s go.”

But when he tries to tug the Ghost King along, he remains in place—and Lang Qianqiu is still working with all his might to escape.

“THAT’S why you hid who you were for all that time!” His student cries. “Because the MINUTE anyone gets close, the minute anyone sees who you are, they CARE! So you just RUN AWAY!”

When Xie Lian speaks again, his voice is low, thin.

“Choosing to walk away isn’t the same.”

It isn’t running away if you don’t actually want to go.

Lang Qianqiu glares at his back, “You never TALKED to me, you just make decisions that impact me without EVER thinking about what I would want—!”

“YOU DON’T ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU WANT!”

The tunnel falls into shocked silence

Xie Lian’s shoulders tremble, and his head hurts, and he—

He isn’t alright.

“The beautiful, talented, illustrious crown prince,” he sneers, hands trembling by his sides. “They give you the entire world, and tell you that it’s yours. That you can do anything.”

He turns his head, his shackles like two twin flames in the darkness of the tunnel, flickering dimly.

“But the one thing you want the most—” he looks down on Lang Qianqiu, nails biting into his palms, “—that is the one thing you cannot have.”

He wishes tears would come.

“I could explain so many things to you,” the prince shakes his head. “But it wouldn’t make your family come back. Yong’an will still be gone. And you don’t know what else you might lose.”

“You—”

“I don’t let anyone close,” Xie Lian continues, “because I break things.”

Never on purpose. But he always does.

“I don’t let anyone close, because they never actually see me.” He gestures vaguely with fangxin, remembering the things the blade has done.

The things Xie Lian used it to do.

“They see a beautiful, talented, intelligent prince.” He shakes his head, a broken laugh slipping from his lips. “And he doesn’t exist.”

“...Don’t say that,” Lang Qianqiu mumbles, trying desperately to hold onto the last glimmer of childhood. The hope he had, when he saw that Xie Lian might not be the monster that he pretended to be.

“And I would rather be the laughingstock of the three realms,” Xie Lian glares. “Or the Blackhearted Guoshi Fangxin. Or—”

A White Clothed Calamity.

He clenches his teeth even tighter, “Or *anyone* else, anyone but the Crown Prince of Xianle.”

That very prince hangs his head.

“Because he destroyed *everything* I loved,” he mutters, his voice breaking.

Still, tears won’t come.

“...Take that last lesson from your Guoshi,” he mutters. “Never put people on pedestals. You both end up broken and disappointed in the end.”

He tries to keep walking, but...

Hua Cheng's hand locks around his, holding him in place.

"...Let me go, San Lang." He mutters, his shoulders sagging.

The Ghost King is quiet for a moment, surveying the two.

"...No."

Xie Lian looks back, raising an eyebrow, and he—

Crack!

There's a snap of Hua Cheng's fingers, and he doesn't hear Lang Qianqiu struggling anymore.

Ruoye quickly returns to him, wrapping around his throat with a nervous wiggle. "...Wh—?"

Something small and wooden is pressed into his hands, a—

A Daruma Doll.

"...What is this?"

"He was upsetting you," Hua Cheng replies calmly. "Now he's a fun Knick knack. Show him off at parties if you like."

"San Lang..." Xie Lian frowns, and now, instead of holding him still, Hua Cheng is pulling him down the tunnel. "Turn him back."

"No."

The Ghost King has hardly ever denied him anything, and now, he's told Xie Lian no twice in a row.

For some reason, he isn't as bothered by it as he thought he might be. "...Why not?"

"Because gege said I couldn't harm him," Hua Cheng replies calmly. "So, he needs to be quiet."

"...He wasn't doing anything wrong," Xie Lian mutters, using Ruoye to make a makeshift scabbard for Fangxin, strapping the sword to his back.

"...I actually agree," Hua Cheng sighs, even if it sounds like he would rather eat glass than admit it. "But my patience is finite."

Funny, because up until now, he's been so tolerant, Xie Lian was actually starting to wonder if the man had any limits at all, but…

Clearly, he does.

“San Lang, where are we going?” Xie Lian questions cautiously, tucking the Daruma doll into his sleeve.

“There's someone the two of you need to speak to.” Hua Cheng's grip slides up from Xie Lian's hand to his elbow, leading him down the tunnel. “I suspect it might be an educational experience.”

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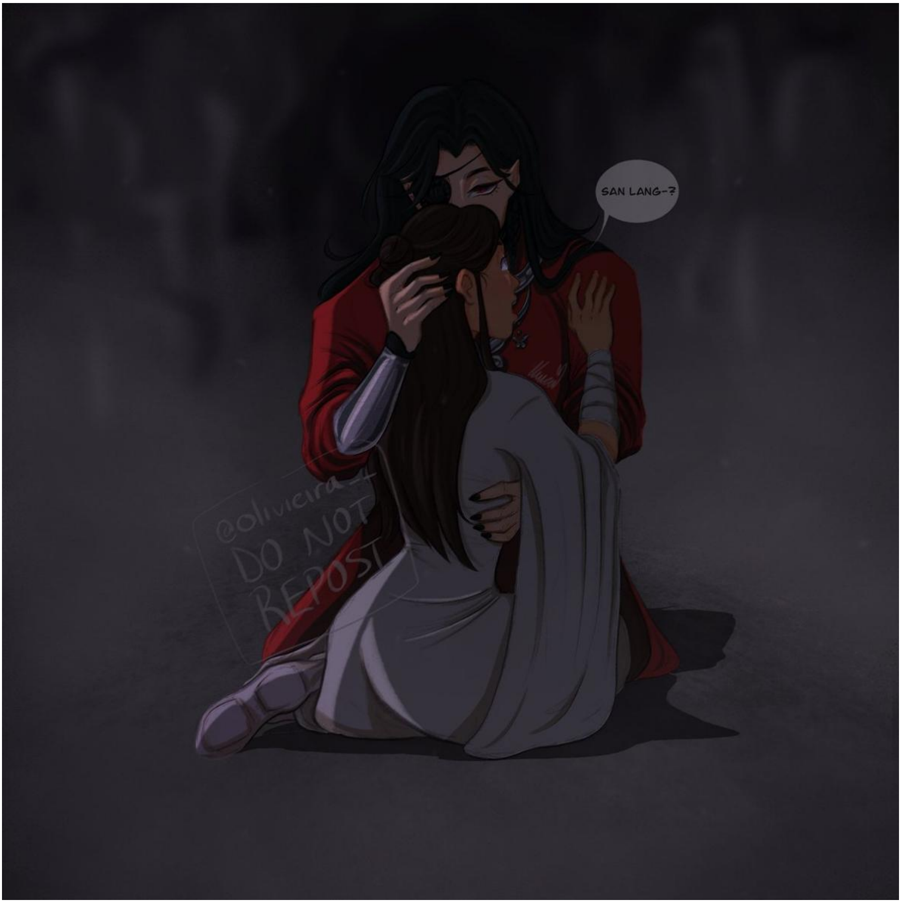
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Chapter End Notes

> thank you so much to olivieira for your hard work, and for allowing me to share it!
>
> xoxo, Evie

Paved with Good Intentions

Chapter Summary

Hua Cheng wasn't wrong, before.

The Night Touring Green Lantern...

"Say..." he groans, kicking at his footrest, "I'm HUNGRY!"

...is truly vile.

Chapter Notes

You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Xie Lian blinks owlishly.

...What?

"...Are they in Ghost City?"

"No."

Hua Cheng's footsteps are light, but sure—leading him just as he did on Mount Yu Jun, with a sureness to him that Xie Lian can't help but...

Trust, to some extent.

"Then where?"

"Our guide is about to show us the way," he murmurs. Xie Lian is confused, until...

Something rounds the corner of the corner. Small, low to the ground, trotting towards him.

And unlike most spirits or animals—Xie Lian can see this one very clearly.

"...Is it yours?" He whispers, tilting his head to the side with wonder.

"No," Hua Cheng shakes his head.

His butterflies are made from pure spiritual energy, stemming from his own reserves. This isn't quite the same.

"He's a guardian spirit."

Ah, Xie Lian has heard of those before, but…not usually described that way, and…

A red panda blinks up at him from his feet, chirping.

…They're never described as 'cute,' either.

But this little creature is certainly adorable, pressing it's paws against Xie Lian's boot as it sniffs his robes, tails held aloft.

"Aye, Aye…" Hua Cheng clicks his tongue, scolding. "Back to work."

It lifts its head, sending Hua Cheng a glare and an offended squeak—and that's when Xie Lian notices—

It's wearing a little hat. Green, with a red tassel on top.

Then, it turns it's back to them, scurrying back down the tunnel, and Hua Cheng guides the prince to follow.

"…A guardian spirit," Xie Lian repeats slowly, watching its tail flick in the air as it trots ahead. "I was always told that animal spirits were the result of Taoist magic."

Hua Cheng shakes his head. "Sometimes—but they form naturally in mountains and forests."

Xie Lian falls silent, watching the creature move about.

For him to be able to see it, it must be an actual spiritual creature, not the ghost of something that was once living.

There's something that he's been thinking about, during his time with the Ghost King.

There are so many things he's seen with Hua Cheng—in the Crescent Moon Kingdom, and then Ghost City—things that are traditionally considered evil, but…

Xie Lian is starting to wonder if 'evil' might just be a term for something that the Heavens don't control.

"...And he doesn't work for you?" Xie Lian questions slowly.

"His name is Qi Qi," Hua Cheng hums, "and I suppose he does in an indirect way, but he would never obey a direct request from me. He's someone else's subordinate."

"...And that person is the one who sent him?"

"Yes."

Xie Lian examines the creature just a little more closely. It's aura isn't particularly large—but it's strong. Probably placing it on the level that most cultivators (within the mortal realm) would struggle to deal with.

Whoever sent it must be an impressive ghost.

The tunnel seems to shift and stretch around them as they move through it—and Xie Lian would be lying if he said he wasn't interested in how the passage worked, but... well...

He's already pushed his luck when it comes to Hua Cheng's traveling arrays, and it seems better to wait.

Eventually they reach the end of the tunnel—and it turns out, it's far more functional with Hua Cheng at the helm, because they don't end up dumped out through a trapdoor.

Instead, Hua Cheng leads them through a doorway, and when they step through... It's a forest.

He can smell as much, and hear the wind creaking through the leaves. And from the lack of warmth against his skin—it must be nighttime, with no sunlight coming down.

Ahead of them, Qi Qi chirps excitedly, charging forward until he reaches his master, jumping into his arms.

"Well done," a voice murmurs—familiar to Xie Lian by now, though slightly different from before. Slightly deeper, older—like a young man between seventeen and twenty years old.

And the aura before him is familiar as well.

Emerald, like the forest itself—but with a burning core.

But when he steps forward, there's a difference in his gate. Each step lands on the ground with a bit more weight than it did before, when Xie Lian heard the youth approaching in the streets of Ghost City, or running down the halls of Paradise Manor.

And now, he remembers.

Back in the Heavenly Capital, when they were explaining to him the tales of the four great calamities, the god he now knows as Ming Yi explained their names and titles—

The Night Touring Green Lantern, also known as the Green Ghost, Qi Rong. Known for his vile tastes.

Also the weakest of the four, having never ascended as a Calamity—and simply included to pad out their numbers, making them an even four like the great tales.

Then, there was Black Water Sinking Ships, a reclusive Water Demon—one who Hua Cheng seems somewhat amicable towards.

...And the most powerful, though he's been long since dead, the White Clothed Calamity, Bai Wuxiang.

Which left the last, the most powerful living—the man standing beside him right now.

Crimson Rain Sought Flower, the Lord of Ghost City—Hua Cheng.

But there was another.

A powerful savage ghost, a subordinate of Hua Cheng's—but strong enough to be able to replace Qi Rong as one of the Four Calamities, given time.

Autumn Twilight Shrouding Forests, the demon...

"...You must be Ren Song," Xie Lian murmurs, bowing his head politely.

The savage ghost smirks, revealing a fanged grin as he bends into a sweeping bow, one that's more for Hua Cheng's benefit, since Xie Lian can't see the gesture. "The pleasure is all mine, your highness."

Earrings jingle softly at his ears as he moves, clinking in the night.

"The lair is two hundred yards ahead, built into a pre-existing cave system," he explains, walking ahead of the ghost king and his god, Qi Qi perched on his shoulder, tail flicking slightly with each step. "There are between two and three dozen human prisoners."

Xie Lian stiffens at the mention of prisoners, glancing at Hua Cheng with concern, but the Ghost king doesn't seem to share it.

"Does he know that you've tracked him here?"

"No," Ren Song replies quietly. "I was concerned he might flee if I revealed myself before you arrived."

Xie Lian frowns, trying to piece together who they're seeing, and why Hua Cheng thought it would be 'educational' for Xie Lian, as well as Lang Qianqiu...

"But I've identified all of the exits, so he shouldn't be able to escape once you're inside."

Unforeseen factors notwithstanding.

(And in this case, there was one factor that the forest demon had not been warned about, and therefore could not have prepared for.)

"...San Lang," Xie Lian questions as they approach the cave entrance. "Who did you bring me to see?"

The Daruma Doll rattles slightly in his sleeve, almost like it's agreeing with him, and...

Hua Cheng simply slips an arm around Xie Lian's waist, pulling him close against his side.

The prince glances up at him in confusion, and he explains—"Invisibility spell."

Now, the rattling of the Daruma doll seems slightly more aggressive, but Hua Cheng doesn't seem to mind. If anything, he seems pleased by it.

As he leads Xie Lian over the threshold, the god catches sight of the first clue to their location.

Tiny little green spirits running up and down the cave system. Not quite ghost fires, but not strong enough to be fully fledged ghosts either. Milling about like ants, talking quietly among themselves.

Finally, Hua Cheng murmurs—

“We’re here to see that waste of space—Qi Rong.”

Xie Lian stiffens slightly at the mention of him. The Night Touring Green Lantern, wasn’t it?

“…The green spirits,” Xie Lian whispers, walking beside him silently, “is that how he got the name?”

“In part, but that’s not how it started,” Hua Cheng replies.

There’s something different about him.

Xie Lian notices it now—even more so than he did before, in the tunnel.

Turning Lang Qianqiu into a Daruma doll and refusing Xie Lian’s request to turn him back—that was already unusually aggressive, but…

There’s tension under his tone.

“He’s been reduced back to a ghost fire several times, though never dispersed. He finds the history somewhat humiliating, so he takes on the green spirits and flames to distract from the truth.” The calamity explains, helping Xie Lian step up and over a ledge.

“…I see.”

Xie Lian allows himself to be led along, but eventually, he has to ask…

“San Lang?”

He receives a quiet hum of acknowledgement, and he fights back the urge to clear his throat, remembering that they have to be quiet for now.

“…Is something bothering you?”

For a moment, he doesn’t answer. He stands alone, his back facing away from the crown prince, even as he grips his hand to guide him, and the question he asks—

“How long was it?”

It wasn’t the one Xie Lian was expecting.

"...I'm sorry?" He mumbles, tilting his head. "I don't—"

"Dianxia," there's something in his tone that gives Xie Lian pause, his heart leaping into his throat. "I will never force you to speak about it, but I need you to tell me how long it was."

"..." Pretending he doesn't know what San Lang is talking about would be childish.

And maybe...

Lang Qianqiu had a point, when he said Xie Lian had a tendency to avoid things.

The prince falls silent for a moment. It's not that he wants to protect anyone else from that knowledge, not exactly. He knows the truth is horrific.

On some distant level. One that feels far removed from him. The reason he doesn't like to speak about it is because...

If he had told Feng Xin or Mu Qing, it would have been about their guilt. Their worry. Xie Lian doesn't have the time, nor the energy to shoulder that burden.

All of his energy goes into pretending those years don't belong to him. That they happened to someone else. Keeping them on the other side of this thick barrier in his mind, and cramming them into a small box.

Xie Lian doesn't want to talk about how he felt.

Doesn't want Lang Qianqiu to apologize, or try to make it up to him. He doesn't want to think about how many years Feng Xin spent looking, or how guilty Mu Qing must feel for refusing.

Finally, he whispers—

"Does it matter?"

Fingertips brush over his brow, cool to the touch.

"Yes." Hua Cheng replies quietly. "It matters."

"..." Xie Lian leans up on the balls of his feet, whispering in the Ghost King's ear for a moment.

The Ghost King's eyes widen substantially, and Xie Lian waits apprehensively. Waiting for the questions.

The pity.

But Hua Cheng doesn't say a word.

Instead, Xie Lian feels him lean down, and...

His forehead presses against the crown prince's, skin soothingly cool when Xie Lian's body temperature flares in response to the closeness.

"S...San L—?"

"There," the Ghost King pulls back.

Xie Lian hears that his voice sounds slightly different now, younger—and when he reaches up to touch his own face, he realizes...

Hua Cheng placed them both in new skins, likely because the invisibility spell won't keep the deeper they go into Qi Rong's lair.

Xie Lian reaches up to touch his own cheek, curious, and a playful voice echoes by his ear, teasing—

"Don't worry, gege looks as charming as ever."

The prince's lips quirk up into a smile, and he almost scolds San Lang for taking this moment to tease him, but...

There's no mirth to it. If anything, he seems...

Distracted.

Xie Lian wants to ask him what's the matter, but then, he supposes...

A century in a coffin is a lot to digest, even if they haven't known each other for very long...

He might not know what to say. Xie Lian doesn't.

But the further they move into the cave, that silence begins to break.

Pierced with laughing, jaunting singing, the faint sounds of bones clacking together.

Xie Lian's grip on Hua Cheng's hand tightens imperceptibly—and the Ghost King's mouth sets into a grim line.

Because that laughter—it's pulling at the edge of his memory.

Drawing Xie Lian back in time, so far back, towards things he's tried so hard to forget —making him strain.

And he tries, now, tries so hard to tell himself that it's a coincidence. Denial is better than the truth.

But now, as they approach the final chamber—Xie Lian hears a voice he was so sure he would never encounter again.

Sneering, rasping—like a voice that might have been high pitched or childish, but has been roughened with centuries of screaming—

"Report?"

One of the green ghosts pipes up, "We've been desecrating Ming Guang's temples, and it's just like you said, my lord! No one in the Heavens has even noticed!"

There's a shrieking giggle as another spirit pipes up—

"We even blamed it on Quan Yizhen's followers!"

Targeting Pei Ming again?

Between the actions of Xuan Ji, the events in Gusu—even Pei Xiu's banishment following the incident in the Crescent Moon Pass...

Xie Lian can't help but pity the general.

The tunnel system of the caves opens to a wide cavern.

Filled from wall to wall with little green spirits, huddling mortal prisoners into small cages. Bones piled high all around—

Most of them from humans.

In the center of the room is a cauldron, large enough to be mistaken for a bath, if not for the water's boiling temperature.

And sitting in the very center of it, with his feet kicked up luxuriously, is a green robed figure, fanning himself lazily with a slightly ripped paper fan, bouncing his toes in time with the sound his little ghouls squeal out in the background.

Hua Cheng wasn't wrong, before.

The Night Touring Green Lantern…

“Say…” he groans, kicking at his footrest, “I’m HUNGRY!”

…is truly vile.

In the corner, he can hear a human man, likely in his twenties, rocking back and forth on the floor, quietly trying to reassure his child.

“Don’t be scared…”

It doesn’t take much time or intelligence to deduce what the prisoners are for.

“Don’t be scared, we—we’ll be alright…”

Qi Rong makes a face, eyes snapping in the direction of the father and his little boy.

For a moment, his expression is unreadable as he uses a human rib bone to pick his teeth, gaze narrowed.

“…say…” he glares, arching one eyebrow. “I think I’ll start with an appetizer.”

The ghouls at his feet shriek with acknowledgement, and the natural candidate?

The boy.

He’s the only one small enough among the prisoners to be considered an appetizer, anyway—

But before the ghouls can reach him, whimpering and trembling as he hides in his father’s arms, Hua Cheng steps forward, walking lazily through the crowd—kicking ghouls aside as he goes.

“…” The green ghost’s gaze flickers to the source of movement, and his eyes narrow sharply. “Who the fuck are you?!” He snaps, crunching the rib bone between his jaws. “Who told you that you could approach?!”

Hua Cheng smiles, hands clasped behind his back.

“Is the green ghost so ignorant, he doesn’t realize when he has an esteemed guest?”

The ghost king's tone is perfectly pleasant—almost cheerful—but Xie Lian knows better by now.

There's ice underneath.

"...Esteemed guest?" Qi Rong sneers.

"Royalty of Xianle, to be specific."

That manages to draw out a laugh.

A snide, cackling sound.

"Royalty from Xianle?" He snorts, "You think that's fucking funny, do you?"

Xie Lian remains still, not saying a word.

"Tell me—how are you related to the Royal House of Xie?"

Hua Cheng's smile turns sly.

"...Through Prince An Le."

Xie Lian can't keep the grimace off of his face.

Just thinking about that name makes his chest tighten with anger—and inside his sleeve, Xie Lian can feel Lang Qianqiu rattle with recognition.

"An Le?!" Qi Rong barks, looking him over.

"You? You look nothing like the guy! Besides, he died without having any children. He was the last of the Royal bloodline! You have a lot of nerve, lying to this ancestor in his territory!"

Xie Lian bites back the urge to roll his eyes.

San Lang said something along those lines himself, before—but from his lips, the words sounded genuinely menacing.

From Qi Rong, it sounds like a joke. A weak attempt at seeming more frightening than he is.

"How did he die, then?" Hua Cheng muses, tilting his head.

Xie Lian has always been a skilled fighter. That, in part, is why he can detect the minute changes in Hua Cheng's stance, just from sensing the slight movement in the air.

Like a beast cooking before it pounces.

But even more so, that tension is still building.

That same feeling he's had since they arrived in this cave, finally reaching the point where it seems ready to snap.

“The fuck? What makes you think you have the right to ask questions? Someone—get rid of this piece of shit!”

His little green ghosts leap to attention, but…

Before any of them can make a move, Hua Cheng has disappeared.

Now, he stands directly behind the green ghost, fingers knotted in his hair, yanking his chin back.

“That's an interesting skin you're wearing,” the calamity hisses. “Take it off.” Xie Lian blinks, listening close.

Skin? What sort of skin could the ghost be wearing that would offend Hua Cheng so much?

“Who the fuck do you think you are, putting your hands on me?!” Qi Rong glares, trying to reach back and free himself. “I'll wear whatever I—!”

BANG!

Xie Lian jumps at the sound, startled as he listens to the floor crack, pebbles flying in every direction.

Hua Cheng has slammed the Ghost's head into the floor so violently, it's completely disappeared into the rock, forming a small crater with his neck and body sticking out.

It's not like Xie Lian has never seen the ghost king resort to violence before—he did that easily enough in the Sinner's Pit. Threatened to do so with Lang Qianqiu.

But those instances were highly controlled. Purposeful, even.

BANG!

BANG!

BANG!

"…San Lang?"

…There is nothing about this that resembles control.

Hua Cheng yanks him up by the hair, smashing his head down, over and over again, until the ghost is choking up blood.

"SOMEONE—SOMEONE STOP HIM?! WHY ARE YOU IDIOTS JUST STANDING AROUND?!"

Hua Cheng yanks his head back up, holding Qi Rong's neck in a forced arch, tendons straining, glaring down into that face.

A face he adores, twisted into a demented parody of the original. Twisted with hate, eyes burning an acidic shade of green.

"Who is going to stop me?"

Hua Cheng's voice is calm—arrogant. But his expression tells a different story. Lips pulled back into a snarl, eye burning brightly with rage.

"Who on earth can stop me from doing whatever I like with you, Qi Rong?" His hand twists more viciously into the green ghost's hair.

He's shifted back into his true form now—one that the Night Touring Green Lantern is unfamiliar with, but…

That gaze, and the red robes—they're clues enough.

"You?!" Qi Rong coughs, blood dripping down his chin. "Why are you here?! Finally going to make a meal of me?!"

That earns him a condescending laugh.

"A meal of you?" The ghost king questions coldly. "You aren't even worth eating."

Qi Rong struggled more violently, only for Crimson Rain to bare his fangs before his throat with a hiss of warning.

"I wouldn't even give you to the rats…"

Hua Cheng snarls. “They got indigestion, last time.”

Implying that he has, in fact, fed Qi Rong to a pack of rodents before. Xie Lian can’t say he disapproves, but still...

“Now, where were we?”

BAM!

“Take.”

BAM!

“That.”

BAM!

“Skin.”

BAM!

“Off.”

“...San Lang,”

All of the little green spirits that were milling about the room before have retreated to the far corners, practically jointing their human hostages in their cages, reeking with terror, but...

Xie Lian isn’t afraid.

Instead, he rushes to the ghost king’s side.

The moment Hua Cheng feels the god’s hand against his back, he goes quite still, Qi Rong’s limp and bleeding form dangling from his fingertips.

Xie Lian doesn’t glance his way. Doesn’t even want to know what the hideous, resentful energy inside that soul must look like.

“...Are you alright?“ Xie Lian murmurs, his lips tipping into a slight frown.

He doesn’t understand why they’re here, or what this has to do with Qi Rong.

He has no idea how he feels now, learning the Green Ghost’s true identity.

And he has no clue what upset San Lang so badly.

When the ghost king doesn't reply, Xie Lian's hands come to rest on his shoulders, rubbing gently.

He's never exactly had to deal with someone foul tempered before. Lang Qianqiu was an obedient student. Banyue was a sweet tempered girl.

The closest comparison he can think of is Hong'er—who was never once cross with Xie Lian. He would have swallowed hot coals before speaking harshly to him.

But he would fly into a rage when the god was insulted, and Xie Lian often had to talk him down from it.

"Don't be angry…" He murmurs, shaking his head, stroking the ghost king's shoulder with one hand while the other rubs up and down his back. "Everything's alright…just calm down, please? For me?"

Given how quick Hua Cheng has been to refuse him today, he isn't optimistic, but…

Slowly, he feels the calamity relax under his touch, and while Xie Lian can't see—he knows his expression is far more calm now than it was only moments before.

"…Apologies," he mutters, hanging his head. "Did I frighten dianxia?"

"No, no…"

"Have I offended him?"

"No," Xie Lian reassures him again, his hands still rubbing over the ghost king's shoulders. "I was only worried…"

Xie Lian can respect decisions made out of anger. There is such a thing as wrathful justice, and he is very familiar.

But he also knows what it's like to make a decision out of pain and impulse, only to regret it later.

Hua Cheng's mouth tilts up at the corners. "…His highness doesn't need to waste his energy worrying about me," the ghost king mutters, "I'm alright."

Xie Lian frowns.

Normally, Hua Cheng's attitude is cocky, bordering on outright arrogance. But this...

This is the first time that Xie Lian has heard him be outright self deprecating.

"It's not a waste," he replies, squeezing the ghost's shoulders gently.

"..." Hua Cheng smiles faintly, reaching up to place his hand over the prince's, squeezing for just a moment, and...

To Xie Lian's shock, he can't move—or speak, for that matter.

The spell is relatively simple, and without spiritual powers, he doesn't have the means to fight it.

He doesn't panic. If Hua Cheng wanted to do him harm, he's had many chances to do that already, but...

Xie Lian is wary now, staring blankly in Qi Rong's direction, and...

Hua Cheng repeats his question, "How did Prince An Le die?"

...He's starting to guess at why they're here.

He struggles, mouth straining, wanting to talk over the two, to tell them the conversation is pointless, but...it's no use.

"Why the fuck do you care about that?!" Qi Rong grumbles, spitting out blood once again. A tooth comes out with it, clacking against the stone floor.

Hua Cheng smacks his head down on the floor once more—

BAM!

And he repeats the same question, calmer now, but there isn't an ounce of mercy in that tone—

"How did Prince An Le die?"

"What makes you assume I know?!"

BAM!

"You know something?" Hua Cheng muses.

And the threat he opts for next—it surprises him.

"Your friend is waiting outside."

Hua Cheng is objectively far more powerful, and yet...Qi Rong pales at the mention of the forest demon Ren Song.

"Should I call him in to play with you?"

Physical violence only works on Qi Rong to a certain extent. Xie Lian knows that much. He was incredibly tough skinned, even in his mortal life. He only broke under Xie Lian's hands because the torture was, well...extreme.

Xie Lian expects his tolerance is even higher as a ghost.

His instinct is to assume that Ren Song couldn't do worse than Hua Cheng, but...

Then, he remembers what Ming Yi said.

That Ren Song's magic was known for causing madness.

It's hard to know what impact that would have on Qi Rong, who is already insane—

Now, he seems afraid.

"...Lang Qianqiu," the green ghost mutters, feet thrashing as he tries to get his hair out of Hua Cheng's grip.

The Daruma doll rattles inside Xie Lian's sleeve, and the prince winces.

"IT WAS LANG QIANQIU, ALRIGHT?! LET ME GO!" Qi Rong howls. "THAT'S ALL THIS ANCESTOR KNOWS!"

Now, the doll shakes so violently that it falls out of Xie Lian's pocket, rolling across the floor, wobbling back and forth with protest.

Instead of seeming irritated, Hua Cheng seems to decide that it's time for his god's little 'Knick knack' to speak.

With a snap of his fingers, Lang Qianqiu appears once again in a cloud of smoke, coughing for a moment as he rises to his feet, his expression twisted with anger.

“Me?! Prince An Le was my best friend!” He snaps, shaking his head vehemently. “It’s known—he died from an illness!”

“An illness? An Le?” Qi Rong snickers, hanging from Hua Cheng’s grip from the hair —and now, Lang Qianqiu can see what the calamity meant, ordering him to ‘take that skin off.’

The face before him...

Is identical to that of his Guoshi. Other than the eyes, gleaming bright green.

“That boy was as strong as an ox, and you mean to say he just died out of the blue? What illness does that?” Qi Rong looks him over, “I would have expected the blackhearted Guoshi Fangxin to have a student that wasn’t so...”

“Me too,” Hua Cheng sighs.

“You—?!”

“But Qi Rong...” The ghost king raises an eyebrow, using his grip on the green ghost’s hair to pull him up just a little higher. “Did I hear you admit to knowing Prince An Le personally?”

Qi Rong’s face scrunches up with irritation. “And so what?! Is that a crime?!”

Lan Qianqiu seems to find the idea preposterous. “And what would an honorable prince like An Le have to do with the likes of you?!”

“...” Qi Rong stares at him, then a wide grin spreads across his face. Unlike the true owner, his teeth are razor sharp.

“And why do you think he was friends with you, huh?!” The green ghost snickers. “God, you really are a dumbass!”

Lang Qianqiu’s brow furrows, and Xie Lian’s stomach twists. Don’t, he thinks—there’s no point to this.

But Qi Rong doesn’t stop.

“HAHA, An Le couldn’t STAND you!

His grin is wild, more and more satisfied as he watches the distress in the Prince of Yong'an's eyes. "You think people were grateful, when your dumbass parents gave them shitty land and shitty titles?!"

"My..." Lang Qianqiu's hands ball up, trembling. "My parents were HONORABLE! They ended centuries of discrimination against the people of Xianle! Gave them land and titles—An Le had no reason to resent me!"

The things Lang Qianqiu is saying are true, but... Qi Rong cackles even harder.

"You think that makes a difference?!"

Xie Lian grits his teeth, listening as the ghost jeers.

"Stolen land! Stolen titles! You give back the ancestral wealth your people stole, and you call it generosity?! BAH!" He grins, "Stupid PIGS! You all DESERVED to die! And then you killed An Le in revenge!"

Hua Cheng raises an eyebrow, lifting Qi Rong a little more violently, forcing his chin back so he can make eye contact with the ghost king once more. "What makes you so sure it wasn't a disease, hmm?"

The green ghost glares up at him defiantly, then lets out a huff.

It's hard for Lang Qianqiu to look at that face, one that he now connects with...the most complicated relationship of his life, twisted into such a hideous expression.

"Because it was clearly retaliation for what happened at the Gilded Banquet."

Xie Lian can see it starting to dawn there.

That slow, horrible realization of the truth.

Xie Lian has felt that pain before, albeit on a smaller scale.

Thinking someone was his friend, never realizing how far apart they stood. How little he understood them.

But Xie Lian was lucky.

"You mean..." The prince of Yong'an swallows hard, his eyes widening. "...You and Prince An Le were the ones who...?"

"Well, I helped move things along a little bit," Qi Rong shrugs. "He did all the leg work."

Then, he makes Xie Lian's teeth clench.

"We would have been able to finish the job, if it wasn't for that damn Guoshi..."

And finally, there it is.

"...We?" Lang Qianqiu questions softly.

If Xie Lian could, he would be hanging his head.

"Us of Xianle," Qi Rong grins, relishing in his distress.

"We decided to show your piece of shit father our fucking gratitude, condescending ass...we would have killed you too, wiping out the entire bloodline, imagine!" His cackles echo off the walls with satisfaction, "But Guoshi Fangxin...he saved your life again. Fucking BASTARD!"

He groans, like, if Hua Cheng would let him go long enough, he'd be bashing his head into the ground himself with frustration.

"...Again?"

Xie Lian silently curses the fact that he and Hua Cheng don't have a communication array set up. He has no way of asking for release.

"You really think a random group of bandits managed to kill that many imperial guards?!" Qi Rong groans, feet flailing in the air once more. "God fucking damn it, I'm tired of you good for nothing shit for brains!"

And of course, he's remembering now. Xie Lian knows he is.

The day they met.

How many of his guards died. How young he was. How frightened.

That every single one of those men died for him. The weight he had to carry. Xie Lian knows that feeling.

(It hurts.)

"...That was An Le?" Lang Qianqiu whispers, his voice suddenly small.

This, in the end, is where their stories diverge.

Xie Lian had a friend that he didn't understand. One who was different from him. And even though they both tried, they never quite saw one another clearly.

But underneath it all…

There wasn't hatred between them. There never was.

But there's an inherent disconnect, when you are born without peers. When you're too naive to realize that wealth and privilege place you so far away from everyone else.

And when you realize what people really thought of you…

It hurts.

Not only that—it's so viciously lonely.

Xie Lian was a happy child. He didn't know how else to be.

But there was a quietness, one that he was always seeking to fill. A lonesome kind of silence.

Lang Qianqiu was the same. But he got to keep the illusion of omnipotence.

Xie Lian felt so safe, when he thought he could do anything.

He was never afraid, when he thought that he was strong.

But when you realize just how much you didn't see, just how much you didn't know, the world becomes frightening.

And then you start questioning yourself.

Looking back at the things you said and did when you thought you knew everything.

"…Oh, I get it," Qi Rong grins, eyes gleaming. "You buried that Guoshi of yours, right? Put a stake through his heart and everything—YEOWWW!"

He squeals with annoyance when Hua Cheng's fingers tighten viciously in his hair, yanking him a couple of inches higher from the floor.

(Xie Lian never told him about the stake.)

But now, finally—he feels his mouth fall free.

Qi Rong has already said what he needed to.

And the first word out of his mouth actually startles Lang Qianqiu. Hua Cheng as well, but marginally less. His eye only widens slightly when Xie Lian mutters—

“Bullshit.”

“...Excuse you?” Qi Rong glares, slowly revolving from where he’s dangling by his hair in Hua Cheng’s grip.

“You come into a man’s house—while HE’S EATING DINNER, mind you—and YOU CALL HIM A LIAR?” Qi Rong crosses his arms. “GET THE FUCK OUT!”

Xie Lian ignores him completely, staring blindly in Lang Qianqiu’s direction.

“Your father—you saw me,” he reminds the prince, pleading. “I killed him. An Le—it’s as you said, he had no reason to harm you. This creature— he’s insane, and a liar. You shouldn’t trust a word he says—”

“Wait a minute, so you’re the Guoshi Fangxin?” Qi Rong muses, glancing over the skin Hua Cheng has him in.

“You’re way more boring looking than I thought you’d be. Rumors said you were a looker. Ah, well. Probably just bullshit anyways! The king was already wounded, reports show that much. Why so eager to take the blame, old man?” He snickers. “Irritated you didn’t get there first?”

“I—” Xie Lian’s hands are trembling, where he clenches them at his sides. “I didn’t—it was—”

“Guoshi,” Lang Qianqiu croaks, his voice trembling—and Xie Lian hangs his head in response. “Stop.”

But what’s left if he does?

He’s starting to understand what Pei meant, before.

‘I think you take pride in your ability to endure suffering.’

Xie Lian's lips quiver, and his throat tightens.

'That's the only way someone can endure a lifetime of being punished.'

Lang Qianqiu found out anyway. He's hurting, anyway.

And if that's true, then...

It might not seem like much, when stacked next to so many lifetimes of failure, but...

Xie Lian spent more time alone, in that coffin, than he did for any stretch among humans in his eight hundred years. With only the dreams of the ones he lost to keep him company.

By the end, he thought he would simply lay there until he faded. For however many centuries it took.

Every day, Xie Lian still wakes up in the dark. Sometimes, he'll throw his hands up and stretch as far as he can—just to make sure he won't find the coffin lid above him.

If it all came to this, to Lang Qianqiu learning the truth from Qi Rong's lips—it's more than just another failure.

It means that Xie Lian endured that without purpose. Or, more accurately—

Xie Lian endured all of that because of Qi Rong.

"...Pathetic."

His voice is low, cold—and at first, the green ghost doesn't seem to recognize that it's directed at him, still snorting and giggling in Lang Qianqiu's direction, but...

Once he does realize, he frowns.

"After all that, you're calling ME pathetic?! HA! What a fucking JOKE!"

"No," Xie Lian replies flatly, slowly lifting his head. He speaks evenly. Doesn't have the uncontrolled wrath that he did when he was young. "You're the one everyone is laughing at."

That makes the ghost stop his howling and cawing, his eyes narrowing as he stares him down.

“You’ve always been the butt of the joke, Qi Rong. Even when you’re the one trying to tell it.”

Now that he doesn’t seem particularly bothered with hiding his identity, Hua Cheng allows the disguise to fall away.

Finally, green eyes widen sharply with recognition. “…Cousin?”

Qi Rong blinks, staring at him in shock, then smirking when he sees the shackle in his eyes. “Hah, I heard you ascended again. Stupid fucking heavenly officials, not seeing what a sick bastard you are! You were Guoshi Fangxin? All this time? HA! HA! THAT’S FUCKING PRICELESS!”

Hua Cheng’s gaze darkens as the ghoul prattles on, practically wiggling in his grip from deranged excitement. “I guess that Heavenly Emperor of yours left you shackled this time? How’d you even get another chance?! Probably had to get down on your knees and suck his—!”

BAM!

This time, he’s slammed into the floor so violently, his head actually gets stuck. Hua Cheng lets him go, watching as Qi Rong writhes and pushes at the ground with his hand, struggling to push himself free.

When he does, he’s wearing his own face, rather than Xie Lian’s.

But before he can sit up, there’s a boot on top of his head, pushing it back down into the crumbled rock, grinding it down until his face starts to crack and bleed against the shards—

“San Lang,” Xie Lian calls out, his tone even. “Stop.”

Hua Cheng is silent, his gaze wild.

Still, he obeys, lifting his boot from the ghost’s head, trembling with anger as he takes a step back.

Lang Qianqiu is shaking as well—but not from rage. Rage will come for him later.

Now, he only has guilt and regret.

Xie Lian closes his eyes with a sigh.

All these years later, and he’s still dealing with Qi Rong’s messes.

“Going through all of that trouble…” Xie Lian sighs, taking a step towards him. “All to avenge a clan that you aren’t even a part of.”

Qi Rong pushes himself up onto his hands and knees, glaring. “I—!”

“My parents took you in out of obligation,” the elder of the two murmurs, watching his aura now with faint distaste.

It’s twisted and warped, sparks flying off the edges, the inner layers twisting like thorns.

Green, like an infected wound, flesh that needs to be cut free.

“And then I banished you.”

Qi Rong’s teeth click together anxiously at the memory, and there’s satisfaction in it for Hua Cheng, seeing the green ghost’s bravado flicker.

“…Just before you murdered me,” He hisses, his fingers scrabbling at the gravel with bitterness. “Does your precious emperor know about that?!” He sneers. “Or do you think he’d banish you again, if he knew? HA! Always such a liar—”

“He probably does know,” Xie Lian replies. “Either way, it doesn’t bother me.”

“What?” Qi Rong finally manages to sit up properly. “Has this ancestor’s esteemed cousin finally stopped pretending that he’s some saint?!”

That actually makes him smile, somehow. In spite of it all.

“I never thought of myself as a saint, Qi Rong.” He murmurs. “It’s been centuries since I thought of myself generously at all.”

He can’t see the way Hua Cheng grimaces in response to that.

“But,” Xie Lian blinks owlishly, “what I did to you—that’s never haunted me at all,” he admits.

Qi Rong’s eyes flare, infuriated. “Actually, I feel pretty good about it.”
“Wh—?!”

“It’s a good memory for me.” Xie Lian explains. “Sometimes I might be having a bad day, and I’ll remember. It cheers me up,” he crosses his arms, tilting his head to the side. “But now, I have to admit—it’s become even more amusing.”

Qi Rong can handle many things. Endure most forms of suffering. What he can’t stand, in the end, is being looked down on.

That’s why his cousin has always been one of the few that could truly get to him— straight to the core.

“You were so terrified of human face disease, you allied yourself with the creature that destroyed Xianle...”

Xie Lian won’t utter Bai Wuxiang’s name, not even now—but he recalls his alliance with Qi Rong with utter contempt.

“Then, centuries later, you’re still murdering people in their name,” Xie Lian concludes, shaking his head. “It’s pitiful, really.”

The green ghost glares up at him venomously, blood streaked down his chin.

Even in his own skin, they look alike. Similar facial structures. Family resemblances, and all that. Qi Rong’s hair is slightly darker, a little curlier. His nose and chin are sharper, and...

There’s this hatefulness to his expression that his cousin lacks. A harshness to the curve of his mouth, a constant sneer.

But that hatred is never quite so pronounced as when he looks up at Xie Lian, hands trembling with the desire to throttle him.

“You sure are comfortable, having a Ghost King around to protect you, huh?” Qi Rong sneers, turning his glare on Hua Cheng, who stares back at him with impassivity. “It’s easy to show up here, insult me in my own house, pretend you’re above me—!”

“I am,” Xie Lian replies. “And San Lang doesn’t need to protect me from you,” he kneels down, crossing his arms over his knees as he stares at Qi Rong, displaying an eerie ability to make eye contact, even when he can’t see what he’s looking at. “If you disagree, try to hit me. I won’t let him stop you.”

Of course, Qi Rong knows better than to try—but still, he has no impulse control.

Xie Lian catches his fist with ease, squeezing, holding it in place as Qi Rong’s arm trembles from the strain.

“Wow,” the god murmurs, his tone bitingly sarcastic. “Qi Rong has gotten so strong.”

Of course, Xie Lian’s cousin has always been weak.

Even the worst things he’s achieved in his life—he always had help.

In the case of the Gilded Banquet, it was An Le who did most of the work.

And in Hong-er’s case…

Qi Rong was only able to hurt him because of Bai Wuxiang.

Xie Lian knows—Hong’er would have kept silent as a choice. And he also chose not to fight back.

If he had, it would have awoken Xie Lian—and the White Clothed Calamity would have gone after him.

But in a one on one fight, even at seventeen—Hong’er could have handled Qi Rong.

After all, Qi Rong led a life of privilege and wealth from a young age, and Xie Lian’s…

His Hong’er was a soldier.

“It’s no surprise you’re listed as one of the four calamities,” Xie Lian murmurs, his tone light. “I’m trembling with fear.”

His hands have never been so steady.

It’s hard now, to remember that day, and not resort to the anger he once felt. To resist the urge to rip the green ghost apart.

But Xie Lian is no longer the only one with a grudge against Qi Rong. His life isn’t solely for the prince to take.

And in any case…

Xie Lian has had eight centuries to think about his old life.

He knows now, beating Qi Rong will never get the reaction that you want.

“But it’s not because you’re weak,” the prince murmurs, still holding

Qi Rong's fist between his fingers. "That isn't why you're beneath me."

He lets go of the green ghost's fist, rising to his feet.

"I'm not a good person," Xie Lian admits calmly.

Hua Cheng looks on, his expression...complicated.

"I've done horrible things, but—" He tilts his chin down, looking down on Qi Rong. Just as the prince always has.

No matter how many statues Qi Rong toppled down, smashing them to the ground, trying to change their positions—somehow, it always ends up the same.

"You are your father's son," Xie Lian murmurs.

He doesn't need to see to know that Qi Rong has flinched.

"And I don't think I could ever sink that low."

Qi Rong's father was quickly forgotten after he died. Only living in the memories of those who knew him.

His horrors, his cruelties, are only remembered by the likes of Xie Lian and Qi Rong. A comparison so vile, so insulting, that even Xie Lian's cousin recoiled from it.

"...Shut up," he mutters, wrenching away, pounding his fists against the ground. "Shut up! ...SHUT THE FUCK UP! I'VE HEARD ENOUGH FROM YOU! YOU LAME, PATHETIC FAILURE!"

Xie Lian has heard it all.

"YOU COCKSUCKING MOTHERFUCKER!"

Now THAT is colorful.

Maybe he *hasn't* heard it all.

Hua Cheng's eye flashes dangerously, and the only thing that's holding him back from dismembering Qi Rong is Xie Lian's implied order to hold back, but—

"YOU SON OF A—!"

THUMP!

"...AHHH!"

It would seem that Lang Qianqiu, who had been frozen with horror up until now, was finally stirred into action.

Leaping forward and, with one sweep of his sword—cutting Qi Rong in two at his middle.

"Lang Qianqiu!" Xie Lian cries, startled. "Don't be so rash!"

"What?!" His student sends him a sharp look, as though Xie Lian has lost his mind. "Did you not hear what he said?! HE PLOTTED THE MURDER OF MY ENTIRE CLAN! WHY SHOULDN'T I TAKE HIS ROTTEN LIFE?! LOOK WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU!"

Xie Lian flinches.

See, this is why he doesn't share.

You give away one little peep about an admittedly not-so-great time in your life, and boom!

It's part of Lang Qianqiu's backstory now, not just his own. And in part, that's fair.

But in another way, it isn't.

"It's not as easy as chopping him up," Hua Cheng rolls his eyes. "You would have to know the location of his ashes, then destroy them."

"Fine!" The prince snarls, his shoulders trembling with rage. "Then I'll find them! I don't care how long it takes!"

Xie Lian opens his mouth to protest, then he hears this... Weird pattering on the floor.

Like an animal, almost...but not exactly. It's four distinct points of contact against the floor, but there's something odd about it.

From behind him, Hua Cheng grimaces. "I could have lived without the sight of that." Xie Lian glances toward him, confused, and he explains:

"He's...fleeing." Then, to clarify, he tacks on— "In pieces."

Oh.

Xie Lian grimaces at the thought—but he's spared the sight of Qi Rong's detached legs and hips running across the room, smacking to the opposite wall, while his torso and head flee by walking on his hands.

"THIS ISN'T OVER, ASSHOLES! HEY! HEY! OVER—DAMMIT—" He hand-walks himself over to his legs, tries to grab his ankle with one hand, but that sends him tumbling over in a heap. "THIS ANCESTOR WILL BE THE ONE TO COME OUT ON TOP IN THE END!"

Xie Lian rubs his temples with a groan.

Honestly, it's humiliating to think that the two of them are even related.

He half expects Lang Qianqiu to go charging after him, but the martial god seems to gauge that, given Qi Rong's limited mobility, he's allowed to have a head start.

Instead, he looks to Xie Lian.

"Are you done?" The prince doesn't immediately respond, but that doesn't deter him. "Now that I know, can you just tell me one thing?"

Xie Lian lets out a tired sigh, dropping his hands from his face. "What is it?"

"My father." Lang Qianqiu mutters. "What happened between the two of you?"

Xie Lian falls silent, the memory pricking uncomfortably at the edges of his mind.

"...It won't make you feel better, Lang Qianqiu," he whispers.

The truth is so much worse than living with the lie.

"Guoshi...that isn't up to you."

No, he supposes not.

"Was he already hurt, when you found him?"

"...Yes," Xie Lian admits, wrapping his arms around himself.

"Badly?"

He bites his lip, trying not to remember the trusting look in the king's eyes.

"Yes," Xie Lian mutters. "He wouldn't have survived."

He could try to play it off, say that he wasn't sure, but...

Xie Lian remembers it well. The agony the man was in. The slow, inevitable death that laid before him.

"...Then why?"

He wants to argue, to say what he's been saying—that knowing doesn't fix anything, but...

Ignorance didn't help either. They still ended up here.

If Xie Lian was the person he used to be, he would have been angry with Hua Cheng for doing this. Would have blamed him, for the pain and regret that he's feeling right now.

But he doesn't. Xie Lian did this.

"...He ordered me to have the guards go out and kill the people of Xianle in retaliation," Xie Lian mutters, holding himself a little tighter.

After all, he knows what it's like—to love one's father, but to learn to feel disappointed in him.

"If he had lived any longer than he did, he would have given the orders to the guards who were remaining," Xie Lian concludes, feeling hollowed out. "That's why I..."

Why he helped the king along, allowing him to die quickly. Relatively painlessly.

"...I wouldn't have let them," Lang Qianqiu stares at Xie Lian, his expression impossible to read. Caught between so many different emotions—

So much pain.

"You know I wouldn't have."

"...I did," his Guoshi agrees. "But I didn't want that to be your last memory of your father."

The prince falls silent, his posture telling a story of tension. Xie Lian couldn't have predicted what he was going to say.

"...Instead, you chose to take away the last loved one I had left. The closest thing I would have had to family," Lang Qianqiu points out quietly. "You."

Xie Lian couldn't have known how much it would hurt to hear it.

"...You didn't need me," he mutters, holding himself tightly, his shoulders hunching inward.

"Yes, I did," Lang Qianqiu whispers.

He needed his Guoshi so much, his voice still aches from the memory of it.

"I was seventeen years old, and I was alone." He mumbles, his voice wavering. "How easy was that for you?"

Hua Cheng stiffens, clearly riled by the comparison—but Xie Lian simply hangs his head.

"It wasn't."

Lang Qianqiu closes his eyes, breathing in slowly through his nose. Xie Lian can feel it now, how hard he's trying to think about his words, to put thought behind his actions.

Beyond the hurt, the anger, and the guilt—he cares for his Guoshi, and doesn't want to be impulsive.

But that doesn't mean that his words don't cause pain—even if they both needed to hear them.

"...I know you thought you were doing the right thing," Lang Qianqiu mutters. Maybe he didn't before, but he does now. "But this was never about me."

Xie Lian's stomach sinks.

"You..." The prince of Yong'an shakes his head, "I don't know if you were in that much pain, or if—if you hated yourself that much, but—"

Hua Cheng's eye narrows sharply, "Watch it, boy."

"San Lang—" Xie Lian's voice is small, but his plea is sincere. "Let him speak."

"…You used me to hurt yourself," Lang Qianqiu concludes, and each word hits like a weight in Xie Lian's chest.

The same weight that his student now bears, forced to live with the knowledge of what he put his Guoshi through.

"I have to live with that, but so do you."

Xie Lian's body physically reacts to the words, shrinking, curling in on itself, as though that could somehow shield him from the pain that's churning inside.

Because Lang Qianqiu is right.

'I-I didn't want to do that!'

It hurts.

Remembering how much pain Xie Lian caused.

'Why did you make me do that?!'

Being cradled in Lang Qianqiu's arms as the boy wept, frightened and alone.

And—

'I-I still need you!'

He said that.

Xie Lian's throat tightens.

He had forgotten that Lang Qianqiu said that, back then.

'I'm so sorry, Guoshi…'

It hurts.

Because—

'What do we do, when faced with the wicked?'

Lang Qianqiu is right.

Xie Lian wanted to be punished for failing. Not just in that instance, but in so many others.

He wanted to throw himself on the sword, before it could land on someone else.

But forcing Lang Qianqiu to hurt him—that wasn't protecting him.

The truth is—Xie Lian hurt him deeply.

The Crown Prince of Yong'an turns away, leaving the cavern without a word, clearly going after Qi Rong.

Hua Cheng's lips curve into a snarl as he goes to follow, but—

"Don't," Xie Lian warns him, and when the Ghost king seems reluctant to obey, he mumble—

"If you go, I'll be angry."

And that draws Hua Cheng to a dead halt.

Not because Xie Lian sounds cross with him—just the opposite.

The prince of Xianle sounds...

Profoundly sad.

"...He had no right to speak to you that way," the Ghost King mutters darkly, turning back to Xie Lian. "Someone should teach him sense—"

"He had every right." His god interrupts him—and even as his voice aches, it's firm. "I hurt him. Why bring him here, give him the chance to see things clearly and then forbid him from having emotions about it?"

"He needed to know what you actually did—and why," Hua Cheng comes to a stop in front of Xie Lian, watching the way his god nearly slumps from the guilt

"...You don't even seem to realize what I actually did," Xie Lian mutters bitterly, shaking his head.

"Dianxia—"

"I manipulated him," the prince turns away, his voice slightly raw, his ribs hurting from how tightly he's holding himself. "I patronized him. I lied to him."

“Your intentions were to protect him,” Hua Cheng follows behind him, not allowing Xie Lian to shrink too far away with self loathing.

“No,” Xie Lian croaks, swallowing thickly. “I thought that’s what they were, but…I was just…It was my fault, and I wanted to be punished.”

“That was Qi Rong, and An Le.” Hua Cheng corrects him firmly, “Not you.”

“No…” Xie Lian feels frustration building in his chest, struggling to explain what, to him, has long since been an accepted part of his reality. “I was too comfortable.”

Hua Cheng pauses, eyebrows raised.

“What?”

The prince groans, pressing his palms against his temples.

“I stayed too long, and I…I was too happy,” he mutters, fingers knowing in his hair. “I’m a god of misfortune, Hua Cheng. When I stay in one place for too long, I…”

He doesn’t cry. Not really, but…

His voice still cracks.

“I break things.”

There’s a pause, and then Xie Lian feels a warm, heavy weight upon his shoulder— Hua Cheng’s hand.

“…Oh, Dianxia,” the Ghost King sighs, his tone…rather loaded. “That isn’t true.”

Xie Lian bites his lip, trying to find some evidence that Hua Cheng might be right. To find a time when something he loved didn’t suffer or break as a result of his failure.

He can find none.

And yet…

Hua Cheng seems so sure of it. Of himself.

“…San Lang?” He whispers.

Another hand comes to rest on his shoulder, the shadow of an embrace.

There's been something bothering him, ever since Hua Cheng came and plucked him from the heavens. Something subliminal, maybe.

Still, Xie Lian looks back over his shoulder, "...Have we met before?"

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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ENDURASHROOM

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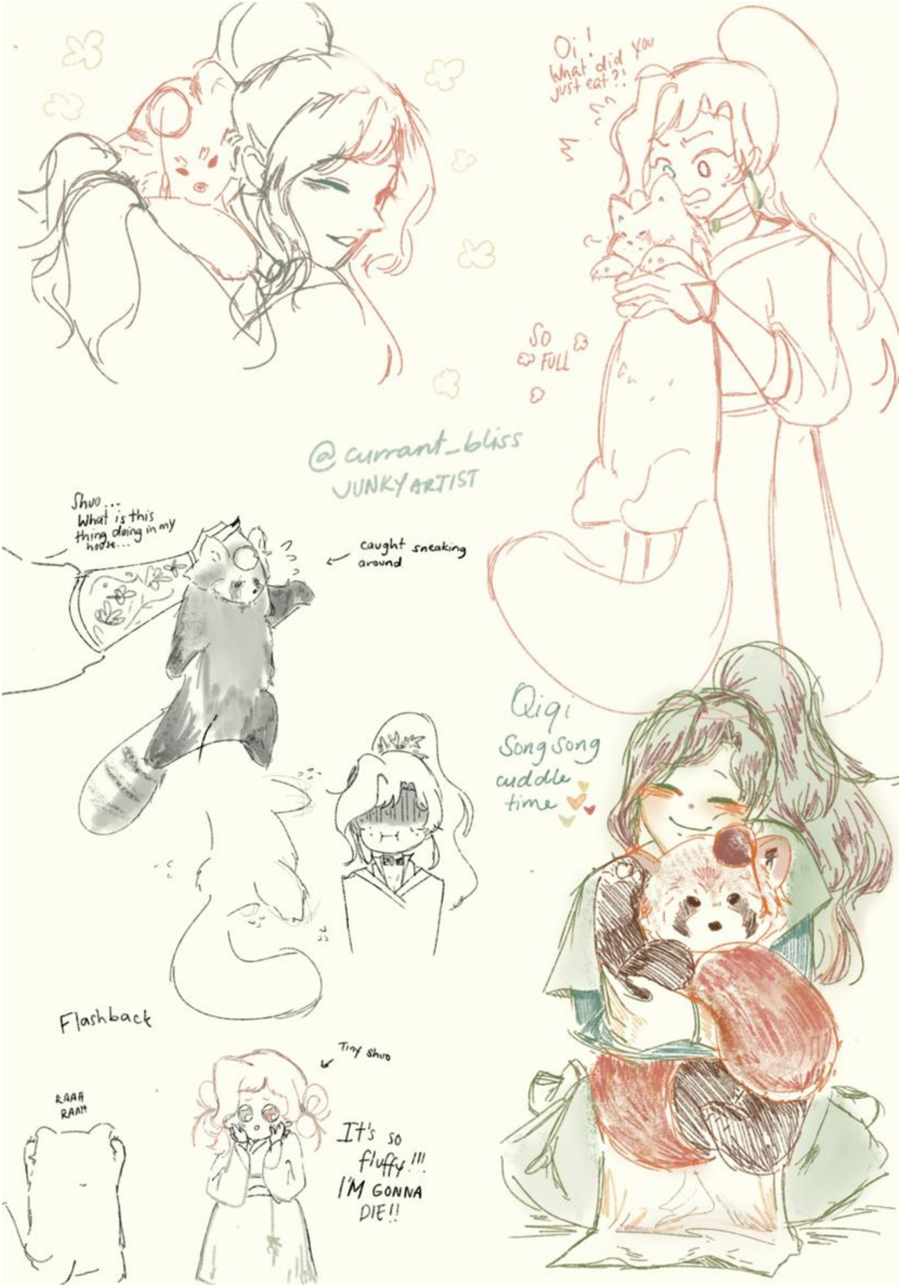
Oi! What did you just eat?!
So FULL
@currant_bliss
JUNKYARTIST
Shuo... What is this thing doing in my house...
caught sneaking around
Qiqi Songsong cuddle time
Flashback
Tiny Shuo
RAAH RAAH
It's so fluffy!!! I'M GONNA DIE!!

CREDIT: JUNKY

[image]

CREDIT: SEONG

Chapter End Notes

thank you to ash, junky, and seong for their amazing artwork, and allowing me to share it!

xoxo, Evie

Seeking Perfection

Chapter Summary

> It was a simple question.
>
> ‘Have we met before?’
>
> But it’s been so long, the silence feels like it’s own kind of anger. Something between a yes and a no.
>
> Hua Cheng’s hands feel heavy on his shoulders. Not holding Xie Lian down, but still—
>
> The weight of them feels enormous.

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A few hundred meters away, Qi Rong staggers through the exit of the cavern, hands tugging at the hem of his robes as he tries to pull himself back together.

“Stupid...incompetent...BASTARDS!” He snarls, pawing at his legs miserably. “STAY —STAY STILL, DAMMIT! GOD FUCKING—!”

Suddenly, he finds himself lifted up by his hair once again—a far easier task, given his recent loss of half of his bodyweight—

Only to find himself face to face with the Crown Prince of Yong’an once more.

“...the FUCK?!” Qi Rong glares, his detached lower half kicking around. “HOW DID YOU CATCH UP ALREADY?!”

“...You weren’t exactly moving fast,” Lang Qianqiu glares, turning around to make his way back into the cave.

“You could’ve given me a HEAD START!” The green ghost glares, “You already CUT ME IN HALF, ASSHOLE—WHY ARE WE GOING BACK IN?!”

Lang Qianqiu did technically give him a head start—if only to confront his Guoshi— but now, he has other things in mind.

"I'm going to throw your head into that cauldron of yours, and feed you to your little minions," the martial god growls, his eyes burning scarlet with anger.

"…HAHA!" THe green ghost cackles, eyes widening with surprised delight. "Well, would you look at that?! Cousin crown prince's student is a little TORTURER! HA! THAT'S SO FUCKING HILARIOUS!"

BAM!

His laughter is muffled when his skull is slammed into the mountainside.

"Does it count as torture when it's someone lower than a beast?!" The crown prince of Yong'an hisses, slamming him into the stone formation once more, drawing more muffled laughter from the creature.

"HAHAHA! I'm SURE YOU—YOU'D LIKE TO THINK SO!"

Lang Qianqiu yanks the head back, finding Qi Rong's face streaked with blood as he cackles and chortles with satisfaction, teeth gleaming in the moonlight.

"Do whatever you like! THIS ANCESTOR WILL JUST COME BACK TEN TIMES WORSE, HE'S PRACTICALLY A CALAMITY ALREADY!"

"You—!"

Lan Qianqiu snarls, dragging him into the cave entrance, prepared to make good on his threats—until something very odd happens.

He trips.

The martial god has never been clumsy, particularly not when he's so focused, but…

Here he is, sprawled in the dirt.

He could've sworn…

…It was almost as though a root jumped up from the ground, wrapping itself around his ankle.

"How the—?" He questions, pushing himself up onto his elbows, looking back—and finding nothing there.

Qi Rong cackles, running forward on his hands, "CATCH ME IF YOU CAN, FUCKER! HA—!"

The little monster stops laughing all of the sudden, falling silent, and before Lang Qianqiu can turn around to see what it is, he hears an unfamiliar voice ringing through the forest.

Soft, taunting—with an almost melodic smoothness to it's tone.

"Hello, Qi Rong."

There's a soft jingling ringing through the air as Lang Qianqiu rolls over onto his back, still sprawled out on the ground as he pulls himself to sit up.

Through the darkness, he sees a set of eyes, and nothing else. One the color of the leaves above.

The other, a flame.

"Did you make a new friend?" The voice purrs.

Unlike before, facing the threats of a ghost king and two martial gods—now, Qi Rong grows pale, pulling himself back in Lang Qianqiu's direction.

(As though he might prefer going into the boiling cauldron.)

"You seem a little…torn."

"R…REAL fuckin' funny, Ren Song!" The Green Ghost glares, "I'LL RIP YOU IN HALF, NEXT TIME!"

The only response he receives is tinkling laughter, and Lang Qianqiu has had enough. "What, do you think your ally can save you?!"

"Ally?" Ren Song questions coldly, stepping into the moonlight.

Hands clasped behind his back, black and emerald robes stirring slightly with the breeze.

"You're rather ignorant, aren't you?" His expression turns imperious, and Lang Qianqiu's cheeks grow hot.

Partly from sheepishness. But also—

Because that smug, arrogant air about him is similar to that of Crimson Rain Sought Flower.

For obvious reasons, the prince isn't fond of the similarity.

"Were you the one who cut him in half?"

"I..." Lang Qianqiu opens his mouth to answer, then stops.

...What is he doing, complying with a ghost?!

"..." The prince rises to his feet, clearing his throat. He stands substantially taller than the forest demon—and still, he feels the need to square his shoulders and puff his chest out. "I'll be the one asking the questions, demon!"

Ren Song tilts his head back, slowly arching an eyebrow. "Is that so, brat?"

"...Excuse me?" The god glares, eyes burning slightly brighter, and the ghost doesn't seem intimidated, tossing his hair back over his shoulders, earrings jingling as he does so.

"Did I misunderstand?" Ren Song muses, taking a step closer. "I thought we were going back and forth calling each other things that were obvious." He stops in front of him, eyes widening innocently. "I could have called you an imbecile," he adds, tilting his head.

He rolls on the balls of his feet to get further into the god's space, hands still clasped behind his back.

"Or obnoxious," he hisses, eyes glinting with a playful form of condescending. "Which one of those do you prefer?"

"..." Lang Qianqiu huffs out a breath, leaning back.

"You may refer to me as General Tai Hua," he clears his throat, squaring himself once more. "Or your highness. Clearly you aren't aware—but I'm the Martial God of the East. We're in my territory."

Ren Song's eyes widen with mocking surprise, "Is that so? Oh, dear..."

He even goes so far as to allow his lower lip to wobble fretfully.

"You aren't going to disperse me, are you, General Tai Hua?"

"...Not if you stay out of my way," the prince shakes his head, going for Qi Rong again. Ren Song watches, dumbfounded.

...Is he really stupid?

"...And you're the one who cut him in half?" The forest demon repeats dryly, watching his movements.

"I'm about to do worse than that." Lang Qianqiu mutters darkly. "And you shouldn't be calling people older than you brats."

Now, the demon's eyes flash with irritation.

Visually speaking, Lang Qianqiu is in his early twenties. Ironically enough, he actually looks older than the prince of Xianle.

And Ren Song, despite possessing skins that make him look older...his natural form leaves him looking somewhere near eighteen or nineteen years old.

Permanently a teenager. Thankfully he's no longer visually a child, or a pre-teen, but—

He doesn't enjoy the reminder of his unnaturally prolonged youth.

"And what do you mean by worse, General Tai Hua?"

"I'm going to destroy this body of his," the god mutters.

"Then, I'm going to find his ashes and destroy them."

That makes Ren Song's eyes widen sharply.

"...Destroy?" He questions softly. "You mean to disperse the creature?"

Lang Qianqiu nods, distracted, having assumed that much was already obvious from his own words.

"He destroyed my clan," the prince replies, reaching down to yank Qi Rong up by the back of his collar.

"It's my right."

Ren Song's lips press into a firm line. "You should be warned," he murmurs, his tone low and flat, "there are others who have already laid claim to his life."

That hadn't exactly occurred to the martial god, but he shrugs. "Well, it would appear that I've gotten him first. I'm sure that any of them would understand—!"

THUD!

Something grabs the back of his robes, yanking until he's swept from his feet and slammed against the ground.

Qi Rong flies from his hands tumbling and rolling against the ground until his face slams into a tree—and when Lang Qianqiu tries to sit up again, there's a foot on his chest, keeping him down.

"Your Guoshi should have taught you more about ghosts, it seems."

Ren Song leans over him, lips pulled back to reveal sharpened canines, gleaming menacingly in the moonlight. And when he speaks, his eyes flash brighter.

"You don't get between a ghost and it's prey."

He might be smaller than Lang Qianqiu—but the power behind his leg is enough to keep the god pinned to the ground, struggling to throw him off.

"Your prey?!" The prince glares, gripping the ghost by the ankle as he tries to yank him off, to no avail. "What gives you the right?!"

"You're not the only one whose life got ruined by that piece of shit," Ren Song's foot presses down harder, the heel digging into Lang Qianqiu's skin through his robes. "I got him first. His life is mine. Understand? Or should I speak slower?" He sneers.

"...Alright," Lang Qianqiu closes his eyes, breathing in through his nose. "You might be small, but you aren't weak. My mistake."

Somehow, Ren Song seems more irritated than he was before. "Small?"

"But," the prince of Yong'an's grip tightens around the ghost's ankle. "I'm not stupid."

That's when the demon hears it.

Something whistling through the air—and while his strength aided by gravity was enough to keep the god down—

He can't pull his foot free.

BAM!

The flat of the sword slams into the small of the forest demon's back, and of course— that's when Lang Qianqiu let's go of his ankle, sending him flying.

"Oof!"

The blow would be strong enough to knock out a weaker opponent, but Ren Song only ends up slightly winded, coughing.

Lang Qianqiu leaps to his feet, turning back on Qi Rong, who has started attempting to log roll into the shrubbery.

(Which is hard, it turns out, when your hips are detached.) But before he gets close, he hears the words—

"Gege, can I eat this one?"

Then, a pause.

A long pause.

Then, Ren Song lets out an irritated snarl, charging after the martial god.

"Who are you talking to?!"

"I'm not talking to anyone," the ghost glares, "he didn't answer, so I'll just take a few bites WHILE I'M WAITING!"

At first, Lang Qianqiu assumes he must have been speaking about Qi Rong, since he claimed to have his own vendetta, but—

The martial god is the one who ends up getting tackled. "WAIT— ME?!"

"WHO ELSE?!"

"MAYBE THE GHOST YOU SAID RUINED YOUR LIFE?!"

The individuals in question have over millennia of battle experience between the two of them. Each feared and respected within their own spheres for their might. Disciples of two of the most powerful beings to walk the earth.

And right now, they're wrestling like children.

"I DON'T WANT HIM DEAD AT THE MOMENT!"

"HOW DO I RANK HIGHER ON YOUR PRIORITIES?!"

They roll over until Ren Song is straddling his hips, one hand wrapped around the prince's throat while the other pulls back, claws extended —

"I'M A COMPLICATED PERSON!" He snarls. "AND I'M NOT SMALL!"

His hand plunges downward, nails scraping against the martial god's cheek before Lang Qianqiu catches him by the wrist.

"Okay! OKAY!" He wheezes as Ren Song's grip on his throat tightens. "I COULD HAVE PHRASED THAT DIFFERENTLY—!"

"HOW?!"

"...Undersized?"

Now, the ghost squeezes until Lang Qianqiu's eyes bulge from his skull. "O-OKAY..." He wheezes, "SPRITE-LIKE?!"

"I DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS!"

"This—THIS IS STUPID!" The prince glares, coughing, "GET OFF!"

"BACK OFF OF MY KILL, AND I WILL!"

"Why should he even be YOUR KILL?!" Lang Qianqiu shouts, gripping Ren Song's wrist with one hand, using the other to attempt and pull the ghost's hand from his throat, "I already said—HE SLAUGHTERED MY CLAN!"

"AND?! HE KILLED MY BROTHER!"

"WELL, I'M SORRY FOR YOUR LOSS!" Lang Qianqiu shouts, still looking infuriated, and Ren Song pauses, his brow furrowing with confusion, but he still maintains a wrathful tone.

"...THANKS!"

"BUT ONE BROTHER VERSUS AN ENTIRE CLAN?! YOU CAN'T COMPARE THE TWO!"

"HAH?!" The ghost sputters, his eyes widening with annoyance, "it's not MY FAULT that I didn't come from some BIG FANCY CLAN or that my siblings were ALREADY DEAD!"

"No, but IT DOES MEAN THAT I LOST MORE THAN YOU DID!"

"HE WAS THE ONLY FAMILY I HAD LEFT?! IT'S THE SAME THING!"

This time, when Ren Song hears that familiar whirring in the air, he's prepared for it, releasing Lang Qianqiu's throat as he ducks, dodging the incoming sword—but the martial god uses that as an opportunity to flip them over, pinning the ghost down by the wrists.

"Look!" He glares, slamming Ren Song back down when he attempts to kick free, "I'm not unreasonable, alright?! We can take him down together, if that's what you want! Fair?!"

"NO!" The demon huffs, blowing his bangs out of his face. "I just said I DON'T WANT HIM DEAD RIGHT NOW!"

"That makes NO sense, and if you want to get revenge, YOU'RE GONNA HAVE TO COMPROMISE!" Lang Qianqiu huffs. "When did he kill your brother, anyway?!"

"A century ago!" Ren Song hisses, "Why does that matter?!"

"Well, he killed my clan THREE centuries ago, so he got me FIRST!"

"OH?! THEN WHY HAVEN'T I BUMPED INTO YOU UNTIL NOW?!" Ren Song tugs at his wrists until the skin bruises from it, but with Lang Qianqiu on top of him, his size provides a natural advantage.

"WELL—I DIDN'T KNOW IT WAS HIM UNTIL HALF AN HOUR AGO!"

"THEN HE GOT ME FIRST!"

"NO! THAT'S NOT HOW THAT WORKS! YOU JUST KNEW ABOUT IT FIRST!"

Ren Song opens his mouth to argue more, then seems to become utterly exasperated by the situation, ramming his leg up until it slams into, well—

A very sensitive area, leaving Lang Qianqiu wheezing and rolling off.

The forest demon sits up, his ponytail knocked askew by the wrestling, loose pieces of hair falling into his face as he whips his head around, looking for the—

“...Fuck,” he mutters, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Lang Qianqiu is rolling around, hunched and wheezing.

“That...wasn’t...honorable!”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” Ren Song hisses, whipping his head around to pin a glare on the martial god. “Now look at what you did!”

Lang Qianqiu sits up—with no small amount of trouble—and sees that Qi Rong’s torso has gone limp, eyes wide and unseeing.

“...Is he dead?” the prince mutters, eyes widening slightly. His own hair is a tousled mess from the exchange, finger shaped bruises forming around his throat. “That feels kind of anticlimactic—”

“He was already dead, dipshit,” Ren Song sneers. “The word you’re thinking of is dispersed, and no, he just...”

The ghost groans, his face sinking into his hands.

“He’s probably possessed one of those human prisoners and run off.”

Meaning...

He got away.

Lang Qianqiu sits there, stewing in his frustration.

“...I had him!” He snaps. “Don’t talk to me like it’s my fault when YOU’RE the one who got in the way!”

“HA!” Ren Song laughs, but with no mirth. “Isn’t that hypocritical.”

Before Lang Qianqiu can ask what he means, the ghost rises to his feet, brushing himself off.

“...Where are you going?”

“Where do you think?” He mutters, pushing his hair behind his ears. “To go find him. Which wasn’t fucking easy the first time, you irritating, entitled little—”

He stops when Lang Qianqiu rises to his feet, following after him. “...What are you doing?”

The god blinks back at him, arching an eyebrow. “What does it look like? We’re both looking for the same ghost.”

“...No,” Ren Song glares, hands balling into fists. “You’re not coming with me.”

“I wouldn’t say I’m going WITH you, we’re just both going to the same destination.”

“...I swear to hell, I’ll kick you in the balls again,” Ren Song glares at him sharply, which only results in Lang Qianqiu moving out of kicking distance.

“That’s not going to stop me!” He mutters as they walk deeper into the forest. “Oh really?”

Thud.

The prince blinks.

Thud.

“What was it you said before?” Ren Song taps his chin with his finger, “See here, I’m a martial god and we’re in MY territory! Look how big my dick is!’”

He even deepens his voice for proper mocking effect.

Lang Qianqiu looks properly scandalized. “I never said that—!”

Thud.

“Any forest is my territory,” Ren Song cuts him off coldly. “So, do you really think you’re in a position to be pestering me?”

“...”

Thud.

Lang Qianqiu’s expression turns somewhat grim. “...You brought the panda, didn’t you?”

Ren Song’s smile reeks of quiet smugness.

A roar rumbles through the trees as the bear lunges from the darkness, and Lang Qianqiu barely manages to dodge it, smacking into a tree that wasn’t there before, but —

"Oh, I always bring Dian Dian."

...This is going to be troublesome.

While chaos is unfolding outside, inside the cave, it remains quiet.

All of the little green ghosts and humans having fled to the outer chambers, looking to make their escape.

Only two remain: a god and a devil.

And the devil is taking quite some time to answer.

It was a simple question.

'Have we met before?'

But it's been so long, the silence feels like it's own kind of anger. Something between a yes and a no.

Hua Cheng's hands feel heavy on his shoulders. Not holding Xie Lian down, but still—

The weight of them feels enormous.

Xie Lian waits so long, his mind has room to wander. To find beasts in the dark to be frightened of, but—

Eventually, there's a sound.

A low, strained noise, somewhere between a grunt and a whimper.

Like...

Like Hua Cheng is in pain.

"...San Lang?"

Xie Lian turns his head, meaning to turn around and make sure he's alright, but...

Those hands grip him slightly tighter now, keeping him in place.

"Is something wrong?"

“...Just an old wound acting up, your highness.” The Ghost King replies, his voice clearly strained. “It’s nothing you should worry yourself with.”

Xie Lian frowns, because of course—he does worry.

“I didn’t know ghosts struggled with such things,” he admits, his brow creasing.

“Any wounds after death will heal, of course.” Hua Cheng murmurs, biting back the taste of blood. “It’s the ones that killed you that linger.”

The mere sound of that makes Xie Lian’s stomach sink. “...Is it still bleeding? Do you need me to—?”

Then again, he has no idea what sort of injury killed Hua Cheng, and it seems disrespectful to ask.

“No, no...” he shakes his head. “It's just...”

It hurts sometimes.

(Though what Xie Lian could not possibly know is that it hurts all the time. Every moment. An ever lasting kind of ache, the bittersweet kind of longing that is only soothed by the prince’s presence.)

Hua Cheng’s eye closes for a moment. “...What made you ask that?”

Xie Lian glances up, horribly distracted by the prospect of the Ghost King being injured. “What?”

“...If we had met before,” Hua Cheng explains, watching the look on the crown prince’s face. “I’m curious.”

And it isn’t exactly a denial, either.

“...You knew Qi Rong was involved, just from hearing the circumstances from me and Lang Qianqiu.” Xie Lian murmurs. “Which means you knew that he had a motive that connected him to An Le and the rebels from Xianle...”

Meaning—he likely knew exactly who Qi Rong was as a mortal. His connections to Xianle—and by extension, Xie Lian.

There are very few people left these days who know anything about Xianle. Most of those stories have been lost to time.

And he knows that Hua Cheng is close to his own age, having recognized Lang Ying's illness immediately.

Which means there is a decent chance that Xie Lian met him during his mortal life. Or, during his first ascension as a god.

It would certainly explain why he feels so at ease with Hua Cheng. Why they get on so well.

But Xie Lian can't think of who he would have been.

The prince can't imagine he would have forgotten meeting someone like Hua Cheng— yet, at the same time, he can't recall having met someone who would fit his description that could still be wandering the earth.

There are mitigating factors, of course.

Hua Cheng could have been younger—it would be difficult for Xie Lian to find resemblance between a youth and a grown man through touch alone, and he's never seen Hua Cheng clearly.

And, he lost his eye after he died, so that can't be taken as a clue either...

"As usual," Hua Cheng murmurs, his eye remaining closed. "His highness is clever. The plan seemed his style—and I was already aware of his connections to Xianle. Was that the only reason you asked?"

Honestly?

No.

Xie Lian asked, because...

It feels like Hua Cheng knows him.

He perceives Xie Lian's discomfort when others don't. Often guesses what he's thinking, or answers questions before the prince even needs to ask.

It's rare that anyone pays attention to him—and when they do, they're always... disappointed by what they find.

"...But you won't say whether or not we've met," Xie Lian mutters. "Which makes it sound like we have."

Hua Cheng's hands tighten on his shoulders, almost imperceptibly. "If the answer was yes, why do you think I wouldn't say so?"

Xie Lian falls silent, thinking.

"Either because you were hiding something, or because you couldn't say so," he concludes. "Those are the only options, really."

"And do you?" Hua Cheng questions, raising an eyebrow. "Think I'm hiding something, I mean."

"...I don't," Xie Lian admits.

Which really only means one of two things.

Either they really haven't met before, which makes Hua Cheng's silence baffling, or...

He really can't say.

But what would stop him from saying so?

None of it makes any sense—and the harder Xie Lian thinks about it, the more he...

"..." Hua Cheng watches him, expression strained, lingering somewhere between hope, and remorse. "Would it change very much, either way?"

He's trying to soothe Xie Lian for the fact that he's struggling to puzzle together an answer.

And it works—in part.

"...If you had met me back then, you might know..."Xie Lian starts, then stops, biting his lip.

"Know what?" Hua Cheng prompts gently.

The god turns his head away, clutching something hanging from his neck.

"...I'm not who you think I am, San Lang," he whispers.

There's a brief pause, then the Ghost King questions, "What do you mean?"

"I just..." Xie Lian swallows thickly.

It's terrifying, sometimes—to think that someone could see all of him. Every ugly, warped piece of himself that he's tried to hide away.

But it's also lonely, sometimes. To be so isolated, that no one actually sees...

"...You just...you shouldn't think of anyone as perfect, San Lang," the prince mumbles, wrapping his arms around himself. "You'll be disappointed."

He does that often. Hugging himself.

It wasn't something he used to do when he was young.

He never needed to, back then.

Hua Cheng is starting to notice it more and more often now.

And maybe he can't answer Xie Lian's questions. But he can do one thing.

"Dianxia..."

Hua Cheng's hands lift from his shoulders—and for a moment, Xie Lian fears that the ghost king is going to take a step back, but...

Just the opposite.

Arms wrap around his waist, pulling him in.

It's a gentle embrace, a cautious one, something that Xie Lian could have stopped.

He doesn't.

(He doesn't want to.)

It's a kindness, one that is likely being extended because the prince has been visibly upset throughout all of this, but...

"When did I ever say that you had to be perfect?"

It's a simple question, and yet—Xie Lian's heart is in his throat.

His lips press together tightly, and for a moment...he leans back into the embrace, even going so far as to turn his head, pressing his face into the ghost king's shoulder.

There's been so much happening lately, and he... Xie Lian feels hollowed out by it.

Since his ascension...those few days he spent with San Lang at Puqi shrine were the only moments he felt like he actually had a chance to take a break.

Since then, he was in the Crescent Moon Kingdom, then Ghost City, and now, this...

Almost like he can read Xie Lian's mind, Hua Cheng gives his waist a gentle squeeze, murmuring—

"Dianxia should get some rest, after all of that." Xie Lian nods, taking a deep breath.

He knows that he needs a break.

"...Thank you," he mutters.

Hua Cheng raises an eyebrow.

"...After all of that, I assumed his highness would be angry with me."

"No," Xie Lian mumbles, shaking his head, his cheek rubbing against the front of Hua Cheng's robes. "I didn't really like that spell you put on me—but the rest of it..."

The prince sighs heavily.

"You were right, and so was he." Xie Lian doesn't lift his head. "I needed to tell him. I was just...running away from it."

"I wouldn't call it that, your highness," Hua Cheng's tone is gentle, even though Xie Lian doesn't feel like he deserves it.

"...You wouldn't?"

"You were strategically retreating while contemplating your options."

"...For three centuries?"

"You were weighing your options very carefully," Hua Cheng replies breezily. Xie Lian's mouth twists, biting back a smile, and...

Laughter is muffled by the ghost king's robes.

"San Lang, you're—!"

There are people out there with laughter that slips underneath your skin, tugging at the edges of your heart until it aches sweetly.

Xie Lian has always been one of them, but his laughs have become such a rare thing. "—you're too generous with me..."

"Impossible," Hua Cheng replies easily, and Xie Lian...

He finally lifts his head, glancing up in the direction of Hua Cheng's face. "...Though—that wasn't what I was thanking you for."

"Oh?" The calamity raises an eyebrow. "Then what is it?"

"I..."

Xie Lian trails off, taking a breath. "What you said."

'When did I say that you had to be perfect?'

Hua Cheng arches an eyebrow, shaking his head. "That was nothing, dianxia—"

"No." Xie Lian cuts him off firmly. "I..."

He swallows hard.

"No one has ever told me that before."

And that makes him wonder how they could have possibly met before.

Because if Xie Lian had known someone like Hua Cheng, when he was a child— someone who would have told him something like that...

Fingers brush over his chin gently, guiding him to look up. Xie Lian would have been so much happier, if he'd had that.

Their faces are tilted toward one another, and Hua Cheng's expression is conflicted, as though he might want to say more, to do something more, but—

"I TOLD YOU!" A voice rings out. "I'm stronger in this form!"

Xie Lian jumps at the sound of Shi Qingxuan's voice, and Hua Cheng's eye twitches with annoyance. “HA! My luck was better too, you should have let me try this sooner!”

But who is with her—?

The two gods enter the cavern, and Xie Lian hears an all too familiar voice: “Your highness—”

Hua Cheng doesn’t move, but Xie Lian immediately steps away, only too familiar after the arrival of Lang Qianqiu before that it’s easy for those just arriving to… misinterpret what they see.

“Get away from him.” Feng Xin’s voice is low, firm, his bow drawn. Hua Cheng glances over at the weapon, slightly weary.

That one is dangerous, and the bolt of spiritual energy crackling against the thread could cause damage, if fired.

Of course, he would win. But it would get ugly.

Xie Lian seems to sense the same thing, staying between Hua Cheng and the others, holding his arms out, “Look,” he calls over, “this has all just been a huge misunderstanding!”

“We can discuss it when you’re safe,” Feng Xin mutters. “Come here.”

Xie Lian’s jaw squares with stubbornness. “I am absolutely safe, Feng Xin. I haven’t been in danger for a single moment.”

Hua Cheng’s expression momentarily softens.

“Now, put aside your weapons, we can talk this out—!”

But before Xie Lian can finish making his plea, he feels hands gripping him by the shoulders—and Hua Cheng pulls the god behind him. Gently, but firmly, standing before him with his arms crossed.

E’Ming, who has done nothing but tremble with guilt all night, goes deathly still.

Feng Xin’s eyes narrow as he begins to brace himself for a fight—but that’s when Shi Qingxuan speaks up, waving her whisk nervously.

“C-Crimson Rain! There’s no need for this! What happened to Paradise Manor was an accident, his highness had nothing to do with it!”

“Wh—?” Xie Lian blinks quickly, throwing his hands up, “I set the fire!”

“Yes, but I’m the one who blew it out of control!” Shi Qingxuan cries, throwing an arm over her face, “If you’re going to punish anyone, let it BE ME! Or my brother! He can pay you double the cost!”

“But San Lang already told me that—!”

“I haven’t even counted your emperor sending someone to spy on me,” Hua Cheng glares, easily shifting to block Xie Lian when he attempts to interfere. “So, there’s nothing to discuss.”

Xie Lian glances in the direction of their voices, and slowly, he begins to put it together.

They’re putting on a show for the people listening—but if Xie Lian allows them to do that, won’t everyone blame San Lang?

“...Stop pretending,” he frowns, trying to lean around him.

When Hua Cheng shifts in front of him once more, he frowns, leaning up on his toes to try and speak over his shoulder, and when that’s not enough, the god has to make a rather undignified hop, “You know San Lang was just trying to save me! Why pretend he did something wrong?”

“...Well,” the wind master tosses her hair, “everyone in the communication array already heard what they needed to, so now we don’t have to keep on.”

“I wasn’t pretending,” Feng Xin glares. He still hasn’t lowered his bow, his gaze fixed on the ghost king.

Shi Qingxuan ignores him for the time being, opting to explain things to the prince—

“Your highness, everyone was going to make a poor judgment regardless. Why not let it be of Hua Cheng, whom they had a bad impression of from the start? That way, there’s no harm done.”

Despite being the one blamed, Hua Cheng sounds pleased when he replies— “You get it.”

“Of course,” Shi Qingxuan grins, hands on her hips. “How would I, Lady Wind Master, be the most popular goddess *and* god in the heavens if I didn’t know how to work a group?”

Finally, she turns back to Feng Xin, who is still standing at the ready. "Are you going to put that thing down before someone gets hurt? Those two are clearly on good terms. Don't be stubborn, now."

Feng Xin doesn't look at her and he certainly doesn't respond. "...Come on now, don't be stubborn," Shi Qingxuan frowns.

That's when the idea seems to occur to her—and if Xie Lian could have seen the look in her eye, he would have warned her, but—

Instead, she lunges forward, pressing her chest against Feng Xin's arm, batting her eyelashes.

"Come on," She pouts, hugging his arm as she rubs her ample assets against his bicep, "I know you're a big *strong* man, but can't you put that down and talk it out?"

It's effective. But not in the most flattering way.

Feng Xin stares, the color promptly draining from his face.

Shi Qingxuan stares, trying to process *that* reaction, because she was sort of expecting his complexion to go in the OPPOSITE direction, but —

Feng Xin screams.

More accurately, he jumps three feet in the air, his cry blood curdling as his arrows disappear in a puff of smoke.

"THE FUCK?!"

When he lands, he doesn't do so gracefully, falling on his ass, scrambling away from Shi Qingxuan in a blind panic.

"D-DON'T YOU EVER DO THAT AGAIN! DON'T YOU DARE!!" He shouts, pointing a trembling finger in her direction.

The Wind Master stares.

"...Good god..." She frowns, tossing her hair in offense, but her gaze is somewhat distraught.

After all, Shi Qingxuan takes pride in being one of the most beautiful women in the continent, no—the world.

She looks to Xie Lian, vexed.

"...Did his mother get smothered to death by a pair of breasts before his very eyes when he was a child?!"

Hua Cheng lets out a snort that is poorly disguised as a cough, and Xie Lian sighs. "No, no—but he's always been like that, ever since we were kids..."

"I HAVE PERSONAL SPACE!" Feng Xin cries, now a solid five meters away from the Wind Master. "IT'S PERFECTLY NORMAL!"

"...He's like you with spiders," Shi Qingxuan mutters, crossing her arms. Hua Cheng arches an eyebrow, looking down at him.

"Spiders?"

Xie Lian becomes flushed.

"...That has nothing to do with this," he smiles awkwardly, "it's nothing—!"

Shi Qingxuan's voice cuts in, dry. "There's one on your boot."

"...eeEEAAAK!"

To which the crown prince promptly shrieks, leaping into the Ghost King's arms.

"AND YOU'RE TELLING ME NOW?!"

He shouts, kicking his feet while he clings around Hua Cheng's neck —

(The Ghost King caught him easily and without complaint.)

"...I lied," the Wind Master mumbles, staring at her feet. "Nan Yang hurt my feelings..."

Xie Lian pauses, dangling in Hua Cheng's grip.

"...Then why did you have to punish me for it?" He mutters, feeling somewhat betrayed.

Shi Qingxuan waves that off, not seeming particularly guilty. "Are you really suffering, your highness?"

He gawks in her direction for a moment before scrambling back out of Hua Cheng's arms.

Hua Cheng doesn't seem nearly as happy to let him go as he was to catch him—but he allows the prince to slip free without protest.

If Mu Qing were here, this is where he would likely make some sort of dry comment about how Hua Cheng didn't seem to be suffering either.

But he was only willing to help on the premise that he wouldn't have to deal with Feng Xin, because if he did—he would strangle him.

So, it was deemed better for Feng Xin to come, and Mu Qing to continue tending to Ming Yi in the heavens.

Point being: he isn't here.

For some reason, in spite of his swelling jaw, Feng Xin wishes that he was.

But—now that their weapons are set aside, Xie Lina chooses to address something more pressing.

"Feng Xin, listen—you know the Night Touring Green Lantern, Qi Rong?"

His former guard frowns. "...Yeah? What about him?"

Xie Lian grimaces, "...It's THAT Qi Rong."

It takes a moment for him to put it together, and when he does, Feng Xin's eyes widen. "...You can't be serious."

"I am."

"What kind of dumbass uses his actual name for that sort of thing?!"

But neither of them really has to continue on that vein, because they both know:

Qi Rong is exactly the sort of person that would do that. Nothing surprising there.

"...This place was his lair." Xie Lian sighs. "He ran off not long ago, with Lang Qianqiu going after him..."

"He is?" Shi Qingxuan perks up. He's shifted back into his male form now, clearly not wanting to trigger Feng Xin's phobia any further—or to take another blow to his ego. "I thought the prince was chasing after you, your highness. What happened?"

From behind Xie Lian, Hua Cheng shrugs. “He found out who the real culprit behind the gilded banquet was, and he took up pursuit.”

When Xie Lian doesn’t debate the claim, the other two Heavenly Officials practically sag with relief.

“Why didn’t you say so to begin with?!”

“...I didn’t know it was him,” Xie Lian admits. “San Lang was the one who figured it all out. That was why he brought us here.”

Feng Xin rubs his chin, processing that information, but Sh Qingxuan focuses on another matter.

“...Do the two of you know Qi Rong? You seem familiar.”

Both men grimace at the same time, and Xie Lian, with no small amount of shame, replies...

“...He’s my cousin,” the prince explains. “We both knew him well in our mortal lives.”

Shi Qingxuan’s eyes widen. “Really? Your actual cousin?”

When Xie Lian nods, the Wind Master hums, tapping his whisk against his chin.

“Your highness—you are such an interesting person,” Shi Qingxuan muses. “The martial gods of the south are your old pales, the martial god of the east is your former student...”

He glances around the cave, examining Qi Rong’s lair in earnest. “Night Touring Green Lantern is your cousin, and Crimson Rain Sought Flower is your...” He glances over his shoulder, looking from Feng Xin to Hua Cheng before settling on— “...sworn brother.”

That’s what he says, anyway—but there’s a suggestive undertone that makes it clear that isn’t what he means.

Hua Cheng raises an eyebrow while Xie Lian turns slightly pink, and Feng Xin, well—

He seems offended that a calamity would be his prince’s sworn brother.

“And you have me, the great Lord Wind Master, as your friend!” Shi Qingxuan concludes, doing a dramatic little twirl for effect. “What an amazing number of connections you have!”

Feng Xin, however, doesn’t seem to find that matter particularly important.

“If that’s true, your highness—you should report back to the Heavens and tell everyone. Not just to keep the emperor abreast of the matter, but to protect your reputation.”

Shi Qingxuan crosses his arms, sulking. “I’m surprised you can say the word ‘abreast’ without crying.”

Feng Xin gives him a sharp look. “Say another word about it, and I can have a talk with your older brother about what happened at the summer solstice celebration.”

Whatever that was, it must have been embarrassing—Xie Lian can feel Shi Qingxuan blushing from several feet away.

Hua Cheng interrupts their bickering, nonetheless.

“There’s no need for a facade, General Nan Yang. His highness isn’t a fool.”

(That’s debatable, but Xie Lian appreciates it anyway.)

“Why not just admit you’re rushing him back because you don’t want him in my company?”

Xie Lian frowns, looking in Feng Xin’s direction, shaking his head. “Oh, I...I’m sure that’s not what he means—”

“Because he doesn’t want you associating with the likes of me,” Hua Cheng concludes. “Isn’t that right, Nan Yang?”

Feng Xin’s reply is absolutely frigid.

“As long as you’re aware that he shouldn’t be socializing with ghosts and demons.”

Hua Cheng smiles, though he doesn’t immediately respond—and Xie Lian frowns, placing a hand on the ghost king’s arm.

“Well, I happen to like this ghost, Feng Xin. He’s my friend.” He points a scolding finger in the general’s direction.

“And even if he wasn’t—you should never judge a man by what he is, but who he is. You know better.”

The martial god freezes, somewhat crestfallen, and Xie Lian turns, making his way toward the cavern entrance.

Hua Cheng smiles, clearly pleased as he follows after him, and Feng Xin seems trapped somewhere between shock and sheepishness.

“Is your highness returning—?”

“No,” Xie Lian shakes his head. “There were a number of Qi Rong’s minions left behind. Someone has to deal with them.”

“Oh, your highness,” Shi Qingxuan walks by his side, his tone bright and friendly, “Nan Yang can deal with them. They’re flat chested.”

Hua Cheng doesn’t try to mask his laughter this time, and Feng Xin glares. “No, this is my cousin, I should deal with his mess…”

They step through the cave mouth, and Xie Lian feels a familiar hand on his arm. “There’s no need to bother with it, dianxia.”

Xie Lian frowns, about to argue, but— “Did you just open your umbrella?” He’s familiar with the sound by now. “Mmm,” Hua Cheng agrees.

Xie Lian allows himself to be pulled underneath, listening to the latter of a sudden downpour.

And with it, he smells iron—blood.

Shi Qingxuan flicks his fan open, shielding his face as he watches the storm of gore.

“You Ghost Kings really are amazing…” He muses. “I always thought the Crimson Rain would be a hideous sight, but there’s something about it…”

“Are you actually admiring it?” Feng Xin hisses.

He was caught in the open during the downpour, now finding himself drenched in blood.

“You can’t deny—it’s rather impressive.”

Suddenly, Hua Cheng is beginning to find that the company the Wind Master keeps makes more and more sense.

"There," he murmurs, snapping the umbrella shut. "It's been dealt with."

"...Thank you, San Lang." Xie Lian frowns, guilty. "You've already done so much—"

"It's nothing, gege." The Ghost King shakes his head, giving Xie Lian's shoulder one last Pat before taking a step back. "Go home and rest."

Xie Lian can't help but turn after him, sensing a portal opening. "...Will you go back to Ghost City?"

"Yes," Hua Cheng replies. "I'm assuming you will be returning to the Heavenly Capital, but," he turns his chin to look back at the god over his shoulder. "If you would like to return with me, you're welcome."

Xie Lian smiles, surprised by how...tempting that is.

"Next time," he promises. "I'll help you clean up the mess I left..."

"Ren Song already took care of that," Hua Cheng smiles. "All that's left is cosmetic touches. But you can sit back and relax, certainly."

Xie Lian arches an eyebrow, surprised by how swift that work would have been.

"...He really is an impressive young man," the prince murmurs, reaching out to catch Hua Cheng's sleeve, squeezing gently. "You've done very well with him, San Lang."

Xie Lian says that because he means it, but also...remembering how the mention of Shuo's brother seemed to weigh on him.

"..." Hua Cheng's lips quirk at the corners. "Thank you, dianxia."

"...I should be the one thanking you, after everything," Xie Lian frets. "I—"

Fingertips brush over his forehead, and he falls silent.

There's a tap at his forehead, so gentle, it gives the prince pause.

"You think too much," Hua Cheng murmurs, stepping back. As the portal closes behind him, he adds—

"Just keep doing as you like."

And with that, he's gone.

Xie Lian stares after him, remembering.

That night, in Puqi shrine, when Banyue tried to apologize to the ghost king—Hua Cheng didn't allow it.

'I didn't teach you magic for self defense.'

'I taught you magic so you would have the freedom to make your own choices.'

He wasn't just saying that, was he?

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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Shuo / Ren Song

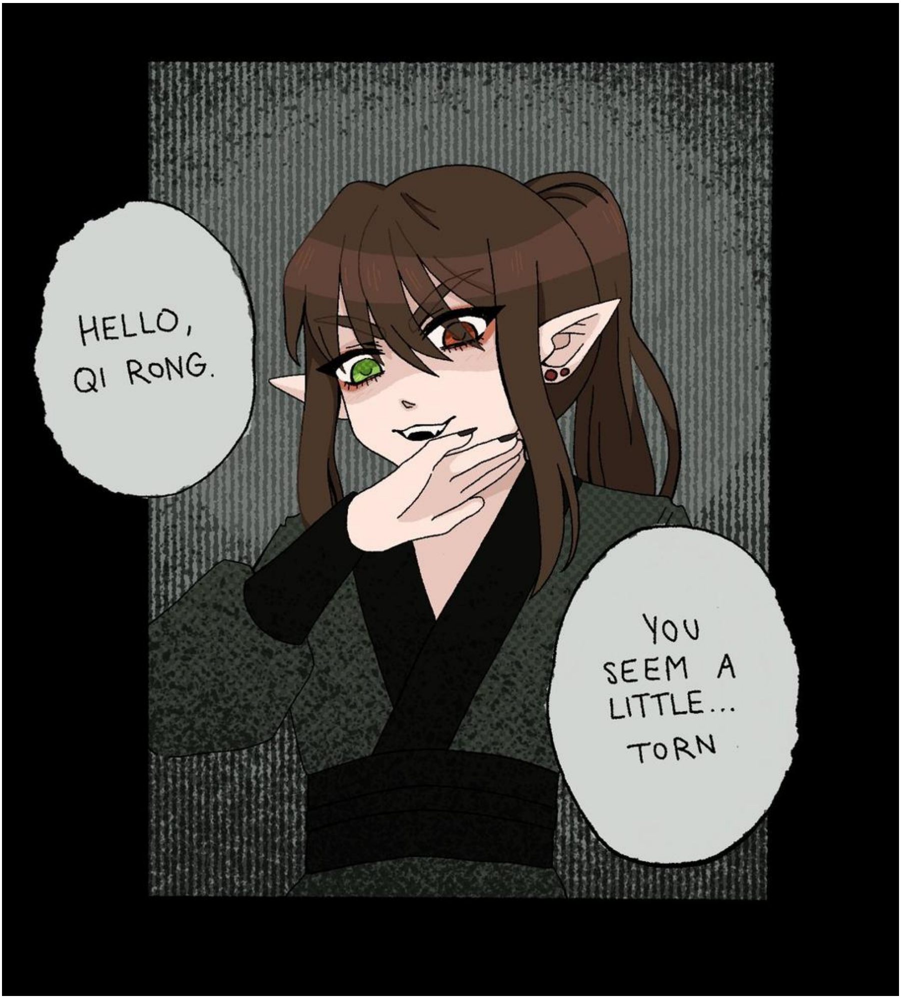
[image]

CREDIT: LACE

Shuo / Ren Song

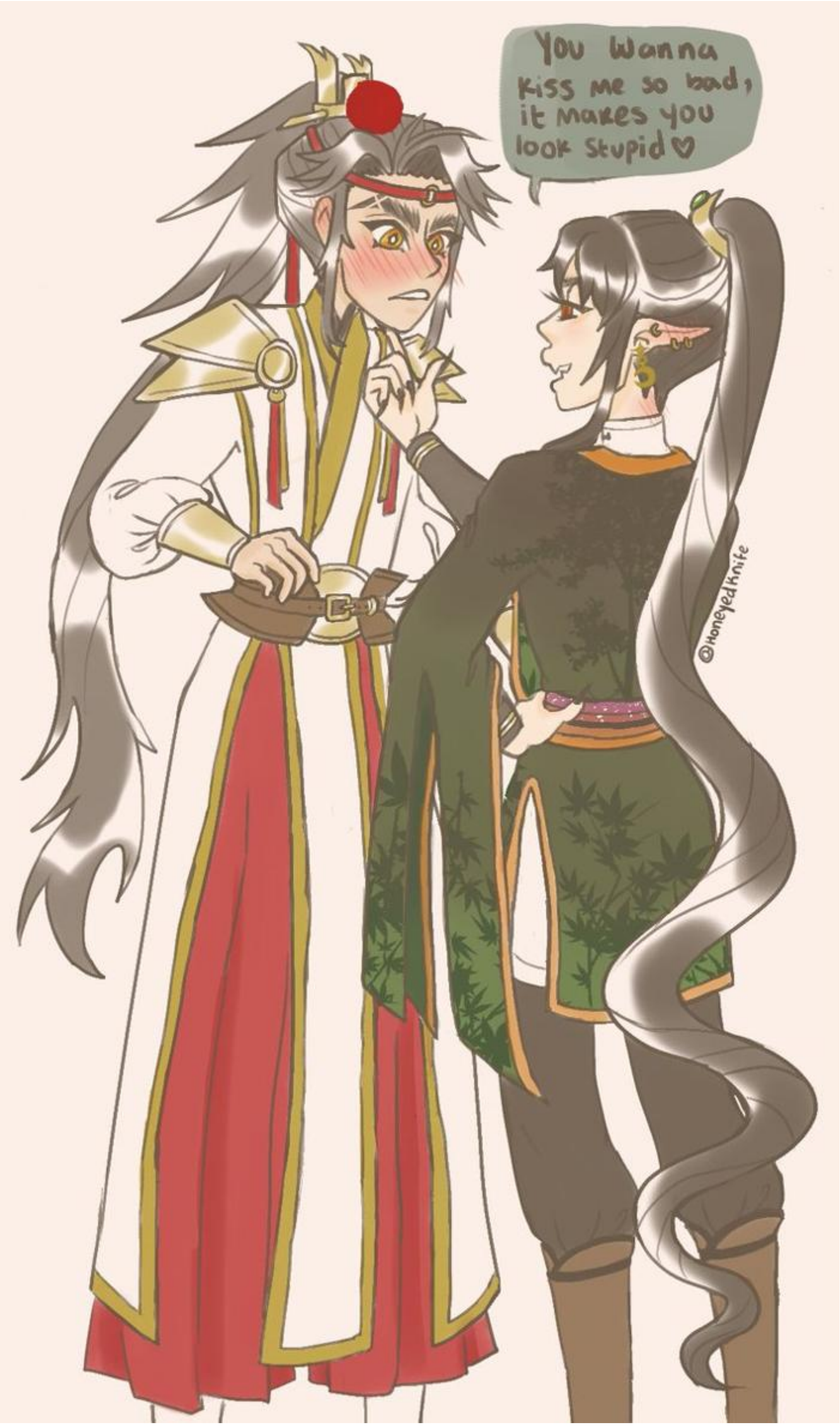
[image]

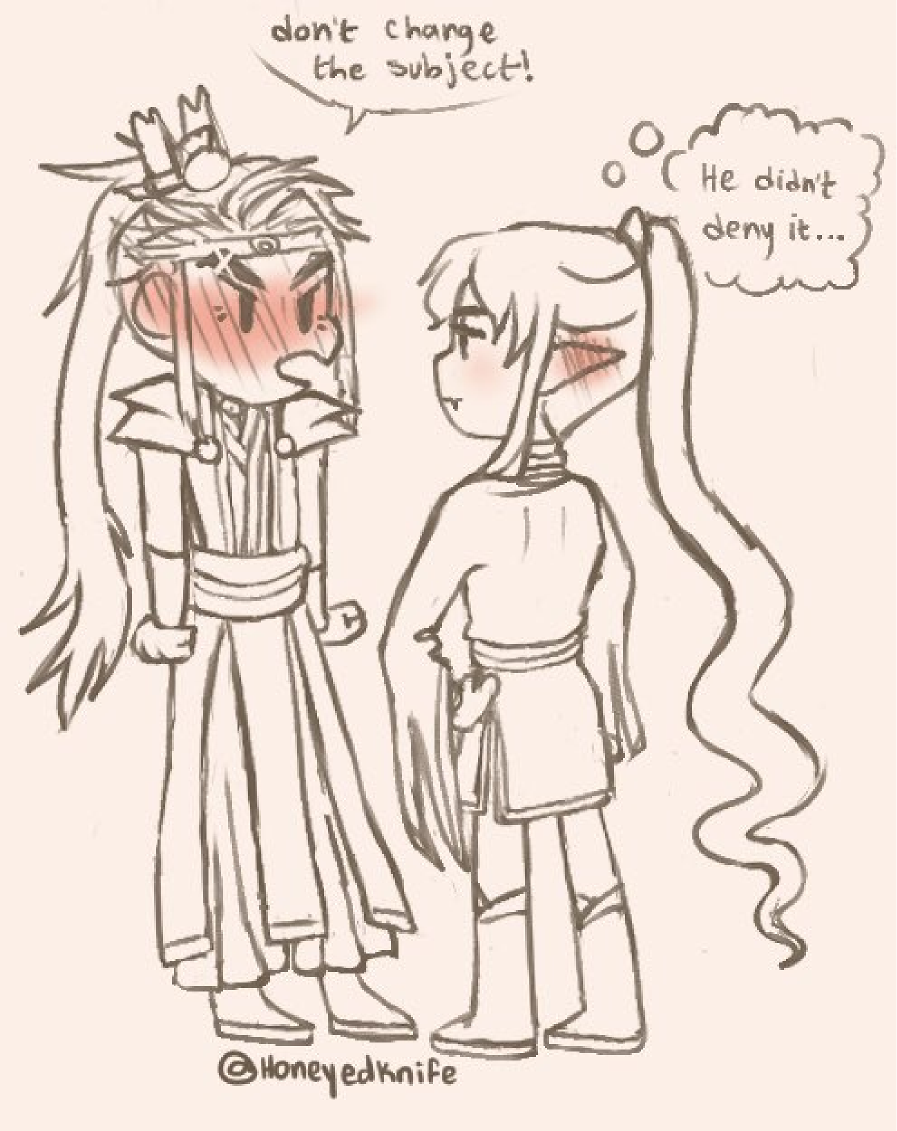
CREDIT: ENVY


HELLO, QI RONG.
YOU SEEM A LITTLE... TORN

CREDIT: ASH

Shuo / Ren Song x Lang Qianqiu (Flirting)


You wanna kiss me so bad, it makes you look stupid ♡
@honeyedknife


don't change the subject!
He didn't deny it...
@HoneyedKnife

CREDIT: HONEY

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you to Lace, Socks, Ash, Envy, Yue Ling, and Honey for their amazing artwork, and allowing me to share it!

xoxo, Evie

The Secrets We Keep

Chapter Summary

“I see.” The emperor replies. “Ling Wen, have your people investigate the matter. If that’s all, we’ll reconvene when we know more.”

There’s a smattering of voices as martial and civil gods begin to leave the hall, but before Xie Lian can make to join them—

“Xianle, you stay.”

The prince comes to a halt, not terribly surprised by that, but—

“And you as well, Lord Water Master.”

Chapter Notes

!! SERIOUS TRIGGER WARNING !!

This chapter contains a depiction of sexual assault, descriptions of past grooming, and domestic abuse. Please read with caution.

You do NOT need to read the sexual assault scene to understand the rest of the story. If you would like to skip it, skip from when Xie Lian leaves the Martial Hall in the first scene all the way to the large paragraph break, and there will be a summary at the end notes for the chapter for those who skipped. All relevant plot details will be included.

For those wanting to use the control + f function to skip to the scene after the assault, use the phrase, "When Xie Lian leaves the Heavens, he’s fortunate to avoid hitting any more clouds."

There will also be artwork linked at the end of this chapter that could be triggering to those who have survived sexual

assault. No assault is depicted, but the aftermath is.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shi Qingxuan takes some mercy on Feng Xin, using his powers to blow most of the blood off of him, leaving him only mildly less stained, and the process of ascending to the capital once more actually goes rather smoothly, even if Xie Lian finds his thoughts drifting frequently.

To Lang Qianqiu, Qi Rong, and all of the rest.

What it could mean. Why all of this is happening now. And San Lang...

He's forced to give up that train of thought when they return to the Grand Martial Hall, and all eyes remain upon them.

"Xianle." Jun Wu muses, calm. "It's good to see that you're alright."

Xie Lian winces, apologetic. "I'm sorry for worrying everyone..."

"Not your fault," Shi Qingxuan assures him, patting his arm. "It's not like you asked to get swept off like that."

The god frowns, but bites his tongue.

"Was the crown prince injured?"

Mu Qing's voice is crisp, business like, and Xie Lian shakes his head. "No, but thank you for asking."

The martial god shrugs, crossing his arms, in too foul of a mood to allow himself to be seen as showing concern.

"It's my job."

"...Now seems like a good time to mention," Ling Wen speaks up, her voice carrying through the hall, "General Tai Hua has made contact, stating that the Crown Prince of Xianle is not the culprit behind the Gilded Banquet. He's in pursuit of the actual culprit now."

It makes sense that he would report that in, but Xie Lian can't say he enjoys the curious whispers echoing through the hall, half wishing he had taken up Hua Cheng on his offer to return to Ghost City.

"With that settled, I find there is a more pressing concern," Jun Wu muses.

“How Crimson Rain was able to breach the capital so easily. Who was on security?”

“...Me.” Pei straightens from where he stands beside Ling Wen, his jaw locked. “It was my lapse in judgment that caused this.”

He bows his head to the emperor, apologetic.

From his other side, the Water Master rolls his eyes, examining his fingernails for non-existent dirt.

“Leaving an injured man in charge of security seems like a bigger lapse in judgment.”

Xie Lian listens carefully, surprised that the man who forced his brother to remain silent in their last meeting would speak with such candor now, but...

Shi Qingxuan did say that Pei Ming, the Water Master, and Ling Wen were close friends.

That much seems true now, especially.

Jun Wu arches an eyebrow, looking at Pei. “General Ming Guang, do you wish to be relieved of your duties until you have finished recovering?”

The martial god shakes his head, casting Shi Wudu a pointed look. “No, your majesty. I have made no such request.”

“I see.” The emperor replies. “Ling Wen, have your people investigate the matter. If that’s all, we’ll reconvene when we know more.”

There’s a smattering of voices as martial and civil gods begin to leave the hall, but before Xie Lian can make to join them—

“Xianle, you stay.”

The prince comes to a halt, not terribly surprised by that, but—

“And you as well, Lord Water Master.”

That draws a note of surprise.

Xie Lian has never actually held a conversation with the god before. They have little to do with one another—

Why hold them both behind?

Both of the Heavenly Officials stand there in relative silence as the room clears out. Xie Lian, with his hands folded into the sleeves of his robes—curious, but relaxed.

Shi Wudu maintains a similar posture—but there's a defiance to it. His hip cocked, fanning himself, bored.

Xie Lian waits until the room seems relatively silent, murmuring, "Your majesty— there was something Xianle wished to discuss with you, but…it's of a rather sensitive nature."

Jun Wu considers that, resting his chin upon his hand.

"There is nothing you can say in front of me that you could not say in front of the Water Master," the emperor replies calmly. "He has my complete confidence."

Incredibly high praise, coming from the likes of him. Enough to even raise Xie Lian's brow, but…

It can't be helped.

"…Did you place Ming Yi in Paradise Manor as a spy?" He questions, keeping his head hung low.

Jun Wu's response is swift, lacking in any remorse. "The Water Master did, upon my orders." Shi Wudu remains silent, watching with a sharp gaze. "I thought you might ask about it."

Well, that certainly explains why he was kept behind.

Still, Xie Lian's brows remain raised. "I wasn't under the impression that Lord Water Master was involved with reconnaissance."

"Let me say it like this," Jun Wu muses, watching the two younger gods standing before him.

His expression is that of satisfaction.

"Xianle solves the mysteries that lie before us," the Emperor explains, his eyes remaining on the younger of the two—

"…And Shi Wudu keeps our secrets."

They make quite a pair, standing side by side.

Shi Wudu's gaze cuts over to Xie Lian, taking in the sight of him when compared to his own stature.

They're the same height, the same build. Though, due to his status as a martial god, the Water Master suspects Xianle's body is slightly more athletic than his own.

His hair is lighter in color, and styled differently–but similar in silken texture.

As for his eyes, that similarity would be impossible to discern–no one has seen what they actually look like in eight centuries.

But Shi Wudu is certain that Jun Wu remembers them well.

"If you should ever need the Water Master's assistance going forward," Jun Wu carries on, watching the two with satisfaction, "feel free to ask. He is at your disposal."

Xie Lian is somewhat sure that a proud god like Shi Wudu wouldn't be pleased to be at anyone's 'disposal.'

"...That's very kind," he mumbles with a polite smile, nodding in the Water Master's direction. "Of course, if you need my help for any reason, the same goes to you."

But when he returns his focus to Jun Wu, his expression is somewhat strained with worry.

But there's a response to his question that catches Shi Wudu's eye.

"...About San Lang," he starts, then corrects himself, "I mean–Hua Cheng, you know he didn't mean any harm, right?"

Jun Wu's eyes widen sharply.

He isn't a particularly expressive man. Not usually.

But now, his eyes are heated and narrowed, filled with emotions that Shi Wudu has never seen in the man's face. Not in his four centuries in the Heavens.

Anger. Pain. Resentment, and...to the Water Master's shock, a hint of guilt. But he works to rein that in before he replies.

"...Of course, if Xianle thinks that, I trust his insight into Crimson Rain's intentions." The emperor replies with a smile that seems a trifle forced, not that the intended recipient would ever know it. "But you should be wary of him, your highness. And of Blackwater as well."

Shi Wudu watches without saying a word, as the Heavenly Emperor rises from his throne, moving forward to stand before the prince of Xianle.

“It takes an immense amount of pain and suffering to become a ghost king,” he explains quietly. “For those two who have emerged from Mount Tonglu—it defines who they are.”

Xie Lian can’t speak to Blackwater’s state of mind, he knows nothing about the man— but it doesn’t line up with what he’s seen of Hua Cheng.

“...And what about the other Ghost King?” He questions. “He didn’t come from Mount Tonglu, did he?”

It’s rare that Xie Lian can speak of Bai Wuxiang. The mere memory of the damage that was done makes it near unbearable.

It takes Jun Wu a moment to answer, and when he does—he does so quietly. “Love can make a monster out of anyone.”

What an odd thing to say.

Though Xie Lian supposes that it’s true.

Love made a monster of him, once. Or rather—grief, the loss of it.

“You have had a trying few weeks,” the emperor sighs. “You should rest. The Palace of Xianle is being examined after the break in, but...”

He shrugs. “You’re welcome to reside in the Imperial Palace for as long as you need.”

“Oh,” Xie Lian’s eyes widen slightly. “That’s kind of you, my lord—but Xianle could never impose. Besides, this humble scrap god has matters to attend to in the human realm. But thank you.”

“Are you certain?” The Water Master speaks up, and there’s something about his tone that Xie Lian doesn’t have a word for, but...

It’s tense.

“No one would question you wanting a rest.” Then, his timbre becomes more recognizable—annoyed. “Some of us are too foolish to rest when we're told to."

He must be referring to Pei Ming, in that case.

"Oh, I'll rest," Xie Lian assures him with a smile. "But I would rather do so in my own shrine. I'm sure you understand."

The Water God lets out a soft 'tch.'

"I don't understand why you would want to slum it," he mutters, snapping his fan open, holding it in front of his face. "But to each their own."

His tone is condescending, of course—and it doesn't betray the emotion lurking in his gaze:

Anxiety.

Xie Lian smiles serenely.

"Oh, I don't think of it that way—and I should be thanking you," he murmurs, bowing his head to the Water Master. "Your younger brother was invaluable during our mission, and was valiant in his attempt to rescue me—even if I didn't need saving."

Shi Wudu's fan does not lower.

"...Thank him, then," he mutters, his fingers tightening their grip around the spiritual tool, the whiteness of his knuckles betraying his uncaring attitude. "That has little to do with me."

"...From the way Lord Wind Master described it, you were the one who raised him."

Xie Lian shrugs. "Not to mention the one who taught him cultivation. He's clearly a well brought up young man."

"..." Jun Wu can't see his expression, the fan hides that.

But it softens, ever so briefly.

Even the coldest, proudest of men have their points of weakness.

"Thank you."

Xie Lian smiles in assent, bowing to them both. "I'll be going, then—and thank you, your majesty, for hearing me out. I'll be returning now."

He turns to make his way from the room, and the Water Master goes to follow, but...

"No," Jun Wu murmurs softly. "Stay."

Shi Wudu goes still, his shoulders hunching as Xie Lian makes his way out the doors of the Grand Martial Hall, watching as they slowly click shut.

Caging him in. "...What is it?"

Jun Wu leans back on his throne, crossing his legs, leaning his chin against his palm once more.

"You know," He muses, taking on a far more relaxed posture, "him, I understand." He nods in the direction from which Xie Lian just disappeared. "Pei isn't particularly complicated. Even the likes of Mu Qing and Ling Wen aren't hard to figure out, if you watch closely. But you..."

Jun Wu arches an eyebrow. "You're trying to pick a fight with me, and I'm curious as to why."

Shi Wudu faces away from him, his posture tense.

"That scenario never ends well for you."

It never has. The scars have healed, but the water god can still feel them.

Every day.

"...I don't know," he mutters, lowering his fan. "Poor impulse control, I suppose."

"...Of all of the diseases I thought you might catch from that dog," Jun Wu sighs, "Impulsivity was never one of them."

The Water God's empty hand balls up into a fist.

"Are you sure you aren't the one that's trying to pick a fight with me?" He asks quietly. "Or is that just petty jealousy?"

"Ah," the emperor smiles, shaking his head with a fond chuckle. After all these years, his Water Master can still make him laugh. "Let's be realistic, darling," he rises to his feet. "It wouldn't be a fight. At best, you could accuse me of toying with you. But I am curious…does he know?"

Shi Wudu won't turn to look at him.

"…See, I was telling Xianle the truth," the emperor smiles. "So many secrets…"

Shi Wudu knows what he's doing.

Antagonizing.

Because then, he'll snap. Then, the emperor can pretend he was provoked. He knows that, and still.

"You're just angry because your precious Crown Prince of Xianle would prefer to sleep in a broken down shrine than your palace."

That sends the smirk dropping from the Emperor's face, and Shi Wudu —

He's angry.

People call him proud. Condescending. The 'Water Tyrant,' but none of them ever know.

There is a constant, boiling anger underneath his skin. One that stems from pain.

"And by the way," he turns around, his eyes narrowed into a harsh glare, "What secret have I been keeping from him, exactly? That you have a proclivity for younger men who just so happen to idolize you?"

Jun Wu doesn't react, but the rage in Shi Wudu's chest is cresting. For so many years, it felt as though he was lucky.

Lifted higher than the others. Favored. Like the weight of his sins came with an equal reward.

"How old was he when he ascended? Seventeen?" Shi Wudu's tone turns cutting. "How old was I, when you came to me?"

And back then, it didn't feel like something was happening to him. Shi Wudu's childhood ended when his parents died.

He saw it happen. Felt the last vestiges of naïveté stripped from his heart when he watched the life fade from them.

It was normal, after that, for him to have to do things that children shouldn't.

To make decisions that should not have been up to him. Fight battles that he shouldn't have had to. Face things he wasn't prepared for.

Shi Wudu lived in a world of adults.

It wasn't strange to him when Jun Wu treated him like one.

It never occurred to him that he was, in so many ways, still a child.

"You say that as though anything inappropriate happened at that time," Jun Wu raises an eyebrow, but his tone was cold.

"I simply saved your brother's life, as I recall."

"No," Shi Wudu shakes his head, his gaze narrowed. " *I* saved my brother's life. All you did was show me the method."

And while nothing happened when Shi Wudu was seventeen... It wasn't long after that, when things began.

Shi Wudu was so, so happy back then.

So proud, to have such an important man's attention.

So determined to be worthy of it.

"And this anger against Pei..." The Water Master sighs, crossing his arms. "What's the logic behind it? What, did you think we were lovers?"

"Are you two lovers now?" Jun Wu questions. "That would be somewhat contradictory, don't you think? He's also much older, and he had his eye on you the moment you ascended."

Shi Wudu's lips twitch, and in spite of everything—he's pleased. "Did he really?"

Jun Wu glares.

Of course, it was different.

Foremost, Shi Wudu didn't notice. Pei was friendly, helpful—but more of a friend than a mentor.

When he did notice that the general was attracted to him, it was centuries later. Shi Wudu was a powerful god in the Heavenly Court in his own right.

And the reason that Shi Wudu noticed—that was because he had begun to feel that way too. Had begun watching his friend closer, to see if that same desire burned in his gaze.

Pei might be a flirt, but he never began making advances until Shi Wudu's own glances began to linger.

It was slow, and easy. Then quick and terrifying, but he never once wanted it to end. And that isn't what he has with the emperor.

"If you wanted to have me in public, or take me as a consort, you could have done that years ago." The Water Master points out, his tone frigid. "I would have agreed to it."

In an instant.

In the beginning, Shi Wudu was enchanted by him. Dazzled by the power. The attention. Craving stability.

"But you didn't—probably because, among other things, people would have raised eyebrows at it." The Water Master shrugs. "And now, you act like a jilted lover."

"Oh, come now," Jun Wu's eyes flash, and his tone turns somewhat condescending. "Is that what this is? Resentful that I took you to bed without asking your hand in marriage? Is that what it takes to keep your legs shut to other men?"

The mere implication behind his words makes Shi Wudu flinch with annoyance.

"As much as you might want to," Jun Wu steps down from the dais, his footsteps echoing throughout the hall. "You can't revise the past, just because it doesn't suit your narrative. You know that."

He stops in front of the water god, reaching out to touch his cheek, watching those sapphire eyes glare back at him hatefully.

So, so beautiful.

If Jun Wu had a weakness for anything, it would be a person's eyes.

They tell so much, and hide so little.

Shi Wudu hadn't wanted marriage back then. The emperor knows, even if he never said so.

Because he didn't want to give anyone reason to think he had risen by Jun Wu's favoritism alone.

And he only brings it up now as a means of justifying an affair with... Pei, of all people.

"...You know," he murmurs, his eyes fixed upon Shi Wudu's, "I normally don't mind it when you challenge me. I often like it. You have always known that."

So few are proud enough, egotistical enough, to raise their voice to Jun Wu. There's something enjoyable, exciting, even, about arguing.

"...But I wasn't in the mood for that today," Jun Wu concludes. "You must have been aware."

Shi Wudu would beg to differ. Forcing him to sit through that conversation with the Prince of Xianle felt like being antagonized. Like Jun Wu wanted him to lash out—

"Now, my mood has changed. I think..." His fingertips lift from his cheek, and Shi Wudu feels the back of his neck go cold. A feeling that spreads down his limbs, his chest, until his body feels almost numb. Detached from him. "That I'd like you to be quiet, now."

Shi Wudu opens his mouth, planning on making some sort of sarcastic response, but...

A single sound doesn't come out.

Just a weak, hoarse sound. Too faint to even be a whimper.

His vocal cords are locked, frozen in place by magic.

"Always acting like you're trapped..."

Jun Wu mutters, glaring down at him. "Like I'm some hideous monster forcing a life of power and privilege down your throat."

The younger god glares back at him, fighting against the spell—to no avail. "You have never come close to seeing me angry. Did you know that?"

He slowly circles the god, his eyes narrowed.

“And after the things you’ve done…”

Jun Wu’s voice echoes in his ears, weighing Shi Wudu down. Making his shoulders tremble.

“How dare you act like a victim?”

He steps close to the Water God’s back, leaning down to whisper in his ear.

“Why don’t you pray to him, hmm?” The Emperor murmurs, his breath fanning across the side of his neck. “I haven’t stopped you. Go on. Ask him to help you.”

But he knows—Shi Wudu won’t.

Even if he was willing to put Pei in further danger by pitting him against the Emperor. Even if he thought it was possible that Pei might win—

That would require admitting to the things he has spent centuries fighting to hide.

Fingers brush his hair back over his shoulder, and when lips press against his throat, the Water God cringes, wishing desperately that someone might walk back through that door. That someone might see them like this, but—

“I have never forced anything on you.”

Jun Wu murmurs against his skin. The touch is gentle, but it rings with a subtle violence.

“But clearly, you need to learn the difference.”

Shi Wudu’s eyes widen, and his stomach plummets.

“Start walking.”

He makes no effort to move his legs—but still, they obey.

The spell is powerful, locking him in like a marionette.

Jun Wu orders him to follow him to the imperial residence, and he does. Demands that the Water Master strip himself bare, and he is obeyed.

In some ways, it doesn't feel that different from how it's always been. All the emperor has done is strip away the illusion of choice.

This feels like a more naked version of events. As though they've finally stopped pretending that one of them wanted this.

Ever since he was a child, Shi Wudu has been good at going somewhere far away in his head.

At pretending that certain things weren't happening to him. They were happening to someone else, and he was far away. He was safe. And it didn't hurt.

He's dragged back when Jun Wu orders him to stop with the tears, and the Water God's eyes go dry in response.

He's dragged back when he's ordered to move positions again. When he's told to smile. To be grateful for it.

With each forced return to reality, his mind scrambles to get away. To become blissfully blank, until it's over.

And it is over, eventually.

With the emperor sleeping, sprawled across his bed—having taken what he wanted.

With the water master curled on his side, arms cradling himself like tape cordoning off the scene of a crime.

Eyes staring at the wall, blank and hollow.

There are things no one tells you.

That sometimes, there's no one to pray to.

No one to ask for help, when the one who is supposed to answer those prayers is the one that's hurting you.

He sits up slowly, his body numb, robotic.

It hurts, but that feels removed from him. Distant, somehow.

Hair slips over his shoulder in an ebony curtain, obscuring the blood that lays beneath.

For a moment, he contemplates returning to his own palace—

But he can't.

Shi Qingxuan would notice something was wrong.

For the same reasons, Pei's home isn't an option either.

There's nowhere to go.

Something glints in the moonlight, catching his eye.

The Water Master's eye follows it, finding something sitting on top of the cabinet against the far wall.

Something all too familiar, by now.

A dagger.

"…"

Shi Wudu's head tilts to the side.

His footsteps pad silently across marble floors, so accustomed to this sort of pain, he doesn't limp anymore.

The steel is black. The engraving is intricate. A dragon curled around it's hilt. And, etched into the blade—

'The God Slayer.'

He lifts it up, fingers steady.

It's heavier than it looks, sitting solidly against his palm.

Shi Wudu lifts it before his face, dragging his fingertip along the edge, a small cut forming on the pad of his index finger, watches the blood bead up with quiet fascination.

It doesn't heal, dripping down the side of his finger, one drop landing on the floor beneath his feet.

Slowly, his attention turns back to the emperor, sleeping just halfway across the room.

And for a moment, it seems so easy.

Just to walk a few feet over.

To lean over him.

To stare at the pale column of his throat, fingers tightening around the grip of the dagger, and imagine it gushing with red.

Imagining what it would be like, for all of it to be over.

How his life might be different, if he wasn't constantly forced to dance in the palm of someone else's hand.

Then, imagining becomes yearning, and it grows inside of him, swelling until he can't stand it anymore.

Painfully aware of the limits of his chains. And he wants out.

It's so close.

So painfully close, that he'll find himself screaming with frustration later. Remembering the way the blade kissed the emperor's skin. That he was one flick of the wrist away from freedom, but—

But then, those eyes snapped open. Jun Wu doesn't even flinch.

"Oh?" He arches an eyebrow, surveying the Water Master with a curious gaze. "I didn't know you had it in you."

Shi Wudu grits his teeth, his wrist trembling slightly, but he forces himself to remain steady. "You know I do."

"To kill someone, yes..." The emperor smiles faintly. "But you'll never give up all of this."

For a moment, Shi Wudu thinks he must be referring to the twist, garbled mess of whatever it is that lies between them, but...

Jun Wu's expression sharpens.

"Go ahead," he snaps his fingers. "I won't stop you."

At first, Shi Wudu thinks Jun Wu means to allow him to slit his throat, but—

All the sudden, a wave of exhaustion sweeps over him—and it feels like a heavy weight has suddenly landed on the back of his neck, drawing him down.

"Didn't you hear me?" Jun Wu murmurs. "Go on."

Then, there's another snap of his fingers—and Shi Wudu's wrist becomes so heavy, it slams down to the floor, dragging him down with it.

"Y—You..." The Water Master struggles, trying to regain his bearings, "What are you —?!"

But when he looks down, he falls silent.

Sitting there, around his wrist, is the familiar pattern of a cursed shackle.

"That's two..." Jun Wu muses, looking him over. "How about a third?"

Of course, the Water God opens his mouth to protest, but...

Snap!

Just like that—the world goes dark.

"Go on." Jun Wu repeats the word, his tone cold as he watches the Water Master blink, disoriented as he struggles to regain his bearings. "You want out?"

He must, given how frantic his movements are.

"You know you don't need me to take them off for you. You know how."

That reminder makes Shi Wudu go still, staring blindly into the dark.

He's never felt more alone, than in this moment. Never felt more helpless.

It's hard now, to imagine living that way for eight centuries.

Still, he doesn't say a word, he just...

Does the harder thing.

"...I'm sorry," he croaks, his shoulders slumped, head bowed with...submission.

An agonizing thing, for a man so prideful.

"Will you be trying that again?"

The shackles tighten before he can answer, making him sink to the floor with a pained cry.

“N-No...” He gasps.

Jun Wu is sitting up now, bare chested, hair slipping over his shoulder as he smirks down at Shi Wudu, the moonlight illuminating one half of his face.

The other remains in darkness.

“You could get rid of them yourself,” he reminds him once again, lips twisting into a smile.

“But you won’t do that, will you?”

It’s never a real option.

“You won’t give up the power and privileges I have given you, will you?”

Jun Wu can’t put cursed shackles on a mortal, or a ghost.

Only a god.

And the easiest way to escape them?

Renouncing that godhood.

It’s a cage to which Shi Wudu holds the key.

He doubts Jun Wu has made the same thing clear to Xianle. The prince seems like the type who would have relinquished his godhood long ago, if he knew that he could.

But for Shi Wudu, it isn’t a real option.

He can’t leave.

He could never leave Shi Qingxuan behind.

And if he did, he would have to explain.

The Water Master would rather die, than force his brother to live with the truth. Would rather suffer, day in and day out.

Jun Wu wasn’t wrong.

Shi Wudu keeps their secrets.

But no matter how much power he has—

Living like this will never be a privilege.

Snap!

The weight disappears from his wrist and neck, light creeping back into his eyes, and he trembles, gasping, limp on the floor.

The emperor pours himself a glass of wine.

“I’ve kept every promise I ever made to you,” He muses. “Haven’t I?”

The Water Master doesn’t reply, curling up on the floor. Doesn’t move.

“Your brother has lived the last four hundred years in luxury and happiness, has he not? Your reputation has been without blemish.”

Luxury. Reputation.

Those things used to matter so much to him.

“And I think now, after that little outburst,” Jun Wu tilts his head, sipping his wine. “I’m starting to understand where all this is coming from.”

Shi Wudu very much doubts that.

“Do you know,” He sits back against his headboard, staring out across the darkness of the room. “I’ve always believed that fate can connect us through our lifetimes.” His wine has a bittersweet taste. “Don’t you?”

The water master feels muddled. Lifetimes?

“I’ve been around for so long—longer than any of you realize—I’ve actually encountered quite a few souls that I used to know. Over and over again,” he muses, twisting the cup between his fingers, watching the water slosh back and forth.

It shifts back and forth between wine at his command. Easily transmuted. Light then dark. Bitter, then sweet. Burning, then tasteless.

“It takes some time, to learn to recognize the similarities. They’re subtle. And of course—it's impossible for you to remember, but I do."

If you were to ask Jun Wu—he would tell you that some things about a soul never change.

He is fairly certain that the Prince of Xianle, for example, would have been stubborn. In every single lifetime.

"I suppose it makes sense that fate would bring you back to me…"

His eyes drift down to where the Water Master lies on the floor in a heap, his hair covering his face in a dark, silken curtain.

Obscuring his eyes. The masculine shape of his shoulders.

Now, it's easy to imagine a different face. Different eyes. A different body.

"…I don't know what you're talking about," Shi Wudu croaks, his voice hoarse.

"Of course you wouldn't," the emperor agrees. "And that makes it all the more ironic."

And it makes his cruelty to the younger god all the more justifiable.

It makes even more sense now, that he would try to kill Jun Wu with that blade.

The blade that she forged, so many years ago.

"But you know, I did keep something," the emperor tilts his head, lowering his glass from his lips. "Open that chest over there and take a look."

The Water Master doesn't move at first, so the emperor gives him a gentle nod in the right direction. "Go on."

"…" Slowly, reluctantly, Shi Wudu rises to his feet, legs wobbling as he walks to the corner of the room, where an ancient, stone chest remains, lifting the lid.

There are many things in the chest that seem utterly foreign to him. Weapons. Ancient artifacts that he can't even begin to recognize.

What seems to be a child's toy, a stuffed fox.

And sitting on top of it all, is a wooden box. One inlaid with gold. An beneath the glass—

A butterfly.

Silver. Wings tattered from so many years having gone by, despite careful preservation.

A beautiful display. But there's something hideously sad about the sight of it. It feels like a reflection of Shi Wudu's own situation.

"That was the first gift I gave you."

The emperor explains.

The first of many.

And in the end, she turned every single one of them into a source of pain.

Into a curse.

But when Shi Wudu stares down at that box, he feels something very different.

That Jun Wu is wrong.

Somewhere in the cracks and crevices of his soul, Shi Wudu knows that he isn't the soul who was given this box.

It feels utterly unfamiliar to him. Cold, poisonous underneath his hands. It's impossible to know one's past lives, of course. That isn't how it works.

But there are brief moments of familiarity. Where you think you might have felt something before. Done something. Met someone.

Shi Wudu has felt that. But never with Jun Wu, and certainly not with this box. But he supposes that might be fair.

After all, this all happened because of his own choices.

His decision to switch his brother's fate with that of someone else.

It makes sense, in the end, that he should be punished for someone else's choices. That he should be switched, in a sense, with someone else.

"Now," Jun Wu sets his wine glass down, watching Shi Wudu's back. The bruises he left there. "Come back to bed."

For a moment, the god doesn't respond—and the emperor smirks.

"You are far too intelligent to be such a slow learner, my dear."

The choice is clear.

It isn't up to him.

None of this has ever been up to him.

But it's better to go willingly than it is to be forced.

So, he does.

Climbs back into those sheets. Into those arms.

Lets him take what he wants with no struggle.

And Jun Wu has always been a taker.

He takes, and he takes, and he takes.

Until everything feels numb.

Inside and out. Like Shi Wudu is a tapestry that has been pulled apart at the seams, until only a pile of threads remain.

When the emperor sleeps again, he doesn't dare reach for that blade a second time.

He doesn't dare go home.

Doesn't dare seek out the one place where he has always felt safe.

He stands in the streets of the Heavenly Capital, empty in the night. Robes rumpled. Hair loose.

And it all feels so ridiculous. Even among gods, he is powerful.

His wealth is unmatched.

Few people in all three realms have ever risen so far as he has.

But now, at his lowest—

He has nowhere to go.

He finds himself leaning against one of the pillars that lines the street, examining his wrist.

Remembering the shackle that sat there. His lips twist into a bitter smile.

He, amongst the most powerful gods, in that moment, feels the desire to pray to one of the weakest.

And yet—

‘Do you think I would ever treat Xianle the way that I treat you?’

That’s the misunderstanding in all of it.

‘Do you think he would ever allow himself to be in this position?’

Shi Wudu has always been far weaker than him.

But in this contemplative silence, considering praying—

Shi Wudu actually hears one.

A prayer.

It’s been many years since he listened to one personally.

His deputies handle that now. It’s rare that Shi Wudu’s head is ever quiet enough to hear, but—

‘L-Lord Water Master!’ His throat tightens. *‘Please, help!’*

When has he ever been able to help anyone? What has he ever done, besides causing damage?

Besides breaking things?

What good has he ever done?

‘I don’t know if you can hear me,’ the voice pleads. That of a young man, no older than a teenager. *‘I don’t—I don’t have any money to offer, but my little sister—she’s —!’*

The Water god pauses, listening closely.

‘I can’t stop them!’

In the mortal realm below, a young man struggles.

Wrenching at the arms holding him back, trying to get free.

To get to her.

“L-LET HER GO!” He cries.

“G-gege!” The young girl whimpers, her eyes wide with terror. “H-Help me!”

They booked passage on this vessel weeks ago.

To escape the economic downturn in the north. The chaos that has been brewing for years now.

The plan was to go South, so he could cultivate under the clan in Yunmeng. It would be quieter there. A better place to raise his little sister.

But now, it seems they won’t make it.

The fall of Yong’an led to lawlessness across the plains.

The seas were no exception.

They had barely been on voyage for more than a day before their vessel was taken by pirates.

They already killed the ship’s captain and crew, along with most of the other passengers.

But, as foul men often do—they left the little girl alive. The only girl on the entire ship.

And now, her brother can do nothing but watch. Fighting as hard as he can, while the others hold him down.

“GEGE!”

“I—” He chokes, thrashing as the rain begins to fall down.

A storm is rolling in rather suddenly, it seems. It was perfectly clear only a few moments ago.

“I’M HERE, I WON’T—” He bites one of the hands holding him down, fighting with all of his might. “I WON’T LET THEM—!”

But he knows, in his heart, that he can't stop it.

He's prayed to every god he can think of, but he has nothing to offer—and he doubts any of them will answer. Not in time to help them.

One of the men holding him down snickers, glancing up at the brewing clouds in the sky, the sea slowly beginning to churn underneath them.

It's funny now, how unpredictable the weather on the ocean can be. Storms of violent nature brewing up—often out of nowhere.

"Your gege is brave," he comments, smashing the young man's face down against the planks of the ship deck. "But weak. There's nothing he can—"

BOOM!

The lightning strike so sudden, so powerful, it knocks many of the nearby men off of their feet. And with them, go the ones who were holding the young girl down.

"The hell kind of storm is th—?"

BOOM!

The entire sky flashes white, crackling with power. Now, there's a figure.

Standing in the center of the deck, long, dark hair whipping around in the breeze.

"S...Say," one of the pirates mumbles, leaning close to his companion. "W-Where did he come from?"

The stranger's face tilts up, sapphire eyes sparking with every flash of lightning.

Normally, it's not an odd thing for a stranger to appear in the middle of such a confrontation, drawn in by the noise.

It is odd, however, when you're on a ship.

"W-Who—?"

A voice cuts clearly through the sound of the storm, low and cold.

"You dare attack my worshippers?"

Scattered, frightened whispers echo among the group of pirates.

A god?

A god is here?

For what? These insignificant children?

And who—?

While they seem confused, the little girl is not. Sitting up, her tears mixed with the rain.

"L-Lord Water Master!" She croaks.

The men around stir, fright starting to permeate the are.

It's—

It's the Water Master?

The little girl scrambles to his side, hiding behind his robes, trembling like a leaf. "I said," the figure repeats, "you dare to harm my worshippers?"

"We...my lord, we didn't know—!"

CRASH!

Another bolt of lightning strikes the water nearby, briefly blinding them, sending the men holding the little girl's brother to the ground stumbling.

Now that he's free, he immediately rushes to her side, holding her in his arms.

"Gege!"

Shi Wudu turns his head, looking over the port side bow.

They're a few hundred meters off the shore. He can see a human city, twinkling in the distance.

"...Get off the ship."

It's a quiet demand, not spoken in anger, and—

It’s directed at the children.

The elder of the two stares up at the water god, his mouth hanging open with shock.

“I…She can’t swim, we’ll—!”

“You’ll be alright.” The Water Master murmurs, not casting so much as a glance their way. “Get off the ship.”

The teenager swallows thickly.

The sea is churning violently below them, but…

There really is no other choice.

Cautiously, with his sister in his arms, he makes his way to the side of the ship, taking one more anxious glance.

‘You’ll be alright.’

He bites his lip, and his little sister tugs at his sleeve.

“We’ll be okay, gege.” She whispers, still shaken and pale from what happened before, but—

A god is here to protect them.

They slip over the side, and instead of plunging underneath the waves—they land gently on top of them.

The water feels as solid as stone.

And when the next wave rises, it carries the two on top of it, swiftly carrying them back to shore.

“M-My lord,” one of the pirates whispers, dropping to his knees. “W-We had no idea —”

“Of course you didn’t.”

Shi Wudu tilts his face back, looking up into the sky.

That’s what humans do, when they think no one is watching.

When they think there are no consequences for the destruction they cause. When they know their prey is too weak to fight back.

They unleash the very worst of themselves.

The lack of consequences is their justification.

It turns exploiting the weak into a fact of life. Into justice.

Shi Wudu has used those justifications himself before, when he harmed others.

And in this moment, he wonders—

How many children have prayed for salvation, going unheard?

Not realizing that those same cruel men often ascend as gods too. "We—we didn't mean—!"

BOOM!

Thunder crashes again, almost like it could shatter the sky above.

Shi Wudu doesn't care what they meant. Doesn't care what they thought.

For a moment, the pirates think the sky has gone completely black, swallowing up all light, but…

It's water.

A wall of water, rushing towards them faster than the helmsman can respond.

A wave so tall, it shrouds the moon and stars above, even the lightning flashes can no longer be seen.

There are screams of course, pleas for mercy.

Prayers that go pointedly unanswered.

Shi Wudu has sunk many ships before.

He doesn't even flinch when the wave slams into him, obliterating the ship—and the mortals remaining inside. Reducing it to nothing but splinters.

Swallowing the remains, dragging them down, down, down, lost beneath the sea.

The wave dissolves back into the ocean itself, leaving one figure standing on its surface.

‘Gege?’

He can hear him there, in their private communication array, his tone slightly strained with worry.

‘Where are you?’

The Water Master sinks to his knees, his head in his hands.

The storm rages around him with no sign of letting up anytime soon.

If anything, it intensifies into a small hurricane, reflecting the raging inside. Can’t go home.

Can’t get out.

Can’t tell the truth.

CRASH!

From the shore, two children watch the lightning flash.

Shi Wudu clutches his head in his hands, wishing that the pirates would stop screaming and begging.

“LET ME GO!”

They’re dead already, why won’t they just stop—?

“WHY WON’T YOU JUST LET ME GO?!”

Oh.

That’s him.

He’s screaming.

The children can’t see the god who saved them, shrouded by the storm.

The raging winds and crashing waves that push him further and further out from everyone else. Cold words and arrogant stares given physical shape and form.

‘Shi Wudu keeps our secrets.’

That wasn’t true.

Shi Wudu keeps Jun Wu’s secrets.

And now, alone in the storm, he doesn’t know what he’s protecting anymore.

Not himself. Not Shi Qingxuan.

But by the time he sees the bars of his cage clearly, by the time he finds the key—

It will be too late.

And the Water Master will drown.

When Xie Lian leaves the Heavens, he’s fortunate to avoid hitting any more clouds. It would seem that, even without his sight—it’s really more about controlled posture than it is about aim.

Still, he doesn’t land where he intended. Rather than the hills below Puqi Shrine…

He finds himself standing on a mountain. A familiar one at that.

It’s been over eight centuries, but he knows it by the smell of the trees. The taste of the air.

The occasional broken swing he finds on the path.

Mount Taicang.

It’s been so many years since he returned here.

He used to come more, early on in his banishment. Less, as time went on.

Now, he doesn’t think he’s returned since he burst from that coffin two centuries ago. The path is familiar—but overgrown.

He finds himself forced to use fangxin to cut branches and brambles free, making his way to the top of the hillside.

Part of him is glad not to see the ruins where his greatest temple once stood. Sitting at the peak of *'the Summit of the Crown Prince.'*

Not because he hasn't accepted his fall in rank in position. Heavens no, Xie Lian accepted that long ago.

It's hard, because he remembers how proud his father looked, when the temple was first built.

And it's that pride turning to disappointment that hurt him the most.

There's a well that sits among the ruins and rubble. Long since dried up and abandoned. Hardly something worth noticing—

To those unaware of what lies beneath, anyway.

It's a simple matter to throw one's legs over the side and slip down to the tunnel below.

His boots land with a heavy thud against the mud, barely sinking down as he reaches out, palms pressing flat against the bricks making up the side of the well, fumbling until he finds—

Ah, there, the handle.

It pulls open with a heavy screech, dust drifting through the dark.

If anyone actually knew that there was a mausoleum for the royal family of Xianle beneath the hillside of Mount Taicang, it would have been robbed long ago.

After all, diamonds and other jewels still glitter across the ceiling.

The monarchs who are buried here still wear the silken ceremonial robes that they did in life.

It feels strange sometimes, being here. As though he's treading the echoes of a life that no longer belongs to him.

The God Pleasing Crown Prince feels like a fictional character.

This beautiful, shining ideal that people look up to, but...

It’s not real. It’s not him.

And when he comes to the end of the royal tomb, the resting place for the last King and Queen of Xianle…

The god sinks to the ground, pulling his knees up against his chest.

“…Hi, Mom.” He mumbles, resting his chin against his knees. “Hi, Dad.”

Sometimes, in the dark, it still feels like they’re hanging over his head.

“…I’m sorry I didn’t bring anything,” He mumbles, hugging his legs a little tighter. “And I’m sorry it’s been so long.”

Really, it might be true that most sons don’t outlive their parents by as many years as he has, but really? Three whole centuries?

It’s disgraceful.

“…I ascended again,” he always leads with the good news. He knows they would have liked that. “Third time’s the charm, right?”

He bites his lip, tilting his head down until his cheek is pressing against his knees, and he shrinks into an even smaller ball.

“I’m doing much better now,” he adds, his voice small. “I’m eating plenty, so don’t worry. I saw Feng Xin and Mu Qing, by the way—they’re doing well.”

That would make his mother happy, he knows.

She was always so happy, seeing the three of them together. Even towards the end, she…

Xie Lian takes a deep breath.

“…And I saw Qi Rong again,” he mumbles.

He’s already come here and confessed to what he did before.

There’s no need to beg for forgiveness now. And even if there was—he wouldn’t actually be sorry.

“…He’s hurt a lot of people,” the prince admits, staring in the direction of his mother’s grave. “And I’m…not sure how I should deal with him. I don’t…know what to do.”

It’s not like they’ve ever answered him. Their souls moved on long ago. They don’t hear his words now.

But still, there’s comfort in coming here, and talking through the things that he doesn’t understand. Pretending that someone is listening.

Like praying, but more sincere.

It’s been so long since someone was willing to just sit around and listen to him talk— this feels as good as any other heart to heart.

That is, until he hears something. Quiet sniffling.

Not from him, but...

From inside his mother’s grave.

“...” His heart stutters. “...Mom?”

For a moment, some paranoid part of him wonders, but... The closer he listens, his heart sinks.

There’s a heartbeat. Quiet, but quick—terrified, like that of a small rabbit. And the tone of the breaths and sniffles—

They’re that of a child.

But what is a living, breathing child doing in his mother’s grave?

Are there grave robbers here? But if there were, why bring a little child with them?

Then, from the corner of his eye—he sees something that explains everything.

A glowing aura. Acidic green.

...Him.

“...You aren’t welcome here.”

Xie Lian’s voice is low. Frigid.

This is a place for members of the Xianle royal family.

A family that Qi Rong no longer has the right to call himself a member of.

“Why would you even come?”

There’s a pause, then a snide reply—

“Paying my respects to the man and woman who raised me, of course.”

Xie Lian makes a low noise of disgust in the back of his throat.

‘Raised’ is an exaggeration.

They fed him. Clothed him. Housed him. He was treated well.

But they weren’t his parents.

“...And you brought a human child here to do that?” The prince mutters, caught somewhere between exasperation and exhaustion. “What, was your plan to eat him?”

“...Maybe,” Qi Rong drawls. It’s not his usual voice. More like that of the human that he’s wearing as a skin.

“Kids are useful, y’know?”

“And you left it in a coffin,” Xie Lian retorts, his voice ringing with disgust. “Did you just decide at some point that you were such a failure at being good, that you would just overachieve in the opposite direction?”

There’s a shocked pause—and finally, a slightly manic giggle.

“You know,” his cousin grins, watching as Xie Lian moves to lift the lid of the coffin so he can pull the child out, “I suppose I should feel flattered that no one else gets to see this side of you. Just your cousin!”

And of course, Xie Lian knows what side he means.

The part of him that’s still capable of being condescending, angry, and cruel.

Though he doesn’t know if it counts as cruelty, when Qi Rong isn’t capable of the same thoughts and feelings of an actual human. He never has been.

But when he lifts the child out of his mother's grave, he feels that side boiling up to the surface. Coming just as quickly as it hides away.

Because—

There was too much free space inside the coffin, for a child to be able to hide successfully.

And at first, Xie Lian can feel the truth creeping up on him. The slow, dawning realization. Like a prickle on the back of his neck.

But he doesn't want to believe it. No matter how horrible Qi Rong might be, he— Xie Lian doesn't want to think he would do that.

The first time he asks, his voice is calm.

"...Where is my mother's body?"

There's silence at first. That, Xie Lian can live with.

What he can't stand is the jeering, sadistic little giggle that slips out.

"...WHAT DID YOU DO WITH HER BODY?!"

The child in his arms flinches and cringes with shock—and Xie Lian can barely bring himself to care, setting him down before he turns on Qi Rong, trembling with rage.

"Oh, there's no need to be so dramatic! Auntie is still there, just...in a different form!" He cackles.

Xie Lian doesn't want to know what he means. has a sick, twisting feeling in his gut, but he doesn't want to confirm it.

Still, he has to.

And when he reaches into the coffin, feeling the pile of ash underneath his fingertips, all he can think to say is—

"She was kind to you." It's true.

The Queen of Xianle probably showed Qi Rong more kindness than the boy ever received in his life. Never raised her voice to him, or treated him unfairly.

And this was how he repaid her.

“...But you remember what you said, don’t you?” Qi Rong hums.

He’s standing against the wall, watching every flash of pain and rage in Xie Lian’s expression with glimmering satisfaction.

“Back when you killed me?”

Xie Lian bows his head, and he grits his teeth.

“You said she didn’t love me. That her kindness was given out of guilt.”

Qi Rong taps his thumb against his chin. “Shouldn’t I hate her, then, for treating me so falsely?”

But Xie Lian knows that isn’t why.

Qi Rong doesn’t hate Xie Lian’s mother. And even if he did, he wouldn’t have done this to hurt her.

Because she’s gone.

No, he...

He did this to hurt him.

Because he didn’t want Xie Lian to even have a body to pay respects to.

“...What I said about your father before,” Xie Lian mutters, not looking up from the grave. “That really got to you, didn’t it?”

Qi Rong pales, then glares. “You think—?”

BAM!

The punch comes so swiftly, the ghost doesn’t even have time to flinch before he’s slammed against the wall.

And this time, in the mortal shell he’s using—blood begins to pour down his chin. “You’re too weak to hurt me directly,” Xie Lian snarls, holding him down.

He always has been.

Like a jackal that will only attack a calf when it’s been separated from the herd. Weak, and cowardly.

“So, you did this, right?”

Mutilated a corpse. That of his own aunt. And over what, indignation? As if he has a right to be indignant.

What a joke.

Xie Lian pulls his fist back, striking him over and over again. Until Qi Rong is laughing with childish glee as he slumps back, and Xie Lian hears the child from before crying out with terror.

“D-DON’T HURT MY DAD!” He cries.

Then, the choice of a human skin makes sense.

It makes sense, as much as it hurts.

(And it hurts so much, it feels like he can hardly breathe.)

Still, he laughs.

No matter how many times Xie Lian hits him. No matter how much anger he puts behind the blows.

“S-See what I mean?!”

“DAD!”

He can’t stop. He won’t, he—

“YOU’VE ALWAYS BEEN LIKE THIS!” Qi Rong cackles, blood pouring from his chin, staining his teeth. “EVEN WHEN EVERYONE THOUGHT YOU WERE PERFECT, YOU WERE ALWAYS LIKE THIS! I SAW YOU CLEARLY!”

His teeth come together with a click, and…

Xie Lian can’t listen to it anymore.

The hand gripping Fangxin rises up, and the laughter reaches a fever pitch.

“HA! HAHA! TOLD YOU SO, TOLD YOU SO!! COUSIN CROWN PRINCE IS A MONSTER, JUST LIKE ME!”

He won’t.

“DON’T, MY DAD—!”

He won’t.

“ENOUGH!”

Xie Lian knows that the person Qi Rong admired once, the figure he loathes now with so much passion—

None of that was real. It was all fake. Shrouded, pretending to be perfection. But—

‘When did I ever say that you had to be perfect?’

CLANG!

Finally, the blade comes down. But memory is a funny thing.

Something that you often learn not to trust, or find less reliable in the present, simply blaming your own lack of recall.

But sometimes, memories are far more honest than you might think. Sometimes, within memory—

We find who we really are.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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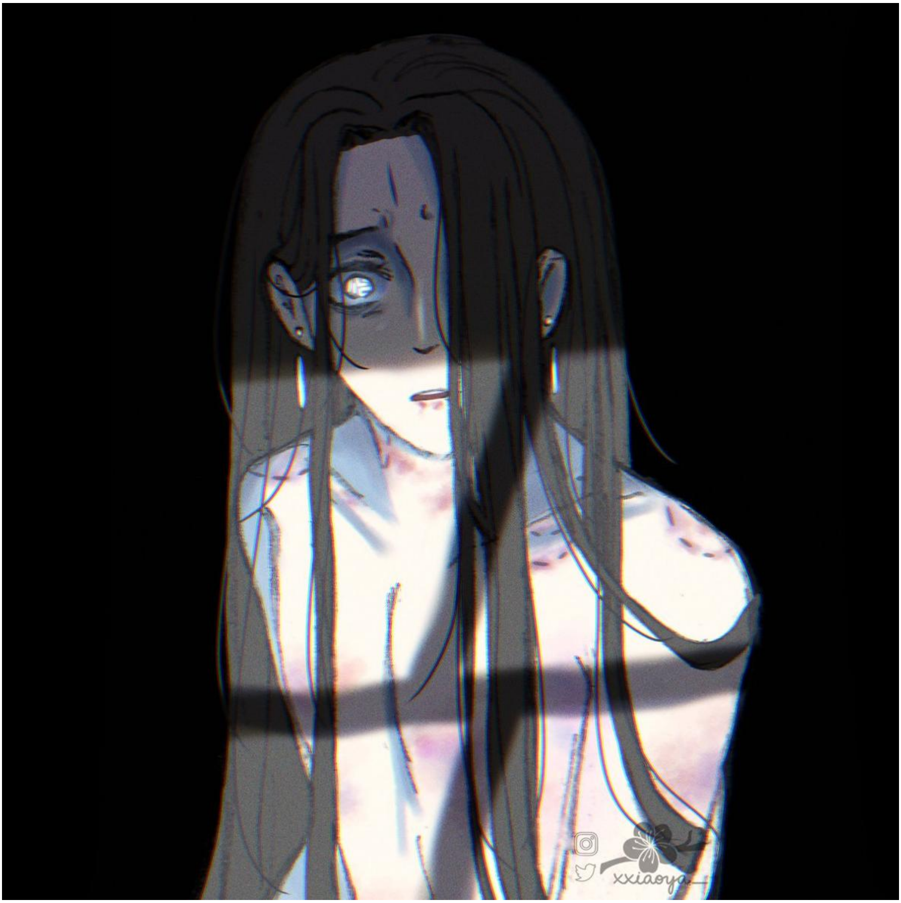
CONTENT WARNING: DEPICTIONS OF THE AFTERMATH OF SEXUAL ASSAULT + ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Shi Wudu + Jun Wu

[image]

CREDIT: SEONG

Shi Wudu (the aftermath + the cursed shackle)



CREDIT: PRI

Chapter End Notes

SUMMARY OF THE TRIGGERING SCENE: Jun Wu sexually assaults Shi Wudu. In the aftermath, Shi Wudu gets a hold of the God Slayer and attempts to kill him, only for Jun Wu to stop him and place him under cursed shackles, mirroring Xie Lian's. He taunts the Water Master, and reminds him that he can escape if he chooses to renounce his godhood. Shi Wudu gives in, and Jun Wu removes the shackles. Distressed and unable to reach out for help, Shi Wudu assists two mortal children who happened to be praying to him at the time, saving a young girl from being sexually assaulted, and slaughtering the pirates who captured them.

Origins

Chapter Summary

> Long ago, on the central plains, there was a Kingdom known as Xianle.
>
> Vast in land and resources—with four great blessings:
>
> Beautiful women. Vibrant music and literature. Wealth beyond compare, and most of all…
>
> Their Crown Prince, who pleased the Gods.

Chapter Notes

> You can find me on twitter and keep up with current updates of the story HERE

See the end of the chapter for more notes

824 YEARS PRIOR

Long ago, on the central plains, there was a Kingdom known as Xianle.

Vast in land and resources—with four great blessings:

Beautiful women. Vibrant music and literature. Wealth beyond compare, and most of all…

Their Crown Prince, who pleased the Gods.

But before his ascension and the war that followed, before the infamous parade on martial Avenue…

Around the feasting hall, the nobility raises their glasses, cheering over the sound of the music.

“TO THE CROWN PRINCE!”

…he was a child, just as any other.

Young lords and ladies dance throughout the palace, fireworks shooting off overhead.

After all, their queen had not only safely given birth to a healthy baby —but also a male heir.

No small task.

A string of failed pregnancies had haunted the Royal Family of Xianle for years.

Much of it was blamed on the King marrying an older woman, the sister of a childhood friend—reducing the years in which they could safely have children.

But now, the Royal bloodline is secure—and the kingdom rejoices.

The Queen sits fair above the feast, on the Royal dais. Reclined on a chaise sofa—in theory, so she could watch the celebrations below, but…

She can't seem to take her eyes off of the child in her arms.

Propped up against her knees, eyes wide as they take in the sound and the spectacle.

"Should he really be so quiet?" She murmurs, pushing his hair away from his face, gently tucking soft brown curls behind his ear.

The Queen had only thought the newborn would be able to tolerate such a party for a few minutes, at best—but he's been content to be among all of the sound and commotion for hours.

The King smiles, pressing a kiss against her forehead.

"He's happy to be with his mother," he assures her. "As am I, always."

His wife bites back a smile, her tone slightly scolding. "You flirt, here? In front of all of your subjects—!"

She's cut off with a squeak when he kisses her, softly, sweetly.

"With my Queen, yes."

She smiles into it, her heart softening.

"With the mother of my child, always."

Mother.

Her chest warms as he pulls away, and she looks down at that little face once more.

She's a mother, now.

"...My sweet little Xie Lian," she croons, leaning down to press her lips against his forehead, holding him close. "Welcome," she whispers as the little boy coos in response, pressing close to his mother's warmth. "We're so happy to finally meet you."

The King watches his family fondly, not caring for the feasting or the celebration. Only for her, and the child in her arms.

But still—Xie Lian is not a child like any other. He is the Crown Prince of Xianle.

And as such, there are traditions to be followed.

Representatives from around the continent, showing gifts from kingdoms far and wide to congratulate Xianle on it's new heir.

Trays laden with gold. Yards upon yards of silk. The finest of horses. Rare treasures from far and wide—

But the man at the end of the line has no gift. And he's a slightly peculiar fellow.

Dressed in white robes, holding himself with an air that seems far beyond his years— he doesn't seem a day over twenty—and with ivory hair, trailing down his back.

One of the guards steps before the royal family as he approaches. "Hold it!"

The Queen smiles, shaking her head. "Relax, General Feng. Allow the poor man to introduce himself before you're up in arms..."

The general frowns, somewhat reluctant—but takes a step back under his Queen's command.

"Approach."

The young man smiles, grateful. "Thank you."

When he reaches the Royal dais, he bows deeply, hands folded before

him.

“It has long been tradition for a chief cultivator from one of the local sects to give a newborn prince his first fortune reading,” the ivory haired man explains. “I have come to offer my services.”

The king is familiar with such a tradition—after all, a cultivator from the local sect told his fortune after his own birth, so he nods. “Very well, go on.”

The cultivator bows his head, approaching the Queen’s side. The child in her arm is slightly small, born a little early.

But there’s already a mess of hair upon this head, a warm shade of brown, fluffy in texture, falling before his eyes.

And when Mei Nianqing bends before the child, examining his small palm, gaining the details of his birth—

He smiles.

The Queen watches him, cautious.

“...Is it good?”

“Well,” the cultivator looks up. “He was born under a cursed star, but,” he holds one finger up before the child’s parents can react, “this is not a reason to panic.”

The king stares, his brow furrowed with worry. “...Forgive me, priest—but it sounds worrisome.”

“No, no...” Mei Nianqing shakes his head. “To be born under a cursed star only means that one’s fate will have great impact on the world. This doesn’t necessarily mean it will be good, or bad.”

“Oh,” the Queen lets out a shaky breath of relief, holding Xie Lian closer. “Is that all it says?”

“...He will have to work very hard,” the cultivator cautions them both, “and it will not be easy—but he will shine brighter than any other.”

That small, flushed little face cracks with a tired yawn, pressing his face into his mother’s dress.

“...It won’t be too hard, will it?” The King smiles, laughing with a hint of nerves. “He’s only three days old, priest.”

"...I see many trials," the cultivator admits. "But the signs say he will endure them all, and rise past it. For he has the greatest blessing of them all."

The King and Queen raise their eyebrows in unison, and Mei Nianqing smiles.

"Your son will be adored like no other. Praised from one end of the horizon to the next. But he will have one great love of his life—one that will carry him through any hardship."

After all, no matter how far we fall—it is the ones who love us most who catch us, in the end.

"...Well," the Queen smiles, pressing her forehead to her son's. "I can't wait to meet this great love of yours, my darling."

There's shouts for another round of song—more fireworks.

The kingdom rejoices from one end to the other—and that night, they light countless incense sticks in the temple of the god the King and Queen prayed to for a successful pregnancy.

The Heavenly Emperor, Jun Wu.

Now, with eager excitement, they watch their little prince grow.

But...

"YOUR HIGHNESS!"

Excited peals of laughter echo through the imperial gardens.

"SLOW DOWN!"

...sometimes, growing up is quite a process.

"Just a little further!" The seven year old exclaims, stretching his fingertips up high overhead. "I've almost got it!"

He makes one well placed jump, stretching out as much as he can, but... The butterfly flutters just out of reach, darting back over the palace walls.

And the prince, naturally, goes tumbling back down to the ground in a tangle of hair and silk robes.

“OW!” He cries out, rolling over, pulling up his robes to reveal a skinned knee.

Maybe, some day, the prince of Xianle will be a great warrior, and a scratch like this will be forgettable.

But for now, his lip wobbles, and his eyes well up with tears.

“MOM!”

The Queen sighs.

“My darling, what have I told you about jumping like that?” She murmurs, leaving the table set up by the koi pond to hurry to his side, checking his knee. “You’re lucky it’s just a scratch!”

Her son pouts, eyes pricking with tears. “But I just wanted to catch it!”

The Queen sits back, exasperated. “Catch what, my love?”

“The butterfly!” Xie Lian exclaims, staring at the palace walls reproachfully. “I just wanted to say hi!”

The Queen thinks that over, kissing the cut on his knee to mollify him.

“...Well, butterflies belong in the sky with their mothers,” she explains, leaning up to kiss his nose, “and my baby belongs down here, with me!”

That finally draws a happy giggle from him, banishing all thoughts of skinned knees and butterflies, cuddling closer in her arms.

“...And,” she adds, and from her tone, Xie Lian’s giggling has already stopped, “it’s time to go inside anyway.”

“...Mom!” The prince whines, pulling back. “I already finished my lessons for the day!”

“You did,” she agrees, “and I let you play—”

“Only for TWO HOURS—!”

The Queen can’t help but laugh, pulling her son to his feet as she leads him back inside. “You say that like it’s no time at all!”

Xie Lian’s pout deepens as he drags his feet. “It went by so fast!”

“Well,” she smiles, ushering him down the hall. “It’s a big day.”

The prince huffs, his hair sticking out in every direction. “But my birthday already happened!”

“Xie Lian,” his mother shakes her head, “that isn’t the only important day of the year!”

“I know!” He blinks. “But it isn’t the mid autumn festival either!”

“Silly boy...” She sighs. “Have you already forgotten about the ceremony?”

Xie Lian pauses awkwardly, a sheepish grin spreading across his face as he shakes his head. “Haha...nope! Definitely not! I practiced!”

The Queen shakes her head.

Heavens, what is she going to do with him?

“But, you went and got yourself all messy, which means...” She trails off, and her son groans miserably.

It means he’ll have to be bathed all over again.

Xie Lian doesn’t actually mind looking fancy. He enjoys it—

It’s the process of getting there that he despises.

Being shoved (gently placed) into a tub of freezing (carefully heated) stinking (scented with lavender oil) water, scrubbed raw (with the softest of sponges), and forced to sit perfectly still while the servants fuss over his hair.

The entire thing takes an hour!

But by the end of it he is freshly cleaned, dressed, hair pulled up into a gleaming ponytail, topped off with a head piece of gold and pearl, holding onto his mother’s hand as she leads him back down the palace corridors.

“What if I don’t like him?” The little prince mumbles.

“You will,” his mother assures him. “You like everyone.”

Xie Lian pouts. That isn’t necessarily true.

He doesn’t like the royal gardener at all. He’s too tall, and his mustache is scary. “What if he doesn’t like me?”

Before the Queen can answer, Xie Lian is swooped up.

“Everyone likes you,” his father assures him, settling the prince upon his shoulders. “How could they not?”

“Darling!” The Queen scolds her husband as her son giggles happily, placing his hands on top of the King’s head to steady himself. “We just got him cleaned up!”

“And he’s still perfect, my love, don’t worry,” the king assures her, holding the prince up on his shoulders as they stride into the throne room.

Inside, a rather formal assembly is waiting for them.

The entire imperial guard, along with the commander of the armed forces.

He stands at the very front, his hands resting on a young man’s shoulders.

“Stand straight, boy.”

And of course, the child does, his expression horribly serious, because he knows—this is the most important day of his life.

The first day of the only job that he will ever have.

The door opens, and the entire world seems to shrink down to one small moment.

When the King and Queen enter the room, a boy striding between them.

Dressed in robes of white, red, and gold. Glittering jewels in his hair—and a smile that shines like the sun.

“Attention!” The guard is called to a salute, and the boy in front moves in perfect tandem with them, his eyes forward, even if he’s slightly pale from the nerves.

“Now,” the king kneels down behind his son, hands on his shoulders, “you remember General Feng, don’t you?”

Xie Lian nods, his eyes slightly wide.

The captain of the armed forces has always been a rather intimidating figure. Bulky and mustached.

But he isn’t as scary as the gardener. He gave Xie Lian a piggy back ride once.

“Hello…”

The General bows deeply, kneeling before him. “It’s an honor to see you again, your highness—may I present my son, Feng Xin.”

The boy before the general is taller, which is to be expected—he’s two years the prince’s senior. With sun kissed skin and dark hair, pulled up neatly.

And his expression— It’s so serious.

“As of this day forth, he is to be your personal guard and sword brother, until his final breath.”

The crown prince nods, rocking on his heels slightly—until he notices everyone staring, and he jumps to attention, clearing his throat.

“Do you, ah…”

He holds out his hand, trying his best to look rather serious. “Do you promise to do all that stuff?” His mother sends him a disapproving look, and he tacks on—

“Protect me forever, and everything?”

(She’s certain now that he didn’t practice his lines at all.)

Regardless of the slightly bungled delivery, Feng Xin sinks to one knee —

(Unlike his prince, he was practicing all morning.)

—takes his hand, and kisses it. He was personally a little embarrassed when his father told him that he had to—but rules are rules.

“I promise!”

Xie Lian smiles, standing still, being very graceful and dignified (for a whole five seconds) before the boy rises back up to his feet, and then he's back to being a small ball of barely contained energy, thrumming with excitement, having realized something—

For the first time in his life...

"Wanna see my room?"

He gets to be around someone his own age.

Well. Not exactly his age, Feng Xin is nearly ten. But close enough!

The newly vested guard hesitates, looking to his father, who simply shrugs.

"If dianxia likes, you may go."

Xie Lian beams, turning and running off down the hallway, and after a moment of being too stunned to react, Feng Xin chases after him.

"Wait up, your highness!"

They'll spend the afternoon with Xie Lian going through his things, going through all the toys they can now share.

Then, he realizes that might sound a little babyish. After all, Feng Xin is an older kid. Maybe he'll think this sort of thing is stupid, but—

He listens intently, trailing after Xie Lian like a newfound shadow.

It's never lonely anymore.

Far away, in a kingdom to the North, a far less heartwarming scene is unfolding.

CRASH!

A golden chalice crashes to the ground, spilling wine across the rug—ancient, expensive, and this stain won't come out.

"Qing Yuan! Control yourself!"

“HOW CAN YOU ASK ME THAT NOW?!”

The young woman paces the room like a wounded animal, dark hair loose around her shoulders.

A gorgeous young lady. Desired across the city for her poise, her mind, and her talents.

Now, she’s gone pale, deep circles edged beneath her eyes. She looks to her parents, wrathful.

“I hope you’re both happy,” she hisses, her hands trembling by her sides. “I married that *pig* for you! And now, the minute he gets back from Xianle, he’s going to...”

She trails off, covering her mouth with horror. She can’t look at the crib in the corner. Can’t bear the thought.

“Darling,” her mother frowns, fanning herself awkwardly. “I think that’s rather uncharitable of you, to assume he would reject the child...”

Of course, it’s easy for her to say.

She’s wearing the earrings Qing Yuan’s husband paid for. The carriage they arrived here in was a gift

Of course, she’ll give him the most generous interpretation. He provides the lifestyle of luxury and comfort that her family has always craved.

An old, near forgotten line of nobility, desperate to feel the trappings of wealth once more.

“He will,” Qing Yuan mutters. “Because he is greedy, and stupid—and he is cruel. He’ll take one look at the boy, decide he’s deformed, and—he’ll...”

He won’t want to live with the shame.

“Funny...” Qing Yuan’s sister speaks up now, leaning over the child’s crib.

He’s an interesting little fellow.

Even with the red eye—which she admits, is unsettling to look at—he has a cute face. Chubby cheeks and all that. Inky black hair sticking in every direction.

“…I would have thought he would be more upset about the fact that you gave birth to a fully formed child after…”

She pauses, tilting her head. “How long has it been since your wedding? Six months?”

If that.

Qing Yuan flushes, but she doesn’t say a word.

It doesn’t help matters that the child looks nothing like either one of them—other than having his mother’s hair. That’s it.

“Furthermore, wasn’t he born under the star of solitude?” Her sister muses, reaching down to poke at the baby’s cheek.

He giggles, unaware that he’s the subject of such strife, reaching to grasp at her hand with his little fingers.

“…What of it?”

“I thought, for a child to be born under such a star…it meant his parents would have to love one another deeply,” she muses, glancing up at Qing Yuan, eyebrows raised. “Am I to take this to mean that you’re actually in love with…how did you say it? Your ‘stupid, cruel, and greedy’ husband?”

Qing Yuan doesn’t answer, and her father lets out a heavy, exasperated sigh. “Why didn’t you say something before we finalized the match?”

“…Because I didn’t know,” she mutters, wrapping her arms around herself. “I wasn’t sure, not until…”

She gave birth so early. To a strong, healthy child.

“…And what of the child’s actual father?” Her mother groans, picking at the pearls around her neck, already using a tone of distaste when she references the matter. “Could he be of some use? Or do you not know who it could be?”

Qing Yuan’s lips turn up into a wry, slightly bitter smile.

“You know, with such a warm, supportive mother figure like yourself, it’s a shock that I was so desperate to find affection in others.” She murmurs, turning back to the liquor cabinet. “A real fucking head scratcher.”

“Don’t blame your mother for your mistakes—”

“I am telling you,” their daughter glares, gripping the edge of the table tightly, “that my son, your GRANDSON, is in danger. And all you care about is calling me a whore?! Ha!” She pours herself another glass of wine. “Unbelievable.”

“That’s why she asked you about the boy’s father,” her own father intercedes with a frown. “Do you think he could help?”

“...” Qing Yuan is quiet for a moment, staring down into her wine glass. “...No,” she mutters, downing it in two swallows. “I can’t ask him.”

“What, is he really that much of a cad?” Her sister mutters, still watching the little boy play with her finger in his fist, blinking up at her curiously. “You think he wouldn’t help the child?”

“...He would,” Qing Yuan shakes her head. “He’s an honorable man. But...”

“But?”

His help would come with a price.

Involving her child in a world that she wants to keep him away from.

“...I can’t ask him,” she repeats, shaking her head.

“Well, that limits our options.” Her mother frowns. “Couldn’t we just...give him to a well-to-do family for adoption?”

“No,” Qing Yuan shakes her head vehemently. “We can’t do that, either.”

“But—”

“You screamed, when you looked at him in his crib,” she mutters, holding her glass tightly. “My husband is likely to have him thrown from a window on sight. I can’t trust anyone else to...”

She’s the child’s mother. She loves him. She’ll protect him.

Qing Yuan can’t trust anyone else to do that. The world is cruel. And

—they'll only ever see him as one thing. One deformity.

Maybe the affair was a mistake—but she won't abandon him. Not now, not ever.

They eventually come to the settlement: they'll tell her husband that the baby came early, only to be stillborn.

Her son will be taken into her parents' household as a ward. To be raised in relative comfort, invisible. There's even discussion of sending him to Xianle, but...

"I knew you were going to run," her sister makes the comment later, when she finds Qing Yuan throwing together a pack later that night, working under candlelight. "Where will you go?"

"...Mother and father were going to send him away the moment they had the chance," she mutters. "I'll make my own way."

After all—she'll have to lay low for a few years. She has no doubt her husband will make a show of looking for her—he loathes to be humiliated.

There's a noble family near Qinghe. The eldest son is...open minded, and a friend.

He won't care that one of his concubines has a child. And while her son grows, she can fade into the background.

It's not a terrible plan. If she's lucky—she can make it work.

"...I always did admire that about you, you know." Her sister sighs, glancing over at her nephew. "So self possessed. Independent. Determined to do everything on your own. I was jealous of you, really."

Of course, she could hardly be jealous of her now, in this predicament.

She understands.

"But you were also far too proud," her sister concludes. "If you hadn't kept it a secret for so long, I could have helped you, jiejie."

"...Yes," Qing Yuan mutters, pulling her pack together. "And your comments earlier were extremely helpful."

"I was angry with you for not at least telling me," the younger woman admits. “And mother and father were never going to believe that your husband could kill an infant without adequate justification. But…” She glances down at the boy one more time. “Do you think…the eye is some sort of curse? Are you…in more danger than you think?”

“…No.” Qing Yuan lifts the back over her shoulder, shaking her head. “It’s no curse.”

She walks to the side of her crib, reaching down to touch the side of his face.

She believes, with all of her heart, that the perceived deformity her son was born with will be a blessing, in the end.

That’s how it’s always been in many of the fairytales she read as a child. That one’s greatest trials can become their greatest strengths.

“…Can you tell me one more thing? Before you go.”

Qing Yuan nods, however hesitantly.

“…The boy’s father, who is he, really?”

The older sister pauses, her shoulders slightly hunched.

And it’s impossible now, to fathom which one of them that she’s trying to protect.

“…His name is Hong,” she mutters.

“The father?”

“My son,” Qing Yuan mutters. “His father was a soldier. And he loved me.”

The way she says it—

“…Is he dead, jiejie?”

She’s quiet, still so tense.

“…Yes,” she lies, and it comes from her so smoothly, so easily. “Before the wedding. That’s why…I wasn’t sure.”

Part of being prideful is being a good liar. It’s the best armor there is.

And in her case—he may as well be dead.

That's part of why they have to leave.

Because if he finds her, he'll find the boy. And if he learns the truth...

Qing Yuan knows he'll step forward to claim him. And bringing Hong into a world that...

...it's no place for a child.

She leaves her home for the last time that night. Leaves no note nor letter of goodbye.

Turns away from the life of power and privilege that she could have had—with a certainty ringing in her heart.

That this choice is the right one.

That her Hong'er is special.

And that someday, if given the chance—he could change the world.

She slips out on horseback that night, her child clutched in her arms. Looking for safety in the great cities of the north.

But unlike before, when she would set off on a long journey... Qing Yuan does not pray.

The kingdom of Xianle flourishes in the six years that follow.

And with it, their crown prince continues to grow.

From a charming, overeager little seven year old, to the very beginnings of a teenager.

And throughout those years, his dearest friend was by his side.

Running through the palace grounds. Sitting through lessons. Staying up in the night, listening as his prince read him stories from his scrolls.

Training with him, day in and day out, growing in tandem.

Well, except…

Feng Xin has the tendency to grow a bit faster than him.

Which is getting harder and harder not to notice, the older the prince gets.

And he wants to be a good friend. To congratulate his guard on his tallness and broadness, and all that. Like it's some sort of achievement, but…

"Your highness?" Feng Xin blinks, "Are you alright?"

He's bent over the river, hair down, for once—wet from where he was splashing water over his face.

Xie Lian supposes it's fair, that he'd be more grown up. He's two and a half years older. Xie Lian…

His eyes are stuck on one drop of water slipping down his bicep. It slips down tanned skin, disappearing into the dip of his elbow. Xie Lian…you see, he—

"Xie Lian?"

The prince glances up, startled, "Hmm?"

Feng Xin tilts his head to the side, raising an eyebrow. "Was training too vigorous today? You seem distracted."

Oh.

"…I'm fine!" He agrees quickly. After all, if it's not too rigorous for Feng Xin, then it's not too vigorous for him. "I just got lost in my thoughts, that's all!"

He glances back up the hill towards the palace, shoulders drooping with a sigh. "…We should probably go back."

These days, between lessons, training, and everything else—he doesn't get nearly as much time out here as he used to.

Actually having fun, that is.

Feng Xin nods, shaking his hair out like a wet dog before pulling it back up into a messy bun on top of his head. "Of course."

While they’re walking up towards the palace, a very different conversation is happening within.

Between the King of Xianle, as well as his Chief Guoshi.

“I don’t mean to say that any harm should befall the boy,” Mei Nianqing mutters, keeping his voice low. “But this...”

The King seems tired, glancing over the railing, down to the palace grounds below.

“What would you have me do, Guoshi?” He mutters. “Send him off to god knows where, not knowing if he’ll keep quiet? Or have a child killed?”

“Neither,” his advisor shakes his head. "But he's been working in the kitchens, hasn't he? Why not keep him there? Why..." Mei Nianqing glances around, lowering his voice. "Why bring him so close to the Crown Prince? Is that not reckless?"

The King of Xianle grows quiet, watching the grass sway in the breeze.

"...You see this ring?" He murmurs, lifting his right hand into the air. A gold circlet glimmers on his pinky, a ruby set into the face. "It means absolutely nothing to me. I have a dozen just like it."

The words sound callous, unfeeling, but...

"But to a peasant, this is more than most could achieve in an entire lifetime." He shrugs. "If I were to give it away to someone on the street–their grandchildren could reap the benefits from it. Do you see what I'm getting at, Guoshi?"

"...I'm not sure I do," he admits.

"If I keep him in the kitchens, I know where he is, yes." The king agrees. "But that doesn't provide much more than that. However, if he's a royal attendant..." He glances over at Mei Nianqing. "He can support a family on those wages. He has many sisters I hear, and no father."

Finally, the Guoshi seems to understand what the king is getting at.

"...And in that position, he has no reason to speak about what happened."

If he did, he would only have everything to lose.

"Precisely. And he isn't a threat to my son, if anything..." The king shrugs. "I think it could be a good experience for Xie Lian. Being around someone his own age, who is..."

He almost says 'normal,' and realizes that word couldn't be applied here.

"...working class," he concludes.

Mei Nianqing doubts that the exposure to a peasant is necessary.

After all, the prince has always displayed a high amount of empathy, and in spite of his station...

He's quite egalitarian.

The move seems like one that stems more from self preservation, but he relents. "...Fine," he agrees, "I will defer to his highness's wishes."

"Good."

The king smiles, even if it wasn't up to Mei Nianqing in the end.

After all, this is, at its core...a family matter.

"Now, if you don't mind..."

It's a polite way of being dismissed, and the Guoshi takes it gracefully, bowing his head.

"Of course, your majesty."

He leaves the room. Not part of the official royal residence, but rather a tertiary meeting space. Somewhere where trade ministers or generals might meet, but the royal family is rarely seen there.

As such, the young man who is ushered inside freezes upon seeing who awaits him.

He's thin, even for his age. Naturally sun kissed from performing Labor in the fields over prior summers—but his complexion is rather pale now, seeing the king's face.

"...I'm s-sorry, your majesty," he bows his head, nearly bending in half as he scrambles back towards the door. "W-wrong room—"

"No," the king corrects him, watching the young man with a grim expression. “I summoned you here, Mu Qing.”

The boy freezes before he can reach the door, still bowing low, his shoulders trembling.

“…I haven’t said anything,” he whispers, visibly frightened.

“I know,” the king steps forward, his expression grim as he takes in the boy’s stature. The way he instinctively averts his gaze. How eager he seems to remain close to the door. “You aren’t in trouble.”

The child doesn’t say a word, remaining tight lipped, and he…

It feels utterly bizarre to the King, taking time out of his day to meet with the son of a woodworker and a housemaid. Normally, this is something he would delegate. It seems like madness that he hasn’t, but…

Some issues are so sensitive, they have to be handled personally. Still, he can’t help but ask…

“How old are you now, anyway?”

Mu Qing doesn’t look up, his heart rattling in his chest.

“…Thirteen next month, your majesty,” he whispers hoarsely. The King rubs the bridge of his nose with the heel of his palm.

…He really is Xie Lian’s age.

Good fucking heavens, it makes one slightly ill to think about.

“…Well, it just so happens, my son turned thirteen recently.” The king murmurs, forcing his tone to remain light. “At that age, he’ll no longer have a nursemaid or a governess, but rather…a personal attendant.”

The responsibilities are mostly things that the boy is already familiar with doing. The hairdressing and the tailoring will be a learned skill, but he’s at an age where he can pick it up quite easily.

Still…

The king doesn’t personally hand out promotions to his servants.

Such things normally come down from higher level attendants and housekeepers. For the king to do this himself, means…

"...Is this a bribe?" Mu Qing questions cautiously, "Because I-I really wasn't going to —"

"I know," the king repeats himself calmly. "But think of it like this—I am aware, as are the others involved, that your family has...suffered significantly from past events. And that...I bear some responsibility for that."

Mu Qing sneaks a glance at him through his lashes, lips trembling with uncertainty.

"Think of this...as an opportunity," the king explains. "You'll be with my son, day in and day out. You'll be compensated well for your work. Receive the same education as he does. There's been discussion of him studying cultivation on Mount Taicang..."

The King trails off.

"And no one will ever ask you for something inappropriate," he adds quietly, watching the way the word 'inappropriate' makes the boy shrink even further. "Rather than thinking of it as a bribe, let's just say I have a desire to...make things right, as they stand."

The young man doesn't argue with him, but the king knows—he's too cynical to trust that this is purely being done out of kindness. And he isn't wrong.

"...It's in both of our best interests if you are close to this family. Loyal to this family." The king's gaze bears down on him. "I don't want the guilt of having to harm a child to keep this quiet. Accept the kindness. Make the most of it. And, if you're smart—"

(And they both know, the boy is highly intelligent. He wouldn't have survived if he wasn't.)

"—you'll forget the entire thing and start over."

That's where he loses him, in part.

Mu Qing can make the most of it. He can start over. There isn't much that he can't do, with regards to his family.

That's why he's here to begin with.

But he can't forget. As badly as he wishes he could. Or pretends that he has.

It also isn't entirely a kindness.

There are opportunities, like the king said. The pay is substantial, but...

It would also mean living in the palace full time. Away from his mother. His sisters.

Not that he has a choice, but it's a terrifying prospect for a boy so young.

"...Thank you, your majesty," he mumbles, not lifting his head. "I'll make the most of it."

Of course, he doesn't have to threaten Mu Qing. He already did. Saying that he didn't *want* to have the guilt of harming a child.

But he *could* , if he had to.

The option is there.

One wrong step. One secret slipped loose. The mere perception that he's taking advantage of the royal family's kindness, and it could all come crashing down.

The king absolves his guilt, the secrets are kept...

And Mu Qing keeps the house of cards tilting just *so* .

When Xie Lian arrives back in the great hall for the afternoon, he half expects his Guoshi to jump down his throat for not returning earlier to begin his meditations for the evenings, but...

There's no such scolding to be found. Instead, his mother is waiting for him.

"Ah, darling," she smiles, walking over to meet her son in the entrance, pressing a kiss to his forehead. "How was training? Oh, Feng Xin," she glances over at the guard, "Are you alright? You look like you've fallen in the river..."

The teenager perks up, shaking his head. "Oh, no, your majesty—I just fell in some mud during training and had to wash up after."

He says he fell, but Xie Lian actually struck him with more force than he meant to during sparring, sending Feng Xin tumbling.

(Which he apologized for, naturally—even if Feng Xin insisted he'd done nothing wrong.)

"I see..." The Queen sighs, turning back to Xie Lian. "Well—we have news. I'm sure you remember how your Uncle passed, recently..."

It wasn't particularly sad news for anyone, but he nods.

"...Well, my sister and your cousin, Qi Rong, have come to live with us here—in the palace. Isn't that nice?"

The prince doesn't react immediately, his face frozen as he tries to school it into something like excitement.

Xie Lian's mother adores her sister, he knows that.

He also knows that his Aunt has been in declining health since the death of her husband...so, it's reasonable to have her here.

But Qi Rong...

Look, Xie Lian knows he's supposed to be nice to him. To care about him. He's family, after all.

But something about the younger boy...

...Makes Xie Lian's skin crawl.

But, before he can put too much thought into it, she adds—

"Oh, and I almost forgot—your personal attendant was selected for you today. M... M...Oh heavens, they just told me his name—"

"Mu Qing, your grace," a voice pipes up quietly.

Xie Lian follows the sound of that voice, and standing behind his mother is...

A boy around his own age. Taller, much more thin, with long, raven hair pulled up into a high, neat ponytail.

"...Oh," the prince smiles, taking a step closer. "Hello then—it's very nice to meet you."

The servant nods politely, keeping his head bowed low, arms clasped behind his back —and Xie Lian sends Feng Xin a look.

“Aren’t you going to say hello? He’s going to be with us everyday.”

“Oh,” the older boy blinks, nodding in Mu Qing’s direction. “...Nice to meet you.”

The raven haired boy glances up, his eyes lingering on Feng Xin’s face for a moment, eyes widening briefly before he looks down again “...I promise I’ll work hard.”

The prince nods amicably, and...

“...Wanna see my room?”

...Some things never change.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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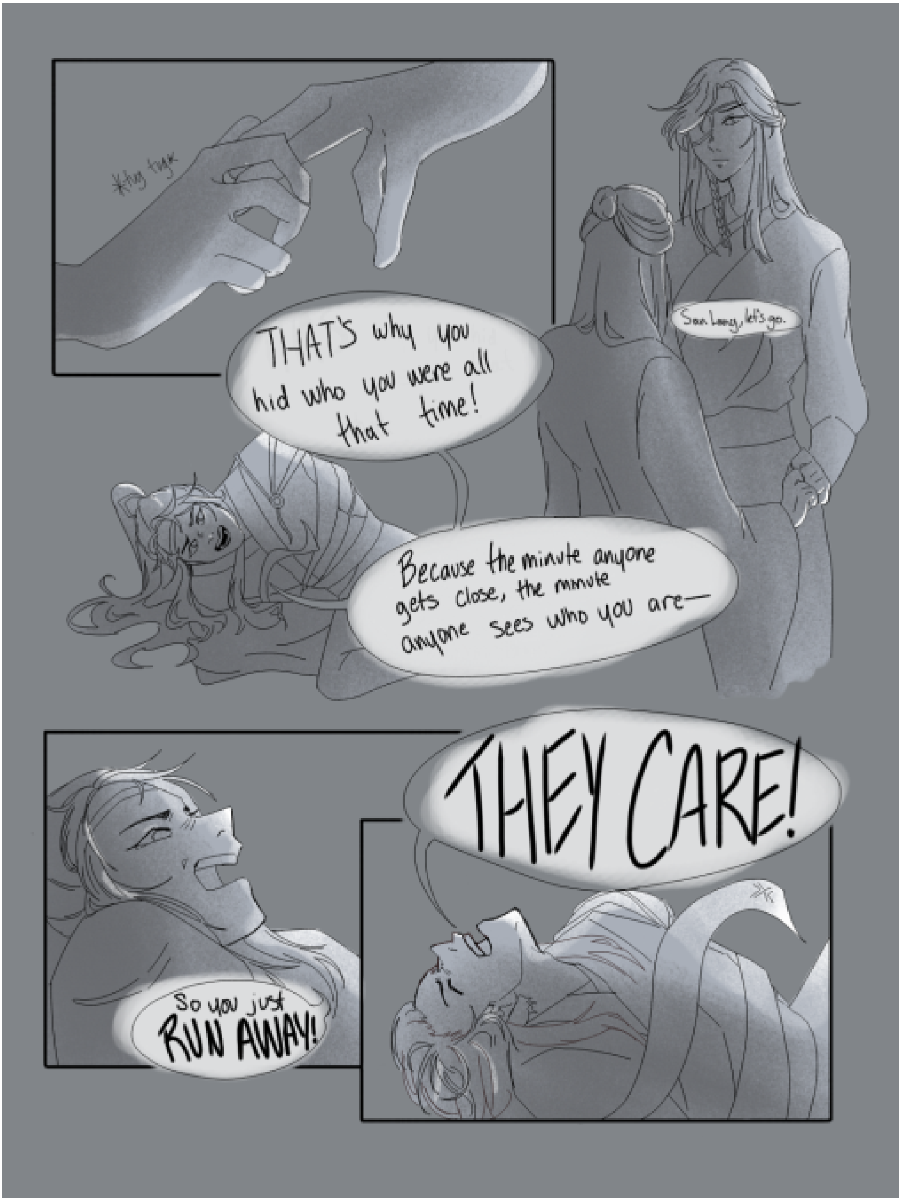
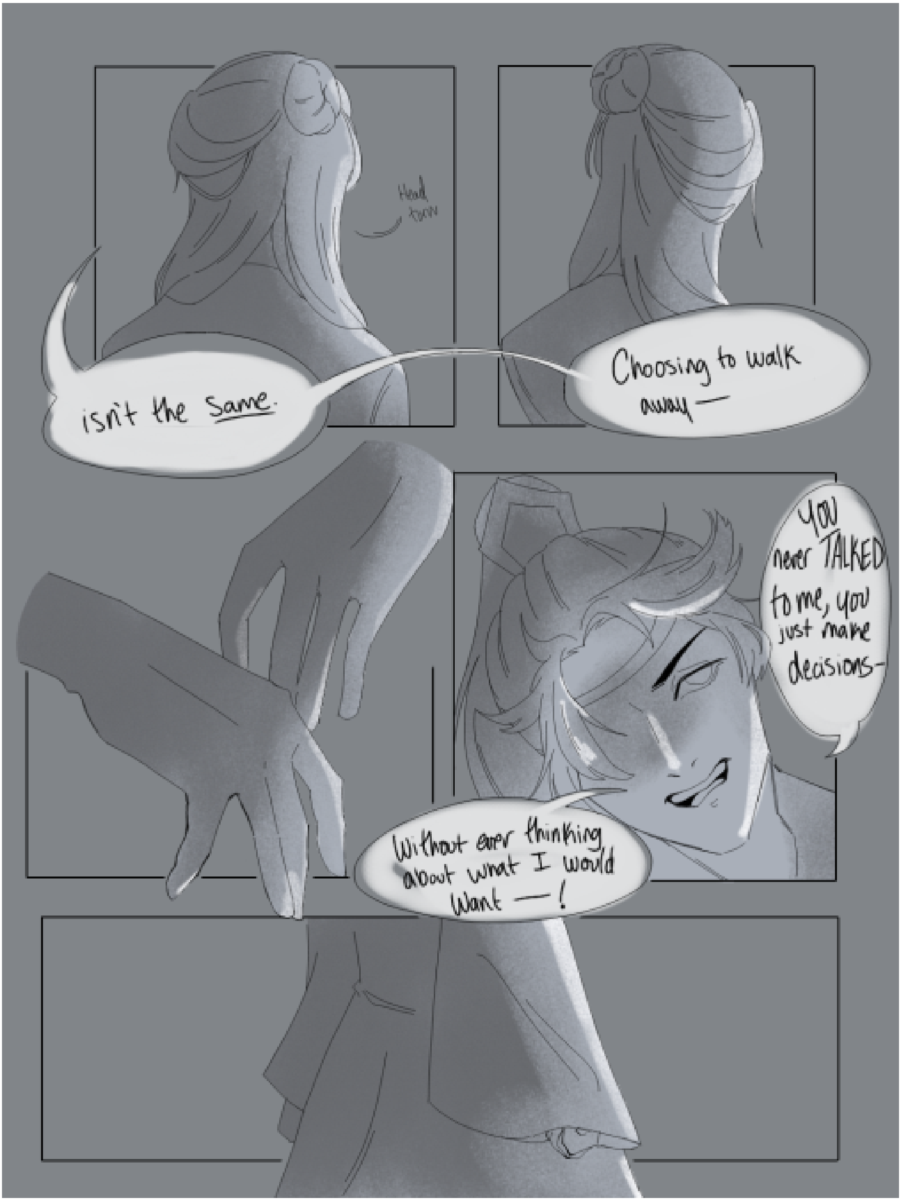
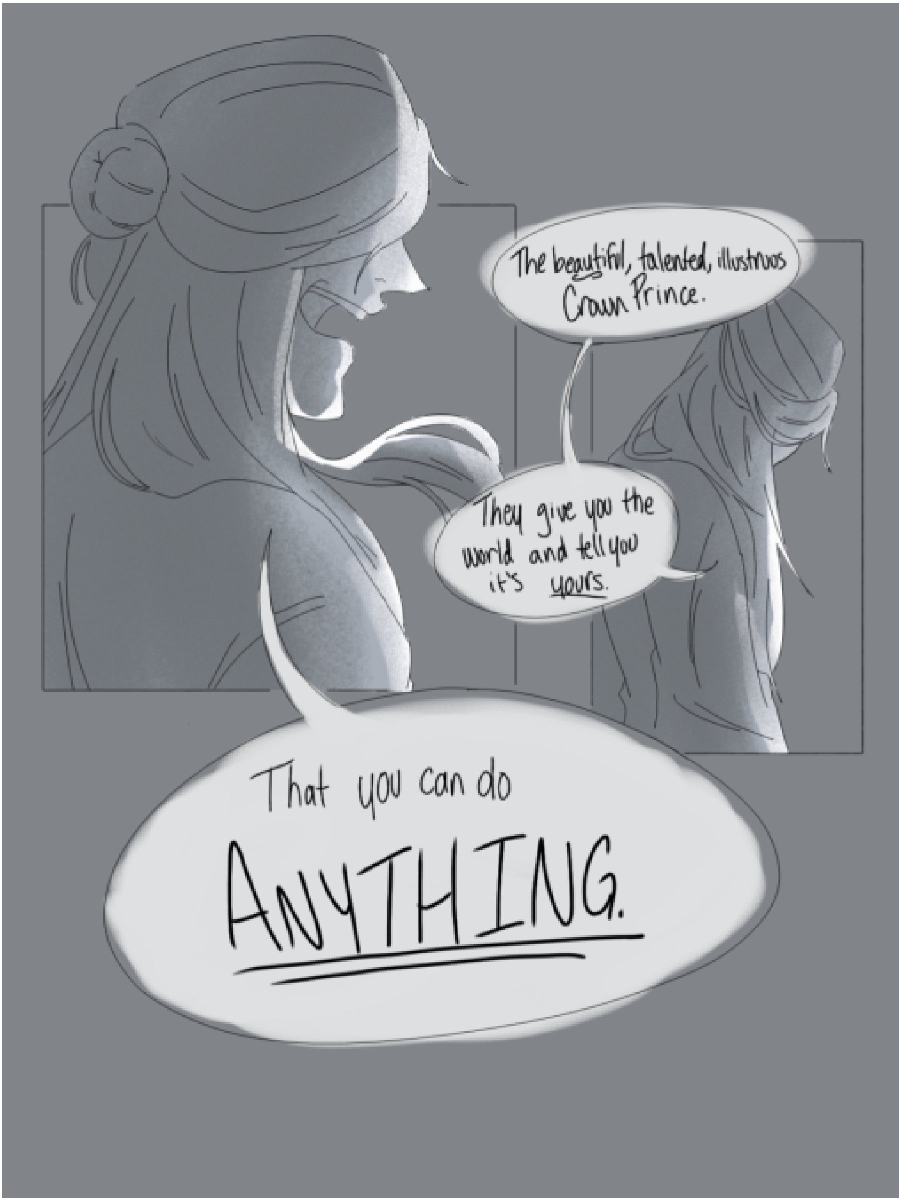
The King and Queen of Xianle + Baby Xie Lian

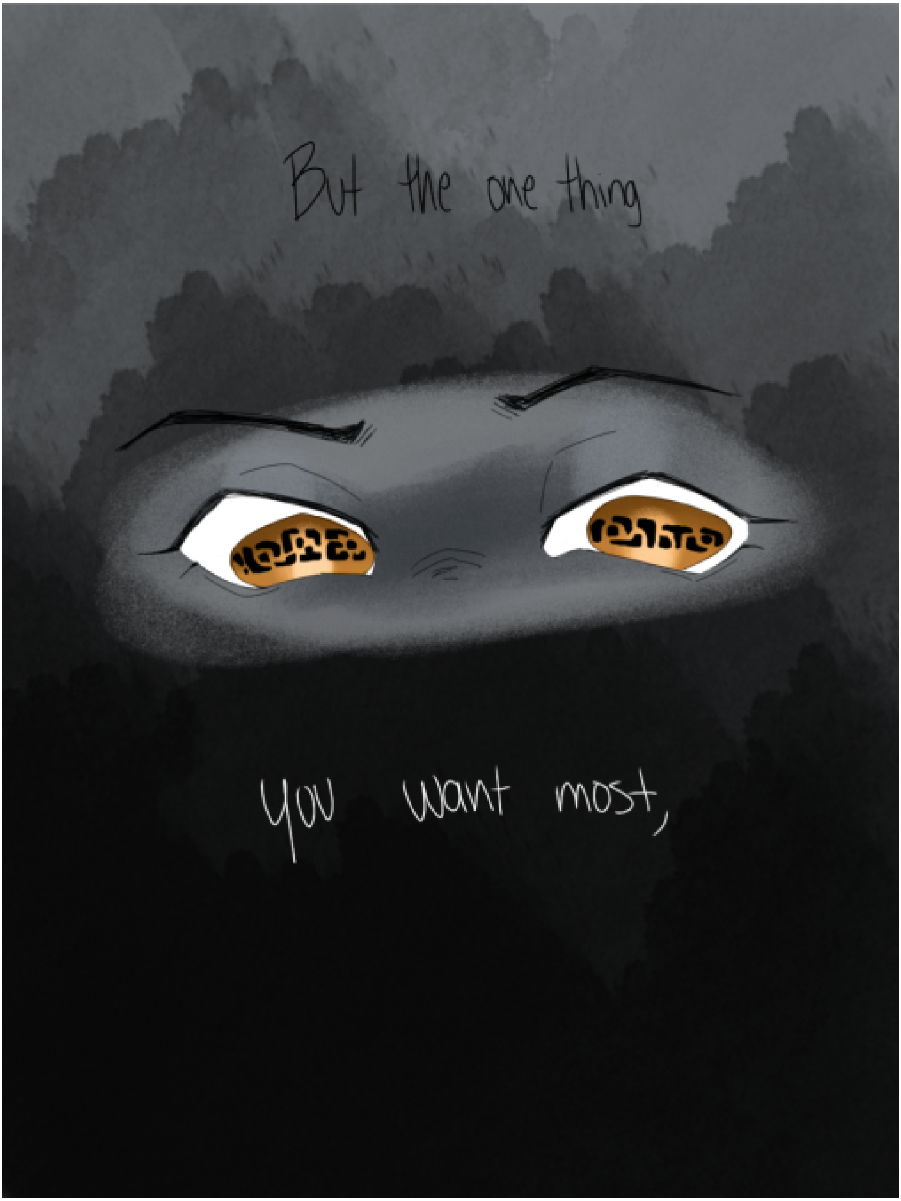
CREDIT: YUE LING

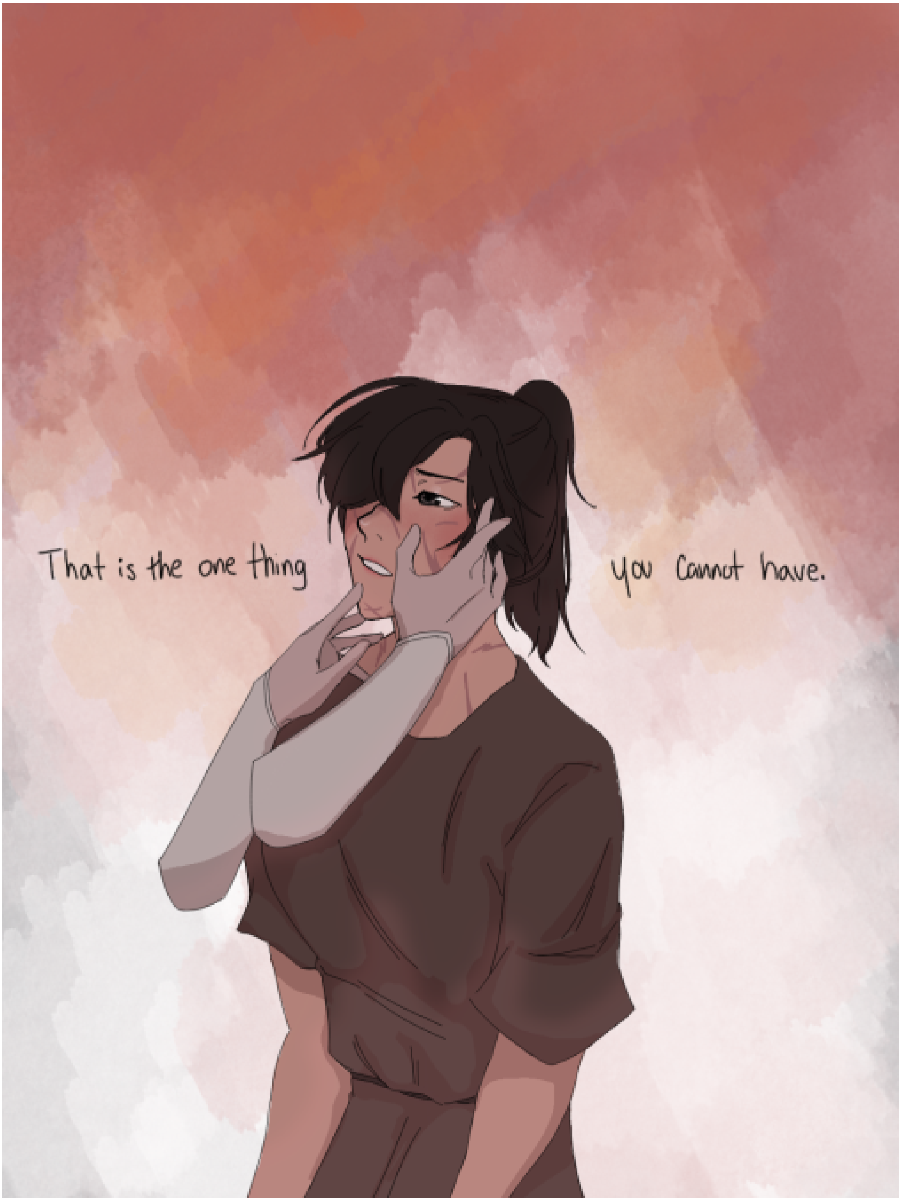
The Confrontation between Xie Lian and Lian Qianqiu (post Guoshi Fangxin reveal)


tug tug
San Lang, let's go.
THAT'S why you hid who you were all that time!
Because the minute anyone gets close, the minute anyone sees who you are—
THEY CARE!
So you just RUN AWAY!


Head turn
Choosing to walk away—
isn't the same.
YOU never TALKED to me, you just make decisions—
Without ever thinking about what I would want —!


The beautiful, talented, illustruos Crown Prince.
They give you the world and tell you it's yours.
That you can do ANYTHING.


But the one thing
you want most,


That is the one thing
you cannot have.

CREDIT: CASS

BABY FENGLIAN

CREDIT: HITHREN

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you to Cass, Hithren, and Yue Ling for their beautiful artwork, and allowing me to share it!

Tales from Xianle

Chapter Summary

> “W…wake up Feng Xin first, I’m…m’ gettin’ there…”
>
> Mu Qing rolls his eyes, but there’s little bite to it. “Yes, dianxia.”
>
> There’s a bit of a routine to get through, anyway—he doesn’t mind.

Chapter Notes

> Content Warnings for this chapter: fraught familial relationships, teenage awkwardness, and congee
>
> Enjoy the baby Xianle trio!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For years, it was just the Crown Prince and Feng Xin. Rising in the morning together. Training together. Xie Lian sitting through his lessons while his guard waited dutifully in the corner.

And in some ways, things don’t change, but… In other ways, they do.

“Good morning, your highness,” the door to Xie Lian’s bedroom always opens promptly, half an hour past sunrise—with the prince’s attendant already deep into the work day, a breakfast tray balanced on one hip, drawing the curtains with the other. “Did you sleep well?”

Xie Lian groans softly, pressing his face into his pillows, pulling the sheets over his head. “‘M having…a good dream, Mu Qing…g…gimme a second…”

The servant arches an eyebrow, setting the tray down on the bedside table with such practiced grace, it doesn’t make a sound.

“What about, dianxia?”

“Mmmmmm…” he sighs with a yawn. “Hand…some…butterflies…”

Mu Qing cracks a small smile, alone in the dim lighting of the Royal apartments. He’s always out of it when he first wakes up.

“W…wake up Feng Xin first, I’m…m’ gettin’ there…”

Mu Qing rolls his eyes, but there's little bite to it. "Yes, dianxia."

There's a bit of a routine to get through, anyway—he doesn't mind.

First, setting out the prince's clothes for the day. Checking to see that his boots are properly shined.

He always buffs them after the prince is off to bed for the evening—but sometimes, Xie Lian sneaks off to the kitchens for a snack during the night, and Mu Qing returns to find them scuffed.

Last night was one of those nights, it seems. The attendant sighs, starting again.

Then, he deciphers Xie Lian's incoherent grunts to figure out which blades the prince wants to use during training today, sending word to one of the palace runners so the armorer can have the proper weapons brought up.

(Xie Lian is mumbling something about a mountain, now.)

One of the better parts of the morning, of course, is waking the guard hound that sleeps on a tasseled silk cushion by the food of The prince's bed.

"...Morning, Jun Jie," the teenager whispers, kneeling down to scratch him behind the ears until his tail thumps tiredly.

"Did he keep you up last night?" The hound lets out a soft 'boof!' Of agreement, snuffling at Mu Qing's palm, looking for a treat.

(He sneaks a piece of meat from the prince's tray for him, knowing that Xie Lian won't notice or care—he hardly eats it anyway.)

And then, comes the worst part of Mu Qing's morning. Obviously. Going to the kennel and waking up the dog.

The ugly, smelly one.

There's a door to the room adjoining to the prince's bedchamber, and the moment Mu Qing opens it, he stumbles.

He catches himself silently, of course—not even crying out when he twists his ankle. Better than making a scene, anyway.

And when he sees the culprit, a stray boot strewn across the floor—he glares.

"…"

… ***THUNK!***

The boot rebounds heavily off of the side of Feng Xin's sleeping head, making him sit up with a startled squawk, scrambling for his sword before he goes tumbling to the floor in a heap.

CRASH!

"…" Mu Qing leans against the door, crossing his arms and raising an eyebrow.

"Well, I can't speak for the crown prince, but I feel safer already," he drawls, watching as Feng Xin sits up, rubbing the side of his head with a glare.

"Shut the fuck up, why don't you?!" The teenager glares, and Mu Qing shrugs.

"Put on a shirt, no one wants to see that."

Who wants to see someone's pectorals when they're in the middle of their workday, anyway?

Not him. Certainly not him.

Before Feng Xin can muster a response, the servant turns away, ponytail whipping around behind him as he returns to the prince's chambers.

"W…" Xie Lian is sitting up now, his hair sticking up in every which direction, "What was that?"

"Oh…" Mu Qing shrugs, walking over to move the tray from his bedside table, to setting it on the prince's lap, "it would seem Feng Xin fell out of bed, your highness."

"Oh…" Xie Lian yawns, already more than familiar with this part of his routine, scooting forward, picking at his breakfast while Mu Qing slides in behind him with a brush and comb, working out the newly formed knots in his hair. "Is he alright?"

"Oh, I think so."

By the time Feng Xin does arrive, slightly concussed, his robes for the day thrown about him loosely, he finds the two sitting together like that—Xie Lian, picking at a bowl of grapes while Mu Qing kneels on the bed behind him, working his hair up into a perfect ponytail.

“Oh, Feng Xin!” Xie Lian brightens, smiling over at him sleepily. “You’re up!”

And just like that, his irritation seems somewhat secondary.

“Good Morning, your highness.”

His own tray is left on the far cabinet—but he takes it without complaint.

Because sure, he loathes dealing with Mu Qing in the mornings. And the evenings. And meal times.

But, there is one point in the day where he gets a break. A precious, much needed–

"Oh, by the way," Xie Lian mumbles, swallowing down a grape, "Mu Qing is coming to lessons today."

“...What?” The bodyguard glances up, nearly choking on his congee. “Are you k—?!” He pauses, forcing himself to school his tone when Xie Lian raises an eyebrow. “I mean...won’t he be busy with...work?”

“No,” Mu Qing replies calmly. “I finish that before you two wake up.”

“Besides,” Xie Lian smiles, “I think I might learn a little better with someone studying with me.”

Feng Xin picks at his plate, suddenly not as ravenous as he was before. “That’s really only helpful if he can keep up, right?”

Mu Qing gives him a sharp look, stepping behind the changing screen with his prince, helping him strip from his night clothes, then dressing him in his robes for the day. “I can keep up, thank you.”

“You—”

“Mu Qing is very intelligent, Feng Xin,” Xie Lian cuts him off. “And it’ll be more fun if he’s there!”

“...” Feng Xin doesn’t say a word to that, turning his attention back to his bowl of congee.

‘He isn’t your friend.’

That’s what the guard wants to say.

That this is someone new. A stranger. And Xie Lian shouldn’t let him close so easily.

Before, it was just them, walking the hills up and down from Mount Taicang, and now...

There’s a third person there. Sitting beside him in his lessons. Training alongside the both of them in the afternoons, and...

In part, Feng Xin feels a little...

Left out, when the other two devolve into academic conversation, in which he can take little part.

It can feel somewhat threatening at times, but also...

Maybe, on some small, near minuscule level...

"...You should finish up for the night."

...He worries.

Mu Qing glances up from where he's knelt on the floor outside of the prince's bed chamber, buffing out his boots for the second time that day, leveling him with a glare.

"What are you talking about?"

Feng Xin stares down at him, arms crossed, tight lipped.

To be absolutely clear: if Mu Qing wants to work himself to death, that's his business. Feng Xin doesn't care.

But, if you happen to be a casual observer, you'd notice that he works eighteen hours a day.

To the point where his eyes are unfocused, and his hands are slightly raw.

"...Maybe worry about yourself, instead of bothering me," the servant mutters, keeping his head down, shining the boot between his hands just a little more aggressively. "Wouldn't want you telling the prince that I 'can't keep up.'"

"When did I—?!" Feng Xin Sputters.

Then, he remembers that Xie Lian went to bed only a moment before, and he forces himself to lower his voice. "When did I say I was going to tell him?!"

"You didn't have to," Mu Qing snaps quietly. "And if you don't start putting your boots up before bed, I swear I'll–!"

Then, Feng Xin makes an unfortunate decision.

A poor choice of words, if you will.

“...Isn’t that your job?”

Mu Qing’s hands freeze on top of Xie Lian’s boots. “...Excuse me?”

“I mean—putting stuff away—”

“For the prince,” the raven haired teenager hisses. “Not YOU!”

It’s the first time that Xie Lian wakes up to the sound of his bodyguard and his servant arguing in the hallway, loudly enough that it stirs the entire eastern wing of the palace—

(But it’s certainly not the last.)

And in the years that follow, that’s all either of them seem to remember.

Feng Xin, watching a forming friendship, feeling somewhat threatened by it.

Mu Qing, watching the other two obliviously mooning over one another, and—not caring. Only finding it irritating and disgusting.

But there were other days.

Days when they didn’t argue.

Days that were...Fun.

“Your highness...” Mu Qing mumbles, feeling somewhat reluctant. “I don’t think this is going to work.”

Xie Lian blinks, rocking back on his heels, “What do you mean? I made the plan up myself.”

Which naturally means that it is, without question, a perfect plan.

(If you ask Xie Lian.)

Mu Qing isn’t perfectly convinced.

“...Your clothes...are going to stick out.”

“Oh...” Xie Lian frowns, glancing over into the mirror. “These are the cheapest ones I have...”

And for where they’re going, they’ll...

Stick out horribly. The mere thought makes Mu Qing want to cringe.

Then, Xie Lian seems to be struck by an idea, glancing over his shoulder, an excited glint in his eye.

“...Couldn’t I just trade with you?”

Mu Qing pales.

“...That’s not possible, your highness.”

“I don’t think so,” Xie Lian muses, turning around fully and looking him over, tapping his perfectly manicured index finger against his chin. “You’re taller, but I weigh more, so...the fit should be about the same...”

As if *that* is the problem.

“...My clothes would probably fit you,” he admits, fighting the urge to snap at how ridiculous the entire thing is, “but I can’t wear yours, dianxia.”

Xie Lian frowns. “Why not?”

It feels ludicrous he even has to say it.

“I would get in trouble.”

“Even if I ordered you to?”

Mu Qing falls silent, not saying a word.

There are moments when the prince seems to think that, with the sweep of an order, he can make every problem go away. Like that’s helping, somehow.

But it isn't helping. Mu Qing still gets in trouble.

Still, luckily for him—Xie Lian seems to pick up on the underlying anxiety.

This time.

"...Alright, what if I borrow an extra set from you?"

Mu Qing doesn't ask if it's an order or not—he doesn't want to resent it later, if it is.

The robes are a little scratchy, if you ask Xie Lian—but not too bad. A little baggy around the hips, slightly tight in the arms, and overlong at his wrists, but...

It achieves the desired effect, certainly.

"...Now...if we're doing this," Mu Qing stops him, "there are terms."

The prince stops in his tracks, staring at him curiously. "...What sort of terms?"

"You don't talk to anyone, if you do, you don't tell them who you are—actually, it might be better if you just pretend you can't talk at all—are—are you listening to a word I'm saying?"

Xie Lian nods, his eyes slightly wide. "Yes, of course, just..."

He tilts his head to the side.

"I didn't realize you could be bossy, Mu Qing."

The servant blanches, his cheeks splotchy and pink. "I just..."

"I didn't say it was a bad thing," the prince points out. "Actually, no one ever bosses me around—except for Guoshi, anyway...so I don't mind it, it's different!"

On one level, the fact that he finds something charming about someone speaking to him sternly is a little endearing. Mu Qing won't admit that.

But as someone who has been ordered, day in and day out for his entire life— Mu Qing finds it somewhat grating.

"And keep that guard of yours on a leash," Mu Qing mutters, eyes flickering about as they make their way to the servant's exit.

"Oh," Xie Lian blinks. "Well—I didn't tell him."

Mu Qing rolls his eyes, opening the door for him to step through.

(Even when Taizi Dianxia is posing as a servant, he waits for someone to open the door.)

"That doesn't mean he doesn't know you're sneaking out."

"Well," the prince frowns. "I'm not doing anything I'm not allowed to do."

Technically speaking, he can leave the palace—or Mount Taicang—whenever he wants. He just usually doesn't.

'No, you're just disguised as a servant and sneaking out the back...' Mu Qing thinks to himself, but doesn't dare say.

And luckily, he doesn't have to say another word before Feng Xin proves his point, falling into step behind them.

"...Your highness? What are you wearing?"

Xie Lian spins around, clasping his hands behind his back. "Good afternoon, Feng Xin! We were just...ah..."

"..." Mu Qing glances between the two of them, letting out an irritated sigh. "His highness asked me to escort him down to the village at the foot of Mount Taicang for the day."

After all, it's one of his last free days in the summer. The rest has been spent rehearsing.

The festival to celebrate the Heavens—one they hold at mid-autumn every year—and this year in particular, the crown prince himself has been chosen to portray the Heavenly Warrior.

Not surprising, given he's the foremost disciple on Mount Taicang, but it requires much preparation.

As such, this is his last day to go and do as he likes—and he has every intention of making the most of it.

"...Why dress like that, then?" Feng Xin frowns, following closely behind them both. "And why not inform the guard?"

"Well…" The prince smiles, somewhat sheepish. "…I didn't exactly want all of the attention to be on me."

It's a somewhat novel idea.

Xie Lian doesn't inherently loathe attention. He was born and raised into it—it's natural to him.

To be admired by everyone. To hold a room in rapt attention when he speaks.

And he's never once seemed to be one of those nobles that hungered for the idea of what it might be like to live a 'normal' life, or anything like that.

So…

Feng Xin watches the back of the prince's head, curious.

Where is this coming from?

Feng Xin puzzles over that the entire walk down the mountain, and he notices something:

Xie Lian is as carefree as ever, walking lightly, but…

Mu Qing seems slightly more stressed than usual, his shoulders hunched. Maybe because of the sneaking around, but…

When they finally do reach the village, they end up waiting outside of a small building, with Xie Lian twiddling his thumbs, Mu Qing tapping his foot anxiously, and Feng Xin—

He can't take it anymore.

"What the fuck are we waiting for—?"

Before he can finish the statement, the doors open.

And with it, a small flood of school aged children comes flooding out.

Which Feng Xin is even more surprised by—not because of the fact that Xie Lian is visiting a local school, he's done that before—

But doing it here, like this—and so quietly.

Why is he—?

"Gege!"

A little girl comes rushing down the steps—her dark hair pulled into low pigtails, and the sight of Mu Qing—

It makes her smile wide, dimples cut into her cheeks as she throws herself into his arms.

"You came!" She cries, hugging him tightly around his waist. "You said you couldn't come!"

"...I wanted to surprise you," Mu Qing mumbles, bending at the waist to hug her back.

His tone is softer than Feng Xin has ever heard it. Gentle and warm.

Honestly, he hadn't thought that Mu Qing was capable of sounding like that.

"...Aren't you gonna get in trouble?" She mumbles against the front of his robes, and Feng Xin distantly remembers—

Mu Qing does have younger sisters, doesn't he? Several.

"Yeah, well..." the older brother in question smiles awkwardly, glancing over at Xie Lian. "Someone important wanted to meet you."

"..." She glances in the direction of Mu Qing's gaze, following it until she sees...

Xie Lian, kneeling down beside her with a warm smile. "You must be Miss Suyin, is that right?"

At a passing glance, Mu Qing's clothes disguise him easily enough. But when you look him in the face...

Even if he wasn't recognizable, the red pearl earrings that he forgot to take off before leaving the palace that morning gleam in his ears, and the little girl's eyes widen.

"...Dianxia?!" She whispers, shocked, then starts to bow very low, clearly startled, but Xie Lian quickly waves that off.

"Your older brother mentioned it was your birthday today, is that true?"

"..." Suyin nods, eyes the size of dinner plates.

“I see…” Xie Lian hums. “Well, it just so happens that I came here to enjoy the end of summer festival, but…” he sighs, blowing a lock of hair out of his eyes. “I don’t have a date. And you know, as a prince, I can’t just take anyone, but…I thought the birthday girl might make time for me.”

Suyin wasn’t always a shy child, but in the last couple of years, she’s been…reclusive at best.

Mu Qing wasn’t sure how she was going to react to having this sprung on her, but—

The ten year old smiles, bobbing her head cautiously, and Xie Lian grins right back at her.

“…But does that mean gege won’t have a date?”

Mu Qing’s expression softens. Obviously, a day with a prince is any little girl’s dream come true—and she’s still worried about him.

Xie Lian brushes that off with a quick laugh—

“Oh, no—Feng Xin’s his date!”

His friends choke.

Suyin glances over at the two, quickly sizing Feng Xin up.

The guard shrinks slightly under her gaze, and Mu Qing’s hand smacks against his forehead, exasperated.

“Are you kidding?”

“What?!”

“She’s ten, and she’s four feet tall.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Mu Qing had assumed Feng Xin’s terror of women only extended to adults, but— apparently not.

“…Well,” Xie Lian looks back at Suyin with a smile. “They’re having fun. Wanna show me around?”

Suyin offers a slow, eager smile in response, taking his hand. “…Okay!”

Mu Qing had to admit...initially, when Xie Lian broached the idea, he thought it was ridiculous.

And even still—he was absolutely certain that the prince would forget that he offered, so...

He never expected to be here, in his village, watching his little sister leading the crown prince of Xianle from stall to stall, sharing sweets with him, braiding flowers into his hair.

And it...makes him look at the prince slightly differently than he did before.

It wasn't that he thought little of him. Mu Qing isn't blind to what the rest of the world sees.

He just...sometimes found him to be lacking in sincerity.

And that's hard to believe now, watching Xie Lian carry Suyin on his shoulders, watching the fireworks above.

It's hard to believe that he isn't sincere, when they make their way back to Mu Qing's home. He doesn't go inside, Mu Qing insists on that much, but he's rather chivalrous, dropping Suyin off at the door and presenting her with flowers, kissing her hand.

He's very much a prince charming, and Suyin's eyes sparkle with happiness.

"...He'll make a good husband one day," Mu Qing comments offhandedly, where they're standing off to the side, his arms crossed.

Feng Xin keeps his eyes trained ahead, his expression flat. But his lips turn down slightly at the corners, and Mu Qing...

He feels a little bad. And then he resents himself for feeling sorry. It's a ridiculous crush. He's an idiot, and he should get over it, sometimes you just–

"Of course he will," Feng Xin replies calmly.

Mu Qing watches him from the corner of his eye, biting his lip. He never really has to hide his expression from Feng Xin, in moments like this.

Because he's never looking at Mu Qing.

"She'll be a very lucky princess." He shrugs, arms crossed.

"..." Mu Qing looks away.

...Sometimes, you just want things that you can't have.

But sometimes, Feng Xin is looking at him.

Laying back on the grass that night, watching the last of the fireworks before they walk back.

The prince between them, listening as Mu Qing hesitantly answers his questions.

About how many nights he used to lay out here, with his father and his sisters. Counting the stars until they couldn't keep their eyes open.

How they held onto the grass, so that way they wouldn't float away.

But one day, his father let go.

Feng Xin watches Xie Lian's expression crack slightly with sympathy. Watches, as he reaches for Mu Qing's hand, and promises not to let go.

The prince's kindness always makes Feng Xin's heart soften, but...

That isn't what he's looking at, in that moment.

...It's Mu Qing.

How wide his eyes get, when someone shows him kindness. Not narrowed or guarded, just...

Shockingly vulnerable.

They're obsidian in color. Feng Xin has called them ugly before, in arguments, but...

He's never meant it.

They reflect starlight so easily, so expressive.

And there are things that Feng Xin sees, things that Xie Lian can't–simply because he's never had to worry about such things.

Like when a family has been broken, and one child is left holding it all together.

He didn't know Mu Qing had so many younger sisters.

He didn't know that Mu Qing's mother had such a kind face–but with the laugh lines around her eyes comes shades of grief. Evidence of crimes years from years past, like the witness marks on a clock. The scars that peek beneath the sleeves of her dress hold a story that no one wants to tell.

Feng Xin was born to protect things. That's all he's ever been taught to do. And guarding his prince has never been hard.

It's a natural instinct, to protect the things we love.

But for the first time, Feng Xin finds himself noticing...

No one is protecting Mu Qing.

And he doesn't say anything then.

He's too proud to admit that there's more to his forced interaction with the younger teenager than brewing resentment and antagonism.

When it's time to go, Xie Lian is sleeping peacefully, his cheek pressed against Mu Qing's shoulder.

The servant goes to wake him up, but Feng Xin stops him, shaking his head. "I've got him."

Xie Lian mumbles sleepily, his arms hooking around Feng Xin's neck as he's pulled over his back, one leg hitched around his waist while the guard holds the other beneath the knee.

"...He's such a baby," Mu Qing mutters, walking beside them. "He's about to be seventeen, he can't just fall asleep all over the place..."

"Sure, he can," Feng Xin shrugs. "That's what he's got me for."

The servant falls silent, his chin tilting down.

The night is quiet, leaving them surrounded by the soft rush of the breeze through the grass. The crickets chirping lazily in the forests framing the path to Mount Taicang, fireflies drifting lazily through the air.

Suddenly, Mu Qing feels someone grasp for his hand.

Feng Xin's fingers are rough, calloused from training too often without cloves. He has them, the idiot just forgets to wear them.

Mu Qing's hands and feet are always cold like ice. When he visits home, he'll press them against his sister's legs when they're trying to sleep, just to hear her scream and giggle, flailing as she tries to get away.

But Feng Xin's are warm, making Mu Qing's fingertips naturally seek out his palm, not even thinking about it.

It just comes naturally.

For a moment, neither of them say a word. Mu Qing has wide eyes, lips slightly parted, and Feng Xin is pointedly staring ahead.

"...I didn't know about your dad."

That makes Mu Qing's eyes narrow slightly, his stomach sinking with disappointment, even though he feels stupid for having hopes at all, not even knowing what he was hoping for, but...

He doesn't want Feng Xin's pity.

But...it isn't.

"My mom died."

The admission is calm, blunt, with little art to the delivery. "I was about the same age. I saw it."

Each phrase is a little clipped, like it's still hard for him to talk about, but delivered with careful intent of what he wants Mu Qing to piece together.

That Feng Xin gets it.

That it hurts. That it's frightening.

And he gets it.

"...Oh," Mu Qing mutters, watching the back of Feng Xin's eyes with a wide eyed gaze.

"But I don't have any siblings, so..."

So, he can't understand that part.

'It's hard.'

That's what Mu Qing wants to say.

That it's hard, and it's scary, and he's tired, but he doesn't get to be tired. Because he isn't just letting himself down if he breaks down.

That his mother is so proud of him for learning cultivation. The whole village talks about it.

Even if it's just a spot that the royal family gave him out of charity, and the Guoshis certainly don't want him there.

That his mother cried with happiness, when she found out Mu Qing had been chosen to play the demon in the festival for the heavens this year.

But Mu Qing isn't like the other cultivators there. Xie Lian is training with every intention of becoming a god, and Mu Qing...

He's just lucky to be there at all, and it would only take one wrong step to ruin all of that.

He knows it, and he's scared, and he can't say so.

Instead of saying any of that–he opts for not saying a word.

Keeping his head low, holding Feng Xin's hand a little tighter.

Because it's comforting, and he needs it.

For the entire walk home, Feng Xin doesn't let go.

Only when they reach the back gates of the palace, and Xie Lian begins to stir against his back, mumbling under his breath.

"Shhh..." Feng Xin lets go of Mu Qing's hand reaching up to pat the back of the prince's head, "We're back, your highness."

"And thank goodness you are."

Mu Qing freezes, and he'd never admit that he shrinks behind Feng Xin at the sound of General Feng's voice, but that's exactly what he does.

The young guard swallows dryly, setting the groggy prince down on his feet, "Yes, sir."

"Where were you three all afternoon?"

"...In the village," Xie Lian replies calmly, rubbing at his eyes, yawning as he starts to wake up fully. "I wanted to enjoy the festival. Is there a problem?"

Mu Qing stays behind the two of them, face downturned, shoulders tense. Of the three, he has the most to lose.

It was his sister that Xie Lian snuck off to spend the day with. Even if it was the prince's idea, no one would see it that way.

"...His highness should have informed the palace guard, so we could have sent an escort." General Feng replies calmly. "It isn't safe."

"In the village?" Xie Lian arches an eyebrow. "...I respect that you have a job to do, General Feng, but I am capable of protecting myself. And if I wasn't, I had Feng Xin with me."

The General arches an eyebrow. "Is that so?" He glances over Xie Lian's face, taking in sight of a small cut on the prince's cheekbone. "It doesn't seem as though you were completely unscathed."

Xie Lian touches his cheek, then shrugs. "I was playing with some children, and we rolled around a bit. It was probably a rock."

General Feng doesn't seem particularly impressed by the explanation. "You've never forgone an escort before, dianxia. Is there something you're trying to hide that your parents ought to know about?"

Mu Qing shrinks silently behind them.

(Or someone he's trying to protect.)

Feng Xin watches Xie Lian's eyebrows rise up sharply, slightly insulted. He's a tolerant person, hardly ever irritated, but...

He doesn't like being treated like a child, not under any circumstances. "I–!"

"It was my fault." Feng Xin speaks up. "I said he didn't need one." Both of the other teenagers look at him, shocked.

"It was a small excursion, and it was so close...his highness wanted to enjoy the festival without a fuss, and I told him I could do the job by myself." He explains. "It was my fault, General."

His father surveys him coldly.

"I see." He turns to Xie Lian, bowing his head politely. "I hope you enjoyed your afternoon, dianxia. I'm sure you probably have to wake up early for the rehearsals, don't you?"

Xie Lian frowns, because...he does.

General Feng isn't a bad man, just...old fashioned and strict.

Particularly since his wife died. The entire thing was miserable business, and he hasn't been the same since.

"...Yes, I suppose I'll see you both in the morning," he murmurs, sending Feng Xin a look of quiet worry before he turns to go inside.

Mu Qing follows after him. After all, the prince still needs to bathe and ready himself for bed, but...

He hesitates in the doorway while Xie Lian carries on down the hall, pulling one of the floors from his hair, twirling it between his fingers, breathing it in with a sigh.

He doesn't hear what Mu Qing does.

CRACK!

The sound of a vicious slap.

"You don't come back unscathed when your prince doesn't," General Feng reminds him coldly. "You know better."

It's an unfair reaction–and punishment–over something as minor as a scratch, but...

"...I know, general." Feng Xin replies quietly, his head bowed. "I'm sorry."

"I don't want to hear 'I'm sorry,'" His father glares. "Don't let it happen again."

"...It won't, sir."

Feng Xin sounds calm, unaffected.

Always the soldier, even with his own father.

"Good." General Feng glances up at the sky, the moon already rising high. "Run three laps around the grounds. And you'll be running extra training rounds during the prince's lessons for the rest of the month."

It's obvious overkill, but the guard doesn't argue. "Yes, General."

Feng Xin turns on his heel, moving to fulfill the order without another word. And Mu Qing...

Slips down the hall after his prince, lost in thought.

In the years that follow, he'll be angry, and he won't be generous enough to look back on this moment when he's frustrated.

Wondering how Feng Xin could be so emotionally obtuse. Why even the most obvious parts of a relationship could flummox him.

But on this night, with the sound of that slap settling heavily in Mu Qing's chest...

He understands it.

Xie Lian is quiet that evening, watching himself in the mirror as Mu Qing combs out the wet strands of his hair.

“If you’re worried about Feng Xin, he’ll be fine.” Mu Qing offers, his eyes averted.

“...I’m not worried, not really,” the prince shakes his head. “I just feel guilty that he’s being punished over something I did. I hate it when he does that. General Feng would never punish me.”

It isn’t about whether or not Xie Lian would have been punished, but Mu Qing doubts the prince would understand that.

“...Thank you, for today.” The servant mutters. “It meant a lot to Suyin.”

Xie Lian smiles at him through the mirror. “I had fun, and I was happy to do it.”

But Mu Qing notices something else—dark circles underneath the prince’s eyes. “...Have you not been sleeping well?”

Xie Lian shrugs, glancing away. “If I explained, you would probably think I was crazy…" he mutters, laughing self consciously.

Mu Qing shrugs, going back to combing his hair—

"Alright, well," the prince finds one wet lock, twirling it between his fingers.

And he starts with, of all things…

"Remember how, ten years ago…there was a volcanic eruption? Far out west?"

Mu Qing arches an eyebrow. "…Yes?"

"Well…" The prince bites his lip. "I had a dream, and I woke up just as the shockwave passed through Xianle."

Well. That's admittedly odd. But it was also years ago. Xie Lian would have only been seven years old.

"Was the dream that bad?"

"...That's the thing," Xie Lian winds that lock of hair around his finger a little faster. "It wasn't. It...it's my favorite dream that I have."

Implying that it's recurring.

Which is odd. Volcanos are never considered to be a good omen. Few even knew there WAS a volcano in the south west, but...

So much land must have bene abandoned for a reason--and more than a thousand years ago, no less.

"...What's it about?"

Xie Lian bites his lip, pulling his knees up against his chest, where he's sitting on a stool in front of his vanity. "It always starts out dark, where I can't see a thing...and then..."

"What?"

"Butterflies," Xie Lian mumbles. "They're everywhere."

"...You're losing sleep because you're dreaming about butterflies?" Mu Qing questions flatly, and Xie Lian's cheeks...

Well, to the servant's surprise, they get a little pink.

"No!" He twirls that lock of hair round and round his finger. "But they're beautiful, Mu Qing." His voice gets quiet, awestruck from talking about it. "Silver, and they glow in the darkness. That's when I start following them, and..." He trails off, and Mu Qing can't help but notice...

That blush isn't getting any less noticeable.

"...And what?"

"There's...a..."

Xie Lian is forced to stop when that lock of hair is wound all the way up his finger, and when he lets it go, it curls loosely.

"...a man, there," the prince mumbles, seeming a little sheepish.

Mu Qing pauses, comb held aloft.

"A man." He repeats flatly.

Xie Lian's eyes meet his in the mirror, and he has the sense to look a little embarrassed.

"You shouldn't be losing any sleep over a man, your highness."

"It's not like that!" Xie Lian shakes his head vehemently, finding another lock of hair to pull at anxiously.

"I've never met him! And..." He sends Mu Qing a look that is riddled with an uncharacteristic level of anxiety, "It's not like I'm a princess or something, it's not...something...inappropriate..."

Right.

Mu Qing keeps forgetting the prince hasn't come to terms with that.

He figured out that Xie Lian had no interest in women about three weeks into working for him. Three years since, and the prince seems to be aware of that fact as well–but terrified of admitting it.

Understandable, but still.

"And does this man happen to be good looking?"

"..." Xie Lian tilts his chin down, nodding. "He's...handsome," the prince admits.

Mu Qing is a little bit suspicious that the King and Queen might be a little too stuffy to have certain...conversations with their son.

It isn't weird for a teenage boy to have...intense dreams.

Sure, with his cultivation method, it's not like Xie Lian needs a full blown 'talk.'

Mu Qing's own mother didn't really have one with him either, but the circumstances were slightly different, and they both knew a conversation wasn't necessary.

Still...

"But it's odd." Xie Lian mumbles, pulling his finger away from another newly formed curl.

Mu Qing sighs, trying to think of a way to say that it isn't 'odd,' wondering if that's even his place, when–

"It's like he knows me," Xie Lian whispers. "But I've never met him before."

And despite his insistence that it isn't like that, it...

...Well, it sounds very much like that.

And Mu Qing finds himself inexplicably relieved to hear that it's someone the prince has never met.

"What happens next?"

"...He kneels before me, kisses my hand..."

All normal ways to greet a prince, it's somewhat by the book.

"...And then he tells me to wait," Xie Lian frowns, his brow creasing. "That's when I wake up. Every single time."

Mu Qing frowns.

Well. That sounds somewhat unlike a...teenage boy kind of dream, and more like a...

"I think it means something," the prince murmurs. "I've been having the dream more and more lately, and..." He glances back at Mu Qing over his shoulder. "I feel like something is about to happen. Like...I'm going to meet him."

"Meet...the butterfly man," Mu Qing repeats slowly.

"...Well, that's obviously not his name."

Mu Qing bites back a smile. "Dream man didn't tell you that?"

"No," the prince murmurs, resting his chin on his knees. "I asked, but...it was like he couldn't answer me."

Mu Qing falls silent, contemplative.

Xie Lian sighs, looking away from the mirror. "I'm tired–you must be too. We should both rest, okay?"

"..." The servant sets down the comb with a nod, picking up Xie Lian's boots as he heads for the door. "Sweet dreams, dianxia."

The prince blushes outright this time.

"Mu Qing!" He whines, but the door is already closing, leaving the younger teenager in the hallway, snickering.

It might be a little mean, teasing him, but...

Xie Lian never gets embarrassed like that. Never lets loose, or acts like a normal kid.

Sometimes, it's like he doesn't realize that he actually is a child. Not quite a man yet.

And while he thinks he's sent Mu Qing to bed, he's just given the servant a slightly early start on his nightly chores.

Preparing for the next day, re-shining his boots.

He finishes up with running the breakfast order to the kitchens before heading back to his rooms, and on his way there...

Feng Xin is slightly sweaty–understandably so, it's three kilometers around the perimeter of the grounds, and he just ran that three times over–rubbing the back of his neck as he walks down the hall. Likely to go to the baths, then to bed.

There's a welt on his cheek.

"..."

They stop in the hallway, staring at one another.

After all, it's rare that they're ever alone.

Mu Qing is slightly unkempt himself. Sleeves rolled up to the elbow, hair a little scraggly after cleaning for the last hour or so.

And he wants to ask...

...It's stupid, but Mu Qing wants to ask Feng Xin if he's alright.

But he doesn't find the words to say that out loud.

Instead...

"...C'mon," the servant mutters, turning on his heel, leaving Feng Xin standing there, staring in confusion.

"Huh?"

"You heard me."

Mu Qing doesn't look back, his ponytail bouncing behind him lightly as he walks toward the kitchens. "Move your ass."

Feng Xin's eyes narrow slightly with irritation, and yet...

Well, he follows after him, shoulders hunched as Mu Qing leads him to...

The kitchens.

Empty now—the cooks won't arrive for a few more hours, anyway.

Mu Qing reaches for a few ingredients, tossing them into a bowl in near silence as Feng Xin watches, neither speaking a word.

They always keep a small fire going in the night, burning low under the stoves.

As such, he's able to place a pot over one of them without an issue.

“...” Feng Xin watches the mixture bubble with a raised eyebrow. “What are you doing?”

“Shut up.” Mu Qing mutters, grabbing a second bowl, throwing in a few more ingredients, mashing them up into a paste.

Feng Xin falls silent again, none too thrilled about it, trying to figure out how this relates to the prince, because that's the only reason the two of them are ever together —

Or, well—this could be a prank, but he can't figure out how, and Mu Qing doesn't seek him out for that.

He's like a cat that will knock something valuable off of the counter if it happens to be in his path.

He's more interested in crimes of opportunity.

Having finished whatever it is he's doing, Mu Qing turns his head to look at Feng Xin contemplatively.

Mu Qing is almost seventeen, still in the middle of a late growth spurt, and at nineteen, Feng Xin is as tall as he's going to get.

And he's not going to stretch up, or actually ask the idiot to bend down, so...

He hops up onto the kitchen counter, the bowl in hand.

"Come here."

"..." Feng Xin watches him reluctantly, and Mu Qing rolls his eyes.

"I'm not gonna fucking bite you, but if you wanna be a baby about it..."

That inspires some irritated grumbling, but the teenager steps over until his hip brushes lightly against Mu Qing's knee.

Which he doesn't seem to notice. And Mu Qing doesn't either.

Obviously.

He dips two fingers into the bowl, bringing them up to the welt on Feng Xin's cheek. The guard doesn't wince, even though it must hurt, he just raises an eyebrow.

"What is this stuff?"

"...It'll make the swelling go down by the time he wakes up," Mu Qing mutters.

It’s an easy deflection. Obviously, Xie Lian would be upset to find out that Feng Xin got slapped over the incident.

Hiding it from him is easier.

Obviously.

“…” Feng Xin seems to accept the answer, looking over towards the pot sitting on the stove. “What’s that for, then?”

Mu Qing blinks, setting the bowl with the makeshift salve down. “Congee.”

“…How is that supposed to help?”

The servant stares at him like he’s stupid.

“You just ran for what, two hours straight?” He questions dryly, “Were you seriously going to go to bed without eating anything?”

Feng Xin stares at him, his expression frozen and blank, gears moving slowly in his head.

“…You made me congee.”

Mu Qing isn’t looking at him.

He’s wiping the mixture off of his fingertips with a rag, and grumbling. “Honest to fucking god, you’re a grown ass man, I shouldn’t have to tell you to eat something after that.”

Feng Xin’s expression hasn’t changed.

“You made me congee,” he repeats, eyes locked on his face.

Mu Qing carries on, not paying attention to what he’s saying, “And it was my sister he went out to see today, so if anyone found out why, it would’ve been my ass. I don’t wanna owe a stupid prick like you.”

He finally does stop talking when Feng Xin’s hand lands on his shoulder.

Finally, he stops, looking up, and…

Feng Xin is staring down at him intently, and he repeats it one more time…his voice noticeably softer.

“You made me congee.”

“...How many times are you gonna fucking say that?” Mu Qing mutters.

But now...it’s...

Congee isn’t particularly hard to make. And it isn’t fancy, either. It’s not a particularly big gesture, except for the fact that...

It’s the only thing Feng Xin eats for breakfast in the morning. Ever. Even with the array of dishes that gets sent up each morning.

And now, Mu Qing can’t seem to shut up.

“And the stuff was already out for breakfast in the morning, I didn’t go out of my way or anything, so don’t go and get any—!”

It’s not exactly like Feng Xin decided to do it.

At first, he just wanted to make him shut up.

Which he did.

With his mouth.

Leaving Mu Qing frozen, eyes wide, his hands holding the lip of the counter in a death grip.

Feng Xin’s lips are just a little bit chapped, but warm against his own. Insistent too, even if they’re slightly clumsy.

And it’s...

Slightly terrifying.

Because it’s easy to hide what you’re thinking, to hide that you want something, when you aren’t under strict scrutiny.

Mu Qing didn’t realize how badly he wanted to be kissed until it actually happened.

And now he’s here.

He’s here, and his heart is pounding, and he can’t breathe.

He’s here, and it feels like there’s a balloon swelling in his chest.

If it explodes, he might die.

They're both frozen for a moment. Mu Qing with an avalanche of self revelation, and Feng Xin, realizing what he did.

And Mu Qing—ever sarcastic, guarded, slightly vindictive Mu Qing—

"…You're really sweaty," he mumbles.

Which sounds like something that might be a complaint, but he doesn't say it that way.

His voice is a little small, though not upset, just…

Nervous.

Like a boy who just got kissed for the first time.

And it might be Feng Xin's first time kissing someone, but he's older. Supposedly more worldly. And he'd rather die than admit to that.

Instead, he answers rather intelligently—

"You still have grass in your hair."

This time, it's harder to say who leans in. Just that someone does.

Mu Qing's lips part under his, trembling slightly. The movements are slow, awkward —then clumsy and rushed.

But good.

His hands are in Feng Xin's hair, and it's good.

Feng Xin's hands are on his waist, and they're warm.

Mu Qing doesn't know it right now. That over the next eight centuries, this is the only boy that he's going to kiss.

Usually when he's angry, or hurting.

Over time, he'll forget that their first kiss was the sweetest.

It lingers too long for either of them to call it a mistake. It can't be labeled as impulsive either. Not when it's a series of decisions.

Feng Xin, pressing closer. Mu Qing's knees slighting farther apart. His lips parting, and Feng Xin's tongue peeking between, drawing a gasp.

Feng Xin seems to decide at one point that it's too good to pull away. Mu Qing comes to the parallel conclusion that he doesn't want him to.

The frantic rush of it all won't come until the next time. This is...

Touching without a destination in mind.

With every brush of Feng Xin's mouth comes with a question:

Is this okay?

Should we stop?

Mu Qing thinks it is, and doesn't ever want to.

But eventually, they do.

When there's the faint clang in the distance—probably one of the cooks arriving to start breakfast preparations.

The two jump apart—well, Mu Qing can't do more than lean away, but Feng Xin practically leaps back, hair standing on end, blushing from ear to ear.

They sit in silence for a moment, wide eyed and breathless, staring at one another, unable to think of what to say.

Eventually, Feng Xin blurts out—

"I'm sorry!"

Mu Qing doesn't respond, lips still slightly parted, a usually overactive brain struggling to catch up.

The guard turns to go, then stops, remembering—

Then, he's fumbling for one of the extra bowls, snatching a spoon.

He barely manages to ladle himself a serving before one of the cooks walks in, raising an eyebrow. "What are you two doing down here so late?"

Feng Xin jumps at the sound of her voice, his shoulders hunching, and he barely manages to blurt out—

"Thanks for the congee!"

There is something mildly hilarious about the way that he makes a beeline for the door, running into it and nearly spilling the rice porridge all over himself before slipping out.

The cook stares after him, sending Mu Qing a curious look. “What’s gotten into him?”

Mu Qing shrugs, looking away. “A girl tried to hold hands with him in the village today. He might be in the process of faking his death to escape the embarrassment as we speak.”

That draws a soft laugh from her.

“You’re too hard on him, you know,” she points out gently. “He’s a good lad. Just a little thick headed.”

Mu Qing knows that.

He’d rather die than say so, but he does.

“And you should be in bed, little dove.” She adds, tying an apron around her waist. “You’ll be lucky if you get more than an hour of sleep at this rate. Go on.”

Mu Qing shrugs, looking down at his feet. “I’m not a little kid anymore…” he points out quietly.

“Bah,” the cook sighs, reaching over to pinch his cheek. “Could’ve fooled me, with that sulky expression of yours. Take a bun with you, understand? There’s hardly any meat on those bones.”

All of the women in the kitchen treat him like that—but then again, they’ve known him since he started here, back when he was only twelve years old.

He does take the bun, but he hardly eats it. Laying in bed, staring at the ceiling.

Occasionally brushing his fingertips over bruised lips, curling up on his side.

‘You still have grass in your hair.’

He reaches up to feel for it, but…

Feng Xin must’ve brushed it off already.

Is it going to be different tomorrow?

Will they say anything?

Will it be worse if they don't?

He barely sleeps at all, and the next morning—Feng Xin doesn't wake up to a boot slamming against his head, or a kick against his door.

They're both quiet, looking anywhere but each other, and...

The day before—the stupid festival, the fireworks, walking home after, even that brief lapse in sanity in the kitchens—

It was a good day. Like...

What it might have been like, if the three of them were normal teenagers, and the world wasn't complicated.

But they aren't.

He's reminded of that when the palace seamstresses drop off the robes for the mid autumn festival for the final fitting.

When he's busy placing flowers in the prince's hair, arranging his sleeves as the Queen stands off to the side, examining the costume's details.

"Oh, darling..." she smiles, her eyes brimming with pride. "You look perfect."

"Well," Xie Lian pushes his hair behind his ears, trying not to get in Mu Qing's way. "They don't have the mask finished yet—"

"And when it is, that will be perfect too," The Queen waves him off. "You always are."

The performance will be perfect, naturally. The entire day will go off without a hitch, because—

Because it's Xie Lian. And Xie Lian is perfect.

That's easy to stomach, coming from a mother to her son. Even if it seems to make the prince a little tense, but...

When Mu Qing's gaze slides towards the door—

He sees him watching.

Or—

The better way of saying it is that he sees the *way* Feng Xin is watching.

Eyes trailing over the prince's face, the jewels in his hair, the graceful poise of his arms.

It's more than simple admiration.

Mu Qing's fingers grow still.

In a distant way, he thinks to himself—

'Oh. That's fucked up.'

And it sounds so calm in his head. Unbothered.

But it isn't.

Because it's unfair, and terrifying, and vulnerable, and— Mu Qing doesn't have to hide it when his lips tremble.

Because no one is looking at him anyway.

'Why did you do that?'

That's all he can think about, watching him look at someone else like that.

'Why would you kiss me like that, and then look at him like this?'

But it's a necessary reminder:

That most of the time, you don't get what you want.

And it's hard not to look at that perfect face, the face of the boy who never gets mad, the boy who doesn't have any secrets—the boy that always gets what he wants—

It's hard not to look at that face, and hate him.

Just a little bit.

Then, he swallows it down.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY (FENGQING EDITION)

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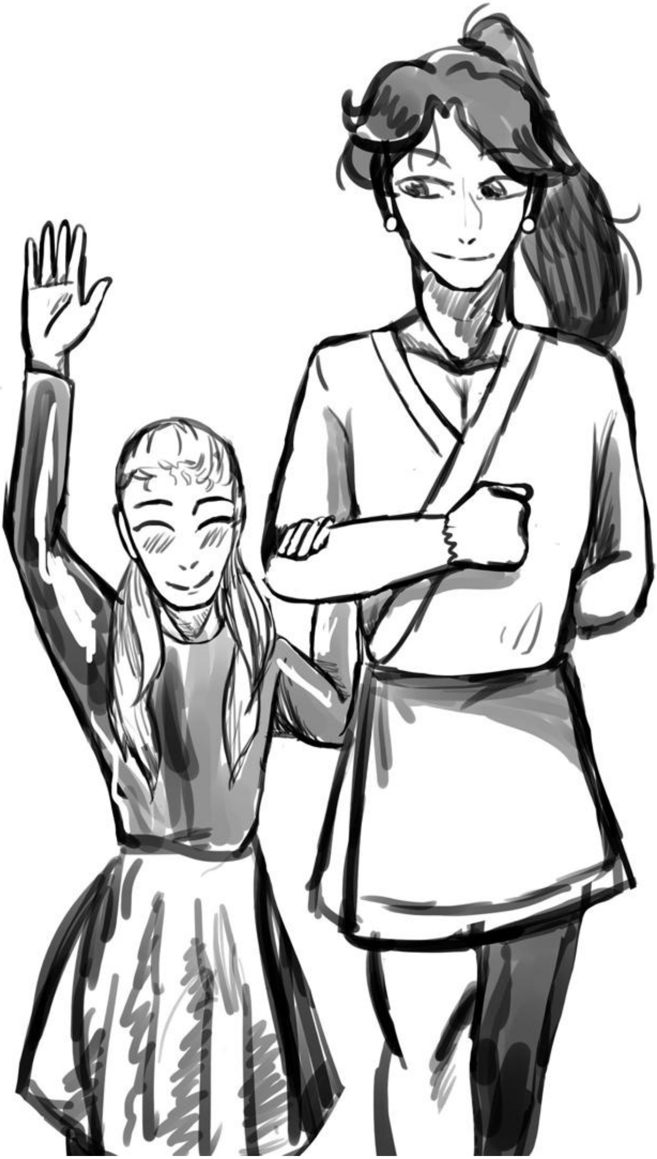
Xie Lian + Suyin



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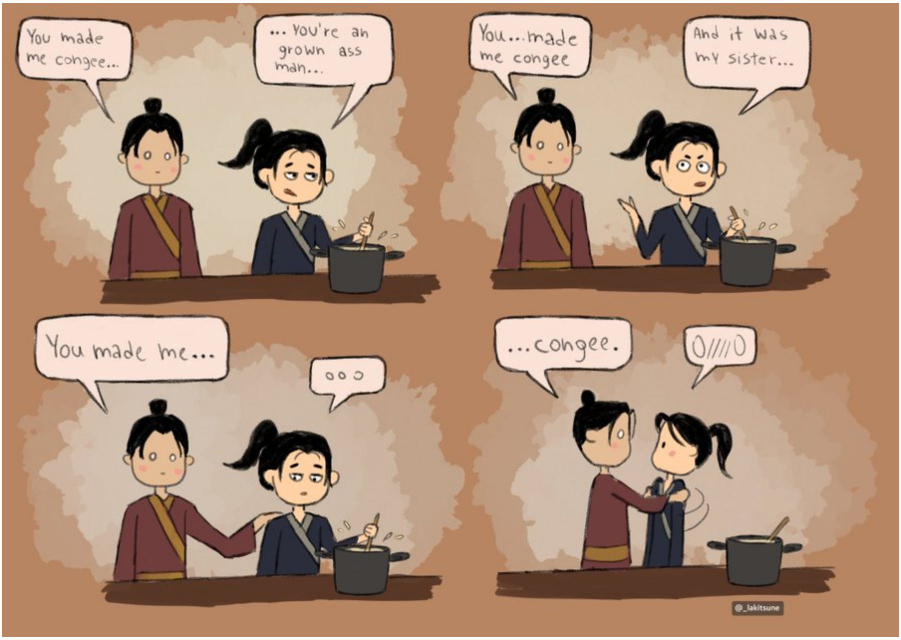
You made me congee...
... You're an grown ass man...
You... made me congee
And it was my sister...
You made me...
o o o
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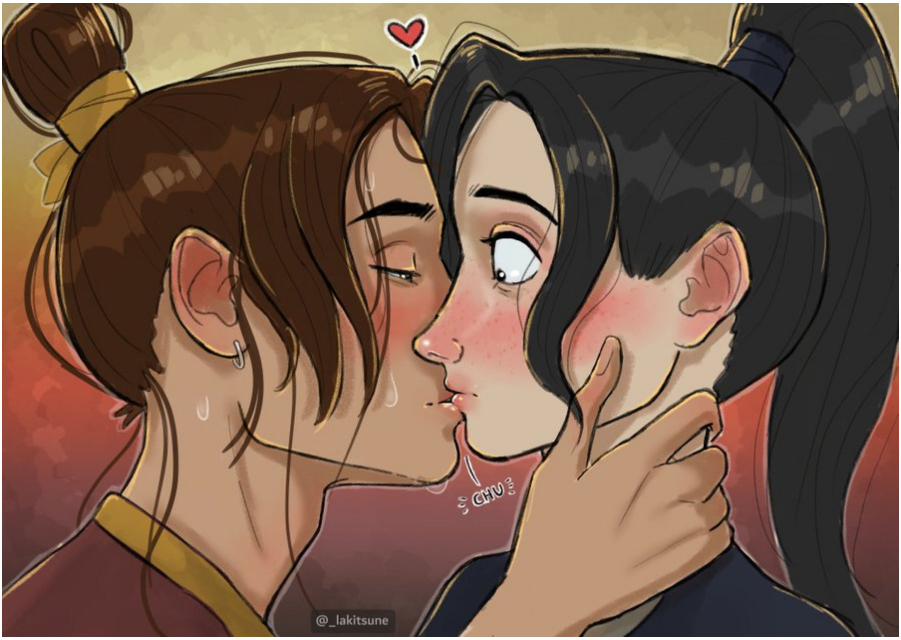
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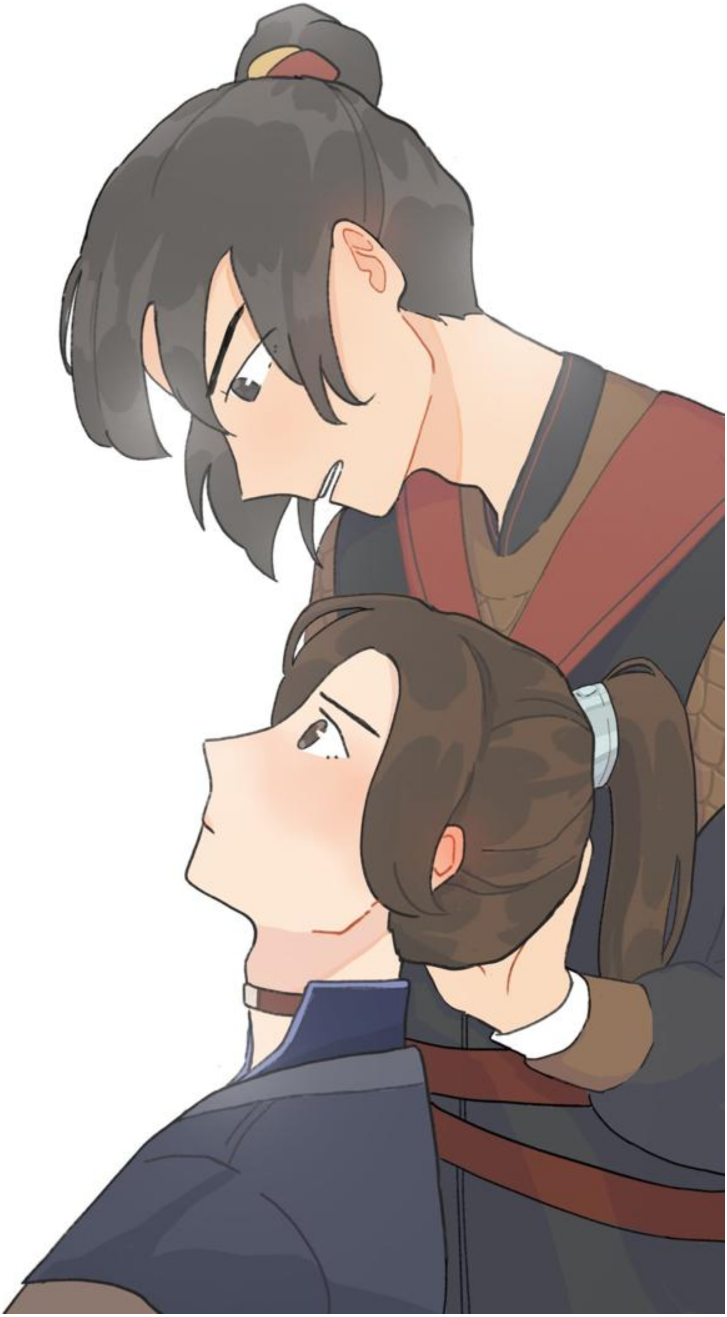
CREDIT: LAKI

Nan Feng + Fu Yao (the Banyue hair pulling incident)



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Chapter End Notes

Thank you to Eve, Laki, Lili, and panicking_artist for their beautiful artwork, and allowing me to include it!

This chapter is basically just a love letter to fengqing / the xianle trio, thank you for indulging me!

xoxo, Evie

It's Always Been You

Chapter Summary

> But that's the thing about perfection—it doesn't exist.
>
> When you assign that quality to a person, all you're doing is building a palace out of golden blocks.
>
> And one day, it's doomed to come tumbling down.
>
> Because one day, for the first time in Xie Lian's life…
>
> Things weren't perfect.
>
> The day his life changed forever, and he didn't even know it yet.
>
> The day when, after making three laps around the Grand Martial Avenue, all of the screaming and cheering seemed to go quiet.
>
> The day when a boy dropped from the sky like a falling star.

Chapter Notes

> No major content warnings necessary for this chapter, but! This is an important one!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

But that's the thing about perfection—it doesn't exist.

When you assign that quality to a person, all you're doing is building a palace out of golden blocks.

And one day, it's doomed to come tumbling down.

Because one day, for the first time in Xie Lian's life…

Things weren't perfect.

The day his life changed forever, and he didn't even know it yet.

The day when, after making three laps around the Grand Martial Avenue, all of the screaming and cheering seemed to go quiet.

The day when a boy dropped from the sky like a falling star.

And he would feel so ashamed later, to remember how, at the time, it didn't feel like he had done anything special. Other than the scolding he got after, the memory didn't stick out to him.

Not until later.

But for the little boy who fell, it was everything.

"Oi!" The kick is sharp, landing heavily against a small set of ribs, sending the little stray scurrying back from the street stand. "You think I'm supposed to believe a mongrel can pay?! Go on!"

The child lingers on the ground for a moment, holding his side.

"Are you deaf?!" The stall owner glares, "I'll kick that ugly little face of yours in if I see you near here again!"

There isn't a coherent reply from the boy, his head hanging low, and the man glares.

"Be a little more generous, love." His wife mutters from beside him. "He's the one who..."

The entire neighborhood remembers it, but scarcely speaks of what happened to the poor woman.

It's not something that bears repeating.

"Doesn't give him the right to be a little thief," her husband grouses, crossing his arms stubbornly.

"..." The Stall Owner's wife shakes her head, sending the boy a sympathetic look. "Why don't you go to the temple of the Heavenly Emperor? I hear they're giving out bread for the festival. Or...the procession always hands out sweets, how about that?"

The boy pulls himself to his feet, spitting blood onto the pavement before wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

His movements are slow, stumbling.

He doesn't even look at her as he turns, moving back towards the crowds.

"Who cares," he mutters, keeping his head down.

He's gotten so used to being hungry, it's almost uncomfortable to feel the absence of it. He only tried to swipe an apple because his head has been so light today, but...

It doesn't matter.

He wanders through the screaming, cheering crowds.

None of it matters, and he won't pray to anyone.

That's one of the lessons from his mother that he's managed to keep with him, even if they become harder and harder to remember as time goes on.

You don't waste time, asking for gods to help you.

You look after yourself.

She only ever prayed in their old temple in Qinghe, but never once here, in Xianle.

When the boy asked why—she said there wasn't a temple for him here.

Though Hong'er never asked who 'he' was, he doesn't think that he cares.

All he knows is that the cheering is too loud.

And for what, he can’t imagine.

There’s absolutely nothing in this place worth celebrating.

Xianle is a wealthy city, it’s true—but unless you were born in a certain house, you’d never know it.

For those who aren’t so fortunate, life is a much more brutal existence. It makes them ungenerous, selfish, and cruel.

It doesn't leave room for a boy with no mother, no father, and no food. He's constantly crowded out, shoved away. Hiding like a rodent in the shadows of an alley, just to avoid being beaten.

Even the children here are hopeless. Driven to cynicism at such a young age.

Hong'er is unlucky, because he's ugly. People are even less generous with something they don't want to see.

And no one seems to want to see him, even now.

They grumble with irritation, shouldering him out of the way.

They all want to get closer to the front of the crowd. To see the show.

More accurately, to see the God Pleasing Warrior fight off the wicked Demon.

Saving the precious people of Xianle. Guaranteeing another year of good fortune.

What a joke.

They had the parade last year. They supposedly guaranteed good fortune last year.

But Hong'er's life was miserable last year. And it'll still be miserable this year, too.

But still, everyone around seems to genuinely believe it. Screaming, throwing flowers in the air.

That was something else his mother used to tell him.

Gripping his shoulders, looking him in the eye very seriously. "Don't believe anything, or anyone without a good reason."

Raising a child alone in a city was hard work, after all. Dangerous work.

He keeps on losing memories of her, the older he gets.

Hong'er is afraid that one day, she'll completely disappear from his thoughts.

Then there won't be anyone left to remember who cared about him. Who was kind to him.

Then, he'll really be alone.

But he remembers one thing.

The day they left. Before all of that walking.

Walking, walking, endless walking.

Now, Hong'er that he hadn't complained so much.

He remembers that last day when they were in Qinghe, when his mother, who had always been so cynical of gods and humans alike, asked him to pray.

Hong'er refused. He isn't used to big, grand places. The marble pillars and grand hall of the temple felt alien to him.

His mother went alone. Never forced him to believe in something that he didn't want, but when he returned, he asked a reasonable question, given what she had always taught him–

'Why believe in some martial god, anyway?'

Her answer was simple:

'He gave me a reason to.'

He envies that now.

Because she's gone, and he's alone. She's gone, and no one will look at him.

Even now, he finds himself getting pulled deeper through the crowd–like a pebble, lost in a current.

The only way to escape it, naturally, is to climb the city walls.

Other children are watching there too, elbowing one another as they try to get a better look at the soldiers. The flower maidens, dressed in silks and jewels tossing petals so high, mixing with that of the crowd–to the point where it's practically a rain shower of flowers.

"He's coming!"

"Would you shut up and move out of the way?!"

"They'll be around the corner any minute!"

The cheering is reaching a fever pitch, he's surrounded on all sides, and...

All Hong'er can feel, in that moment, is anger.

Angry at how selfish, stupid, and hungry people are.

At how idiotic it is, to put on a show like this. And for what? To make people think that the world is better than it is?

It isn't.

Awful things happen every day. And people just watch. They think they deserve to celebrate?

For a moment, there's just a desire to ruin it. To shatter that warm image of happiness and reveal it for what it really is.

That's what Hong'er has always done. He breaks things.

But it feels so much better when he's doing it on purpose. When he's in control.

And in that brief flicker of a moment, there's temptation. Staring at the edge of the wall and the plunge below, remembering something else his mother said, long ago.

'I think you'd be an adorable ghost–promise you'll haunt me forever, alright?'

She said that, but she was the one who ended up becoming a ghost.

Hong'er drifts closer, his eyes fixed on that edge.

And it seems better to ruin everything, to smash his fists against this scene and break it, to see her again, than...

The cheering builds to a thunderous roar.

And it isn't until then, that Hong'er actually looks at the parade below.

It isn't until then, that his entire life changes.

There are other figures, of course. The soldiers. The flower maidens. The demon to be vanquished.

But Hong'er doesn't see any of them.

There's just one person.

One person in the entire world.

And for a moment, he already feels like a ghost. Like his body was knocked away in the space of a moment, leaving him without breath or pulse.

Moving like water, long strands of hair streaming in the breeze.

Every step comes with ease, the gleam of his sword marking each movement as he dances through the streets, shining brighter than any of the jewels in his hair.

Hong'er feels caught by it.

Like a hook has sunk into him, and this impossible person is on the other end of the line.

His heart swells in his chest, lips trembling as he leans closer, jostled by the people around as he claws between them, desperate for just one look, just one more look, a small sound of panic escaping his throat when the figure disappears from view.

He needs, he–he just needs to see–

The person in front of him steps away suddenly, when he wasn't expecting it, and he's sent tumbling forward, until...

There's screaming.

It takes him a moment to realize what for, but...then, the wind is rushing past his hair, and pulling in his stomach, like...

Freefall.

He's falling.

And there isn't fear in that moment. Not at all. Just...

Regret.

Hong'er hadn't expected to feel that, before his death.

He's wanted to die so many times, but now, staring up at the sky, feeling it as the ground rushes closer, he just--he just wants...

Thump!

The boy slams into something solid with a thud, but...not the ground.

Ba-bump.

A white jade mask falls away, and the world with it.

Now, the screaming is deafening, but not the same as before.

Not out of fear, or excitement.

No, this–this is euphoria.

'DIANXIA! DIANXIA! DIANXIA!'

But it all fades into a low buzz in Hong'er's ears, his eye wide, focused on the face above his own.

A face adored by so many. Revered in poems and song. Every artist, musician, and author has tried to put the essence of such beauty to words.

For Hong'er, only three come to mind.

'This is it.'

Just those three, his heart hammering in his chest.

'DIANXIA! DIANXIA! DIANXIA!'

This is it.

Deep in his heart, no, his soul, he knows.

Hong'er has never had any love for himself. The world never allowed it.

He's ugly, hateful, and selfish. He always has been.

And, he's always said so.

Sometimes, he's even said the words: *'I never should have been born.'*

There was nothing he ever did that made his mother so angry. Gripping him by the shoulders, and saying—

‘Hong’er, look at me.’

A hand envelopes his trembling fingers, squeezing them soothingly.

‘Your life will never be easy.’

When they land, it’s impossibly graceful.

Hong’er is barely even jostled by it, despite falling from such great height. And still, it feels like he’s falling.

‘But you are stronger—and braver—than you could ever understand.’

Those eyes are like living gold, staring down at him with such warmth, he can hardly breathe.

‘And I know, with all my heart—fate put you on this earth for a reason.’

The Crown Prince of Xianle smiles down at him softly, trying to speak over the roar of the crowds, but it’s no use.

‘My brave Hong Hong’er—you were born for a reason.’

“DIANXIA! DIANXIA! DIANXIA!”

In that moment, he knows:

This is it.

The arm around him squeezes gently, holding him completely secure against the prince’s side.

This is what he was born for.

He doesn’t know why, and he doesn’t know how—but everything he’ll ever be, everything he’ll ever do—

It’s for him.

The prince glances back towards the rest of the procession, and Hong’er suddenly squeezes his hand back, getting those eyes to return to him.

‘Look at me.’

He’s selfish, and greedy, and hungry.

‘Don’t ever stop looking at me.’

“...” The prince smiles at him, gently reassuring.

He lifts his sword with one arm, holding the child's trembling form against him with the other, whispering;

"Don't be scared."

He isn't.

This is the first time in two years that someone has touched him without cruel intentions.

The first time in just as long that he's felt...safe.

Not jostled for even a moment as the prince holds him close, fighting with one hand without a single hint of strain.

And when it's over, the screams of the crowd are unmatched. But Hong'er doesn't hear.

All he sees is that smile, the halo of petals around his head.

...Almost like a crown of flowers.

Centuries later, he will relive his.

He'll jump down into a pit, just to catch his savior when he falls down again.

He'll fight a demon, while cradling this man in his arms.

But that is a hundred lifetimes away. With countless years of longing and suffering and waiting in between.

For now, all he can do is stare, clinging closer. Shivering when the prince's other arm wraps around him, carrying him through the street.

"Are you alright?"

Hong'er doesn't answer. Can't seem to find his voice at the moment, cautiously pressing his cheek against taizi dianxia's sleeve.

"..." Xie Lian holds him close, rubbing a hand up and down his back soothingly as guards surround them, leading them away from the crowds.

The demon from before slips free from his own mask, pushing sweat soaked locks of hair from his forehead as he sends the crown prince an annoyed stare.

"What were you thinking?"

Hong'er frowns, gripping the prince's hand a little tighter.

Who is he, to talk to him like that?

"What was I supposed to do?" Xie Lian tilts his head, "I couldn't let him get hurt."

It's baffling to hear.

It's been so long since anyone cared if he was alive at all, much less if he was injured.

"And if I had left him back there, he would have been trampled," Xie Lian explains with a shrug, glancing down at the child once more, looking him over. "I think he's just shaken up."

"Understandably so," a nearby guard mutters, stepping over. "Do we know where his parents are?"

Still, Hong'er doesn't reply.

That seems to worry the prince somewhat, but in this situation...there's little he can do personally.

"I have to deal with my parents and the Guoshi...could you take him away from here? Getting somewhere quiet might help him calm down."

Feng Xin nods, reaching over to take him when Xie Lian tries to hand the child over.

"...Aren't you going to take him?" The prince frowns, to which Feng Xin grits his teeth, his eyes narrowing slightly with effort.

"I'm trying, but...this little...he...doesn't want to let go!"

Xie Lian can feel as much from the way the child is clinging to his sleeves—and he sighs, offering the boy a patient smile.

“I know you’re scared,” he murmurs, rubbing his back. “But Feng Xin won’t hurt you. And I’m afraid I still have more work to be done.”

‘Don’t.’

That’s all he can think, staring up at him.

Selfish, selfish, selfish.

Don’t go. Don’t stop looking at me.

I just got you. I don’t want it to be over yet.

But slowly, however reluctantly, Hong’er let’s go, allowing himself to be carried away in the guard’s arms.

Still, he looks back over Feng Xin’s shoulder, watching the prince’s shrinking form—

And that feeling in his chest hasn’t changed.

A deep, unshakeable knowledge that Hong’er’s purpose lies with him.

That he’ll see him again.

But next time, the terms will be different.

That’s what he tells himself,

And the rest of Hong’er’s life, all of the years that he draws breath, is defined by the moments he spends with the crown prince of Xianle—and the moments of aching in between.

The next time he sees him—it’s through a veil of fear and pain.

And it’s dianxia, saving him again.

Even when all Hong’er can seem to do is break things. Even when he isn’t trying to.

Even when a building is set on fire, malicious spirits are released, and all anyone can seem to do is blame him.

Hong’er hasn’t pleaded before, but he did then.

That he wasn’t cursed, even if, in part, some small voice in his head was always saying it was true.

And unlike every other time in his life, where he was cast aside, called hideous, scorned and recoiled from like a deformed beast—

The prince just held him close.

“I know,” he whispered. “I know you’re not.”

And it was the third time they met, when everything seemed to fall into place. Which makes sense.

Throughout Hong'er's years on earth, the third time will always be the charm. When he's standing in a temple, more lost than ever.

Asking for a reason. For meaning.

Later, with a note of sheepishness, his god will tell him that these words were arrogant.

Foolish.

'If you can't find meaning, please—allow me to be that meaning.'

In that moment—it was as though Hong'er's life finally made sense.

All while the world rapidly seemed to be learning a lesson:

That Xianle wasn't as invincible as it seemed. That their crown prince was not as perfect as he pretended to be.

It changes nothing, however, for Hong'er.

Because he never needed him to be perfect.

And Xie Lian—

Maybe he was arrogant when he was young. Had a tendency towards delusions of grandeur.

But he always knew that he wasn't perfect.

It was only when he began to fail, for the first time in his life, that he felt afraid.

Because then—everyone else knew it, too.

There were no more festivals. No more nights laying under the stars, counting until his eyes began to feel heavy.

Feng Xin buried a father. Mu Qing a sister. And Xie Lian—

Xie Lian watched so many faces, young, bright, and full of hope, walk onto the battlefield.

For him.

And he watched so many of them come back, only to be laid down in a grave. Over and over again.

To the point where he can't look at them anymore.

To the point where he feels himself beginning to change.

Becoming so angry, so frustrated, so— So helpless.

And Xie Lian expected to be blamed for failing. When his people began to cry out in frustration, he understood it.

What he never expected, not in a hundred years, was for the Heavens to blame him for trying.

His visits become more limited—and noticeably strained. His deputies stand by him, as is expected. But otherwise... The other gods avoid him, when possible.

Treat him like a bad omen.

And, as time goes on, they begin to view him with his newfound reputation in mind:

A god of misfortune.

Still, there is one willing to speak to him.

And it leaves many scandalized, on the eve of the prince of Xianle's trial, that a martial god of such high rank would pay him a personal visit in his Heavenly Palace.

Xie Lian doesn't look up from his calligraphy when the door opens, his posture tense. "Who is it?"

"Your highness."

The sound of that voice is enough to make him lift his chin, startled.

"...General Ming Guang," he murmurs, gripping his calligraphy brush just a little tighter. "Have you come to bring me to the trial?"

The Martial God of the North shakes his head.

"His highness the emperor has requested a private meeting with you before all of that," he shrugs, his arms crossed.

In spite of being so similar in rank and strength, they haven't interacted much since Xie Lian's ascension.

He finds himself regretting that now.

Maybe things were always meant to turn out this way, but—

Part of Xie Lian wonders if it might have been different, if he had asked for help.

Still, it's too late for that.

"Are you here to bring me to him, then?"

"...I doubt you need an escort, your highness."

"..." Xie Lian sets the brush down, turning his head to give Pei his full attention. "Then why are you here?"

"...I didn't think I would have the chance to discuss it with you later," Pei admits with a small shrug. "But I plan on entering your territory."

"...Xianle?" Xie Lian questions flatly. "Why would you want to go there?"

If his intention is to help, that would be maddeningly hilarious.

The war is already over. He already lost.

"...I've been looking for someone, and I now have reason to think they're in the central plains."

Xie Lian finally looks in his direction, raising an eyebrow. "Someone from your territory?"

Pei seems slightly hesitant, but...

He nods.

The prince arches an eyebrow. "...A mortal?"

The general stands a little straighter.

"Last I checked, having relationships with them isn't a crime."

No, it isn't. Not unless you decide to do something more than watch them suffer. Then, you're a criminal.

Xie Lian is slightly bitter.

"And what makes you think this person is in Xianle?"

The tone in Pei's voice surprises him.

"Because it's the only place where I haven't looked."

It's that of…naked worry.

Xie Lian slides back from his table, silks and jewels tinkling softly as he looks at Pei full on.

"General, this sounds like a serious matter for you."

Xie Lian, of course, won't remember this conversation very much as the centuries go on. A moment in a fairly painful time in his life, years that Xie Lian would work very hard to forget—

But Pei Ming won't forget the sympathy. The lack of judgment.

"…She ended things years ago," the description makes Xie Lian's eyes widen slightly. "She would still pray, on occasion—to let me know that she was alright, but…"

The General's shoulders slump.

"One day, she stopped. I started looking soon after that."

It's shocking to hear Pei admit he had that sort of relationship with a mortal woman.

(Of course, if Xie Lian had paid any attention to the gossip in the Heavenly Realm during his time as an official, he would have known the affair was not the part that was shocking. It was the fact that the woman was the one who ended it—and that Pei had continued to worry for her welfare after the fact.)

And while he does feel sympathy, privately, he does think that falling in love with a mortal sounds like a terrible idea.

Xie Lian hasn't had to mourn someone dear to him before. No close friends or relatives. He thinks of the fact that he'll one day outlive his parents with distant dread.

The thought of falling in love with a mortal, then losing them—the prospect of such grief seems overwhelming.

"…If she was in Xianle, I'm afraid her odds of survival wouldn't have been particularly high," the prince admits, trying to avoid sounding particularly self pitying when he speaks. "We didn't have only the war to contend with, after all."

The plague took far more.

Pei bows his head. "I understand that. But I have to know, even if she..."

Xie Lian understands what he means, even if he doesn't say so explicitly.

Even if she was the one who walked away—the General doesn't want to feel as though he...abandoned her.

It's a horrible feeling.

Being all powerful, and still being unable to protect that which you love.

Xie Lian understands.

His lips turn up at the corners, slightly bitter.

"Well, you hardly need my permission to entire Xianle after today. I doubt that anyone does."

Pei watches him for a moment, then lifts his chin.

"If I were to enter a martial god's territory without announcing my intentions, that would only be because I no longer respected the man."

"..." Xie Lian looks away, fighting to hide the emotions on his face, his throat tight.

"...I should go and see the emperor, before the trial starts," he mutters, rising to his feet. "But..." he glances over at Pei Ming one last time.

The next time they meet, he won't be able to see the General's face.

"If you tell me her name, I can check with my deputies."

After all—Feng Xin has been left in charge of dealing with what remains of the Xianle army, but Mu Qing has been handling a growing refugee crisis. If the woman Pei is looking for is alive—it's not impossible that he's encountered her.

The general hesitates, at first.

But finally, he answers.

“Qing Yuan.”

Xie Lian takes mental note of that, and Pei adds—

“She was the same height as you—dark hair, gray eyes, with a small scar on the right side of her jaw. High born—and she spoke like it, too.”

Basic, identifying features.

“...Do you have any idea why she would have stopped speaking to you?” Xie Lian questions softly, adjusting his sleeves as he prepares to leave.

The general bites the inside of his cheek, regretful.

“No,” he admits. “But she is a proud woman. Often to her own detriment… I suspect it has something to do with that.”

“...” Xie Lian nods, making his way towards the door. “I wish you the best of luck then, General. May Heaven’s blessings be upon you.”

Pei’s smile is tinged with a sense of foreboding.

Somewhat frightened by what he might find.

Still, he completes the phrase:

“And by Heaven Official’s Blessing, No Paths are Bound.”

But the news awaiting him when he descends upon Xianle is as cruel as what Xie Lian himself learns upon checking with Mu Qing on his way to the Imperial Palace.

That there was a young woman by that name, matching Pei Ming’s description in the capital city. But Mu Qing doesn’t know that name because he encountered a refugee.

He knows that name, because before the war, most of the working class in the city had heard of what happened.

The young woman known as Qing Yuan had been living in the warehouse district. A former concubine, still known to do such work, but not as a sole occupation. People also knew her to have worked in bookkeeping with a local merchant.

At one point, she was even the assistant to the instructor at a local academy. Intelligent, capable, and hardworking.

But, unfortunately for her—Qing Yuan's past erased the chance for any future. Apparently, when she came to Xianle...it was to flee her husband.

A violent man.

A wealthy one, as it turned out. One who was willing to do whatever it took, to find her once more.

And when he did...

It resulted in one of the most gruesome scenes to rock the streets of Xianle, even with the war and plague that would come.

Mu Qing spares the worst details.

But what he does mention, the detail in the story that makes Xie Lian's heart break for Ming Guang—

It's that Qing Yuan's son saw the entire thing.

A boy of just seven years old.

He disappears from the record soon after that. Likely killed like his mother—or dead, in the war.

A miserable story, riddled with pain and misfortune.

It almost makes Xie Lian wonder if there was some point, to the idea that gods should never interfere in the lives with mortals.

A point that only feels more clear now, standing before the entrance to the Imperial Palace.

It's only been three years since his first ascension. Xie Lian was seventeen then. So excited, so proud.

And all he wanted, more than anything, was the acknowledgement of the god above the rest.

His friend, his mentor—his emperor—Jun Wu. He wanted so badly to seem grown up.

But now, standing before the gates to his palace—Xie Lian feels like he's still an ungrateful, oversized child, waiting for a scolding.

That's not what awaits him, however, when he steps inside.

The emperor is facing away from him, cross legged on the ground.

There's a screen on the back wall of the imperial palace, one that can be pulled back to reveal the gardens below, as it is now.

Endless rows of flowers.

They used to dazzle the young prince. He could lay there for hours, speaking with the emperor about the world below.

It was quiet, peaceful, even.

The only times from the Heavens that Xie Lian ever finds himself looking back on with some measure of fondness.

After all, Jun Wu was a man with the entire world upon his shoulders, but he would take the time to spend an afternoon with him.

A signal that, even among gods, Xie Lian was special.

Leaning his head against the emperor's leg as he laid back against the grass, flowers in his hair, talking on, and on, and on.

But those times are long since passed.

Jun Wu simply watches the flowers, remembering.

There's a sadness to him now.

Xie Lian presumes it must be from disappointment.

Or dread, even, of what's to come.

(And it is. For what is to come. For what he is going to do.)

"You asked to see me?"

(For how far things will go.)

"Yes," the emperor murmurs. "I did."

Xie Lian stands there, silent. Unsure of what this conversation will bring, but knowing it isn't likely to change his predicament.

“You must know that you’re facing conviction.” Jun Wu murmurs, not turning his head.

Xie Lian grits his teeth. “I have a defense, your majesty.”

“Good intentions are not a defense, Xianle,” the reply is quiet, and it makes him flinch. “The road to hell is paved with them.”

He swallows thickly, his hands balled into tight fists behind his back. “It had nothing to do with my intentions,” he mutters.

“There was someone else involved—”

“Bai Wuxiang,” Jun Wu recalls calmly. “You’ve told me.”

“...” Xie Lian’s brows knit together. “Then you should understand. We should be out trying to find him, not wasting time—”

“He will trouble the people of Xianle no more.”

That makes the prince pause.

“What...” He stares at the back of Jun Wu’s head, confusion and frustration boiling inside. “What do you mean?!”

“Calamities are drawn to suffering and pain, Xianle.” Jun Wu stares at the flowers.

The emperor is tired.

“They cannot help it.”

Xie Lian takes a step back, unable to understand what he means. “Are you... sympathetic to him?”

“Of course not,” the emperor shakes his head. “But when a rule is broken, fate will bring a consequence.”

The weight of it is dawning, like a wave beginning to crest.

He can see it, looking down upon him.

And god, he wants to run from it so badly.

“...Are you trying to say that I did this?”

Xie Lian has been called a god of misfortune with increasing frequency in the last few months. A calamity in his own right.

But he never believed it.

Because he knew the truth. He saw the white clothed calamity, standing across the field.

He saw how Lang Ying was protected, over and over again, with the aura of a hero— For a man who, while complicated, and not entirely a villain—

He wasn't a hero either. He couldn't be.

Because if he was, that would make Xie Lian the villain.

That would make him the one who...

His stomach starts falling, and it never stops.

A perfect prince. A perfect son. A perfect god.

"...I didn't do this," he croaks, taking another step back.

Jun Wu won't look at him.

A villain. A curse. A failure.

"We'll never know what would have been, if you had not interfered." The emperor murmurs. "But Bai Wuxiang was brought forth, because you did."

No.

Xie Lian's hands clap over his mouth.

No, no, no.

He—

All he sees now, are those faces.

Young men, marching to their deaths.

'To die for the Crown Prince is our greatest honor.'

An honor.

He—

Jun Wu hears the quiet sounds of distress. The tears the young man is shedding, bordering on hyperventilation.

Still, he doesn't look.

"The punishment will be exile."

Xie Lian sinks to his knees, hands gripping either side of his head.

How could he have done this?

How could this have been him, when all he ever wanted was to—?

"You will be given a cursed shackle," Jun Wu continues. "And forced to wander, until when and if you ascend again."

The prince is barely listening, just trying to breathe, hands trembling. If...if that was true...

Why didn't Xie Lian listen…before so many people got hurt?

He—

"But it does not have to be that way," Jun Wu murmurs. "There is another option."

Xie Lian stares, tear stricken. "...There is?"

"Instead of going into outright exile, or losing your godhood, you could choose to make a sacrifice." Jun Wu explains softly. "A chance to make amends, and start anew."

Xie Lian pauses, his lips trembling. "What is it?" He whispers.

"Your name." Jun Wu explains calmly. "The new kingdom of Yong'an will still need a martial god, after all. No one needs to know that it's you."

Xie Lian listens, frozen and numb.

"A masked martial god would make a rather mysterious sight, people might like it."

Xie Lian reaches down to touch his cheeks with trembling fingertips.

"Of course," Jun Wu leans back on one palm, finally turning his head to glance back at Xie Lian's face, "to be without a name makes one Wu

Ming."

It's a new life, laid out as a possibility.

Wu Ming, the masked Martial God of the Central Plains.

Slayer of the rotten, cursed Prince of Xianle.

"...And that would be...I could never...go back?" Xie Lian mutters, his cheeks wet.

The emperor watches those tears closely, and he shakes his head.

"It would be permanent."

Of course, Jun Wu would know who he was. Jun Wu would be the only one allowed to see his face.

Xie Lian doesn't see the offer as an eternal Gilded cage, as it's intended to be.

But still, his answer is the same.

"...No," he croaks, shaking his head. "I can't do that."

Jun Wu raises an eyebrow as the crown prince wraps his arms around himself, taking shuddering breaths.

"I would never see my parents again," Xie Lian whispers. "Or Feng Xin, or Mu Qing. And even if I could...w...wouldn't taking a new name...be running away from what I did?"

Now, the emperor goes rather still.

"If this is my fault..." Xie Lian swallows thickly, wiping at his tears. "Then let me suffer for it. Let me be punished for it. My—my people's loss isn't so cheap, that I could just walk away from the blame."

For a moment, there is no reply.

Only his ragged, pained breaths. The sniffles accompanying his tears. Finally, Jun Wu asks—

"You think that's cowardice?"

Xie Lian doesn't apply with an affirmative, too lost in his own sorrow. "Even if that means you will be sealed with a cursed shackle?"

“…If that’s what I deserve,” the prince replies quietly, his head hanging low. Then, after a pause—

“…Then Xianle will accept the emperor’s punishment,” he whispers, his voice trembling.

Jun Wu stares him down.

“You will suffer,” he reminds him coldly. “It will be hard.”

“…I know.”

Oh, but he couldn’t have known.

Couldn’t have known then, that he would never see his mother and father again with his own eyes.

That he would never again see the sights of his childhood home before they were reduced to ancient ruins.

Couldn’t have known how heartbroken his mother would be, when she saw that he had lost his sight. How painful it would be, to hear how hopeless Mu Qing sounded. Grim, but determined as he helped the royal family adjust to a…different standard of living.

He couldn’t have known that it would hurt even more, listening to Feng Xin remaining hopeful in spite of it.

Believing that Xie Lian could ascend again, in spite of it.

And in that moment, alone in the dark, Xie Lian, the God Pleasing Crown Prince of Xianle, realized something:

That he no longer believed in himself.

Given the breadth and the depth of his destruction, how could he?

No, no.

He—

He isn’t perfect. He isn’t all powerful, and he isn’t all knowing.

Xie Lian, in the end, is just a human.

He was born human, and he rose as a human.

And when he fell again—

He was so painfully, bitterly human.

And so, rather than becoming a burden on his friends, a burden on his parents—he chooses to be alone.

Because that is what he deserves. That is all he deserves.

But…

There is still someone watching over him.

The bandages over his eyes create a natural disguise—and there are days when he's lucky, and people decide to offer charity. Enough for him to have a hot meal.

What little remains of his skills from cultivation allows him to navigate somewhat— enough for menial work.

People let him help with the harvest, tend to farm animals—but that work comes and goes.

Eventually he finds one of his own shrines in a remote village, worn down and abandoned.

It feels fitting.

Local farmers give him work—and when they can't, he goes hungry.

He used to spend many nights hungry as a child, refusing food due to his delicate palette—but this is different.

This is cold, gnawing hunger—laying on the floor of his shrine, waiting for sleep to spare him from the ache.

But then…someone starts bringing food.

The first time he wakes up with a plate of fruit beside his head, he's too hungry to wonder. Maybe a farmer took pity, sent one of his children out to leave a lame beggar something to eat.

He devours them with little pride, even the berries that he used to loathe as a child. But every morning, there's a plate.

Often in the evenings too, when he returns from a day of working himself to the bone in the fields.

Fruits. Meats. When there's bread, Xie Lian sheds a few grateful tears.

After weeks of this—his curiosity gets the best of him.

But the first time he tries to speak—the creature runs from him.

Scrambling off blindly into this dark, frightening void. Leaving Xie Lian alone, again. Oh, but he can't bear it, even if he knows that he deserves it.

He pleads for the stranger to stay. To come closer. Eventually, he does.

A young man.

Skinny, stubborn—but endlessly kind.

Constantly thinking of Xie Lian, over himself. Offering the prince cares and gestures that he doesn't deserve, over and over again.

All when Xie Lian is—

Is nothing.

He's *nothing.*

Still, the boy does so much for him.

'I can't do anything for you,' Xie Lian reminds him. *'I can't give you anything.'*

Oh, and the reply is so innocent, while holding so much depth.

"I don't want anything."

Still, the boy prays to him.

'I can't answer,' Xie Lian warns him.

"That isn't why I pray."

And of course, eventually—he tells the god that there was a time when he did answer. A time when the child was asking for a reason.

"...And what answer did I give?"

Oh, if only he could have heard it then, the tenderness in the young man's voice. He did, however, hear the smile.

“You.”

That was when Xie Lian knew.

Kneeling in that old, forgotten shrine. Staring blindly into the dark, eyes wide as he whispered that name. The name that would, for the rest of his time on this earth, be carved into his soul.

“...Hong’er?”

Silence followed—and all Xie Lian could hear was the boy's trembling breaths. They sounded a little wet, laden with the occasional sniffle, and eventually—

"...Dianxia remembered me?"

His voice wasn’t smooth, stubborn, or cocky. It was small, awed—thick with tears.

Xie Lian had assumed the plague took him.

The fact that it didn't—that means that the small, terrified child that he caught in his arms that day, the boy who clung to him later, bleeding and broken, sobbing that he wasn't cursed—became a killer.

Xie Lian failed to protect him.

And he would fail again.

He would fail over, and over, and over again.

Never knowing that his Hong’er—his handsome, brave Hong’er, would come back to him each and every time. Because that is who he is.

He’s the one who, against every obstacle, always comes back. That is what he was born to do.

All Xie Lian has to do, in the end, is wait for him. Even when he doesn’t know it. Even when that waiting only feels like suffering, it never is.

Waiting is part of growing.

And that hurts, sometimes.

In that moment, the prince couldn’t explain what he felt.

That even then, when he was nothing, when he could offer nothing, he was still something that brought someone else's life meaning.

That even when the Crown Prince was worthless, he was still Hong'er's reason to remain in this world.

"I remember you," he whispered, lips trembling.

Xie Lian found something in himself that he thought was gone—worn away with every mistake he had made.

Faith.

His arms opened, and the child was hesitant—but eventually, he fell into them, his body trembling with silent sobs.

He wasn't alone—his god was shedding tears of his own. Slipping from underneath the bandages over his eyes, making shining paths down his cheeks as he held his Hong-er in his arms.

"I remember you," he whispered again, voice breaking as Hong-er clung to him. I remember you.

I remember you.

I will always, for as long as I live, remember you.

Remember that name, crying out for him through the centuries, with no hope of an answer. Unwittingly imitating his love's form of prayer.

Hong'er.

His Hong'er.

His handsome, brave–

PRESENT

He sits up sharply, disoriented by the dark.

He always is, when he wakes after a dream.

But he knows where he is. Surrounded by the familiar sounds and smells of the shrine around him.

Their shrine.

His breaths are slow, and ragged.

Xie Lian has never been able to remember his dreams. Not since his first banishment. But sometimes, when he knows he was dreaming about him—he wishes that he could. Still.

He reaches for the chain around his neck, pulling gently.

A ring lands against his palm. Unforgiving metal, cool to the touch. The prince of Xianle brings it to his lip, kissing the face gently.

“Good Morning, Hong’er,” he whispers, letting out a slow breath. “It’s going to be a good day.”

He just has to deal with his cousin, first.

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[image]

LACE

Chapter End Notes

> since we slipped back into the beginning this chapter, I wanted to include this piece from lace back from october! thank you so much for making it, and for allowing me to share it!

Next chapter, we're back into book three territory!

xoxo, Evie

A Gathering in Puqi Shrine

Chapter Summary

> His head slowly turns toward the back exit of the shrine, and he scowls.
>
> He can still hear him, after all.
>
> “When...when I get out of this—!”
>
> Angry, screeching. Like a small, agitated dog.
>
> But no cute little ears, unfortunately—so he has no redeeming qualities.
>
> “Ruoye.” Xie Lian calls out coldly, rising to his feet. “Make him be quiet.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

His head slowly turns toward the back exit of the shrine, and he scowls.

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Angry, screeching. Like a small, agitated dog.

But no cute little ears, unfortunately—so he has no redeeming qualities.

“Ruoye.” Xie Lian calls out coldly, rising to his feet. “Make him be quiet.”

He cuts off with a strangled squeak, and when Xie Lian hears the child stir, he sighs.

His name is Guzi, and he’s five years old. Xie Lian learned as much, toting Qi Rong back from Mount Taicang.

Obviously, Xie Lian wasn’t going to slaughter Qi Rong in front of a child. He thought about it. A younger version of him would have done

it.

No, he'll just have to find a way to get him out of this body, then he can deal with him properly.

But for now, he kneels down, offering a gentle smile, gently ruffling the boy's hair. "Don't worry, little one. You can sleep a little longer. We'll have breakfast later."

He nods off with a tired mumble, and Xie Lian's expression turns cold once more. When he steps outside, there's a familiar, quiet creaking.

His hand reaches out, snatching Qi Rong's ankle to stop him from spinning too much in the air.

"You know, it's been a while since I was that angry," Xie Lian admits. "But I have a question for you."

He snaps his fingers—not the way he usually commands Ruoye, but there was something satisfying at the way Hua Cheng signaled his chains in the gambler's den.

When he does, Qi Rong is unceremoniously dropped to the ground from the branch he was hanging on.

The moment he can speak, he's swearing and grumbling, rubbing at his throat. "Arrogant asshole–!"

"The dead bodies in the trees," Xie Lian questions coldly. "Were you really trying to imitate Crimson Rain, or was that intended to taunt me?"

"…" Qi Rong rubs his Adam's apple, glaring. "I figured you would have known that the moment you heard the stories about me."

Xie Lian picks at his cuticles. "I hadn't heard of you until a couple of weeks ago, and even then—I didn't realize it was you until last night."

The ghost sputters, sitting up on the ground. "How the fuck did you not know?!"

"You really aren't relevant enough to take up much space in conversation," Xie Lian shrugs. "And I didn't think you would be stupid enough to use your real name."

Qi Rong scowls, then sighs, because…

"...Well, how was I supposed to know all of these fuckers were using fake names until recently, huh?! Even Hua Cheng! I had no fuckin' idea, that sly piece of shit!"

Xie Lian raises an eyebrow. "What are you talking about?"

And just like that, the creature goes from scowling to grinning from ear to ear, snickering, "HA! I couldn't say if I wanted to! It's funny though, SO FUNNY!"

Xie Lian's eye twitches slightly, fighting the desire to string him up again.

"...Say, what's that thing you're wearing?" Qi Rong's eyes drift down to the chain around Xie Lian's neck, glinting with curiosity. "Looks cursed, something REAL fowl, you should just give it to your good ol' couSIN—!"

He reaches for it, but a fist hits his cheek first.

The blow is so forceful, his head makes a small dent in the tree trunk behind him, and while Xie Lian shakes out his fist, he comments,

"You know, while I have no intention of stopping you, you should know—I can see your spiritual energy. I know you're here."

Qi Rong stops in the middle of his wails of protest, glancing up—

Just to see a familiar pair of eyes staring down at him, one burning, one green.

"...HOLY FUCK! STAY AWAY FROM ME!" He shrieks, scrambling back, and...

Hiding behind his cousin, of all people.

Shuo sighs, his hair trailing beneath him from where he's hanging upside down on a tree branch, his hands dangling where Qi Rong's throat was just a moment before.

"...Hua Chengzhu didn't tell me that," he admits, crossing his arms. "Sorry for trying to sneak up on you."

"I'm not offended," Xie Lian shrugs, stepping away from Qi Rong, effectively refusing to shield him. "You can do whatever you like with him, but I need to get him out of this mortal's body first."

Shuo drops down, landing lightly on his feet. “I figured as much.”

Xie Lian raises an eyebrow. “You knew he was in another body already?”

“He abandoned his old one when I was arguing with Prince Shit for Brains,” Shuo shrugs. “So, I figured. I’m not looking to kill him, either.”

He strides forward, bending over to examine Qi Rong’s new form.

“I had a plan for dealing with the body switch too, but…” He frowns, “That got more complicated.”

“Oh?” Xie Lian didn’t expect it to be easy, but he’s relieved there was an option in the first place.

“Hua Chengzhu showed you his armory, yes?”

“He did,” he agrees, feeling somewhat…sheepish, remembering how the evening concluded.

Shuo leans back against the Qi Rong shaped dent in the tree, which seems to quickly heal under his touch, bark knitting back together.

“And he showed you Zidian?”

Xie Lian nods, quirking an eyebrow. “Do you mean to torture him?”

“Oh,” Shuo blinks, his eyes widening—then, he lets out a surprised laugh, shaking his head. “No, no, dianxia, that’s not my style—but we’ve used Zidian on him before.”

The mere mention makes Qi Rong shudder.

“Y-YOU THINK I GIVE A SHIT?! YOU CAN SMACK ME AROUND AS MUCH AS YOU WANT, I’LL COME BACK!”

The forest demon rolls his eyes, explaining, “It removes any spirit unlawfully possessing a human body.”

Xie Lian’s eyes widen, impressed.

San Lang built something as elegant as that?

“You make it sound as though that wouldn’t work in this case, though.”

"Oh, it would," Shuo sighs. "But when I was putting the armory back together..."

Xie Lian winces.

Right.

After he inadvertently blew the entire thing up.

"...Zidian was the only weapon that was missing."

"Missing?" Xie Lian mutters, his stomach plummeting from the guilt.

It wouldn't be, if he hadn't been so foolish.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, I never meant..."

"Don't apologize, dianxia," Shuo shakes his head. "Not your fault a thief decided to take advantage. It's being handled." He glances back down at Qi Rong, his eyes narrowed. "Given that someone else is hunting him now as well, I sent subordinates to look for the whip, and I came to find him."

Xie Lian winces at the reminder of his former student. "I'm sorry about him..."

The demon shrugs. "He's an annoyance, not an obstacle."

Xie Lian nods, relieved. Lang Qianqiu certainly isn't weak. He's the martial god of an entire region, after all. But someone strong enough to nearly be a calamity—not a mere honorary position, like Qi Rong—should be able to handle him easily.

The prince sinks into thought for a moment, contemplating the predicament, and finally, he asks—

"Can you cook?"

Qi Rong slams his fists against the ground angrily, "What, YOU'VE CAPTURED ME, AND NOW I'M A FUCKING SERVANT?! I—!"

"Not you—Ruoye, gag him." Xie Lian sighs.

The spiritual tool wriggles slightly with distaste, but it obeys the command—all while Shuo tilts his head, surprised.

"...You mean me, your highness?"

"Well…" Xie Lian sighs. "The body he's stolen—the man has a young son. I'm afraid they're a package deal until you're able to remove Qi Rong from that body."

Shuo grits his teeth, glaring at the ghost with dismay. "But what does that have to do with—?"

"I don't think I can submit a child to my cooking in good conscience," Xie Lian explains, remembering the way Banyue used to vomit up anything he tried to give her. "So, if you could make him breakfast, I'd be grateful."

"…" Shuo looks up at the sky with a heavy sigh. "I can."

Then, he looks down at himself—the pointed ears, mismatched eyes, and sharp teeth, knowing that isn't exactly a comforting sight for a human child, so…

He spins on his heel, shifting into a slightly less intimidating form.

Hazel eyes, a loose ponytail, simple robes.

They begin to move inside, and Xie Lian can't help but ask, "Oh, Ren Song?"

"Hm?"

"Do you happen to know San Lang's Daruma Doll spell?"

It's much more convenient than making poor Ruoye gag him, after all.

"Oh…I do," the demon agrees. "But I'm not allowed to use it anymore."

"Not allowed?" Xie Lian bites back a smile.

"Well," Shuo deposits Qi Rong rather unceremoniously in the corner after dragging him in by the collar, "I turned someone into one without Hua Chengzhu's permission, and he was pretty angry."

"…I see." The prince sits down at one of the chairs by the table. "Was it someone important?"

"Uh…" Shuo pushes his bangs behind his ears, kneeling down to examine the ingredients the shrine has to offer. "Yeah, he's a valued employee, I guess."

Xie Lian leans his chin on his hand.

There's something about him—the arrogant, slightly childish nature—that he finds amusing. Endearing.

"And why did you turn him into a Daruma doll, exactly?"

Shuo hums, placing what he needs on the counter, beginning to chop the vegetables. "I think it was just for fun."

Xie Lian can't help but let out a surprised laugh, and the ghost smiles, adding—

"But I was pretty drunk at the time, so I'm not sure what the reasoning was." That's surprising to hear.

"I had no idea ghosts could get drunk..." He murmurs, eyes wide.

A pot is set out to boil.

"If you're enough of a go-getter about it, sure you can."

Xie Lian smiles, thinking back slightly less fondly on the times in his life when he actually has been drunk, and he sighs, trying to turn his attention to something slightly less...depressing.

"...You've been very accommodating," Xie Lian comments, toying with the chain hanging around his neck. "I'm grateful."

He isn't used to people being helpful as a rule. San Lang's generosity is much more noticeable, and it takes getting used to.

"..." Shuo shrugs. "You're a friend of Hua Chengzhu," he mutters, focusing on the task at hand. "That's reason enough to lend a hand."

He knows his place, after all.

Besides, their interests are aligned.

Xie Lian nods, and after a few minutes of companionable silence, he realizes...

Something has been bothering him. For a while now. Ever since returning from Mount Yu Jun, actually.

"Could I ask you about something?"

Shuo glances back at him, raising an eyebrow, but he nods. “About what?”

“...Calamities,” Xie Lian’s fingers tighten around the chain.

Shuo doesn’t reply immediately, simply waits to see what his question will be, bringing the pot of rice to a simmer.

“...Crimson Rain and Black Water came from the Kiln,” Xie Lian reasons slowly.

“Yes,” Shup agrees, stirring the mixture with a set of chopsticks. “I was there.”

Xie Lian raises an eyebrow—curious. After all—he knew Ren Song was older than he seemed, but...

That’s far more ancient than he had guessed.

“Do you know anything about Bai Wuxiang?” He finally asks, not seeing how the forest demon’s hands go still.

His eyes flicker over to Qi Rong, glaring and squirming in the corner—but he doesn’t seem to care much for their conversation, focusing on his own misery.

“...He was the first calamity, and he destroyed the kingdom of Xianle. I figured you would already know all about him.”

Of course, Xie Lian does. Parts of him, anyway.

“...In the last month, it’s become clear the Heavens...misunderstand quite a bit about the ghost realm,” Xie Lian mutters. “And it made me question something that someone once told me.”

“Well, you’re right about that, dianxia.” Shuo sets the chopsticks down, leaving the food to simmer. “The heavens haven’t bothered to gather accurate information about the ghost realm.”

That way, they can maintain a combative stance, anyway.

“What did they tell you, anyway?”

Xie Lian frowns, picking at his sleeve.

“...That calamities are drawn to pain and suffering,” he recalls quietly. “That they can’t resist it.”

Shuo frowns, resting his hands against the counter. “You’ve spent some time with a calamity now. Did he seem unable to control himself to you?”

“Of course not,” Xie Lian shakes his head. Actually—Hua Cheng seemed far more in control of himself than most people Xie Lian has ever met.

“Then you already have your answer,” the ghost shrugs, pulling the pot off of the stove. “I’ve known him for pretty much my entire life,” he adds, glancing over in Xie Lian’s direction, his gaze...complicated.

“There’s only one thing he can’t resist.”

And from the sounds of it—Shuo isn’t talking about suffering.

Xie Lian’s eyebrows quirk, confused.

“...What—?”

But then he stops, his head whipping to the side, detecting movement. “...Did you hear that?”

Shuo tilts his chin up. “Yeah,” he places a lid on the pot, leaving it on the counter to keep. “There’s a man on your ceiling. Looks like he’s trying to steal a pickle jar.”

Xie Lian gawks, turning his head up, and—

He can’t see any aura at all, heavenly or demonic. But there’s only one person that would want to steal something like that.

“...Pei Junior?! Put Banyue down! And—” He glances over at Shuo, “Did you already know he was here?”

The demon shrugs, watching the former heavenly official with slitted pupils, like a cat observing a moth on the ceiling. “I’ll be honest, given what I’ve seen of your life so far, I didn’t know what would be out of the ordinary for you. So, I went along with it.”

“...”

...That is depressingly logical.

“I see.”

“Would you like me to deal with him?” Shuo murmurs, licking his lips.

There's something about that tone Xie Lian finds worrisome. "Pei Junior—you had better get down here, before he...ah..."

He looks to Shuo, who smiles.

"We'll have to take it outside, if it comes to that. No need to scare the kid, right?"

He stares down Pei Xiu, who slowly—reluctantly—drops down to the ground.

Guzi sits up with a start, frightened by the sudden arrival of strangers.

"...Daddy!"

Shuo's expression turns irritated as he watches the child flee to Qi Rong's side. "That isn't..."

Xie Lian shrugs, holding his hands up, exasperated. "I've told him. Now—you, put the jar down, now!"

"..." Pei Xiu sighs, going to set the jar down, but just as he does...

Instead of landing on the table, it flies through the air—only to be caught by the figure standing in the open doorway of the shrine

"Pei Xiu," a voice rings out, irritated. "I'm disappointed."

At first, Xie Lian is surprised.

"...General Ming Guang?!"

And then, he's irritated

Exactly when did his shrine become a tourist destination, anyway?

Whatever he might feel about it, however, Pei Xiu is the one hanging his head with shame.

(Not for trespassing. Simply for the fact that his general caught him in the act.)

"Throwing your career away for a little girl..." General Pei grits his teeth, shaking his head. "And then trying to make things worse by stealing her away?"

From Xie Lian’s side, Shuo raises an eyebrow sharply, crossing his arms. “Little girl?” He questions dryly. “They’re the same age.” He glances towards Pei Xiu, sending him an unimpressed look. “Is he a little boy?”

Xie Lian is almost surprised to hear him take up for Banyue, but then he remembers witnessing Shuo looking after children in Paradise Manor.

Back then, Banyue was likely one of them.

And in the interest of accuracy, Pei Xiu was three years her senior in their mortal lives. But in three centuries, that difference has become quite negligible.

Immortality tends to complicate comparisons of maturity, anyhow.

Xie Lian is older than Mu Qing by a few months, for example–but he no longer considers himself the martial god's senior. Because, in his mind, he lost a century of life experiences. Memories. Locked underground, trapped in dreams and torment.

In a literal sense, he might be eight hundred and twenty four years old. But in a practical sense, he's only lived seven centuries of that.

Making him literally eight centuries old, mentally seven centuries, and physically… Maybe twenty, give or take.

Funny enough, Hong'er might have been seven years younger, but if he had lived up until now–he might feel older than him too.

"He's certainly acting like a little boy," Pei Ming glares, startling Xie Lian from his thoughts. "So yes, I think we have two unruly children on our hands."

There's something different about him. He's clearly more on edge now, than he was the last time Xie Lian spoke with him.

"At least now I can interrogate the preceptor and learn her true involvement," he mutters.

"…Let's not be so hasty," Xie Lian cuts him off flatly.

It's in that moment when Pei Ming seems to notice the fact that the prince's posture has gone stiff, one hand resting over the hilt of fangxin.

"Come on now, your highness, I'm not arresting her." The general points out. "Do you really think I would harm a young lady?"

"Not a young lady," Shuo mutters, rolling his eyes–and now, he finally seems to warrant Ming Guang's attention.

"...Your highness, who's the kid?" The forest demon's eyebrow twitches.

Xie Lian smiles awkwardly, answering before the younger man can, "His name is Shuo, and he's a friend of mine. Now, could you please put Banyue down, and we can talk about this reasonably?"

"I'll tell you what," Pei mutters, tugging at the lid. “How about I let her out of this thing, and we can all have that conversation together?”

Xie Lian opens his mouth to protest—not that Pei has given Xie Lian much of a reason to think he would lie, but the prince is no longer quick to trust, either—

BOOM!

The minute the lid lifts off of the jar, there's an explosion of air rushing out from the inside, covering Pei Ming in...

Pickles.

The scent is so strong, Xie Lian has to cover his mouth to stop himself from gagging, and he hears a familiar voice.

"So, THIS is how the Great General of the North behaves when he thinks no one is around to stop him?"

Ah.

Xie Lian rubs his temple, wishing he could go back to bed already. Lady Wind Master is here as well. They might as well call it a party.

Pei seems just as irritated.

"What are you doing here?!"

Shi Qingxuan appears in a puff of pastel green smoke, fanning herself haughtily. "Well, as any good friend would do, I relocated Banyue during the crisis upon our return to Ghost City. I thought you might try and pull a stunt like this."

Oh.

Xie Lian blinks, surprised.

That was actually remarkably considerate.

(And he does smile a little bit, hearing someone refer to him as a friend.)

"And what have you done with the girl, may I ask?! You can't just hide her away on your own!"

Shi Qingxuan smiles, smug.

"Oh, I don't mind telling you exactly where I put her," the Wind Master smiles sweetly, turning her gaze to Xie Lian. "Miss Banyue is currently residing under the protection of the Rain Master, Yushi Huang. She's welcome to leave whenever she likes."

Shi Qingxuan snaps her fan shut, smirking in Pei Ming's direction, "If you'd like to try and retrieve her, you're welcome to do so."

"..." Pei grits his teeth, and Xie Lian finds himself...somewhat curious about the tension around the Rain Master's name. "Shi Qingxuan...why are you always involving yourself?" He mutters, shaking his head.

After all, it's not as though he's ever done anything to offend the Wind Master personally.

Other than taking up an iota of his brother's attention, anyway.

Speaking of...

"...Aren't you supposed to be with your brother right now, anyway?" He mutters, scratching the side of his head. "How come you have time to cause trouble down here?"

Shi Qingxuan pauses, her lips parting. "...I thought gege was with you," she mutters, eyes narrowing. She's suspicious, naturally. "Are you trying to distract me from the point? Because if so, it isn't working."

"..." Pei presses his lips into a grin line, his body rife with tension, and... Xie Lian speaks up, his voice quiet–but firm.

"That's enough, both of you." Both gods stop, looking in his direction, and the prince crosses his arms. “Whatever personal dispute the two of you have, now isn't the time or place. Honestly, you're just as bad as Feng Xin and Mu Qing."

The comparison makes both Pei Ming and Shi Qingxuan cringe.

"I'm not interested in having something with the Wind Master that could even be considered remotely close to that dynamic," Pei grouses.

"My brother would kill you if you did," Shi Qingxuan agrees, her pallor slightly green.

...Xie Lian blinks.

"I don't understand—?"

"We'll be going," Pei mutters, grabbing his former deputy by the collar. "But don't think this is the last you'll hear from me about this."

Xie Lian tilts his head.

That was a rather abrupt change of time. And right after...

Once the other two are gone, Shi Qingxuan sighs.

"I'm sorry about that, your highness—but he shouldn't trouble you over the girl again. He and the Rain Master have a...complicated past."

Xie Lian raises an eyebrow. He considers himself to be on good terms with the Rain Master—even if they've never met in person.

And from what he remembers—she isn't the sort to be on bad terms with anyone.

"...I'm the one who should be sorry," Xie Lian sighs. "You've had to go to so much trouble for me over the last few days..."

"Huh? Trouble?" she grins lopsidedly. "It was no such thing! Besides..." Shi Qingxuan reaches out, placing a hand on his shoulder and squeezing it gently. "You helped me rescue Ming-Xiong," she explains quietly. "I'll never forget that."

Xie Lian's lips turn up slightly at the corners. "The friendship the two of you have seems quite special."

The Wind Master looks up for a moment, shaking her head with a small smile.

“...I’ve always made friends easily, but as far as those close to me...it’s always been just me and gege,” she explains. “And he would do anything for me.”

(If only she knew to what extent.)

“Ming-Xiong might be rough around the edges, but...he doesn’t treat me like a baby,” she shrugs. “He makes me feel like I can handle things on my own.”

Which is an important relationship to have. The closest Xie Lian ever came to having someone like that was probably Mu Qing.

Still, Xie Lian was seventeen at that point. The fact that Shi Qingxuan only made that sort of connection as a goddess–over four centuries old, to boot–gives him slight pause.

...Just how much has the Water Master sheltered her, anyway?

In any case, Xie Lian smiles, replying;

"...If there's anything I've learned since meeting you, Lady Wind Master, it's that you are quite capable."

That makes her brighten, eyes crinkling happily at the corners.

"Oh–and if you're looking for Lang Ying, I had him brought to my palace for safe keeping. I'll have him sent back down at once, if you like."

"That would be appreciated," Xie Lian smiles gratefully. "Thank you, for..." He struggles to phrase it, and Shi Qingxuan laughs.

"Like I said, while I have many friends, few of them are close, but you..." She squeezes Xie Lian's arm once more. "I have a feeling we were destined to be friends. I've got your back, your highness, don't worry!"

There's something undeniably naive about that statement, but...

There’s an undeniable warmth in Xie Lian’s chest.

“Well, if you ever need my help,” he shrugs, knowing the offer probably isn’t good for much, “you have it.”

But in the end…

Xie Lian's help is worth more than he thinks.

Shi Qingxuan smiles, glancing over Xie Lian's shoulder at Shuo, who has taken to calming Guzi down, helping the little boy eat his breakfast. "That boy...he works for Hua Cheng, doesn't he?"

Xie Lian shrugs, scratching the side of his head as he glances back in Shuo's direction. "Not...exactly. The dynamic is somewhat complicated. But he's a friend of mine."

Shi Qingxuan nods, accepting the explanation without question. "I should be heading back."

After all, she needs to figure out where exactly her brother went off to, if he isn't with Pei. It's been three entire days.

"But you will be coming to the mid-autumn festival, won't you?" Shi Qingxuan adds, pulling out her whisk. "It'll be no fun without you!"

Xie Lian hesitates.

Of course, the idea of going to the yearly celebration isn't particularly compelling, but he can't afford not to.

He isn't the Rain Master, who has a reputation for keeping to herself. He isn't Ming Yi, who was on assignment for years at a time.

And he certainly isn't the Water Master, who, it seems, has the freedom to contradict even Jun Wu whenever he likes.

He isn't anyone important at all. Certainly not important enough to cause a scene by refusing the invitation.

So, he'll have to go.

But luckily for him, the festival is weeks away.

Much needed time to take a breath, doing work around the shrine, helping the villagers with the harvest.

To his surprise, Shuo stays for the majority of that time, taking his job monitoring Qi Rong somewhat seriously.

He'll cook meals for Guzi, and after mistakenly accepting Xie Lian's offer to cook lunch one day, has artfully dodged repeating that error again.

What he didn't expect was how...peaceful that time would feel.

Qi Rong spends his days forcibly silenced by Ruoye, or pinned underneath Dian Dian (whom Xie Lian must admit, is exceedingly adorable. He can't picture the creature ripping anyone's leg off, it's impossible to imagine.)

Shuo spends his time attempting to psychologically torment Qi Rong out of the human's body (usually by taking him out into the woods for several hours at a time-- Xie Lian hasn't witnessed the demon's magic yet, but he has heard the distant screaming.)

When he isn't doing that, he's helping with menial tasks, not so different from what San Lang did, before.

Or flirting with the girls in the village, very different from what San Lang did, before.

Actually...

Xie Lian stops one afternoon, halfway through a new silk pattern.

Oddly enough, despite his playful, cocky nature, Xie Lian hasn't seen Hua Cheng behave that way with anyone. Well, other than him.

Is he only that way with his friends? Or is there someone...

"..." Xie Lian's fingers drift to the chain around his neck, pondering.

Does it really matter, if that's the case? After all, he's not...

Shuo leans against the doorway, crossing his arms, watching the change in Xie Lian's posture.

"Something bothering you, your highness?"

Xie Lian jumps, nearly dropping his threads. "...No," he mutters. “No, I just...”

He bites his lip, knowing that it’s a silly question, so he puts it from his mind.

Nonetheless, Shuo is still watching expectantly, so...

“Does San Lang not mind you staying away for this long?”

"…" The boy scowls, sitting down with a huff. "He isn't my dad."

He turns his head to the side, staring at the pattern Xie Lian was working on. "He doesn't always keep up with what I'm doing."

Xie Lian doesn't say so, but he isn't sure how there's much of a practical difference between their relationship with parenthood.

"I was only asking since you mentioned being grounded," he murmurs, punctuating that statement with a shrug.

Shuo can't help but blush a little at that, pink splotches popping up across his cheeks. "That was different," he mutters.

"And he said you couldn't use the Daruma spell—"

"He's a ghost king, alright! He's the boss of everyone, not just me!" Shuo crows, and, as a point of how mature he is—definitely not a child in Hua Cheng's care—he flops down on his back, kicking his feet against the floor.

"Stop laughing!"

Xie Lian covers his mouth, shoulders shaking. "I'm not, I'm not…"

"…The point being," Shuo concludes, his hair pooled around his head on the floor, "He doesn't care that I'm here, as long as I'm not causing trouble." Then, after a pause. "…Am I?"

"No, no…" Xie Lian shakes his head, not missing the relieved little sigh Shuo let's out in response. "I guess I was just wondering…what he was up to, that's all."

"…What Hua Cheng is up to?" Shuo's eyebrows quirk. "Dealing with some renovations I think. Why?"

Renovations.

Xie Lian pauses to contemplate that for only a moment, before remembering—

Yes, well, when half of the place got burned down last time, he would probably need to renovate a thing or two, wouldn't he?

"…I was just curious," he mutters, going back to his work.

Shuo sits up on his elbows, a slightly sly smile twisting his lips as he watches the god work. “You want to see him?” He comments, not missing the way Xie Lian’s fingers work slightly faster on the loom.

“He already knows he’s welcome here whenever he likes,” the prince replies.

After all, the last time they were alone together—really alone, here, in Puqi shrine— the ghost king told Xie Lian there were two reasons that he could have approached him on Mount Yu Jun:

1) Just to see him, or

2) because he was bored.

Now that he’s busy, it seems obvious.

“I’d love to see him, but not if that means interfering with his business.”

Xie Lian stops after, pressing his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

He’d ‘love’ to see him? Isn’t that a bit much?

Shuo sits up fully, legs crossed, hands propped against the floor behind him.

“...” His gaze drifts over to the silk that Xie Lian is working on, and he tilts his head. “What’s that for?”

“Ah...” Xie Lian glances back at his loom with a shrug. “There’s a festival in the heavens that I’m required to attend.”

“And you have to dress fancy?”

“Precisely.”

“...Hua Chengzhu’s got all sorts of fancy clothes,” Shuo comments, adding airily, “I bet lot’s of it is in your size, too.”

Xie Lian can’t imagine why. Hua Cheng seems quite a bit taller and broader. Unless—

Unless he’s keeping them for someone else.

Xie Lian frowns, then replies:

“Oh, but I’m accustomed to making my own, by now...”

After all, he's been doing it for the last eight centuries.

Shuo doesn't argue him that point, pulling one leg up against his chest. "I heard you used to sell this sort of thing."

Xie Lian nods agreeably, his fingers working quickly but gracefully as he finishes out the pattern. "It's helped me get by."

'Get by,' is right. From Shuo's perception, the prince has consistently underpriced his work over the centuries.

"I could make you something sometime, if you'd like," Xie Lian offers, making the ghost's eyes widen with surprise.

"...Me?" He questions, sitting up a little straighter. "Why?"

"Oh...we're friends now, aren't we?" Xie Lian glances back with a smile. "Isn't that reason enough?"

"..." Shuo pulls up his other leg, wrapping his arms around his shins with a nod, glancing over to the open doorway.

Guzi is playing in front of the shrine, chasing around Qi Qi, who occasionally stops and turns around on his hind legs, chirping excitedly as the child giggles.

"...And," Xie Lian adds, glancing over to where Qi Rong is bound and gagged in the corner, "my cousin has caused you quite a bit of trouble over the years. It's the least I can do."

Trouble is an understatement, but Shuo shrugs. "That isn't your fault, dianxia, but..."

He glances back and forth between the two. Of course, there is a physical resemblance between the prince and Qi Rong's original physical form. Both good looking, but one...significantly more so. And taller.

"It's hard to believe you two grew up in the same house, to be honest."

Xie Lian is quiet for a moment, working until he finishes the bolt of silk, and when he speaks—he chooses his words carefully.

"...My mother was a strong woman, you know," The prince murmurs, smoothing the fabric out across the floor. "But in a quiet sort of way."

There was never any need to make displays of strength. Simply quiet confidence.

‘So,’ Shuo thinks to himself, watching the prince quietly, *‘you take after her.’*

“But my aunt…” Xie Lian trails off with a sigh. “They rarely ever saw eye to eye on things.”

It feels so silly now, remembering the things that they used to argue about. Politics, marriages. Who to be friends with, who to avoid.

"She wanted an advantageous marriage, just like my mother's, but one day…" The prince shrugs. "She ran off with a wealthy merchant."

Shuo frowns, picking at a loose thread on his pants. "Is that such an awful thing?"

"If you asked my father, yes." Xie Lian smiles wryly. "A queen's sister marrying a merchant was quite a scandal. But that wasn't the real issue, it…"

His expression darkens.

“My uncle was a vile man,” Xie Lian mutters, his gaze drifting in Qi Rong’s direction. Unable to see the way his cousin squirms with anger and discomfort, but not caring. “He was violent with women and children. A predator.”

And his son grew up to be exactly the same.

“…Did Qi Rong tell you that?” Shuo questions curiously, watching the green ghost’s expression with faint satisfaction.

After all, he doesn’t have a right to privacy. Not after the damage he’s caused.

“…No,” Xie Lian shakes his head. “My friend worked in their house before he passed away. Between that, and the rumors…I heard enough.”

Enough to know that Qi Rong’s father was a monster.

And the fact that Xie Lian’s aunt returned as a shell of herself, passing away not soon after…

Her husband shattered her.

“...He already had the worst kind of example by the time he came to live with us,” Xie Lian sighs, going back to his work. Now that the actual fabric is done, the act of cutting and sewing the garments is comparatively quick. “And my parents felt so guilty about his mother, they...”

They gave too much leeway to a child who utterly took advantage of every kindness he was given.

And Xie Lian knows better. He doesn't think a childhood marked by cruelty creates a cruel man.

Hong'er taught him better than that.

Qi Rong is vile, because he refuses to change.

"...I had some notion of that before," Shuo admits. "Just from seeing his memories."

Xie Lian turns his chin towards the forest demon. "You've...seen Qi Rong's memories?" He mutters, startled.

"Nearly all of them, but his early years are...fuzzier."

Which means, in all likelihood, he saw...Qi Rong's death.

And Hong'er's death, too.

The thought makes Xie Lian's stomach churn, but he fights the urge to show it.

"...You must have expected to meet someone very different, based on his memories alone," the prince mumbles.

"..." The younger man is quiet, watching lighthearted self deprecation, shrouding something much deeper.

Centuries of self loathing.

"...No," Shuo murmurs, reaching up to twist an earring beneath his fingertips, a small bell tinkling softly as he does.

"He took someone I loved from me too, dianxia," the demon reminds him quietly. "I know how it feels."

...Yes.

Xie Lian swallows hard, hit suddenly by the realization that… Shuo does know how it feels. Exactly how it feels, actually. To lose someone so dear, then live on.

And on, and on.

“…I didn’t have any expectations for what you would be like,” Shuo explains carefully, fidgeting as he chooses his words, “because no one deserves to be judged for their grief.”

Xie Lian is quiet, allowing those words to wash over him. It’s…complicated.

Because on one hand, Xie Lian was grieving. Shuo hasn’t misread that. And his actions then are far removed from the person he is now.

…And still, Xie Lian can’t help but feel as though he deserves to be judged. “…How were you able to see his memories, anyway?”

Shuo shrugs, reaching down to scratch at a scuff on the toe of his boot. “It’s possible to share memories with those you have a strong connection with, but that isn’t the method I use.”

Xie Lian raises an eyebrow, and the young man leans his chin on his knees.

"Forests are my territory," he explains, a fact that Xie Lian was already aware of, but there's more to it than that clearly, "if I place someone inside an array of mine, regardless of whether or not we have a strong bond, I can access their memories."

Ah. That must be it.

When people say that Ren Song's magic causes 'madness,' well…

Xie Lian can certainly imagine how reliving one's worst memories might drive a person mad.

"…Where did you learn how to–?" Xie Lian stops, glancing toward the front entrance of the shrine.

"…" Shuo glances in the same direction, curious. "What is it?"

Xie Lian doesn't reply–instead he just sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose.

You see, tracking demonic entities is a bit of a nuanced art, one that takes time to learn. Particularly for someone, well...alive.

First, he had to go through Ling Wen. Who was not particularly helpful. Then, unfortunately for him, he had little luck with gaining intel from the Ghost Realm.

Finally, he resorted to paying a cultivator in Gusu to divine his most recent location, which is what led him here.

To a small, relatively run down shrine in the middle of nowhere.

Still, now that he's close enough, he can sense the demonic energy coming from inside, leaving Lang Qianqiu with little reason not to charge through the front door, sword drawn.

"REVEAL YOURSELF, MONSTER!"

...And then there's no answer.

Well, no immediate answer.

And when he surveys the inside of the shrine, he notices three things:

First and foremost, his guoshi, sitting in front of a loom, looking...exasperated, but by what he couldn't say.

Second, a man gagged in the corner.

Third...a teenage boy, sitting beside his guoshi, with soft cheeks, hazel eyes, and what would be an...objectively attractive face, if not for...

The roaring laughter.

"Oh my GOD!" Shuo cackles, flopping backwards until he's strewn across Xie Lian's lap, kicking his feet.

"He's so fucking EMBARRASSING!"

Xie Lian isn't sure whether he wants to laugh, or cry.

"...Guoshi?" Lang Qianqiu's eyes are slightly wide. "What are you doing here? There's demonic energy all over the place, you..."

Xie Lian's smile is slightly pained. "I know, thank you..."

Shuo's continued snickering isn't exactly helping the matter.

"Y-You should have seen it!" He wheezes, "He–He POSED!"

The demon sits up, extending one arm in front of him, mimicking holding out a sword, dropping his voice to imitate him;

"REVEAL YOURSELF, MONSTER!"

At this point, he seems to become overwhelmed by the comedy of his own impersonation, slumping back against Xie Lian's lap once more, clutching his stomach and wailing with laughter.

Now, Lang Qianqiu recognizes him, his face twisting with shock and frustration. "...YOU!"

The ghost is laughing so hard, he's practically wheezing–leading to Xie Lian patting his back, trying to help him catch his breath, and Lang Qianqiu practically flails with indignation.

"THIS is where you disappeared to?!"

Shuo sits up in Xie Lian's lap again, breathing hard.

“It’s not my fault that you couldn’t keep up, or that you’re shit at tracking ghosts,” he drawls, “I didn’t even want you following me in the first place!”

“We BOTH have a score to settle with him, you can’t just—!”

“There is no WE!” Shuo glares, eyes flashing.

“You...” Lang Qianqiu growls with frustration, gripping his sword tightly. “Would you get off of him already?!”

“...Hm?” Shuo tilts his head, eyes wide with mock innocence. “What do you mean?”

“A heavenly official doesn’t need a ghost hanging all over him like a —!”

He steps forward to pull him off, and as he does, Ren Song shifts into a smaller form, that of a boy younger than ten years old, flinging his arms around the prince’s neck, hiding his face in his chest, and Xie Lian, well—

He wraps his arms around the ghost.

“Lang Qianqiu!” He scolds him, his voice turning stern. “Enough!”

His student GAWKS.

“GUOSHI!” He cries, his voice cracking with indignation. “He was the one making fun of me!”

“You don’t have to rise to the bait, do you?”

“And—he’s OLDER than me, apparently!” Lang Qianqiu protests. “He can’t just turn small to get out of trouble!”

“He’s my guest here,” Xie Lian frowns, hugging one arm around Shuo’s back, using the other to pet his hair. “You’re the one who burst in unannounced.”

Lang Qianqiu huffs, staggered by the injustice of it all.

“Only because I was looking for—!” He stops, his gaze suddenly turning to the third occupant of the shrine—the man in the corner, bound and gagged. “...Is that him?”

“How we sneak anything past the heavens is a miracle,” Shuo comments, his voice dry. “The observational skills of a martial god are truly inspiring.”

“Shut your—!”

“Quiet, both of you,” Xie Lian mutters, exasperated. “He’s possessed a mortal’s body, so we’re stuck until we find a safe way to remove him without harming the human.”

It’s quite a predicament.

Lang Qianqiu falls silent, his face screwed up with concentration, trying to come up with a course of action, and...

Xie Lian sighs.

“I’m assuming you won’t be leaving until he’s removed from the human’s body either?”

Shuo glares, hugging his neck tighter. “Bad idea, dianxia.”

The younger prince glares right back at him, hands on his hips, “Why is that a bad idea?!”

“Because you’re loud, you’re distracting, and you bring nothing to the table.” Shuo replies dryly.

“H...!” Lang Qianqiu sputters, trying to decide which point to address first. “...How am I distracting?!”

After a pause, Shuo’s eyes narrow. “Because you’re loud,” he grouses. “Weren’t you paying attention?”

“Hey, I already told you both to stop it,” Xie Lian mutters, lifting a hand from Shuo’s head to rub at his temple. “And he can be helpful.”

“I can!”

“—He can?!”

Xie Lian lifts Shuo out of his lap, setting him down on the ground—to which the ghost shifts back into his adult form out of annoyance.

“Now, you don’t have to look after Qi Rong, Guzi, and Lang Ying by yourself.” Xie Lian shrugs, and Shuo stares.

“I’m not doing it by myself right now!” He protests, watching as Xie Lian stands up, taking his newly finished set of robes with him.

“I’m due in the Heavens. I’m sure Lang Qianqiu won’t mind helping out while I’m gone. Isn’t that right?”

He glances in his student’s direction, and there’s a slightly awkward pause.

Obviously, after the last time they spoke, things were left...slightly tense. After all, he was angry—justifiably so—with Xie Lian for lying to him. And guilty, for what he had done.

Still, he had said the words that, if Xie Lian hadn’t committed the crimes he was accused of after the Gilded Banquet, Lang Qianqiu would, *‘Spend the rest of his life trying to make it up to him,’* so...

“Of course I can,” he mutters, crossing his arms, jaw locked—determined.

“See? There you go.” Xie Lian shrugs, stepping behind the changing screen. “There’s no reason you can’t work together while I’m gone, is there?”

“It’s not about can or can’t...” Shuo mutters.

It’s more that they don’t *need* to.

“Shouldn’t he go to the Heavens with you, anyway?”

“No,” Xie Lian shakes his head. “Jun Wu expects him to be searching after Qi Rong, so he won’t be expected. Unless he wants to come, in which case…”

“No,” Lang Qianqiu shakes his head, crossing his arms. “I won’t be letting him out of my sight until he’s been dealt with.”

The mere implication that he might be dealing with the Crown Prince of Yong’an indefinitely makes Shuo cringe with distaste.

“Then it seems fairly simple to me,” Xie Lian murmurs, shrugging out of his old robes.

Of course, only the shadow of his form can be seen behind the screen, but Lang Qianqiu still looks away politely, while Shuo rolls his eyes, examining his sharpening fingernails.

“Neither of you are obligated to stay, but I have custody of Qi Rong and Guzi,” the prince explains. “So, neither of you can force the other to leave, either.”

It seems fair to him. Lang Qianqiu doesn’t protest the matter either, seeming to find the conclusion reasonable.

Shuo, on the other hand, looks like he would rather be force fed shards of glass.

After adjusting his robes around his body, seeing that the fit is correct, and running a comb through his hair—Xie Lian steps out, staring blindly in the direction of the two younger men.

“Is there anything else?”

For a moment, both of them stare.

It’s not like Shuo of all people should be surprised. After all, he watched Xie Lian make the robes in the first place.

And yet…

It can be startling, watching the god shift from the plain, unadorned white robes of a cultivator, to something so…

Elegant. Ethereal.

The silk itself is rather simple, compared to other patterns he's made in the past, but woven so finely, it almost seems to shine.

More surprising for Lang Qianqiu is the fact that…

He doesn't think he's ever seen his Guoshi wearing red before.

But in this case, the inner layer of the robes Xie Lian is wearing are…distinctly red.

Or, more accurately, crimson, with the outer layer being more similar to his usual white, with the light outline of a floral pattern along the hem.

Even his hair is slightly different.

Instead of his usual top knot, the style is closer to the way he wore it back during his days as Guoshi of Yong'an—half of it pulled back, but tied low, with the hairpin Hua Cheng gifted him several weeks before holding it in place.

"…Well, that's a change of pace."

Shuo's comment is intended to be slightly more flippant, but his voice is slightly too faint to be mistaken for something less than awe.

Xie Lian shrugs, reaching down to pat Guzi's head when the child makes his way back inside the shrine.

"Compared to all of the other officials, I'll be somewhat underwhelming," the god promises with a light smile.

After all, the mid autumn festival is an affair in which every god is looking to display their wealth and power.

For Xie Lian, wearing a slightly nicer set of robes is merely not being an embarrassment.

During his first ascension, he once attended the festival wearing a crown of crystal, so lovely it cast reflections of light everywhere he went.

By comparison, he looks rather modest now.

Shuo glances over to Lang Qianqiu, who looks like he's been kicked in the head by a horse—but after a moment of pointed staring, he seems to come back to reality, admitting—

“Typically Heavenly Officials are slightly more ostentatious, but Guoshi, you still look...”

Shuo glances back and forth between the two of them, pursing his lips with thought, then steps closer to Xie Lian’s side, reaching up to press his fingertips against the god’s temple.

Xie Lian is curious when he feels something spring forth, sliding through his hair.

Delicate vines, interweaving together to make a handsome circlet around his head, adorned by white blossoms, petals stained with red towards the center.

“There,” the ghost mumbles, pulling his hand back.

Xie Lian reaches up to touch the flowers with his fingertips, surprised.

Lang Qianqiu sends a curious glance in Shuo’s direction, and the demon shrugs, toying with his ponytail. “What? Now he actually looks like a Flower Crowned Martial God.”

Xie Lian’s expression softens, and he smiles. “Thank you, Ren Song,” he murmurs. “That was kind of you.”

Shuo crosses his arms with a shrug, looking away and grumbling. "It's not a big deal..."

In any case, he accepts the pat the crown prince places upon his head nonetheless. "Don't destroy anything while I'm gone."

Lang Qianqiu mutters an affirmative in acknowledgement.

Ren Song, however, makes no promises.

The two watch as the prince leaves his shrine, disappearing off to the heavens as day begins to turn to night, and the forest demon huffs, crossing his arms.

"You can deal with the kid with the bandages," he mutters, turning back to Guzi. "He's from Yong'an, anyway."

Therefore, it makes sense that Lang Qianqiu should have to deal with him. Shuo can't even look at him without feeling slightly nauseous, anyway.

"..." The Martial God shrugs, moving in that direction, adding– "I'm not giving up, you know."

“On Qi Rong?” Shuo questions flatly. “Yeah, I got the message the first time we spoke.”

Lang Qianqiu stares after him, his lips turning down into a frustrated frown.

“You know, I offered to share him,” he mutters. “I’m not the one being a child about this.”

“Share him.” Shuo repeats flatly. “What, you wanna hold hands while we stab him at the same time? It’s a fucking stupid suggestion,” he shakes his head, “and I don’t want him dead. You think I’m being childish? Really?”

“As a matter of fact, I—” Lang Qianqiu starts, then stops.

When he glances down, there’s one clawed finger poking into his chest.

Hard.

“I get that you have this whole oblivious puppy attitude,” Shuo stares up at him, his eyes burning with anger. “That’s why no one is ever honest with you.”

“...Oblivious puppy?!” The prince sputters.

“Yeah. And it’s blown up in your face already, hasn’t it?” The ghost glares, watching as Lang Qianqiu grimaces sheepishly. “Our situations are not the same. What he did to you—it isn’t the same as what he did to me.”

He opens his mouth to protest, but Shuo’s finger digs into him a little more sharply, and he closes it.

“My brother was already dead,” Shuo explains, his voice trembling slightly with emotion. “Dispersing someone’s spirit is—believe it or not—way worse than dying.”

There’s only one ghost that has come back from being dispersed. Ever.

Hua Cheng.

And while no one knew him from before, it’s clear that the experience left him…changed.

“And even if it wasn’t worse, it wouldn’t have mattered if it was Qi Rong, or An Le, or anyone else.”

“How could it not matter?!”

“Because your bloodline was already cursed!” Shuo snaps. “Something awful would have happened to your clan eventually, it just happened to be Qi Rong.”

They both stop, standing in front of the shrine, sun sinking under the hilltops in the distance.

“…What are you talking about?” Lang Qianqiu mutters, staring at Ren Song’s expression—hostile, twisted with bitterness and…

Pain.

“…The man who founded your clan,” Shuo mutters, “the first King of Yong’an.”

“What about him?”

“He was a sick, pathetic piece of shit.”

Ren Song drops his hand from Lang Qianqiu’s chest, fists balling up at his sides, and…

The martial god’s eyes widen with understanding.

“You…” He realizes, looking the ghost over, “…You were born in Xianle, weren’t you?”

“…What was left of it,” Ren Song mutters.

Lang Qianqiu glances away, swallowing hard.

“…I’m sorry that you were harmed by the war,” he takes a deep breath, “but wars… they happen. That isn’t enough to curse an entire bloodline. And I was born five centuries later—”

“I’m not talking about the war.”

Lang Qianqiu stops, his eyebrows creasing. “…King Lang Ying died shortly after the war. Everyone knows that.”

"Qi Rong had your clan slaughtered as a ghost." Shuo mutters. "You think your ancestor wasn't capable of causing damage after his death?"

The prince doesn't seem to have a response to that. Which is fine. Shuo does.

"He didn't care about the people of Yong'an. He wasn't a savior." The ghost sneers, crossing his arms. It's a defensive posture, but really—

He's holding himself. Self soothing.

"I died because of the plague that bastard caused when I was six years old, and do you know what happened after that?!"

...The plague he caused?

"The plague was caused by—"

"Bai Wuxiang. With the help of YOUR ancestor. And even after the calamity killed him—he wouldn't stop."

In the distance, from behind a layer of bandages, eyes are watching him.

"He thought the plague would give him his wife and son back. But the way he summoned it the first time—it was by burying children. And you know what?" Shuo throws his hands up, fingers trembling.

"After he died, there weren't any children left to bury!" It's almost funny, in the scale of it's tragedy. "His war, his plague—it killed an entire *generation* of children. Can you even understand what that means?!"

Suffering so beyond the human scale of comprehension.

"He had to use souls of the children he already killed," Shuo mutters, his fingers trembling, then going still as he takes deep breaths, his pupils blown with anger. "I woke up in the afterlife, confused, and scared, only for him to catch me and my older brother, and hang us."

Lang Qianqiu is silent, knowing there's no reason or motivation to lie about something like this—but struggling to comprehend that anyone—much less his ancestor—would be capable of such a thing.

"I watched him bury hundreds of children's souls in the forests of Mount Tonglu."

Hanging there. Unable to move. Unable to do anything but scream and cry. Knowing that no one was coming to save him. Knowing that he was already dead. That his brother was dead.

That his own father was the one who put him there.

“One by one. Knowing one day, I would be next.”

It broke most of the children there before they even went into the ground. When Lang Ying cut them down, they wouldn’t even fight.

Shuo doesn’t know why he was different. There was never anything special about him.

No royal lineage, like Lang Qianqiu. No epic love story, like Hua Cheng. No grand destiny, like Xie Lian.

Shuo just, for whatever reason, didn’t break.

And so many of the people he cared about did.

“I was like that for eight years, before Hua Cheng rescued me and my brother.”

Shuo spent more time hanging in a tree, watching children being buried, their souls slowly dispersing under the weight of the torture, than he did alive.

“Your family. Your kingdom. Every bit of wealth, power, and privilege you grew up with, is built on that man’s legacy.”

Shuo thought he might feel better. That giving verbal weight to his emotions might make them go away.

But it doesn’t.

There was already a weight on Lang Qianqiu’s shoulders. It’s only bigger now. Heavier.

And that doesn’t make him feel better.

“You’ll have to forgive me, for not wanting your grief compared to mine.” He mutters.

He doesn’t need to breathe, but still—his breaths are shaking as he glares at the ground.

"...That's bullshit."

Shuo's eyes grow wide.

He hasn't heard the god swear before.

"You didn't deserve what happened to you. Neither did your brother, or any of the other children. And—fine, knowing that—my ancestor was a monster." Lang Qianqiu agrees, even if it's hard. "But curses—being doomed by the choices of our ancestors—I don't believe in any of that."

Shuo looks up from the ground, looking the martial god in the eye. His jaw is locked, and there's a stubbornness to him.

"My father, my aunts, my uncles, my cousins—they're all dead, because Prince An Le believed in that. But that was a lie."

If there's such a thing as a curse, then maybe, it puts you in a difficult situation. Or it brings tragedy to your door.

But how you respond to that is still your own choice.

"There's a difference between justice and vengeance."

His Guoshi taught him that a long time ago.

"What you want, what I want—is justice. Qi Rong directly hurt us both. But punishing people for things beyond their control, injustices that they can't fix—that's vengeance. That's what An Le did to my family. And once you go down that path—it never ends."

Shuo stares at him, eyes wide, his expression unreadable.

...As if he's seeing the Crown Prince of Yong'an for the first time.

"...What?" Lang Qianqiu mutters, his brow furrowed. "Are you about to laugh at me and call me an idiot again?"

"...No..." The ghost mumbles. "I just...wish you could have had that conversation with someone else a long time ago," he mutters, turning back towards the shrine.

"I should check on Guzi," he concludes, walking away.

Because if he had—and if that person would have listened—

Maybe things would be different.

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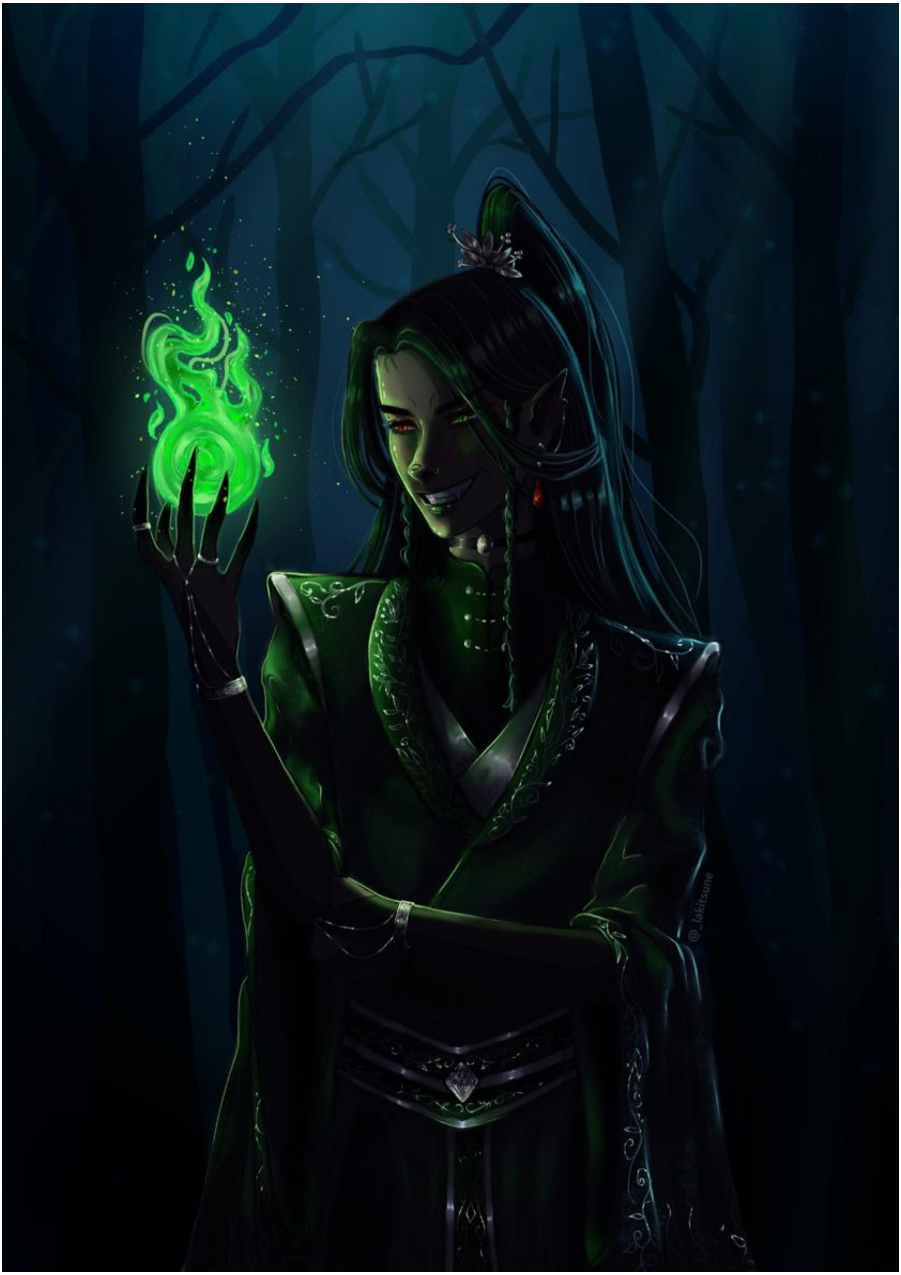
Autumn Twilight Shrouding Forests (Ren Song / Shuo) + Ghost Fire! Qi Rong



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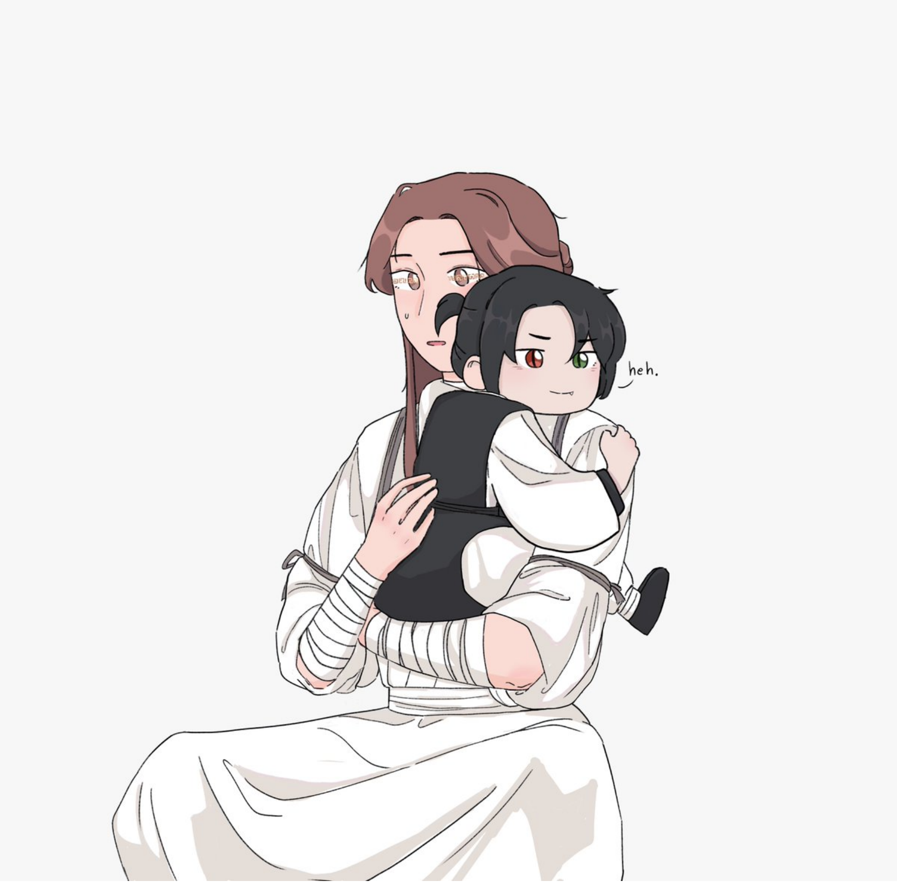
XIE LIAN + SHUO'S CHILD FORM



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Chapter End Notes

thank you to Laki, Lili, and Junky for their beautiful artwork, and allowing me to share it!!

xoxo, Evie

Rumors and Myths

Chapter Summary

> “But why are you sitting back here alone?”
>
> “I...” Xie Lian swallows dryly. “Well...”
>
> “Your highness!” Another voice cries out from across the room, broken up with nervous laughter. “Hahaha, you’re here! Why don’t you come and sit with me, yes? Over here!”
>
> ...Shi Qingxuan.
>
> Xie Lian sends Feng Xin an apologetic smile, rising to his feet as he makes his way across the room.
>
> (And, unfortunately for him, Lady Wind Master is front and center.)
>
> “Lady Wind Master,” he smiles, reaching out to feel for the edge of the table so he can find a seat. Shi Qingxuan notices, reaching over and taking his wrist, guiding him down into the seat beside her. “How are you?”
>
> “GREAT!” She beams, so loud it makes Xie Lean start. “I thought you would NEVER get here!”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Xie Lian's first Mid Autumn Festival as a god was when he was just seventeen years old. Eagerly bounding through the streets of the Heavenly Capital, his friends on either arm. Taking in the sights, the shows, the music all around.

It's even more opulent now than it used to be.

Of course, Xie Lian can't see the multi-story high displays of makeshift golden palaces. Or the massive pyramids of acrobats and performers dancing through the streets. But the sound of it, the rush of movement, the roar of the music, the heat of the fireworks...

It's overwhelming.

Junior officials laugh and gather in the streets, observing the free entertainment, making bets about the battle of the Lanterns, later.

(Xie Lian is unsurprised to never hear his name come up in such conversations.)

The Upper Court, however, is far removed from the streets of the capital, already gathered for the Mid Autumn Banquet.

For such events, the Grand Martial Hall is completely renovated. Ivory tables moved in, velvet and silk curtains hung throughout, music and laughter in the air.

Since Xie Lian's appearance here is perfunctory at best, he drifts towards the back of the room, taking a seat at a nearly empty table, his hood pulled halfway over his head.

After all, if he doesn't make a scene, he can leave after the lanterns are–

"...Your highness?"

Xie Lian glances up, surprised, finding a familiar aura before him. Earth toned, very hard edged.

“...Feng Xin,” he smiles, pushing his hair behind his ears. “Are you enjoying the festival?”

The martial god stares down at him, slightly tongue tied, the tips of his ears pink.

Dark eyes watch him resentfully from across the room, glaring over the rim of a wine glass.

“No,” Feng Xin mutters. “I hate parties.”

He always has, Xie Lian remembers that much well. It was one of the only things he and Mu Qing ever had in common, back in the old days.

After all, they always tended to disappear from gatherings at the same time, back in Xianle.

“But why are you sitting back here alone?”

“I...” Xie Lian swallows dryly. “Well...”

“Your highness!” Another voice cries out from across the room, broken up with nervous laughter. “Hahaha, you’re here! Why don’t you come and sit with me, yes? Over here!”

...Shi Qingxuan.

Xie Lian sends Feng Xin an apologetic smile, rising to his feet as he makes his way across the room.

(And, unfortunately for him, Lady Wind Master is front and center.)

“Lady Wind Master,” he smiles, reaching out to feel for the edge of the table so he can find a seat. Shi Qingxuan notices, reaching over and taking his wrist, guiding him down into the seat beside her. “How are you?”

“GREAT!” She beams, so loud it makes Xie Lean start. “I thought you would NEVER get here!”

There’s a sort of strain to her voice, and Xie Lian can’t understand why or how, but it feels like he’s been pulled into the middle of something.

And, like everyone else, the goddess is dressed to impress.

Her dress is made of soft, swishing fabric—a light shade of jade green with gold embellishments—and her hair is pulled up into a sumptuous, extravagant style, jade and emerald combs holding it in place.

On her other side, Ming Yi wears simple black robes, looking utterly bored.

Well, that’s not entirely true, he seems somewhat engaged with the rack of beef ribs in front of him, gnawing them down to the bone.

(Shi Qingxuan seems a little distracted whenever he licks the sauce off of his fingers.) Other than the gold earrings he always wears, he’s completely unadorned.

It’s disgraceful. Even the laughingstock of the three realms made an attempt at being presentable.

“Come now,” Pei snorts boisterously. “It’s not that serious either way.”

“Of course *you* would say that.” The Water Master’s voice rings clear from his seat beside the general—at the highest table there is, aside from Jun Wu's.

"Lord Water Master, always so judgmental," he chides him, "I'm not embarrassed." He slides the blade across the table, showing where his blood has stained it

Sapphire eyes cut down to stare at it before glancing back up at him, unimpressed.

"Yes," he muses, his tone dry as a bone, "it would be a bit late for you to feel shame."

That draws laughter from across the room, and Pei shrugs, throwing his hands up, not offended in the least.

"I'm just saying, there's nothing wrong with not being a virgin."

Xie Lian's eyes widen.

Ah, Yan Zhen.

Jun Wu has many swords in collection, with enchantments ranging from useful to the peculiar.

This one, for example, won't be stained by the blood of a virgin.

Shi Wudu rolls his eyes, reaching down to slide his finger up over the blade, a drop of his own blood running down the edge, remaining there.

"Well, well..." Pei clicks his tongue, smirking over at him. "And you were shaming me..."

The water master arches an eyebrow.

"Compare my two to your...hundreds, or is it thousands?" He muses, rolling his eyes. "I'm not particularly ashamed, no."

Pei snorts, then stops, his wine glass halfway to his mouth, and when he speaks again, his voice is much softer—and surprised.

"...Two?"

Shi Wudu shrugs. "Are you shocked it's so few, or are you being a hypocrite now?"

After all, very few could imagine why the general would care, either way.

“...” Pei takes a drink, shaking his head. “Then why should it matter if your little sister isn’t? Let her play.”

The Water Master huffs, and Xie Lian can feel Shi Qingxuan stiffen beside him, silently reeling from the stress.

Xie Lian remembers this game. It didn’t bother him, during his first ascension. After all, his chastity was a point of pride, back then. He practically showed it off.

“Of course she is,” Shi Wudu mutters, crossing his arms, “I just think it’s a ridiculous, immature game.”

“And what makes you so sure?”

“She isn’t married,” Shi Wudu replies haughtily.

Pei lets out a surprised laugh, pointing with his glass, “YOU aren’t married either!”

“Yes,” the water master agrees, “who can blame me for a lack of suitable candidates.”

Finally, there seems to be something that Genera Pei doesn’t find amusing—his laughter ceasing as he takes another drink from his wine, grumbling something unintelligible into his cup.

Shi Wudu looks away from him, turning his gaze in his sister’s direction. “Just do it, Shi Qingxuan,” the water god rolls his eyes. “It’s not like you haven’t done it before.”

Maybe not in the last decade or two, but still. What difference does it make?

The sword is passed over, eventually coming to rest on the table in front of them.

Shi Qingxuan bites her lip, Xie Lian frowns, and Ming Yi tilts a bowl of curry in front of his mouth, downing the entire thing in two gulps, meat and all.

“...You don’t have to do anything,” Xie Lian murmurs, his brow pinched with disapproval.

He Xuan has to catch his breath, having been so focused on devouring an entire shank of lamb, he forgot to breathe. “And if you’re not, it’s not like anyone knows who did it.”

“...” Shi Qingxuan swallows thickly, staring down at the sword like it might as well be an executioner’s ax, reaching for it hesitantly, and...

Xie Lian sighs, unable to take it any longer, reaching out to take the blade himself, sliding the sharp edge along his palm.

Of course, it was a noble thing to do, stepping in to take the turn from the wind master, though it certainly won’t distract people from—

Several people pause, startled when the blade begins to glow brightly, rattling against the tabletop.

“...Oh,” Shi Qingxuan stares, shocked.

Xie Lian can’t help but feel...pained, hearing her say it like that. Not hatefully, or with judgement. Just...

Surprised.

Meaning she heard those rumors.

Even now, they still exist. Reminding him of one of the more humiliating moments of his life.

More than simple embarrassment

It was a moment of painful, bone deep humiliation. When the connection between the person he had become and the image he had been clinging onto completely shattered.

Across the room, General Xuan Zhen has grown starkly pale, staring down at his plate, hands limp in his lap.

Remembering his greatest regret.

‘That’s how much you hate me?!’

From two tables over, Feng Xin’s jaw is clenched, his hands balled into fists on top of his silverware.

‘You’d rather allow him to sell himself than accept my help?!’

It wasn’t the worst thing he said that night.

But Mu Qing rarely says things in anger that he actually regrets. The consequences, maybe, but never the action itself.

And god, he—

His shoulders hunch slightly, his eyes narrowed into a glare.

(But only to hide the emotions behind them.)

Mu Qing regrets everything he said that night.

“...Well,” a nearby martial god speaks up, snorting with disbelief. “I suppose we misjudged you, your highness.”

Feng Xin’s glass of wine cracks, and Mu Qing looks positively green. Xie Lian doesn’t say a word.

He reaches for a napkin, calmly using it to staunch the blood on his palm, rather than getting it all over the table.

It’s certainly enough of a distraction from Shi Qingxuan, anyway. Xie Lian expected to have that effect, when he did it.

It’s an uncomfortable reminder, but if it prevents the public revelation that Xie Lian expects she was trying to avoid, well—

It’s a price he’s more than happy to pay.

No one deserves to feel ashamed over something like that, one way or the other.

“Come now,” one of the civil gods snickers, covering his mouth. “It’s not as though he ever said a word to defend himself. And to think, we could have held him in such higher regard...”

Shi Qingxuan glares, opening her mouth to defend him, but—

Before anyone else can say a word, the first person to leap to his defense—

“You say that as if you would have believed him.”

…is Pei.

Xie Lian sits in shocked silence.

“And if your high regard is so cheap, what makes you think anyone wants it?"

Pei, whom Xie Lian has (albeit unintentionally) embarrassed and insulted multiple times since his return.

He's the first to speak up for the Crown Prince of Xianle.

"Ah, yes," the Civil God rolls his eyes. "General Ming Guang, the great defender of concubines and prostitution."

"And?" Pei arches an eyebrow. "You know, in my experience, men only resent concubines because they believe what they're selling is something that they are entitled to have for free."

That statement leaves the civil god red all the way up to his ears.

"It's no prostitute's fault that you couldn't convince a woman to go to bed with you, divinity and all." Pei sits back, crossing his arms over his chest.

Shi Wudu doesn't say a word, fanning himself lazily from the general's side, but... There's an approving glint in his eye.

From the head of the room, sitting at the highest table—Jun Wu seems to have had enough of the commotion, clapping his hands.

Yan Zhen flies from the table, returning to its scabbard.

"I think enough people have had a turn," the emperor murmurs, pouring a glass of wine.

Xie Lian let out a sigh of relief. Not for his own sake, but for Shi Qingxuan's—but when he hears a low drum beat kicking up, his expression becomes a mask of confusion.

"...They came up with this game three centuries ago," the wind master explains, leaning close. "Every time the drum beats, the glass of wine is passed to another god. When it stops, whoever has it has to drink the entire thing."

Oh, a drinking game? That sounds surprisingly normal—

"And," she adds, "a play about them in the mortal realm is displayed for all to see."

And it turns out, Xie Lian wasn't the last heavenly official to arrive.

“Ling Wen!” Pei barks over the drums, “We were wondering when you would arrive!”

To the prince’s surprise, a distinctively male voice replies. “I had a stack of reports to complete, forgive me.”

He takes a seat on the other side of Shi Wudu, their shoulders brushing together. “I’m sure the Water Master was able to keep you entertained in my absence.”

He sends a wry smile Shi Wudu’s way, only for a fan to be snapped in front of his face, blocking it from view.

“I’m always entertaining,” the Water God replies haughtily. “I wish you didn’t have to come in that form.”

Ling Wen arches an eyebrow. She’s handsome as a woman, to be sure —but there’s a different amount of confidence to him, when he takes form as a man.

Tall, broad, with an air of quiet, easy confidence that is...undeniably attractive to anyone within range.

(Even Xie Lian has to admit, he finds Ling Wen’s male voice somewhat alluring.) Still, he’s never seen Ling Wen take his male form before. Why now?

Sensing his confusion, Shi Qingxuan whispers in his ear. “Ling Wen is more often worshiped as a god these days, rather than a goddess—and we’re expected to attend the mid-autumn festival in our most powerful forms.”

Ah, well, that makes sense. And it also explains why—

“And I wish my brother didn’t have to attend in *that* form, either,” Shi Wudu mutters, slumping back in his seat, his arms crossed. “It’s ridiculous.”

Shi Qingxuan glances down at her plate, her lips sagging into a small frown.

Xie Lian can’t see Ming Yi’s expression. The way his food stops halfway towards his mouth, his gaze sharpening as it turns in the Water Master’s direction.

Hateful.

“Come now,” Pei’s voice is playful, though more teasing than it is boisterous. “You say that as though you don’t have a female form yourself.”

Shi Qingxuan stiffens, startled, and her older brother, hidden behind his fan, is scarlet from ear to ear.

“And I think she’s rather lovely,” the general adds with a grin, even if it doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

General Pei has little love for Shi Qingxuan, it’s true.

But the same cannot be said for her elder brother, and the general understands how important that bond is. And that Shi Wudu’s attitudes towards his sister’s feminine form are...easily misunderstood.

Not stemming from genuine distaste, or small mindedness, but rather...

Protectiveness. Fear and distrust of others. Particularly men.

Where that comes from, Pei Ming doesn’t know. He’s tried and tried, but...There’s only so far that someone will let you in, when they are afraid.

And with that damn pride of his, Shi Wudu would far rather be perceived as anything but frightened.

Shi Qingxuan stares at her older brother, shocked, though not unpleasantly so. “Gege, you have a...?”

Before she can finish her questions, the drums come to a halt.

The victim of the first round is some minor martial god, who takes the chalice, downing it with a grin, chortling as they play shows off some minor victory.

Ming Yi goes back to his meat, and Xie Lian leans his chin on his palm, thinking. He’s always found these games odd.

He can’t say that he’s ever enjoyed them, but that never seems to be the intention.

There’s no rush in winning. The only possibility of fun is the amusement of the crowd at one god or goddess’s expense.

But this game, at first blush, doesn’t seem so bad.

After all, plays in the mortal realm about the gods are usually flattering, aren't they? And in the cases of less popular gods, like him—they aren't included in plays at all.

There's no risk. Nothing to build anxiety.

(And, for some reason, the games always seem designed to create that sense of tension.)

Shi Qingxuan remains close to his ear, narrating the plays as they go by, none of them particularly noteworthy, but it's nice to know what's happening.

The first play of note occurs when the cup lands with Feng Xin, and from the mere sound of it, paired with Shi Qingxuan's stuttering as she tries to explain what's going on—

It sounds mildly erotic by nature.

There's a storm of swearing erupting from Feng Xin's table, followed by snickering from Ming Yi, swallowing down a mouthful of roasted duck.

"What do you expect them to write plays about, with a nickname like Dick Yang?" He mutters under his breath.

Shi Qingxuan can't help but giggle behind her hand, but Xie Lian feels bad for poor Feng Xin...

Of the three of them, he was the only one who wasn't forced to practice chastity due to cultivation, and yet (likely because of his father) he was always uncomfortable with intimacy.

"You know," Ming Yi leans back, wiping his mouth with a napkin, his arm resting against the back of Shi Qingxuan's chair, "I've always wondered..."

It's interesting. Normally, the Earth Master is quiet and sullen. He still is now, but...

He seems slightly more talkative, around Shi Qingxuan—directly contradicting his constant insistence that they aren't friends.

"Why does Xuan Zhen's hair look like that at these events?"

Xie Lian's brow furrows—because obviously, he has no idea. "What does he mean?"

"Ah," Shi Qingxuan taps her thumb against her chin, "Well, you remember how, during the plague four centuries ago, Mu Qing began being worshiped as a medicinal god as well as a martial god?"

Xie Lian and Ming Yi nod in tandem, and she continues;

"Mortals don't tell stories as cut and dry as that, like, 'Oh, the Heavenly Emperor sent down a few gods to deal with the mess, and Xuan Zhen happened to be one of them, ' no, they have to make it more...fantastical, you know?" She drags her fingertip around the rim of her cup.

"So, back then, some playwright took the old stories of Xuan Zhen being born a servant, and twisted it into a new story: that he was bullied and hated by his fellow officers, resented for the status of his birth. His master, however, was oblivious to his struggle."

Shi Qingxuan tells the story like it's entirely fictitious, missing the flash of discomfort in Xie Lian's expression.

"Eventually, a plague ravaged the land. Taking young and old, rich and poor. Xuan Zhen was sent, along with his master's other generals, to find a cure."

The drum beat begins once more as the cup is filled to be passed around again.

"General Xuan Zhen discovered a lake with healing properties. Those who drank from it would be cured. But—whenever someone else attempted to fill their cup, the surface of the lake would turn to ice."

As if by fate, just as she continues to tell the story, the cup lands on Mu Qing's plate.

He stares down at it, lips turned down into a slight frown, silver earrings clinking at his ears as he leans over to pick it up.

"The other generals called it witchcraft—and they refused to tell Xuan Zhen's master it was him providing the cure. He worked tirelessly, without credit, bringing casks of water from the lake day in and day out."

Finally, Mu Qing lifts the glass to his lips, swallowing it down.

"Eventually winter came—and with it, the plague reached the royal capital. Infecting the generals, the nobility, and eventually, Xuan

Zhen's master."

As she speaks, the velvet curtain on the stage at the center of the room lifts, depicting the scene she's describing.

"Still, without credit or thanks, Xuan Zhen walked in the snow, bringing water to the people of the city. Curing his master, the men who discredited him, and the nobles who looked down on him. But, eventually—he caught the sickness himself."

As she speaks, the actor on stage—heroic, of course, as any dramatic lead is—falls to his knees, clutching his chest with a dramatic groan.

"One general—and only one—offered to carry him up the mountain side, so he could drink from the lake himself."

On cue, another heroic figure appears, carrying the lead on his back, struggling rather theatrically.

"But the mountain was steep—and with the snow getting deeper, it was impossible to carry another person to the summit, where the lake awaited."

Mu Qing watches the scene unfold with a bored expression, his gaze rather guarded.

"Desperate, afraid he would be too late, his fellow General left Xuan Zhen beneath a cherry tree, hurrying to the summit on his own. But, try as he may, the lake remained frozen solid."

Shi Qingxuan leans back in her chair, twirling a lock of hair between her fingers. "The general returned, planning to try carrying him to the summit again—but it was too late. Xuan Zhen had succumbed to sickness and the cold."

Xie Lian frowns, confused by the story.

"But if he dies in the story, how could he be worshiped as a god?"

"That's the thing," Shi Qingxuan smiles, "the drama of it all—the moment he drew his last breath, he ascended. Not only as a martial god, but as a god of medicine and the winter season."

"That makes sense," Ming Yi murmurs, watching Mu Qing's passive expression as he watches the story of his own 'ascension,' "Even if it is a lie, he's certainly cold blooded enough to be a god of Winter."

"Hush," Shi Qingxuan swats his arm playfully, "I'm not finished."

Xie Lian doesn't entirely agree. Mu Qing is the opposite of cold blooded. He might seem unfeeling at times—but he's one of the more emotional people the prince has ever known.

People just judge too quickly to see it.

"When Xuan Zhen ascended—his hair changed too."

The play makes its dramatic conclusion as she explains—

"It changed in color to match the surface of the frozen lake. As such, General Xuan Zhen is worshiped and painted as having silver hair."

The very same look he's sporting now, silken locks gleaming like starlight as they float around his face, making his eyes seem even darker and more mysterious by comparison, watching as they play draws to a close.

"...That's quite a story," Xie Lian murmurs.

"Too bad it's not true," Ming Yi yawns. "Mortals are truly ridiculous."

"Oh, that's not the most bizarre claim," Shi Qingxuan smiles. "There's even a story that drinking his blood can cure any ailment."

Xie Lian's jaw goes slack, his brow pinching with worry. "...What?"

"Oh," his friend laughs, shaking his head. "Don't worry, your highness! No one is about to take a bite out of him. His worshippers just create dishes incorporating animal blood every winter solstice to obtain blessings for good health in the following year."

"It is odd though," Ming Yi muses, watching the glass pass around the room again. "The things that mortals come up with."

"Oh, I've heard stranger things," the wind master muses. "You know—they'll even make up stories for why certain gods don't exist."

Xie Lian's eyebrows raise. "Why would they do that?"

"Well," Shi Qingxuan snaps her fan open, giving it a couple of gentle flaps to re-adjust some flyaways in her hair. "We have a Water Master, a Rain Master, an Earth Master, and a Wind Master, yes?"

"...Right," Xie Lian agrees.

"The Thunder Master only faded away a few centuries ago, the vacancy isn't old enough that it draws mortal attention—but we haven't had a fire master in over a thousand years. So, with no one to worship, they made up a story to explain it."

Now that she mentions it—it is odd.

Even when Xie Lian was a child, there hadn't been a fire master for several hundred years. Maybe there hasn't even been one in Jun Wu's entire term as Heavenly Emperor.

"See, according to the mortals, there was a volcanic eruption eight centuries ago—and a star that burned so brightly in the aftermath, it could even be seen in the daylight, and it remained that way for several months—" Shi Qingxuan prattles on, and Xie Lian stops her.

"That actually did happen."

Shi Qingxuan stops, surprised. "...Really?"

The drum beats stop again, this time landing on another civil god, with some tale that doesn't seem particularly worth describing.

After all, Xie Lian's revaluation is more interesting.

"Yes," the prince agrees, straining to remember. "It happened when I was...around seven years old. The star burned red in the sky for around three months. It was... beautiful, but strange."

Later on, it would be called a cursed omen, foretelling the fall of Xianle. Xie Lian only remembers thinking that it was beautiful.

"Well, who knows—maybe there's some truth to it. The story goes that the Fire Master was an ancient star, looking down on the world each night—until one day, he fell in love with a mortal. One of royal blood."

The prince smiles faintly, listening close.

"He would watch the mortal each night in his dreams, and the young noble would look up at the stars each night, finding one more beautiful than all the rest. And as time went on, it became more and more painful to be apart."

It's a beautiful story. Something like a fairytale, but...

"The Fire Master knew his beloved would ascend as a god one day. So, he waited, and he waited…but when the noble's day of ascension came, his godhood was stolen from him."

That's the thing about fairytales.

"And so, the exalted fire master, bound to the heavens, was torn from his beloved, shackled to the earth below. In his rage, a volcano rocked the earth, spewing flame and ash into the sky. And his star burned brighter and brighter, until…"

He faded away.

Xie Lian frowns, his stomach sinking.

What a miserable story.

But—

"He gave up his godhood, and his star fell, crashing to the earth below." Xie Lian pauses, his lips parting. "His beloved caught him, cradling the fading god in his arms." Shi Qingxuan recalls.

"And in exchange for giving up his own life, his beloved rose at last as a god, separating them once more."

There's something heartbreaking about the tale—and without thinking, Xie Lian finds himself grasping the chain around his neck, his chest aching with something bittersweet

"According to such tales, his beloved still roams the earth as a martial god now, sustained by one believer—the fallen fire master, who watches over him from the ghost realm below."

There's a heavy pause, and eventually, Ming Yi empties his glass. "That's fucking depressing."

Xie Lian can't help but agree, and Shi Qingxuan shrugs. "Sure, but it's where the term 'star crossed lovers,' came from."

"Really?" Xie Lian's eyes remain wide. "I had no idea."

"Have you ever wished on a falling star?" Shi Qingxuan points out wryly. "That's where that superstition comes from, too."

"That seems like a crock of shit," Ming Yi mutters, picking at his bowl of pickled plums, and Shi Qingxuan's pouts.

"I'm not making it up! Back when I was a little kid, they used to call falling stars 'Tears of the Fire Master!' And if you wished on one, your love would be bound by fate!" She huffs, crossing her arms.

"And how do you know so much about it?"

"Because my gege used to tell me that story every night before bed!" She cries, indignant. "It was my favorite!"

"Oh," Ming Yi snorts derisively. "The Water Master was telling you bedtime stories, was he?"

"He wasn't the Water Master back then, he was just my big brother!" Shi Qingxuan pouts, fiddling with her whisk. "And he was so busy working during the day, I hardly ever got to see him."

"Working?" Xie Lian questions. "Is he that much older than you?"

It always sounded as though they were close enough in age to grow up together as children.

"Mmm..." Shi Qingxuan shrugs. "Our age difference isn't that large—but our parents died when I was a toddler, so he was running the merchant business for as long as I can remember."

At first, it's difficult to imagine someone so young being given such responsibility, but...

As someone who was made the martial god of the central plains at the ripe old age of seventeen, he has no room to call such a thing unbelievable.

"Did he—?"

Just as Xie Lian opens his mouth to question it, the drums stop.

And, as if by fate—

Shi Wudu is left holding the cup.

There's a pause before the curtains draw up, and when they do—Ming Yi snorts, and Shi Qingxuan swats his arm again.

"Don't laugh!"

"Why shouldn't I?" The earth master mutters, heaping more beef into his plate. "It serves him right."

...What is that supposed to mean?

“Oh...” Shi Qingxuan groans, watching the play between her fingers. “He’s going to hate this...”

“Hate what?” Xie Lian questions, given that this is the first play The Wind Master hasn’t leapt into a narration for.

“...” The wind master bites her lip, watching the actress on stage. Long, raven hair— luminous blue eyes—and a haughty expression. Beautiful, but...

“...You know how...the ocean’s tides change with the phases of the moon?” She whispers hoarsely.

“...Yes?”

“Well, uh...”

Shi Qingxuan picks at her food fretfully, and Ming Yi smirks.

“He’s often worshiped as god of the moon as well because of it. But, there’s already a Sun god.”

...The Heavenly Emperor, Jun Wu.

Shi Qingxuan sinks lower in her seat as Ming Yi explains it further.

“The Sun and the Moon have always been worshiped in tandem. But in this case, people already worshiped the Wind and Water masters as siblings.”

For once, the earth god is oh-so-happy to be talkative.

“So, it was natural to worship the god of the moon as the Sun God’s consort.”

Across the room, Shi Wudu’s face is impassive as he watches the display.

But his knuckles are white, where they grip the handle of his fan.

“In some kingdoms, this made little difference, and the Water Master is still worshiped as a man. But in others...”

In places less accepting of relations between members of the same sex, naturally, the Heavenly Emperor could only have a wife.

An Empress, always setting and fading as her husband rises.

“...She is worshiped as a goddess.”

“And gege hates it,” Shi Qingxuan mumbles. “It makes him so upset...”

Xie Lian can’t imagine why it would be such an issue. He wouldn’t mind being worshiped as a goddess. Actually, while it was brief, and the circumstances were stressful, he enjoyed his time in a female form.

But then again, Shi Wudu is different.

Some people care very deeply about being perceived as masculine—as a matter of pride. Xie Lian has just never been one of them.

He’s been stronger than most men since he was a child, but more beautiful than most of them too.

He’ll dress as a woman when needed without a care. And he’s rarely felt compelled to prove his prowess to others. It has always spoken for itself, regardless of his looks or actions.

Strength is strength, regardless of what form it comes in.

But, once again—Shi Wudu’s pride often leads to him being misunderstood.

There are certain stories tied to his female form he doesn’t mind.

A goddess of resilience and rebirth. Known as a protector of mothers and newborn children.

Others, however, draw horror and disgust.

Among them being that, rather than being his younger brother, Shi Qingxuan is actually his daughter with the Heavenly Emperor.

The first time he heard it, he had to excuse himself, becoming sick to his stomach.

And this play—

It feels grotesque.

“...What’s happening?” Xie Lian inquires quietly, feeling somewhat awkward, and Shi Qingxuan startles, clearing her throat.

“Haha…” She laughs nervously, “S-sorry your highness. This one—it’s about the waxing and waning of the moon.”

Oh, well—that sounds harmless enough.

“In this story, she’s reborn over and over again with the new moon, and this is depicting one of the cycles, see…” Shi Qingxuan glances over the stage, biting her lip. “Here, her first born has been promised to a monster.”

Depicted as a horned, hunchbacked beast on the stage, long claws and sharp teeth, reaching for the swaddled infant with a greedy eye.

“But the Moon goddess is clever, creating a golem from stone and earth, tricking the monster into thinking that was the child he demanded…”

The play shows as much, with the monster running off with the child gleefully.

“But, when the child came of age, the golem turned to dust—enraged, the monster returned to demand payment. This time, the cost was far more harsh. He demanded that the child pay with her life.”

Ming Yi watches the horned beast loom over the woman and child, armed crossed, his expression impassive.

“But, rather than allow her child to pay the price…” Shi Qingxuan winces, watching as the actress makes a great show of brandishing a knife. “She takes her own life.”

Shi Wudu seems bored, watching his female counterpart slit her own throat on stage, even if Pei has suddenly grown pale and silent by his side.

It’s only the sight of the heavenly emperor’s actor holding her in his arms, weeping and screaming with grief, that makes him feel sick

The curtain suddenly drops down, and Xie Lian raises an eyebrow, surprised to hear that the play has been cut off so suddenly. “…Is it over?”

“Oh, No, it looks like gege made them stop, thank heavens…” Shi Qingxuan mutters, slightly nauseous.

“You can do that?”

"Oh, sure! You just have to donate a hundred thousand merit credits!"

"..."

The drumbeat starts over again, the glass refilled, being passed again, and Xie Lian can still sense Shi Qingxuan's anxiety, so...

He tries to change it to a subject that she never seems to tire of.

"Your brother and Pei...seem much closer than I realized," he mutters, taking a sip of water.

Ming Yi's eyes widen slightly as he glances over at him, as if silently asking if Xie Lian really wants to open that can of words, but...

Remembering the prince can't see verbal cues, he quickly gives up. "Huh?" Shi Qingxuan blinks. "I already said they were friends."

"Yes, but..." Xie Lian glances in Shi Wudu's direction, eyeing a swirling, deep blue aura. "He seems more tolerant of Pei than he is of others."

"It's even WORSE when we're alone," Shi Qingxuan groans. "He won't let me say ONE bad word about him! In my own palace!"

Xie Lian can see how it might frustrate her, but he actually finds that level of loyalty rather endearing among friends.

It reminds him of Feng Xin.

"And the way he talks about him!" Shi Qingxuan glares, her face reddening slightly with outrage. "He'll never give me a SINGLE compliment—and he won't give Pei one to his face, either—but when we're alone, it's always 'Pei this' and 'Pei that!' It makes no sense!"

In all honesty, Xie Lian brought this up because he expected it to distract the wind master—and it did—but he never expected her to become this agitated.

"Honestly, why is he so BLIND when it comes to him?!" She grumbles, lifting her cup of wine to her lips, glaring.

Ming Yi doesn't look up, picking up a pickled plum, and just before he drops it into his mouth, he casually states—

"It's probably because they're fucking."

...To which Shi Qingxuan spits her wine across the table, choking on it.

(Even Xie Lian lets out a shocked wheeze.)

“They—!” Shi Qingxuan squawks, quickly lowering her voice into a scandalized whisper, “They are *not!!”*

Ming Yi chews on his plum, catching some juice dripping from the corner of his mouth with the tip of his tongue. “It’s highly probable.”

“My brother would *never!!”*

“One of us needs to get our eyes checked, because I saw his blood staining that sword, clear as day.” His gaze cuts over to Xie Lian, realizing that might have been slightly insensitive, “No offense.”

“None taken,” the prince replies hoarsely.

“Just because my brother has had...” Shi Qingxuan swallows hard, her pallor faintly green. “Just because he’s been with someone, doesn’t mean that person was Pei!”

“I’ll be brutally honest—”

...Was he not being brutal about it before?

“He has no choice but to put up with you. But *no one* would put up with the two of you fighting over him unless the sex was *spectacular* —”

“Would you shut up?!” Shi Qingxuan hisses. “They aren’t having—they aren’t doing *that!”*

Ming Yi turns to face her, smiling faintly.

“Why is it so upsetting for you?”

“Because it’s not true! You’re just saying it to tease me!”

“I am not, I think it’s true,” Ming Yi shrugs, glancing over to Xie Lian, “and so does he.”

The prince stiffens, sensing the wind master looking in his direction. “You do?!”

Unable to think of what to say, Xie Lian fumbles for his plate, shoving some mantou in his mouth, but…as he chews, he can feel Shi Qingxuan watching him, waiting intently, and…

He chews faster, fumbling for another bun…only to have the plate pulled out of his reach.

Shi Qingxuan clutches it to her chest, glaring, "You can't eat your way out of this!"

"…" Xie Lian starts chugging his water.

"Your highness!!"

"…Is it so bad if they are?" The prince questions weakly. "They seem very fond of one another."

" *Fond?!* I—!" Shi Qingxuan sputters. "I'm FOND of lots of people, I don't sleep with all of them!"

"Aw," Ming Yi smiles wider, his arm still slung along the back of her chair, "that's very nice."

She's actually irritated enough to elbow him in the ribs for that one. "Oof!"

Xie Lian is too distracted, fumbling for a gentle form of reasoning, to notice the subtext behind *that* exchange. "Well, you know," he mumbles, blood rushing in his ears, "I'm a virgin."

"…Yes," Ming Yi agrees. "I think everyone knows that, now."

Right. Right.

"But, if I was going to be with a person…" Xie Lian trails off, awkward. "It would be with someone I trusted, and was fond of…and those two seem to be…"

"What, so you haven't had someone like that in 800 years?" Well.

"I thought about it, once," he mumbles without thinking. "It didn't work out."

That once, of course, being Wu Ming.

Not for the right reasons. And if Xie Lian was being honest with himself—he wasn't ready back then. He was still young, so vulnerable, and…

Xie Lian thinks Wu Ming would have known that, if he had asked.

And unlike the kiss—when he was so gentle, so considerate—Xie Lian thinks the ghost would have told him no, if he had asked for something he hadn't been ready for.

It makes him remember a small detail. Tactile, sticking out brightly in his mind.

Back then, just before he kissed him on the lips—Wu Ming kissed his forehead first, his nose trailing down, allowing Xie Lian to feel the kiss coming, since he couldn't see it.

Such a small, considerate little detail. Remembering it makes the prince's heart swell with affection.

Followed with a hint of sadness.

"...Just once?" Shi Qingxuan questions, surprised

Well—it has only been once, hasn't it?

Xie Lian gives the matter some thought, wondering if there was anyone else he would...

"..." His face turns slightly red, and he nods—a jerking movement.

"...The point being," he mumbles, swallowing hard, "If they are...together—I don't think that's such a bad thing."

"They're not!"

"They are."

"And what makes you so sure?!"

"First of all," Ming Yi holds up a finger, "your brother allows Pei to tease him without consequence."

In public no less. For someone like Shi Wudu, proud and spiteful, that's no small thing.

"Pei is a powerful ally to have," Shi Qingxuan mumbles—willing to pay the general a compliment before she'll agree that he MIGHT be having relations with her brother.

"It could be for purely political reasons!"

Maybe. If the Water Master wasn't so powerful as to not need allies, but that isn't Ming Yi's only point—

"And," the earth master lifts up another plum, lifting it to his lips.

"All you have to do is watch Pei Ming for more than a few minutes at any point in time to know that he's absolutely mad for your brother."

Shi Qingxuan gawks at the very idea that Pei might be 'mad' for anyone.

"He's a philanderer. The only thing that makes him 'mad' is someone that doesn't *want* to sleep with him. In which case, sure, he *might* be mad for my brother!"

"I don't see why it really matters..." Xie Lian mumbles, wishing they would both stop.

Ming Yi, however, seems to have found a cure to the desperate boredom he's been experiencing all night, and isn't keen to give it up.

"Because the Water Master is her brother, mother, and father rolled into one, and the idea of Pei wrecking his—"

"Enough!" Shi Qingxuan hisses.

"...Point being, she doesn't like it," Ming Yi concludes with a wry smile, seeming satisfied with the chaos he's wrought.

"Would you?!"

"What's next, are you going to tell Pei he isn't your 'real dad?'"

"You—!"

Finally—mercifully—the drums stop.

This time, the wine glass has landed rather close. Actually, closer than Xie Lian realized.

With the person sitting on his other side.

He had no idea who was sitting there before. They had been quiet the entire time, wordlessly eating the food, but...

"Ah, General Qi Ying!"

Xie Lian strains to remember where he's heard that name before—likely from one of Qi Rong's minions, back in that cave...

Isn't that Quan Yizhen? Martial god of the West?

He doesn't know anything about him—and to be fair, no one has brought him up very much since his ascension.

From beside him, the young martial god glares down at the cup of wine, knocking it back with one large swallow.

He's got a slightly wild look, compared to the other gods present. Thick, curly hair, pulled halfway up and out of his face, trailing down his back.

It's somewhat akin to that of a lion's mane. His countenance is youthful—square jawed, straight nosed. Handsome, but in a rather straightforward way, with eyes the color of melted caramel, and sun kissed skin.

Even sitting down, he's tall—broad, and...distinctly quiet.

And when the velvet curtain rises from the stage once more, he remains so. Eyes wide, flickering to and fro as he watches the actors move about the stage, taking every movement in.

And clearly, not liking what they see.

Shi Qingxuan doesn't volunteer to narrate this time—and with Quan Yizhen sitting directly to his right, Xie Lian doesn't feel comfortable asking what's going on.

The play itself is intended to be comedic, by nature.

Depicting a handsome hero in gleaming armor, committing one act of bravery after another. Saving a town. Defeating a demon. Wooing young ladies along the way.

And all the while, another actor—a squat, unattractive man—is trying to sabotage him at every step of the way.

The hero doesn't lift a finger to stop him. No, he doesn't even seem to notice that someone is trying to sabotage him at all. Rather, the man is thwarted by his own clumsiness or stupidity each time.

Tripping over his own feet, falling for his own traps.

At one point, he even confesses to his crimes, unprompted, dismayed to find that no one noticed—or even cared.

Xie Lian can't see any of this—but he can hear the laughter from the audience. It's distinctly...cruel.

And Quan Yizhen—he's trembling, but not with laughter.

The air around him is distinctly distressed—whether from rage or hurt, it's difficult to tell, but...

Something about the silent unrest bothers the prince. And the fact that so many people seem to feel comfortable laughing at his expense.

(Even if they don't realize it.)

The more it goes on, the worse Xie Lian feels—until he just can't stand it anymore.

He feels around on the table, finding a wooden chopstick, delicately sliding one of his boots off under the table, pressing the bare sole of his foot against the floor, feeling the vibrations.

It gives him a rough estimate of where the stage is, the size and height of it, and where the cords holding up the curtains connect to the ceiling. It's not perfect, and he doesn't expect to get it on his first try, but—

SNAP!

The chopstick pierces through the cord perfectly.

The curtain comes crashing down, obscuring the stage from view, all while the gods look around, trying to figure out what happened.

(After all, it was so quick, no one saw.)

Well. Almost no one.

The young man beside him is staring at Xie Lian with wide eyes.

His pupils are almost slightly dilated, but they narrow in on the prince's face for a moment, focused.

And of course, Shi Qingxuan and Ming Yi are watching silently, unsure as to what the temperamental martial god is about to do, but...

He reaches down, carefully lifting the remaining mantou on his plate, placing it on that of the crown prince, one by one.

Xie Lian sits there awkwardly, about to ask what he's doing, but...

That's when Quan Yizhen leaps from his feet, charging over towards the stage.

"G-General Qi Ying!" One of the other gods cries out, "There's not—!"

He dives beneath the curtains, finding nothing, seeming to remember —the play they are seeing is nothing more than an illusion.

The *actual* play is coming from the mortal realm, below.

"..."

The Martial God then turns, moving towards the exit of the martial hall, descending without another word.

Xie Lian glances towards Shi Qingxuan, who has started fanning herself to alleviate the stress. "...What just happened?"

"He's probably off to beat up his own worshippers again..." she mutters, shaking her head. "Honestly, it's a miracle he still has so many..."

Xie Lian opens his mouth to ask *why* general Qi Ying is going to beat up his own worshippers, but—

"And you know what?" Shi Qingxuan turns back towards Ming Yi with a huff, crossing her arms.

The earth master's eyebrows quirk, amused, his mouth lifting at the corners as he crosses his legs, leaning in to offer her his undivided attention.

"What?"

"There's no way you're right."

Xie Lian bites back a groan, shoving one of his newly obtained buns in his mouth.

They're still on this?

"And how do you figure?"

“My brother wouldn’t sleep with someone philandering about with countless other lovers! He’s too proud.”

“You have a point there,” Ming Yi agrees, dark hair falling around his face as he leans down to her height, gold earrings flashing in the candlelight, “but Pei, hedonistic as he may be, hasn’t been seen with a lover in some time.”

“I—” Shi Qingxuan pauses, her lips parted. “How would you know that?!”

Ming Yi’s smile turns slightly sharp as he leans in even further, whispering next to her ear, “Didn’t you hear? I’m quite the spy.”

Bold enough to deceive Crimson Rain Sought Flower, no less.

His breath fans over her skin, the cold metal of his earring brushing against the side of her neck—and she shivers, fighting the urge to bite her lip.

Across the room, sapphire eyes narrow sharply.

“It’s my job to know everything.”

Shi Qingxuan swallows hard, her throat dry.

“...Not everything,” she mutters, but she seems to have no argument left in her. Ming Yi raises an eyebrow, but...

...The drums are back.

And of course, since Quan Yizhen has abandoned his glass, and the feast, Xie Lian picks it up, passing it over to Shi Qingxuan.

It’s the natural step, since she’s sitting right next to him, and so she passes it to Ming Yi—

Who passes it right back.

“...Ming-Xiong!” She hisses, shoving the glass back at him. “Take it to the next table!”

“You do it,” he grumbles, pulling over a bowl of pork belly. “I’m eating.”

“You’re ALWAYS eating!” Shi Qingxuan grumbles. “Just carry it over!”

“Why?”

(They’re still furiously passing the cup back and forth.)

“Because you’re the last one at the table to have it!”

“That’s not an actual rule.”

“It’s common decency!”

“I’m not decent.”

“Well, then I guess the next play is just going to be about YOU!”

But that is something the Earth Master doesn’t actually seem keen on, so— He shoves the cup back into Xie Lian’s startled hands, and...

The drums come to a sudden halt.

Shi Qingxuan stares, utterly scandalized.

“You can’t just do that to a blind man!” She hisses, sending Ming Yi a glare.

“He’s not actually blind though,” The earth master mumbles through a mouthful of pork. “He’s just been running around for eight hundred years with an evil magical blindfold. Not the same thing.”

“MING—!”

“Well, hold on,” Xie Lian holds up a finger, the wineglass dangling from his other hand, “he’s got a point there.”

Shi Qingxuan stares at him, slightly agog, mumbling, “Your highness, we really need to talk about how your threshold for being insulted is far too high...”

“No, no,” the prince shakes his head, “I’m really not blind. I can see spiritual power. And aside from the shackles, there’s nothing wrong with my vision.”

He wouldn’t call it ‘evil magic,’ but Ming Yi isn’t wrong, and Xie Lian doesn’t want to be pitied.

Someone blind through birth defect or injury didn’t choose to be that way.

Xie Lian, however, is being punished for his choices.

The difference is very real.

"..." Shi Qingxuan grimaces, watching as the curtain rises up, and Xie Lian smiles, patting her leg.

"You've already said it," he murmurs, "I have a very high tolerance for being insulted. I'm less likely to be bothered than anyone else here."

The wind master frowns, watching him sip the glass of wine. Disapproving, but unable to dispute his logic.

"...These plays get to everyone, your highness," she mumbles, her expression tinged with a deep frown. "That's the point."

If that was the case, Xie Lian can't imagine who is supposed to be entertained by it. Besides, he's the 'laughingstock of the three realms.'

If there are any plays about him in the mortal realm, he suspects they're probably of a comedic nature.

But he can't help but notice, even as he finishes his glass...

No one is laughing.

Which is surprising, given how low the standards for comedy in the Heavens are.

But more so than that...

It's the silence that Xie Lian finds odd. Not a single soul in the room is willing to make a peep.

"...What is it?" He murmurs, reaching over to touch Shi Qingxuan's sleeve.

The Windmaster starts, clearing her throat. "It—Um—it really doesn't...you don't..."

Her voice is filled with confusion—and...discomfort. "It's clearly something made up..."

The prince raises an eyebrow.

"If it's made up, then why not tell me?"

After all, what could be so bad?

“It’s…” She trails off, unsure, and finally, Xie Lian hears something:

One of the actors on the stage.

Sobbing.

“I-It HURTS!”

Xie Lian’s expression freezes, and his blood runs cold.

No.

That’s—

“HELP ME!”

No.

He knows the answer now, before Shi Qingxuan says it, and the world around him is spiraling.

“…It’s about Bai Wuxiang, your highness.”

Then, the screaming just gets louder.

“PLEASE! IT HURTS! IT HURTS! SOMEONE—ANYONE—HELP ME!”

He can’t see it, but everyone else can, and…

He knows.

That an actor version of himself is strung up on stage, hands bound, being stabbed over and over again with a prop sword.

All while one person watches, wearing a mask. Half smiling, half crying.

Then, it dives slightly off script.

“XUAN ZHEN! NAN YANG!”

And for the worse.

“WHERE ARE YOU?!” The actor screams, “WHY DID YOU LEAVE ME?!”

Ming Yi's plate is suddenly untouched.

From beside him, Shi Qingxuan has turned slightly green, glancing between the play, and the prince, whispering; "This isn't funny, this shouldn't be part of a game, even if it's not true..."

Ming Yi glances over at her, his expression suddenly deathly serious. "Stop it."

Shi Qingxuan stares, not understanding him at first—

"Stop the show, now," he mutters, his gaze carefully trained on Xie Lian's face. The Wind Master glances back over at him, but...

The prince doesn't look upset, not exactly.

Actually, the only way to even tell that he's awake is the fact that his eyes are open, staring blankly ahead. Lips slightly parted, but slack. His brow is smooth. Completely unmoving.

She hasn't seen anything quite like it before, and she doesn't...she should... Ming Yi is right, something's wrong, she—

"...This is a play in the mortal realm?"

Xie Lian's voice is quiet, small. Normally, there's something inherently comforting about the way the prince speaks. His tone is always gentle, always calm, even under difficult circumstances.

Shi Qingxuan has never heard him sound...

Weak. Fragile. Hurt.

Not until now.

"...Yes," Shi Qingxuan mutters, "based on an old, stupid story, I'll stop it r—"

Xie Lian's hand lands on her wrist before she can raise it in order to donate the merit credits.

"Wait."

Shi Qingxuan looks over at him, her expression pinched with worry. "It's no trouble, your highness, it's a drop in the—"

"...This play has been around...for a long time?"

On the stage, the masked figure laughs mockingly, lifting the prince back up when he collapses each time.

"…Yes," Shi Qingxuan admits. "I've heard of it, but I've never seen it before—"

"What is it about?"

Bai Wuxiang's actor drags him back by the hair, cackling with delight—

"BEHOLD! THE SAVIOR OF XIANLE!" His voice—

It's so loud. Too loud. Echoing off of the walls.

"LET'S SHOW HIM OUR GRATITUDE, SHALL WE?"

There's no one showing up to save him, obviously. Xie Lian's character isn't the hero in this play. No, in this scene—They're slaying the villain.

That's the thing about this play, one that makes it so unique—and it's rarely performed.

Bai Wuxiang peels off his mask, revealing his true face:

The same as the Prince of Xianle.

In this play, the lead and the villain must always be portrayed by identical twins.

"It's just…um…" Shi Qingxuan clears her throat, wincing as the extras in the play count the blows.

"THIRTY ONE!"

"THIRTY TWO!"

"THIRTY THREE!"

"It just…there was a rumor, back in the old days, that…the cure to human face disease was…murder," she mutters, clearly uncomfortable. "And a myth that…Bai Wuxiang used…used your immortal body to…"

Right.

Xie Lian forgot.

Before he passed out, back then…

Among the first to cut him were a father and child, fleeing the temple before all the rest.

They probably survived.

They probably—

'You promised you wouldn't tell.'

They probably told the story.

"HELP ME, HELP ME, HELP ME, HELP ME—!"

"FORTY FIVE!"

"FORTY SIX!"

"Your highness," Shi Qingxuan pleads, attempting to tug her wrist out of his grip, but —

He's remarkably strong.

"Please, just let me stop it, I—"

"LET ME DIE! WHY CAN'T I DIE?!"

"FORTY EIGHT!"

"FORTY NINE!"

Ming Yi grits his teeth, his eyes flashing towards the front of the room, then back to Shi Qingxuan and Xie Lian, muttering something under his breath as he reaches over.

"NAN YANG! PLEASE, I-I'M SORRY, PLEASE COME BACK!"

"FIFTY!"

"XUAN ZHEN—WHY DID YOU LEAVE ME?!"

"FIFTY ONE!"

Xie Lian has a tight grip on her, but he isn't looking in her direction. He's just staring ahead blankly, the words rattling around in his head. Echoing like water in a cave, the sound swelling and swelling, never escaping, until it's all he can hear.

"IT HURTS!"

Ming Yi's hand wraps around his fingers, and—with an amount of strength that shocks even Xie Lian, as far away as he is—he wrenches his hand off of Shi Qingxuan's, freeing her.

"IT HURTS, IT HURTS, IT HURTS—"

Help me.

Help me, help me, help me, help, help, help, help me!!!!

It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts...it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS!!!

Shi Qingxuan lifts her hand immediately to stop it, but before she can open her mouth—

The curtain suddenly drops down, and the play falls silent.

The martial hall remains quiet as well. No one is eating their food, nor drinking their wine.

"...That wasn't me," Shi Qingxuan mumbles, glancing around. "Who—?"

From across the room, the Water Master lowers his hand, going back to his wine. He's the first person to move—much less breathe—in the aftermath, taking a sip.

"I happen to know for a fact that there is a very appropriate play titled, 'Tales from Banyue' featuring the crown prince," he comments, setting his glass down. "I certainly hope it was only his bad luck that resulted in me witnessing that during my dinner," his voice rings out, cold and annoyed.

His plate is pushed aside, forgotten.

Instead, he gestures for someone to bring him more wine.

"Ling Wen, which of the deputy gods is in charge of selecting the plays for this year?"

The head civil god startles out of a horrified stupor, shaking his head.

“It was supposed to be Pei Xiu,” he admits, slightly pale after that spectacle. “But as for the replacement, that...”

He doesn’t say it, but he doesn’t have to.

Shi Wudu knows.

That was likely left to the Palace of the Heavenly Emperor, who has no deputies.

Only servants.

They do only as they are told.

“...I see.” He reaches under the table, squeezing Pei’s hand, trembling with anger. “Well, it must have been an error. How embarrassing for us.”

He had to stop the martial god from making a scene twice, expecting Shi Qingxuan to deal with it.

But with the prince stopping him, and Pei ready to burst a blood vessel trying to open his mouth, drawing the emperor’s ire once again...

There had been little choice. Still, it doesn’t matter.

Shi Wudu glances down at his wine glass, and Pei stews, snatching an entire cask from one of the passing servers, keeping it for himself.

He stares at the dark liquid before rising to his feat.

None of it matters.

With one sweep of the Water Master’s arm, the stage disappears.

All eyes turn from Xie Lian, who has yet to move, or react in the slightest—settling upon him.

And Shi Wudu—

His smile is dazzling, his cup raised.

To the emperor, Jun Wu.

“You’ll have to forgive me, your majesty,” his voice oozes with a charming level of confidence. “But this is my last mid-autumn festival before facing my third heavenly calamity, and I intend to enjoy it to the fullest.”

With a sweep of his fan, golden leaves of paper come raining down, drawing whoops of excitement across the room.

Merit credits, falling in abundance.

“The Water Master is so impressive!”

“At his age, facing a third calamity! That’s *never* been done before!”

“His little sister clearly learned her generosity from him—AH! I CAUGHT A THOUSAND!”

Shi Qingxuan is popular, yes. By contrast, Shi Wudu has always been respected.

Everyone in the room looks at him now, eyes filled with admiration—and, however reluctant, deep respect.

All except for one person.

Dark eyes, watching him with nothing but resentment and contempt. Waiting in the shadows of glory and success.

There lies the price of secrets.

Jun Wu lifts his hand, shaking his head.

He doesn’t seem angered by the Water Master’s outburst.

If anything, he seems pleased. As though this was exactly what he wanted.

Shi Wudu wipes his wine.

“By all means, Lord Water Master, enjoy yourself,” he murmurs. “Nothing brings me greater pleasure.”

Of course it does.

The water god downs the rest of his glass, setting it down.

No matter what he does. Somehow, someway, the choice is never his own. It’s simply one domino crashing into the next. Part of a larger picture he cannot see.

“Thank you,” he mutters, bowing his head before turning around, waving his fan once more.

Outside, a fanfare of fireworks explodes, bringing the mood of the party back up to where it was before, dragging the attention away from that grotesque spectacle of a play.

“If I’m not incorrect, I believe there are lanterns to be counted.”

His grip on Pei’s arm is far more gentle than it looks as he pulls the general from his seat, pulling him up—doing the same with Ling Wen, who still seems to be trying to puzzle things together.

By dragging the two of them out, he leads the procession of heavenly officials out of the martial hall, making their way outside, to the newly constructed pavilion in the center square, surrounding a hole cut out to the mortal realm below, where the lanterns will soon arrive.

Inside, five gods remain in place.

Two at tables further from the front, neither have been able to move, much less speak since the play began.

And at the front of the room, Shi Qingxuan rubs Xie Lian’s shoulder, watching his face with concern.

“...your highness?” She murmurs, her tone pinched with anxiety. Even Ming Yi has lingered, standing behind her. Not saying a word, not getting close, but watching him intently. “I know, those plays are awful, but...it’s all pretend, it’s not...”

The Wind Master swallows thickly, wishing he would say something.

“It’s not real,” she reminds him—though really, it feels like she’s reminding herself. “Mortals just make up dramatic stories like that, the truth is always much more boring...”

After all, none of the other plays displayed tonight were real, either. They were all exaggerated, twisted, or outright false.

“...Right?” She questions, starting to wonder, because Xie Lian has been quiet for so...

“Right,” the prince agrees—and now, that tone is back.

Calm, measured—and gentle. Not frightened or bothered, like before.

"None of that was true," Xie Lian smiles, reaching over to pat her arm gently. "I'm sorry I reacted that way, I was just so surprised."

Shi Qingxuan stares at him, unsure—and Ming Yi remains expressionless. "...You were?"

"Yes," Xie Lian laughs gently, shaking his head. "That didn't happen. Many stories like that went around after the fall of Xianle in order to make me look weak. I just... forgot how colorful they were."

"You just..." The Wind Master frowns, watching him closely. "...you seemed upset, your highness."

"I was," Xie Lian admits. "The name Bai Wuxiang brings up bad memories, but..." He smiles wryly, shaking his head. "Do you think I would be sitting here, talking to you right now, if anything like that had actually happened?"

Admittedly, no. Being stabbed a hundred times...

Even a god would have difficulty surviving that. Or maintaining their sanctity in the aftermath. And even if they did...

It's hard to believe they could smile, or talk about it calmly, after listening to it all over again.

Shi Qingxuan bites her lip, and...

Xie Lian squeezes her arm again, repeating it serenely:

"It's just a silly story people tell to frighten children, Shi Qingxuan. I'm alright." The prince rises to his feet, pulling her hand gently.

"Don't you want to see the lanterns?"

She follows him, however reluctantly—and Xie Lian doesn't look at either one of his friends as he walks past, feeling them follow behind as he finally exits the martial hall.

Part of him dreads the fact that they might try to find him later, and ask him more questions.

Part of him is even more afraid of the possibility that they won't.

From behind them, unseen by the others, someone grasps Feng Xin's hand, making trembling fingers grow slightly more steady.

Mu Qing doesn’t look at him, his gaze locked on the path ahead.

They haven’t spoken since the day Crimson Rain Sought Flower broke into the Heavens. Actually, Mu Qing hasn’t spared a single look in Feng Xin’s direction.

But now, in a small, private moment, he squeezes the martial god’s hand. A brief, comforting touch.

At first, he’s too surprised to respond, glancing over at Mu Qing’s face.

The stubborn set of his jaw. The trained, uncaring expression.

His hair—

It hurts, looking at Mu Qing when he’s like this. Feng Xin doesn’t know why.

There’s something about the way his hair shines under the starlight that makes his chest feel tight. Like it’s a struggle to breathe.

When Feng Xin tries to squeeze his hand in return, Mu Qing lets go. Walking faster, disappearing into the crowd of officials without a word.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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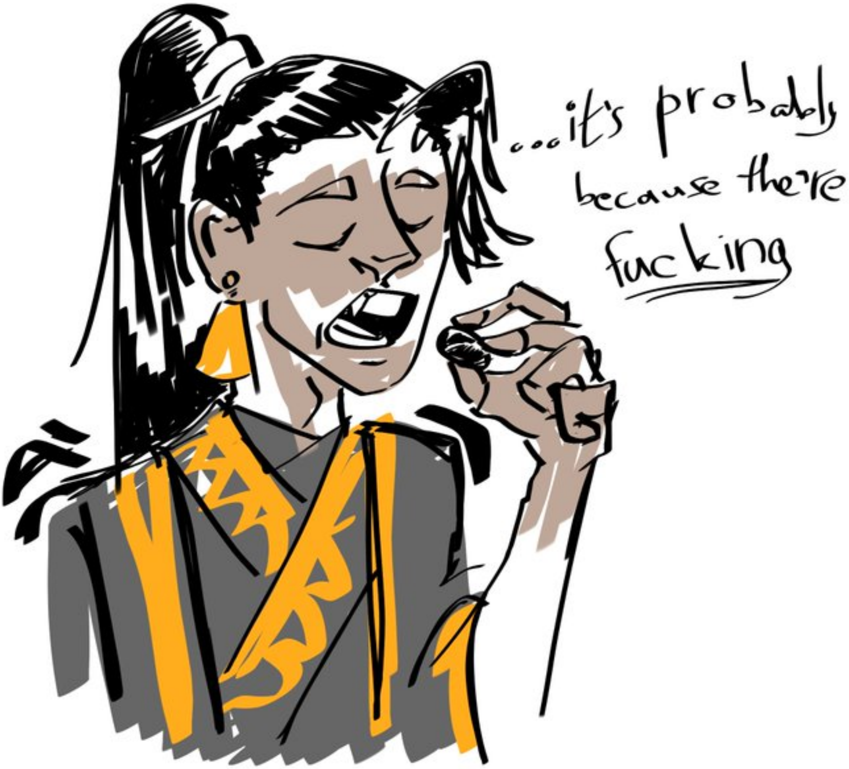
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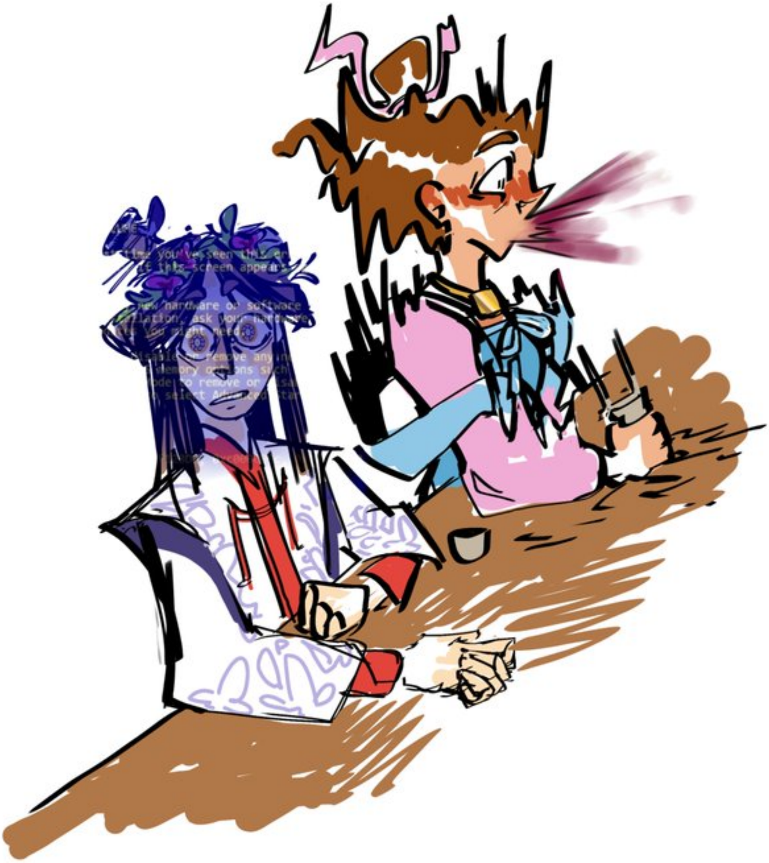
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CREDIT: **Шуряндр**

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you to Шуряндр for this amazing work of art, and allowing me to share it!! I'm so grateful!
>
> P.S. I wanted to apologize for the lack of daily updates! When I started posting this story on AO3, around 100k was already written! As I've been playing catch up, there was always about 100k of the story that wasn't posted on AO3, so I could throw up a chapter each day without issue! The only problem now, unfortunately, is that we have reached the point where there are only 49k words of unposted content, so if I continued posting daily, we would quickly run out! I'm in my last year of graduate school, and while I could get away with writing 10k words a day over winter break, unfortunately my brain gets a little tired

during the semester and I write a bit more slowly. I'm trying to let a little more content build up, and in the mean time I'll still be updating frequently (like 2-3 days), and the chapters will probably get a little shorter. (I know they've been pretty long so far, I've been trying to keep the final chapter count for this story under 100, but I have given up.)

Thank you for your patience!

xoxo, Evie

The Battle of the Lanterns

Chapter Summary

> The Water Master rolls his eyes, opening his mouth to say something about having enough of festivals after this, but…
>
> He stops, his eyes narrowing slightly.
>
> "…Hold on," he mutters, shaking his head, "There's something off with the count."
>
> "What are you—?"
>
> "That was nine."

Chapter Notes

> enjoy a valentine's day special, hualian style!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Being as popular as she is, the Wind Master is able to snag them a spot near the front without a problem, leaning against the railing as she pulls Xie Lian up beside her, smiling. "It always starts slow," She comments. "But the top ten in the count are always exciting!"

"Yes," Xie Lian agrees with a smile, happy to be in the open air at least, and slightly less…distracted, hearing her sound so excited. "It's nice."

He only attended two or three mid-autumn festivals in the heavens before this, it's difficult to remember…

But back then, he was always in second place, only beaten by Jun Wu.

This year, he knows he won't receive any lanterns at all—which is fine, no one expects anything different of him.

The only person left to be disappointed in it is himself, and he's just fine. There is one pleasant surprise to be found in all of this.

Slowly, a gold speck of light, not so different from a small flame or a tiny star, drifts up into the air, floating over their heads.

And Xie Lian—he can actually see it.

Which is a surprise—but it makes sense.

He never knew that the offering lanterns from the mid-autumn festival contained spiritual power, but it certainly explains why they're so expensive to purchase—and even more difficult to make.

Obviously, only the most powerful gods with devoted hordes of followers would be able to receive them in larger numbers.

Xie Lian smiles faintly, the golden light of the lantern reflected in the shackles of his eyes as it floats overhead.

Pretty.

It's very pretty.

An announcer calls out over the crowd, reading over the numbers. "FOR THE RAIN MASTER, YUSHI HUANG...ONE LANTERN!"

Xie Lian pauses, surprised to hear that name.

"...She really only got one?"

Obviously, he isn't being judgmental. After all, he has none.

But for such an ancient, popular goddess...a patron of agriculture no less...he expected her to receive more than that.

"Oh, yes," Shi Qingxuan nods, "she orders her followers not to send them—she insists it's wasteful. She just sends one up for herself each year, and that's all."

"Really?" Xie Lian perks up, his tone notably approving. "How economical."

The Wind Master smiles at him fondly, shaking her head. "She'll have them leave offerings of vegetables instead—then have them come pick them up the next day, so nothing goes to waste."

"That is such a good idea..." Xie Lian mutters, rubbing his chin. It's not as though he has any worshippers to order to do the same, but if he ever does, he'll have to try and get that message out there.

After all—Gods are around to help mortals, not the other way around.

Shi Qingxuan wasn't wrong—it was slow going, in the beginning. One by one, minor gods and deities with smaller totals have their names called out, along with their number of lanterns, the names of their temples.

Some even grumble to have received so few.

Xie Lian finds it horribly ungrateful, listening as they complain about their followers not working hard enough.

Considering how expensive the lanterns are, they're lucky that humans in the mortal realm were able to send as many as they did. How can they complain?

Still, he's proud when they come to eleventh place, and he hears Lang Qianqiu's name called out.

It's impressive, for a martial god his age to rank so high, nearly cracking the prestigious 'top ten' in the Battle of the Lanterns.

A gong rings, signaling that they've finally entered the final phase, and the crowd stirs with excitement.

From beside him, Shi Qingxuan bounces with happiness, squeezing Xie Lian's arm, "This means I'm in the top ten, your highness!" She whispers excitedly. "That's never happened before!"

Xie Lian can't help but smile, pleased on her behalf.

"Congratulations, Lady Wind Master—it's quite an accomplishment."

She beams, just as tenth place is read out—

"TENTH PLACE—THE PALACE OF QI YING, WITH FOUR HUNDRED AND TWENTY ONE LANTERNS!"

Xie Lian gawks, surprised. After all, that's quite a big jump from the place below it, and...Quan Yizhen is half Lang Qianqiu's age.

...Just how powerful is he, anyway?

Still, there's polite cheers and applause, even if the martial god is too busy beating his own worshippers (who are in the middle of sending up these lanterns, WHILE being beaten by the god they're offering them to) to accept the praise.

The entire situation is utterly bizarre.

"IN NINTH PLACE, THE EARTH MASTER, MING YI, WITH FOUR

HUNDRED AND TWENTY FOUR LANTERNS!"

"MING-XIONG!" Shi Qingxuan gasps, whooping with excitement as she turns around, "YOU MADE NINTH PLACE!"

Everyone else barely claps politely, but she more than makes up for it.

In this form, she's even shorter than Xie Lian, forced to leap up to fling her arms around the earth master's neck, feet dangling as she congratulates him. "You deserved more!" She beams up at him, hugging him tightly. "Way, way more!"

"..." Ming Yi rolls his eyes, looking away. "Who cares," he mutters.

(Even so, he wraps one arm around the small of her back, making sure she doesn't stumble back to the ground when her arms grow tired.)

Shi Qingxuan pouts. "I care!" She grumbles. "It's annoying, waiting for everyone else to notice how AMAZING you are!"

Xie Lian smiles behind his hand, feeling a little bad for Ming Yi, who is clearly embarrassed (but too stubborn and proud to admit it) by Shi Qingxuan's praise.

Still, it seems like part of him enjoys it.

It's rare to see two people so different, but so well suited.

"IN EIGHTH PLACE, THE WIND MASTER, SHI QINGXUAN...WITH FIVE HUNDRED AND TWENTY THREE LANTERNS!"

The crowd erupts with shocked applause—and for someone as popular as Shi Qingxuan, many people cry out her praises.

"AS EXPECTED!"

"CONGRATULATIONS, LADY WIND MASTER!"

Shi Qingxuan glances up at Ming Yi, still dangling from around his neck, biting her lip—practically vibrating with excitement.

"..." The raven haired man rolls his eyes once more, but...

She sees the slightest twinkle there—

"Go on and gloat, you big baby."

Shi Qingxuan lets out a breath she didn't know she was holding, smiling brighter than any of the lanterns pouring into the sky in her name.

Quickly, she drops to the ground, running to the railing again to greet the roaring crowds, jumping and waving.

Ming Yi leans back against the pillar behind him, crossing his arms, watching her with the smallest of smiles on his face.

"GE!" She cries out, brimming with pride and happiness, "I MADE EIGHTH! DID YOU SEE?"

And just as quickly, that smile fades.

From his place at the head of the crowd, Shi Wudu hums, fanning himself, "Of course you did." As if such a thing was only to be expected. "Next year, you'll do even better."

Shi Qingxuan's smile fades slightly, and Xie Lian feels...a very specific kind of sympathy.

The Water Master isn't being cruel. His words are technically praise, and yet...

It's the mere expectation of greatness—perfection, even—that can make one's accomplishments feel like less. And the threat of disappointment so much greater.

Xie Lian knows the feeling all too well.

Still, the Water Master is proud of Shi Qingxuan. Xie Lian knows that from their conversation before, when Xie Lian returned to the grand martial hall after Hua Cheng swept him away.

He just wishes that Shi Qingxuan's older brother had an easier time showing it.

"IN SEVENTH PLACE, THE PALACE OF LING WEN, WITH FIVE HUNDRED AND THIRTY SIX LANTERNS!"

Absolutely none of the civil gods congratulate him, doing little more than clapping politely. Shi Wudu, however, grins, poking his friend lightly in the arm.

"When's the celebratory feast?"

"No, no," Pei snorts, catching Ling Wen in a headlock from the other side, ruffling his hair as the other martial gods shout out their congratulations, "Drinking and women, that's how a winner celebrates!"

"Pei!" The Water Master scolds him. "You'll make him blush!"

Ling Wen rolls his eyes, but squished between the two of them...

The Civil God actually, for once, seems happy and relaxed.

"...Yeah," he smirks, glancing over at Shi Wudu, "You can show me your female form, and I'll buy you a drink."

Pei chokes on his own laughter.

"OI! Let's not take it that far!"

"What?" The Water Master arches an eyebrow at him, hanging off of Ling Wen's other side with a teasing smile. "You said you liked my female form."

"But—!"

"Don't be selfish, Pei," Ling Wen snorts, enjoying seeing him so riled.

"You already said, that's how a winner celebrates!"

Their ribbing carries on as the rest of the lanterns drift up, and Xie Lian can see what Shi Qingxuan meant, when she explained the concept of the "three tumors."

Pei Ming, Ling Wen, and Shi Wudu do stand apart from the rest.

But the friendship that runs between the three of them seems to be deep—and genuine.

To the point where it almost aches, reminding Xie Lian of those who stood beside him before. How the three of them stood apart from the others—but always close to one another.

And, as though prompted by his thoughts alone—

"IN SIXTH PLACE, THE PALACE OF NAN YANG, WITH FIVE HUNDRED AND SEVENTY TWO LANTERNS!"

Ah.

Xie Lian smiles, lifting his hands to clap for his friend as the other martial gods cheer.

He—

“IN FIFTH PLACE, THE PALACE OF XUAN ZHEN, WITH FIVE HUNDRED AND SEVENTY THREE LANTERNS!”

...They’ve both done rather well, haven’t they?

“...Are they normally so close together in number?” He murmurs, watching the lanterns flood up towards the sky curiously.

After all, it would make sense for it to get more competitive, the closer you get to the top.

“...Not THAT close,” Shi Qingxuan shakes her head, “but the followers for those two make it a competition between, always trying to one up the other.”

Now, isn’t that familiar.

“Usually they’ll be rushing to beat the other out until the last second. It looks like Xuan Zhen finally edged one out this year...”

(Usually, Nan Yang eeks it out by two or three lanterns.)

Still, neither of the martial gods in question seem to care.

Even Mu Qing, who has never before achieved the top five, can’t even manage a smile.

His lips turn up in a mere show of obligation, but it’s clear that there’s no real joy in it.

He can only think about...

“IN FOURTH PLACE, THE PALACE OF MING GUANG, FIVE HUNDRED AND EIGHTY LANTERNS!”

Every martial god immediately leaps forward, crying out praise, applauding the general. Xie Lian claps too, but...he’s surprised it was close to Feng Xin and Mu Qing at all.

Not to say that his friends are weak—they aren’t.

But in means of power and the number of worshippers—Pei Ming is by far the strongest martial god (aside from the obvious winner.)

And Xie Lian isn't the only one surprised.

Even Shi Qingxuan sounds...bothered.

"...That's a lot less than last year," she mutters, her brow furrowed. A hundred less, to be more specific.

Likely due to the highly public scandal of Pei Xiu's banishment. Without the strong foundation the god already had, he might have lost even more than that.

Xie Lian can't help but feel a little bit responsible, even if the general didn't seem to blame him.

Ling Wen doesn't congratulate him, simply patting his shoulder, and...The Water Master squeezes his arm, looking up at him.

"They'll be back next year, Pei. It will pass."

"..." The Martial God glances down at him, offering a half hearted smile.

The Water Master, always so guarded and jaded, seems to sincerely believe that.

It's funny, because really—it's easy to come to the conclusion that Shi Wudu doesn't believe in anything but himself.

But that isn't true. "You're sure?"

No one is looking at them, awaiting the next group of lanterns, watching the mortal realm below.

As such, no one sees the look that is shared.

"Even if I have to drag them up myself."

Pei clicks his tongue, pretending to be disapproving.

"Such a tyrant," he murmurs.

His gaze, however, is warm.

"AND FINALLY..." The announcer cries, an entire horde of lights bursting through the opening, "THE PALACE OF THE WATER

MASTER, WITH SEVEN HUNDRED AND EIGHTEEN LANTERNS!"

Gasps echo throughout.

Jun Wu's total was announced at the beginning, of course—he's rarely ever counted in the ranking, as it would be considered unfair.

A thousand lanterns.

But Shi Wudu has now come closer than anyone else has, less than three hundred lanterns short of his total.

Actually rivaling him.

Even in Xie Lian's day, when lanterns were far more difficult to come by, he didn't come that close. Not even proportionally.

It's quite the accomplishment.

The crowd absolutely roars with applause, louder than any before, civil and martial gods alike.

But the Water Master, even in light of such a rare achievement, doesn't turn his eyes away from Pei for even a moment.

It seems to matter very little to him.

Pei, however, smiles wider than he has all night, leaning down to whisper in his ear— something that no one else hears.

"Look at you go, kid."

Shi Wudu's eyes widen.

"I'm proud of you."

Now, they grow as wide as they could possibly be—and his cheeks...turn somewhat pink.

That never happens, not in public—and he has to snap his fan open in front of his face in order to hide it.

"I'm four centuries old," he grumbles, glaring up at him sharply. "Don't call me that."

Pei throws his head back with a laugh, and before Shi Wudu can continue chewing him out, Ling Wen pulls him into a brief—tight—

hug.

“It better be a celebratory festival, not just a feast.”

The Water Master rolls his eyes, opening his mouth to say something about having enough of festivals after this, but…

He stops, his eyes narrowing slightly.

“…Hold on,” he mutters, shaking his head, “There’s something off with the count.”

“What are you—?”

“That was nine.”

Xie Lian hasn’t even noticed the issue, too busy being hugged and spun around by Shi Qingxuan, who is still celebrating the Water Master’s win.

“That’s MY BROTHER! Did you see?! That’s MY gege!”

“Yes,” Xie Lian can’t help but laugh affectionately, nodding in agreement. “That’s your big brother!”

The celebration and mirth fades, however, when he starts to hear the whispers.

“…Someone beat the water master?”

“No, no, that can’t be right…”

“Could it be that Pei’s numbers weren’t actually so low this year?”

“Even if they weren’t…”

“Shi Wudu’s numbers were high enough this year to beat Pei at his best…”

So, what on earth…?

“Hey—look!”

The Heavenly Court turns in unison, looking down at the opening to the mortal realm below, Xie Lian among them.

Just in time to see an explosion of light. So bright, it fills the entire night sky.

An ocean of lanterns, so many of them, their reflections completely drown out the cursed glow of Xie Lian's shackles. And he—

He's seen so many things in the last eight hundred years. Some good, some bad. But nothing like this.

So bright, that it's almost like seeing the stars again.

Like that night on Mount Yu Jun, with the butterflies—but this—

Xie Lian gasps quietly, tilting his chin back, attempting to take in the sheer scope of them.

They must be Jun Wu's, but...

Suddenly, Xie Lian notices that everyone standing near him has gone completely silent, standing back to give him a much wider berth than they did before.

"T..." The announcer stammers, "THREE THOUSAND AND ONE LANTERNS..."

That many? How—?

"...FOR THE CROWN PRINCE OF XIANLE!"

For a moment, there's only shocked silence.

Xie Lian stops, staring out at the light surrounding him, his jaw hanging open. "...Me?" He whispers, disbelieving, countless sparks of light reflected in his eyes.

"You," Shi Qingxuan agrees faintly, equally stunned.

And Xie Lian isn't the only one who has a hard time believing it.

As a matter of fact, some officials openly protest the call.

"There must be a mistake!"

"Are those even real lanterns?! They could be fakes!"

Xie Lian can't imagine why anyone would do that—except as a prank.

Which isn't beyond the realm of possibility, of course—but that's quite a bit of effort for a simple joke, and Xie Lian can't imagine anyone caring enough about him to do that.

Then again, he can't imagine anyone caring enough to send that many real lanterns, either.

Ling Wen steps back from examining the list, shaking his head, speaking loudly and clearly over the protests of the crowd:

"They're all real."

Then, over the outburst of shock in response to that— "And clearly labeled, too. They're for the crown prince."

"But! But…who—?!"

Ling Wen picks out one lantern from the horde, checking the label. "One is from the Shrine of The Crown Prince of Xianle in the city of Gusu…"

Xie Lian perks up, surprised, and… Genuinely touched.

He…he has a shrine in Gusu? They…built one for him?

Honestly, given the fact that it's only been a couple of months, and the city was left in absolute disarray…the fact that they took the time to do that, and they were even able to scrape together enough for just one lantern…

Xie Lian swallows hard, his chest filled with warmth

Well, that lantern is real, then.

The rest are definitely a mistake, but—still.

He got a lantern! An entire lantern, just for him! His first offering in eight hundred years!

He—he has a shrine—one that he didn't build himself! He—He needs to visit, and bring some charms!

Oh, and he'll have to tell them to offer vegetables next year, instead. If they even want to make offerings next year. If they don't, Xie Lian won't mind!

Just the one is plenty!

He presses his hands to his cheeks, struggling to contain the sudden rush of… happiness.

He really isn't used to it anymore—it's a little difficult to handle!

That's when Ling Wen finishes his survey of the other lanterns, speaking to the crowd:

"The other three thousand are clearly labeled in his name…sent from Qiandeng temple."

…Qiandeng Temple?

Several people glance around, speaking among themselves, trying to figure out if anyone has heard of the place before—and no one has.

Even Xie Lian feels compelled to admit: "…I've never heard of it either, actually."

But…

He has a temple?

An entire temple? Just for him?

But…why?

It makes sense, with Gusu. He helped free the city. Even if the shrine and the lantern was more than he expected in return, Xie Lian understands why they would do that.

But…he can't think of anyone else who would bother with that.

After all, it's a complete waste. Why build a shrine to him, when other gods can actually provide something to their worshippers?

Who would go through all of that effort, knowing they would receive absolutely nothing in return? People don't just—

"Ah," Pei Ming smirks, his arms slung around Shi Wudu and Ling Wen's shoulders as he speaks up, his voice easily carrying across the crowd, "I told all of you—Crimson Rain Sought Flower didn't kidnap the Crown Prince with ill intentions."

Xie Lian stares, his lips parted.

Well—he's right. Hua Cheng was only trying to help him. But what does that have to do with—?

That’s when he notices it.

See, the spiritual shell around any blessing lantern is gold, a byproduct of the spell lifting them up to the heavens.

But the flames inside these lanterns…

…They’re burning crimson.

Xie Lian stares, his hands still pressed against his cheeks, eyes wide.

Oh.

One Lantern floats down to hover in front of his face.

Hua Cheng…

The prince swallows hard, reaching out to take the lantern between his hands.

…Hua Cheng did this.

Ba-bump.

Hua Cheng did this…for him.

He can hear people around muttering that it must be some sort of taunt to the heavens. Spitting in their faces by turning the Battle of the Lanterns into a joke, but…

All of the sudden, a silver butterfly springs from the lantern.

Several people nearby scream and jump back—but Xie Lian doesn’t even flinch when the creature flutters forward, landing on the tip of his nose before dissolving in a shower of silver sparks.

And he can’t help but laugh happily, holding the lantern close against his chest. In that moment, the prince knows two things:

First, that whatever reason Hua Cheng sent so many lanterns, it wasn’t as a joke. He would never make Xie Lian the punchline.

Second: Xie Lian realizes, in that moment, how badly he wants to see him.

It wasn't as though he hadn't been aware of it before. There were moments in the last few weeks when he wondered if San Lang would visit the shrine.

After all, he had warned Xie Lian that he might 'get sick of him' if he gave him free reign to visit, but...Then, he didn't.

And Xie Lian hadn't held that against him. Hua Cheng is a busy man, and there was every chance that he had only said that to be nice, but...

The crown prince clutches the blessing lantern against his chest, looking at the flood of them still rising through the air.

All this time...was Hua Cheng preparing this?

Xie Lian bites his lip, fingers crinkling the paper sides of the lantern for a moment before he remembers his strength, not wanting to crush it accidentally.

Just for him, who hadn't been likely to receive a single lantern? Xie Lian, he...

It's been such a long time since anyone worked so hard, just to do something kind for him.

Finally, he lets go of the lantern, allowing it to float back up and join the rest. But his hands are still pleasantly warm from where they held it.

Xie Lian wants to see him.

To thank him, of course. And to ask him about how Paradise Manor is doing. Oh, and to tell him what a help Shuo has been. And to ask him what he thinks of Ming Yi's theories about Pei, Xie Lian...doesn't trust his own instincts with that.

(Unlike before, when he received his lantern from Gusu, the thought of asking Hua Cheng to send vegetables next year doesn't cross Xie Lian's mind, not once.)

Debate still echoes across the pavilion, with everyone trying to discredit the prince's win, but...

"Congratulations."

The Emperor's voice forces everyone else to fall silent, stunned at first.

After all--if there was some form of cheating going on, he was the one robbed of a win, but...

On the contrary, he's the first to congratulate the prince, leaning his chin on his hand as he watches the lanterns drifting overhead.

"Xianle has always had a way of creating miracles..." He muses, his lips twisting into a small smile.

Half fond, half something else.

A darker emotion lingers behind his gaze; faint and unknowable.

Xie Lian shakes his head, his eyes never leaving the sky above.

"I had nothing to do with this, my lord." He replies.

(It's rare that he forgets to refer to himself in the third tense, speaking to Jun Wu.)

This was all San Lang.

He's the amazing one, not Xie Lian.

Once she recovers from the shock, Shi Qingxuan finally manages to congratulate him, wrapping her arms around the prince as she jumps up and down, cheering him on.

Few other gods do, but the prince doesn't mind.

Despite being one of those slighted by Xie Lian's sudden win, Shi Wudu doesn't seem to mind. Instead, he's simply listening to Pei and Ling Wen making plans to celebrate in the mortal realm—drawing Shi Qingxuan's attention.

"Ge, are you going with them?"

"...No," the Water Master shrugs. "I have business with the emperor."

"Are you looking to take his place?" Ling Wen questions, his previously neat hair style askew from Pei's rough housing. "We'd be delighted."

That's a lie, and both Pei and Shi Qingxuan roll their eyes in unison

"Actually, I already have plans," she mutters, glancing over at Xie Lian. "What about you? You're welcome to join, your highness!"

"..." The prince finally manages to break his gaze from the lanterns, lowering his chin. "Actually, I plan on returning to my shrine."

The Wind Master frowns, glancing over at Ming Yi, but...as per usual, he's not any help. Actually, he somehow managed to sneak an entire lamb shank out of the feast, and has taken to tearing hunks out of it with his teeth.

"You're sure? It's a night for celebration!"

"I need to check on things," Xie Lian explains. "And after that, I need to thank..." his voice fades, and he's almost surprised to find himself...sheepish. "I need to thank San Lang."

"Ah," Shi Qingxuan perks up, her eyes wide. "Safe travels to you then, your highness!"

Xie Lian nods, stepping back from the crowds. She offers to help him descend, of course—and as enjoyable as that sounds, the prince wants her to be able to enjoy the rest of the celebration with Ming Yi.

Ruoye shivers around his neck, still overwhelmed from all the excitement.

Xie Lian reaches down to stroke it gently, "It's alright," he murmurs. "I know you don't want to bind Qi Rong again when we get back, but...I can give you a bath soon, how does that sound?"

The bandage curls against his skin, sulking.

"...I can try to find fancy soap?"

It's not particularly comforting, but it's more luxurious than what Ruoye usually gets, so...

"Wait."

His steps halt in the city street, just before the gates leading down to the mortal realm below.

He's half relieved that they stopped him. Half dreading the reason why.

Feng Xin was the one who spoke first, but once the word is out of his mouth, he falls silent again, hanging his head.

His lips are pressed together tightly, hands balled up into fists by his sides. Xie Lian is facing away from them both, his expression hidden from view.

"...Congratulations," Feng Xin mutters, and for a moment, in spite of everything, Xie Lian almost forgets what he's being congratulated for.

If not for the lights floating overhead–the only lights that he can see–the anxiety of this moment would have made him forget.

"...Thank you," Xie Lian mumbles, not realizing how hard he's biting his lip–not until the skin nearly breaks. "I was glad…to see the two of you do so well..."

After all, ranking only beneath Pei and the Water Master is quite an achievement, but...

"...I was just going," he mutters, swallowing hard. "I have things I need to–"

"We're really not going to talk about it?”

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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(Xiong Li and Lan An sending up a lantern from Gusu)

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2022

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Chapter End Notes

thank you so much to kefir, esme, tealightful, syl and marta for their beautiful artwork, and allowing me to share it!

xoxo, Evie

Crossroads

Chapter Summary

> “You expect us to hear that...and then what, just...nothing?”
>
> Xie Lian doesn’t look back at either one of them. “It was just a play, there’s nothing to talk about.”
>
> Feng Xin grits his teeth, hanging his head once more.

Chapter Notes

> I want to apologize in advance for how long this chapter is, I couldn't find a good way to split it. The delay in update is a direct result of the length! Thank you for your patience!
>
> Content Warnings for this Chapter: there is a PTSD related panic attack.

Feng Xin is prone to frustration. Aggression is his means for masking anxiety. Xie Lian knows that.

It's just rare for Feng Xin to be frustrated with him.

“...About what?”

It might sound like he’s playing dumb—but he isn’t. There’s an edge to his voice. A hunch to his shoulders.

Mu Qing’s arms tighten where they’re crossed over his chest—but, for once, he’s oddly quiet.

“The play!” Feng Xin stares at the back of his head intently “You expect us to hear that...and then what, just...nothing?”

Xie Lian doesn’t look back at either one of them. “It was just a play, there’s nothing to talk about.”

Feng Xin grits his teeth, hanging his head once more.

Slowly, his attention turns to the one person who hasn’t said a word:

“...Did you know?!”

Mu Qing starts, sending him a shocked look, proverbial hackles rising defensively.

“Why the fuck would you ask me that?”

“There’s nothing to know,” Xie Lian repeats. “It was just a...”

“...” Mu Qing sends Feng Xin a frustrated glare, but when he speaks, his voice is...

Well, for once in his life, the god actually sounds...gentle.

“...It did happen, your highness,” he mutters. Quietly, but firm.

Xie Lian doesn’t turn around, his heart in his throat.

Of course, they know.

‘It hurts.’

Those were the words he said before, on Mount Yu Jun. Just before he passed out.

The words he said in his sleep, trembling with fright when Mu Qing was trying to treat his injured arm.

And if that wasn’t enough... They saw his reaction.

Shi Qingxuan—she’s only known Xie Lian for a month at most. Xie Lian can pull off a fake smile and a calm voice, and have her perceive that as calm.

Not with them.

But it’s Mu Qing’s response that surprises him.

“You don’t have to talk about it,” he mutters. “But...we know.”

Feng Xin sends him a look that seems...

Betrayed isn’t the right word. That implies that he expected Mu Qing to be on his side.

But on this—on this one thing—he seems to have genuinely thought they were going to be a united front.

“Like hell he doesn’t!”

Feng Xin glances back and forth—from Xie Lian’s back, turned away and silent, to Mu Qing's guarded, distant expression, and—

"How are we supposed to just ignore that?!"

Mu Qing's arms are firmly crossed over his chest, a defensive stance, just as closed off as Xie Lian's.

"…There are some things you don't make a person talk about, Feng Xin," he mutters, and Feng Xin…

His tone is angry. His stance is angry. Everything about him reeks frustration. But his gaze is agonized.

"…Right," he mutters, his tone somewhat raw as he stares Mu Qing down, all while the silver haired god refuses to look back at him, "you two have that in common."

Having things—painful things—that they refuse to speak of.

"…Talking about it won't help—"

"HOW THE FUCK DO YOU KNOW?!"

Mu Qing and Xie Lian each recoil in their own way. The martial god shrinks back slightly, while the prince jumps at the sudden shout.

"We've spent the last EIGHT CENTURIES not talking about ANYTHING! Guess what?! THAT hasn't helped EITHER!"

Xie Lian can't seem to make himself turn around, because—

If he does, he'll see the hurt in Feng Xin's eyes, and he doesn't think he can stand that right now.

Mu Qing, however, doesn't back down.

"You could have picked a better fucking moment!"

"When?!" Feng Xin throws his hands up. "Because there will ALWAYS be a reason to put it off, or to avoid it! Or, even worse, you just—you just DISAPPEAR for centuries, and—"

"—Feng Xin—" Xe Lian tries, just as Mu Qing reaches out, however reluctantly, placing a hand on his shoulder—

"NO!" Feng Xin wrenches away from him, away from both of them, taking a couple of steps back. "The two of you—you ALWAYS act like

I'm this oblivious idiot who can't understand shit, but—" He grits his teeth, shaking his head, "Neither of you EVER tell me ANYTHING!"

"I didn't—"

"And then it's, 'it's not a good time,' and 'he doesn't have to talk about it,' but—" He presses his hands against his temples, his shoulders shaking. "That just means that we are *never* going to talk about it."

He isn't wrong.

"It's not like we're gonna sit down and have a nice heart to heart about the coffin thing either, right?" He shakes his head, "We just...sailed right on into the next crisis, didn't we?"

Because that's what they always seem to do.

Xie Lian finally forces himself to turn around—and when he does, he's relieved that he can't see the look on Feng Xin's face. He doesn't think he could stand that.

Mu Qing isn't given the same luxury—and he can barely stand to look at him.

"...Bai Wuxiang is dead." The prince has to fight to keep his voice even, just saying that name. "He's been dead for eight centuries."

"...And did knowing that make it any easier for you to sit through that?" Feng Xin asks, already knowing the answer. "Do you think that made it any easier for us to hear?"

No, it—

Xie Lian hangs his head, pressing his palm against his forehead, taking a long, slow breath.

No, it didn't.

"...It's been eight centuries," he repeats those words again—but this time his voice... It's quiet. Tired. "Why does it even matter anymore?"

Mu Qing stares at him, opening his mouth, struggling for words—but he can't seem to find them.

After all, he doesn't have just the play on his mind. Before that, there was the sword.

Knowing that, all this time, he...

"...I don't know why it doesn't matter to you." Feng Xin's voice has always been strong. Steady.

Not right now.

"It matters to me, because—I didn't promise to protect you until it got hard," he croaks, nails biting into his palms. "I promised to protect you forever."

Now, it's wavering, and Xie Lian's heart aches with it.

"And one day, you—" He sucks in a deep breath, his eyes stinging, "...you just stopped letting me."

Xie Lian has perfected the art of selective memory. Keeping the things that make the days go by easier, working hard to forget the things that hurt to remember.

"Then, I just had to sit there, listening to—'Feng Xin, help me,'" his voice cracks, and this time, when Mu Qing places a hand on his elbow, he doesn't have it in him to shove the other god away.

Xie Lian was almost able to forget.

'Stop following me, Feng Xin.'

'You can't help me.'

He hurt Feng Xin, back then.

And Xie Lian can't explain it to him—not fully—without hurting him even more. He can't explain what Bai Wuxiang did, wearing his friend's face.

That would hurt so much more.

"...I don't think you're an idiot, Feng Xin," Xie Lian mumbles, wanting to reach out for him, but it feels as though he's rooted in place. "And if you want to talk, I just...I don't..."

Xie Lian has no idea what there is to say. "When?"

The prince winces, biting his lip.

"When did it happen?"

“That really won’t—”

“Was it before, or after?”

Xie Lian knows what he means, of course.

Before Xie Lian sent Feng Xin away, or after.

“...” The prince grits his teeth, closing his eyes tightly. “It was before.”
“And you just—you never said?”

Xie Lian probably would have, if he hadn’t forced Feng Xin to leave immediately after that. He would have told someone.

It’s just...there was nobody around left to tell.

“Was it during those years you were off on your own?!”

“No...” Xie Lian mumbles, grasping the chain around his neck. He can understand why Feng Xin might think that. After all, the prince was so profoundly damaged when he returned, but...

That was from losing Hong’er. Which, in the long run, hurt so much more than the stabbing.

“Then when could it have—?”

There’s a certain level of irony packed into this moment, when Xie Lian’s patience frays, and he just wants to say whatever Feng Xin needs to hear.

“It was after the fight the three of us had—”

“Which one?!”

“Feng Xin,” Mu Qing yanks at his arm. “Just let it go, this isn’t—”

“The last one!”

The words fall out of his mouth, and Xie Lian can’t see the look on Feng Xin’s face. The way his eyes slowly widen with recognition.

But that isn’t the worst part, or where the irony lies. There’s a pained, broken sound.

So often, Mu Qing has tried to hurt someone with his words, only to have them land on someone he never intended.

Always sharpening his knives—but never as good at aiming them.

It's almost fair, then, that the *one* argument he didn't help start was the one where he got hurt.

Because—

'You know I—I really felt bad for you, when you told me about that guy you were in love with.'

He takes a step back from both of them.

Because that means...

'I guess it must be a relief that he never had to see this, isn't it?'

...It was Mu Qing's fault.

He was the reason Xie Lian ran off by himself that day.

He was the reason that fight happened, to begin with.

He should have known better, than going back there. Trying to fix it, when they—

When Feng Xin and Xie Lian—they didn't want him to come back.

Mu Qing knew that.

And he's regretted the things he said that night. More than he's ever been able to say.

But he never knew the extent of the harm he caused.

Feng Xin stares at him, not quite understanding, but slightly panicked to see—

In 800 years, he's almost never seen Mu Qing in tears.

The most vivid instance he can remember was when they were young. During the war, when one of Mu Qing's sisters...caught it.

Back then, there was absolutely nothing that could be said to comfort him.

"...Hey," Feng Xin croaks, reaching out to grab his shoulder. "What...what the fuck..."

There’s no bite to his words, just…

“Don’t…”

Worry.

That’s when it clicks for Xie Lian, and his face falls.

“Oh…” He swallows hard, taking a step forward. “Oh, Mu Qing, you didn’t…”
It wasn’t his fault.

They both made mistakes.

Xie Lian only hurt Feng Xin once. And he hurt him deeply, but—

Mu Qing has always been the most complicated relationship in his life. A bond somewhere between friendship and servitude, strained by imbalances of power.

Marked with so many moments of unintentional cruelty.

Mu Qing is bitter, insecure, and wrathful. When he's unkind, it's obvious–and everyone sees it.

But coming from someone like Xie Lian–someone gentle, beloved, and admired… His moments of immaturity went unnoticed.

And he was unkind to Mu Qing. More times than he can count.

So many tiny moments of carelessness, when they were growing up.

Most people would never think back on them. But Xie Lian–

He's had 800 years to do nothing but think about those things, and there are two moments that have always stood apart.

Not that they were particularly cruel–but simply because of how careless he was. How self centered.

From the day he met Hong'er for the first time.

He had wanted to make a more convincing entrance as a 'god,' planning to leap down onto the Martial Avenue from above.

He asked Mu Qing–who already had so much on his own plate, getting the prince prepared for the parade, preparing for his own role, along with his other duties--to go and tell the Guoshis of his plan.

Then, allowed Feng Xin to berate Mu Qing for failing to deliver it properly.

And looking back on it, Xie Lian never paid attention to or cared much about the way Mei Nianqing and the others treated Mu Qing.

It wasn't of enough importance to be noticed.

Or how, later, when Hong'er was clinging to his robes, Mu Qing had said something about them getting stained with blood and dirt...

And Xie Lian's response had been to snap at him. To say, ' *you'll just have to wash them, then.'* Because that was Mu Qing's job.

But you don't speak to a friend that way.

You don't treat someone you respect that way.

Mu Qing has said worse to him. Far, far worse. But on far fewer occasions.

Xie Lian has years of small, passive moments of unkindness to reconcile himself with.

And, of course–

'I was HAPPY when you left!'

'It was a RELIEF, so just–just GO!'

Mu Qing hurt Xie Lian. He hurt him deeply.

But that doesn't mean Xie Lian hasn't made his own mistakes, and he sees no point in weighing their wrongs against each other.

He's never once blamed Mu Qing for what happened that day. Blamed him for his words, yes. Blamed him and Feng Xin for constantly letting their arguments get out of control, but...

What happened in the temple–that will never be Mu Qing's fault. That's no one's fault but his.

Xie Lian caused Bai Wuxiang's descent upon Xianle. He brought it upon himself.

And he knew, that day–even when Wu Ming's ghost fire tried to stop him, over and over again–that he was chasing the calamity into a trap.

He just didn't care.

What happened after...was his fault.

Knowing that, and listening to Mu Qing's pained, shuddering breaths–

That makes it so much worse.

"You didn't..." Xie Lian repeats, trying to find the words to explain it, to make Mu Qing see that he doesn't blame him, but...

There are tear tracks on Mu Qing's cheeks.

Wetness drips from his chin. Silent, other than the broken intake of his breaths.

Feng Xin's hand tightens on his shoulder, his expression dark, strained.

And of course, Mu Qing knows he must be angry with him too.

Feng Xin must hate him for this, too.

Because Mu Qing does. Because Mu Qing always has.

(The truth, however, is that the Martial God simply can't stand to see him in tears.)

"..." He tugs his shoulder out of Feng Xin's grip, taking another step back.

They were always better as a duo.

The Crown Prince fo Xianle and his personal guard. Loyal to the end.

Mu Qing was always the one thing that didn't fit. The part of the story that didn't belong.

Always wanting things he can't have. Losing his temper. Saying things that he can't take back.

And nobody ever wanted him there. He was placed by Xie Lian's side because of a secret.

A crime. Their friendship was built on a bribe of silence.

Feng Xin certainly wasn't happy with his presence. Xie Lian was kind enough to tolerate him.

Neither of them ever wanted to be his friend.

Neither of them ever wanted Mu Qing there in the first place.

And neither of them ever wanted Mu Qing to come back.

Because when it's just Xie Lian and Feng Xin, they don't fight. Xie Lian–

Xie Lian doesn't get hurt.

Because they love one another.

They always have.

But never him.

And why should they?

His jaw trembles, and the tears keep accelerating on their own.

"Mu Qing..." Xie Lian tries again, "Please, don't–"

When Mu Qing speaks, something in the prince's heart cracks.

"...Con-C..." he chokes, his voice cracking and wobbling with every syllable. Because for once, Mu Qing isn't lashing out. "Congratulations...for the lanterns, your highness."

Mu Qing spins on his heel, walking away as quickly as he can, before he can say anything else.

Before he can ruin, break, or hurt anyone else.

Feng Xin reaches after him, taking one step-then looking back at Xie Lian, clearly torn between the two.

The Prince stares after Mu Qing's fading aura, biting his lip. "...I'm okay, Feng Xin," he mumbles. "Go after him."

It's a few moments of hesitation.

Because on one hand–Xie Lian is clearly the least distressed of the three. And on the other...

How can he leave, having just learned–?

"Go," Xie Lian repeats, with the message behind it clear, even while it remains unspoken:

He needs you.

"..." Feng Xin grits his teeth, wishing that they just...that things were...

"...Alright," he mutters, turning around, hurrying off after him.

They'll have to talk about it now. Eventually.

If they don't, and the wounds inflicted are left to fester...

Xie Lian can put things out of his head, when he needs to.

Mu Qing can't.

Things like this–they eat him alive, straight down to the bone.

And Xie Lian would go with him, but...

If he was kind to Mu Qing right now, that would only make his friend feel worse. The best thing he can do, for now, is give Mu Qing space.

(And hope that Feng Xin irritates him enough that he forgets to feel miserable.)

He descends from the Heavens, still aching, slightly bruised from the emotional turmoil of the evening, but...

The lights floating overhead make it hard to feel despair, or loneliness.

The Mid Autumn Festival has always been one of the largest affairs in the Heavens, with celebrations often pouring on into the next day, sometimes even the next week.

But one god isn't celebrating.

Shin Qingxuan’s slippers are nearly silent against marble floors, arched ceilings near cavernous as she strolls through the halls of their palace.

Things haven’t changed much over the years.

Parts of it are actually modeled after their childhood home.

She can still remember it clearly.

By the time she was ten years old, it was just them. No parents, grandparents, no aunts or uncles…distant cousins, but that was all.

But it was so important to her elder brother that she remembered them.

Their parents didn’t marry for love. Not in the beginning. Their mother initially found their father cold and unforgiving.

Eventually, their father learned that she had a love for songbirds, and spared no expense planting a grove of ash trees to attract them.

He would tell her that story when she was small. About how their mother would smile each morning, waking up to the sound of song birds trailing through the open window.

And now, when she hears the birds sing, and the wind stirring leaves in the trees—she remembers her parents.

Their mother used to crave yuèbing, back when she was pregnant with Shi Qingxuan. Filled with lotus paste, soft in texture, sweet on the tongue.

Most people only eat them during the mid autumn festival, but they can be found in the Palace of the Water and Wind Masters year round

There are countless tiny details like that, strewn throughout. So seamless with the rest of the palace, no one knows of Shi Wudu’s secret sentimentality.

But she does.

She steps into her brother’s study, eyeing the stacks of scrolls on the walls. Collected over the centuries.

Some of them were their grandfather’s, bringing the nostalgic scent of dusty paper and long dried ink.

“…I thought I would find you here,” She comments, leaning against the doorframe. “So much for having business with the emperor.”

Her brother shrugs from behind his desk, not seeming particularly ashamed.

Reports and ledgers are spread out in front of him. He isn’t a civil god—but as the god of wealth, he hasn’t escaped paperwork the way the other elemental masters and martial gods have.

“How did you know I was lying?”

Shi Qingxuan shrugs, fiddling with her fan between her fingers, opening and shutting it. “The emperor was still at the celebration when I left.”

Shi Wudu sighs, leaning away from his desk. “Does this mean you were lying about your plans as well?”

“No,” she mutters, eyes downcast, “I have plans.”

Shi Wudu watches her, asking evenly—

“With Ming Yi?”

His little sister’s lips press together tightly, and the fan snaps shut. “Yes. Why?” There’s a defiant edge to her tone, and the water master sighs.

“What sort of plans?”

“Hot springs and massages,” she replies sarcastically. “Seriously—you’ve never asked me that before.”

Shi Wudu presses his index finger down on the surface of his desk, smoothing out the bent surface of one of his ledgers.

“You never refused to touch Yan Zhen before.”

Her cheeks heat up, and before she can sputter out something defensive, her brother holds up a hand. “I’m just asking if it’s like that between you two.”

Her mouth screws up, fingers grasping her fan tightly.

“No!” She lies. “But in any case, you should know—”

Shi Wudu rolls his eyes.

"If this is about you being attracted to men…I know." He points out dryly, and when her lips part with surprise, he has to fight the urge to snort.

Apparently, she thought it was subtle.

"You…do?"

"Our mother guessed when you were three."

Her brother shrugs, crossing his legs. "She guessed about me too, don't feel bad."

She starts, giving him a surprised look—but he doesn't elaborate on what their mother actually guessed—sexuality or otherwise, so…

"And she…was fine with that?" Shi Qingxuan asks, surprised.

"I was too young for it to be much of an issue by the time she passed, so I don't know."

"But…" Shi Qingxuan pushes away from the door frame, stepping into the study fully. "You were betrothed, right?"

To the daughter of another wealthy family, yes—set up when he was seven.

Shi Wudu doesn't think he would have minded it too badly. She was pretty enough. (Not as much so as him, but few are.) And her personality was tolerable.

"It's different when you're the eldest son," he muses, "but ascending invalidated that contract—lucky me."

Shi Qingxuan smiles, feeling honestly relieved. There's no point in telling him about Ming Yi, mostly because…well…

They agreed on keeping that side of their friendship private. Well. More like Ming-Xiong decided, but she didn't disagree.

Still…

"…If you weren't bothered about him being a man, then why would it matter if me and Ming-Xiong were…doing that sort of thing?" She mutters, her eyebrows knitting together.

Shi Wudu sits forward with a sigh.

"...I don't care if you're with a man," he agrees. "Just not that one."

Shi Qingxuan's eyebrows shoot up, then, her eyes narrow. "...What's that supposed to mean?"

Her brother watches her, his gaze evaluating. "Shi Qingxuan..."

"What?!"

"Not that one," he repeats firmly.

"Why?"

Her eyes are so bright, so ready to defend him.

And her brother's response, in the face of that, is painfully blunt. "He isn't good enough for you."

"Not good enough—?" Shi Qingxuan's jaw drops, and her hands drop down to her hips. "Ming-Xiong is BRILLIANT, and he's funny, and he was ninth in the contest this year!"

"...Shi Qingxuan..."

"You can say it as many times as you want! Shi Qingxuan, Shi Qingxuan, Shi Qingxuan! It doesn't change the fact that you don't think ANYONE is good enough for me! Ming-Xiong is great!"

"That's not true," Shi Wudu disagrees.

When his sister stares at him, expectant, he actually has to think about it.

"...I'd be fine with Nan Yang."

Shi Qingxuan practically chokes. "Him?!"

"He's good looking, isn't he?"

"That's not the only requirement!" She sputters. "I'd sooner have Xuan Zhen!"

"Absolutely not," he brother shakes his head.

"Hah?!"

"Vetoed."

“I’m FOUR CENTURIES OLD!” She glares, stomping her foot. “You don’t get VETO POWER on the people I have relationships with!”

“Sure, I do.”

“No!”

“Yes.”

“You can’t stop me!”

“Oh,” Shi Wudu smirks, leaning his chin on his hand, “I could just tell them you didn’t stop wetting the bed until you were nine.”

“That—!” She gawks, “That isn’t even TRUE!”

“Yes,” he agrees, his eyes sparkling with amusement. “But who are they going to believe? Me, or you?”

“GEGE!”

He throws his head back, laughing. Not a mean laugh—but easy, relaxed.

He’s only ever like this when it’s just them.

And even if it’s at her expense, Shi Qingxuan is glad to hear him laugh like that. He hardly ever does it anymore.

“...What makes Nan Yang any better than Ming-Xiong or Xuan Zhen?”

“He doesn’t have anything to hide,” Shi Wudu replies easily, like it’s obvious.

Shi Qingxuan rolls her eyes, crossing her arms. “It’s not Ming-Xiong’s fault he was a spy! It was a mission from the emperor!”

“...” Her brother shrugs. “It seemed a little too easy for him.”

“Don’t blame him for being good at the job YOU picked him out for!” She huffs. “That’s totally unfair!”

“I’m not saying he’s a degenerate or something,” Shi Wudu grouses. “But you could do better.”

“Oh,” Shi Qingxuan laughs, lifting her chin, “Like you and Pei?!”

The expression on her brother's face momentarily freezes, surprised—and he doesn't ask, but the question is clear in his eyes.

'Who told you?'

"..." To which his sister stands there, agape. "...wait..."

She'd thrown the words out there, expecting her brother to immediately laugh it off, or deny it, but...

"...It's actually true?!"

"Is what true?"

"You and Pei!" Shi Qingxuan snaps, pointing at him, and when he doesn't answer— "Oh my god, it IS!"

"Don't be so dramatic—"

"You're—You're FUCKING!" She cries, her face going bright red, all the way up to her ears, and now her *brother* is the one choking.

"SHI QINGXUAN!"

"You're not DENYING IT!"

"Don't be so VULGAR!" He glares, using outrage to distract from the heat in his own face.

"But you ARE!"

"You know—I—yes!" He agrees, "But that isn't the same thing."

"It's EXACTLY the same thing!"

"No, it isn't!"

"That's just a DOUBLE STANDARD! If we're talking about who is and isn't good enough—!"

"Would you calm down and listen before you jump to conclusions?" She glares, crossing her arms, and Shi Wudu sighs.

"...Pei and I are friends," he holds up a finger to silence her before she can argue, "and...there is an intimate aspect to that friendship."

"What does that even mean?!" Shi Qingxuan glares. "Are you in love with him?!"

Shi Wudu isn't taken by surprise by the accusation, this time.

"Of course not," he replies. "Do you think I'm stupid? You know how he feels about that sort of thing."

That makes it easier to lie.

"But he is important to me."

(The best lies, of course, add layers of truth.)

"...Of ALL the people to do... *that* ...with..."

(It's an immature way of saying it, but it's better than her loudly declaring that he and Pei are 'fucking,' so he prefers it.)

"...WHY him?! He's—"

"You don't know him, Shi Qingxuan."

"And you don't know Ming-Xiong, but that didn't stop you from deciding he's—!"

"Look," Shi Wudu cuts her off. "I'm your big brother. It's my job to worry about that sort of thing—and you tend to see the best in people."

"I—!"

"And I love that about you."

Shi Qingxuan falls silent, her eyes widening slightly.

"I don't want you to look at your friends, and feel unsure." The Water Master mutters. "So, just let me be the one to worry about it, okay?"

There's the silent question of course—about the clear double standard.

"Have I ever seemed naive to you?"

Obviously not.

If anything, her brother has always had a jaded, incredibly cynical view of the world, and people—especially men.

"...No..." She admits, biting her lip as her brother looks her in the eye.

“I trust Pei.” He says the words firmly, without an ounce of doubt. “He would never hurt me.”

He could have said ‘he would never betray me,’ but it’s not as simple as that.

Pei is loyal, but that isn’t unique.

The difference is that Pei is never cruel, even when he could be.

“...I would never hurt you either,” his sister points out, her tone doubtful.

After all, her brother has never expressed such faith in anyone. And—he isn’t even family.

“You would never mean to,” Shi Wudu murmurs.

That isn’t quite the same as agreeing, but she doesn’t seem to notice.

“Just understand—there’s nothing going on between him and me that I can’t handle,” he shrugs. “You don’t need to worry.”

She hardly seems mollified, but there’s something else he’s curious about.

“...If you already had plans with Ming Yi, why come here looking for me, anyway?” He murmurs, tilting his head to the side.

Shi Qingxuan shrugs, glancing towards the ground—suddenly self conscious. “I guess...I just wanted...”

“...Wanted to what?”

“...To check on you,” she mumbles.

“On me?” Her brother arches an eyebrow, visibly surprised. “Why?”

“...You disappeared for three days,” Shi Qingxuan frowns. “And you’re never explained.”

Shi Wudu stares at her for a moment, then he shrugs.

“I was attending to business in the mortal realm.”

That’s what he says.

But it’s never stopped him from answering in their communication array before.

“You didn’t answer me for three days, gege.” Her eyes remain downcast, and her tone is riddled with worry.

“But you knew I was alright.” He reminds her, his gaze unreadable. After a moment, he gestures with his hand. “Come here.”

She does so without hesitation, walking over to the side of his desk—and he reaches up, grasping the locket hanging around her neck between his fingers.

“You always know that I’m alright,” his tone is gentle, reassuring.

After all, he’s wearing the other half of the set, tucked underneath his robes. She Qingxuan stares down at it, unable to argue with its literal meaning. Physically, she knows that her brother is alright.

Mentally, however…

She bites her lip, and Shi Wudu sighs.

After taking a moment to think of an appropriate thing to be worried about, he mumbles—

“…I suppose I’m worried about facing my third calamity,” he admits. “It won’t be easy for me this time.”

Her eyes widen, remembering.

“We can talk more—about everything—once that’s over.”

Thankfully she seems to believe that, nodding. “I’ll let you focus on that, then, gege— oh, and I almost forgot,” she rummages around in the folds of her dress for a moment, pulling out a package.

“I bumped into the emperor leaving the celebration—he wanted me to give you this.” Her brother takes it, not asking any questions, just setting the box down on the table.

“Why don’t you go and enjoy the rest of the celebration?”

“What about you, gege?”

“Oh…” her brother shrugs, “I think I’ve had enough excitement for one day.”

She nods, leaning up to kiss his cheek before sliding down from the desk. “Promise you won’t be lonely?”

He snorts, but indulges her with a nod. “I promise.”

With that, she slips out of the room—and her brother is left alone, looking over ledgers and reports.

But that box has a pointed presence of its own. Lingering on his desk—almost like it has a set of eyes, and they’re staring at him.

It’s more than an hour or two before he finally caves, gripping the corner, pulling it towards him.

It was probably intended as a gift for winning the contest. Jun Wu always gives him one (as a show of how gracious, he is, pretending that second place is ‘first.’) And even though Xianle won this year, no one could have predicted that.

But this is no gift.

The dagger gleams up at him, sharp and dangerous. A reminder of that knight. Shi Wudu stares, his jaw locked.

He’s long since stopped trying to discern Jun Wu’s every motivation behind an action. He’s a man riddled with contradiction, but this—

This is a threat.

Or maybe a warning. It’s difficult to discern which.

Either way, it seems a petty reason to leave such a dangerous weapon with the Water Master, of all people.

Before he can contemplate the matter further, he hears a dull thud and a rattle on the other side of the palace.

“…” The Water Mater covers the box back up, setting it on one of the shelves behind him.

He’s surprised Shi Qingxuan would be back so early. After all, when she’s off with Ming Yi, it’s never brief, but…

When he reaches the entrance hall, it isn’t his sister, no— It’s Pei.

Steadying a large, potted tree that he clearly stumbled into, rattling against the marble floors before it settles back down.

“...What are you doing here?” Shi Wudu questions, biting back a smile. “I thought you were celebrating with Ling Wen.”

“I...was,” the general agrees.

Shi Wudu crosses his arms, looking him over. He’s slightly disheveled, as though he’s taken a stumble or two on the way here.

“Drinking, women, and all that.”

“Yeah...” Pei is still holding onto the tree, staring at it as though it’s offended him.

“Well...I did most of the drinking, and he...he did the women,” he explains, and Shi Wudu’s smile widens.

“You left early?”

The general’s gaze turns away from the tree, his current adversary, towards his lover —gleaming violet in the dim light.

“...I wanted...to see you...”

The Water Master laughs, covering his mouth as Pei lets go of the plant, making his way over to him. “In this state, I think you’d just pass out on top of me. I’ll pass.”

“I bounce back fast!” The general protests with a slight pout, his brow creasing. “But that...isn’t why I...”

Shi Wudu raises an eyebrow as Pei Ming leans over him. The Water Master has been leaning back against a pillar as he observes him, and the general has both hands braced against it now, just over his head.

“Then why are you here?”

Pei frowns, staring down at him.

Then, his head sinks down, face pressed into the side of Shi Wudu’s neck. It isn’t exactly a seductive technique. He isn’t kissing him. But his nose does brush against the Water Master’s skin as he breathes him in, drawing out a reluctant shiver.

“I’d...make a good husband.”

Shi Wudu chokes, his hand frozen from where it had been moving to pat the back of Pei’s head.

"…What?"

"Before," he mutters, his tone sulking. "When you said you hadn't had any suitable candidates."

What, back during the feast?

"I'm…suitable…"

The Water Master falls silent, too stunned to reply—and Pei noses closer against his neck, one arm dropping down from the pillar over head, wrapping around his waist.

"I know everything about you," he mumbles—and Shi Wudu's heart sinks.

"…Not everything…" He mutters.

Pei doesn't seem to be bothered by that, holding him close. "I know the important things."

He lists them off, one by one, mumbling against Shi Wudu's hair. Words slightly slurred, from the alcohol—but clear.

Pei knows everything he likes. He knows what pisses him off, too.

Pei knows how much he loves his brother. He knows how he works to keep him safe.

Pei has always known what makes him laugh, and…

"I make you happy," he mumbles, his arm tight around the Water Master's back, fingers stroking through his hair. "…Don't I?"

Shi Wudu bites his lip, his throat tight, aching.

"…Yes," he whispers, reaching up and wrapping his arms around the general's neck, returning the embrace. "You do."

Everything is so easy with him. So comfortable and familiar. Shi Wudu has always been burdened with self awareness. He knows, at his core, that he is not a good man.

Affection has always been his one redeeming quality.

He isn't only fond of those close to him—he adores them. With such a ferocity, it blinds him.

And loving Pei Ming—that has always been the sweetest kind of ache.

"...Then why not marry me?" Pei mumbles, sounding somewhat petulant.

The Water Master's heart is pounding so violently against his ribs, it's difficult to sound unbothered—but he perseveres.

"You never asked."

Pei opens his mouth, but the Water Master stops him. "And you're only saying this now because you've been drinking."

"I am not..." The general grumbles—but still, he presses a kiss against Shi Wudu's throat, "...I've asked someone to marry me before, you know."

That actually is surprising.

"Did you really?"

"...She said no," Pei admits.

But that isn't the point.

The point is that there have been times in his life where he wasn't universally opposed to monogamy—or commitment. He's not incapable.

It just has to be the right person.

"...I was engaged once," Shi Wudu offers, just to enjoy the sensation of Pei stiffening against him with jealousy. "Back when I was mortal."

"I'm glad it didn't work out."

The Water Master gasps playfully, pretending to be offended. "Pei—don't you want me to be happy?"

Instead of replying, Pei lifts his head, taking his lips in a searing kiss.

Slightly clumsy, compared to the usual—but still, Shi Wudu's eyes slip shut, his arms tightening around the general's neck as he pulls him closer, closer.

Teeth scrape at his lower lip, and he sighs.

"...With me," the words rumble in Pei's chest as he bends over him, holding him closer, kissing him deeper. "Just with me."

The Water Master shudders, letting him closer, his knees parting under the onslaught.

He supposes Pei was right, he does bounce back fast, doesn't he?

One leg is already hitched up around the general's hip by the time their lips part— only for Pei's mouth to sink back down against his neck, finding soft, sensitive skin. Nipping and biting until Shi Wudu's breath hitched with want.

"You shouldn't be..." He protests faintly, pushing at his shoulder. After all—he was injured, before—and he's been drinking, but—

Pei catches his wrist, pinning it over Shi Wudu's head as his teeth sink in, leaving a mark.

"'M fine," he mumbles, pressing forward with his knee, drawing out a shudder, "Want you..."

It's not an issue of consent, clearly—he seems plenty cognizant enough to make that decision, and...

Shi Wudu's eyes roll back into his head, his hips rolling forward with a quiet moan. At first, it seems okay.

It's good, with Pei against him, over him. His lips on his skin. There's a slight tension to it—but that's not because of him. It's never because of him.

And it's fine. Good, even, when Pei's mouth is under his chin, and his hand is on his hip, but...

At some point, both of his wrists end up pinned over his head, and that tension starts to build—this time, in an unpleasant way.

Normally, he likes being touched like this. Pei knows that. It's never been a problem before, but now—

Now, he can't move, and the room is dark, and—

"...Stop!"

The moment he gasps the word out, his voice small, weak, and frightened—his chest fills with shame.

It’s the first time he’s ever said that to Pei.

It’s also the first time anyone has ever listened—because the General is off of him in an instant.

Both of Shi Wudu’s hands cover his mouth, his shoulders trembling as he fights to control his breaths.

What’s wrong with him?

His eyes sting.

It’s just Pei. It—

He swallows hard, his chest heaving. Pei would never. Why is he—?

Pei Ming watches him from a few feet away, his hands up in front of him in a gesture of surrender.

But his gaze is heavy with worry.

“...What happened?” He questions—and from his tone...he’s clearly sobered up.

The Water Master shakes his head, fighting to even out his breaths.

“...Nothing,” he chokes—feeling lightheaded, because he—

He’s always composed. Always level headed.

But something in him cracked that night.

He thought, taking that time to himself, waiting three days until the pain went away—

He thought that meant it was gone.

He thought that meant it was okay.

Like it never happened.

But it’s there now, like a wound ripped open, and it—

(It hurts.)

Shi Wudu shudders, weak gasps slowly building into full blown hyperventilation as he slides down the pillar, sitting on the floor.

“Hey…”

Pei Ming kneels down in front of him, his gaze wracked with concern. They’ve been in this position before, only with the roles reversed.

It’s not often—but Pei has always had night terrors.

He’s been in too many wars not to.

Shi Wudu never said a word about it, only held him.

He’s always the calm one. Always too mature for his age. Always keeping it together.

Pei doesn’t touch him, but he stays close, a hand held out. Not impatient or demanding, simply waiting until the Water Master is able to take it.

When he does, his fingers are trembling. “Look at me.”

He can’t seem to bring himself to at first, but with slow, gentle coaxing—eventually he does.

Panicked—but more than that, ashamed.

It takes several minutes of coaching to help him settle his breathing—and even then, the trembling doesn’t stop.

Quietly, Pei asks him again: “What happened?”

There’s a hard edge under the gentleness of his tone—not directed at him, but it’s there.

Anger.

Because clearly, something did happen.

Something serious.

“…Nothing,” Shi Wudu croaks, his voice raw. “Nothing happened.”

There’s no point in pressing him. No matter how angry and worried he might feel— Pei knows that.

Trying to force it out would only bring back the panic attack—and he wouldn’t get an answer.

Still, he makes one more attempt. “If you tell me, I’ll take care of it.” But he can’t.

Not just because of who it is.

Not only because the mere act of knowing would get the General killed.

There are just some things you can’t fix.

(It hurts.)

The Water Master is starting to wonder if he’s one of them.

(And that really, really hurts.)

Pei doesn’t leave.

It’s the first time Shi Wudu has had someone in his bed like this—just to be held.

It’s fees safe.

And as sleep starts to tug him in, his eyes drift towards the window, watching the fireworks.

Wondering if he could be saved—and wondering if he wants to be.

In the city below, someone else is watching the same lights.

Eyes deep and dark, like frozen eyes beneath the sea. Remembering a time when he was a child, sitting on a city roof. Back then, it felt like looking down on the entire world.

‘Gege, these are the best seats ever!’

Back when He Sheng thought he could do anything.

Back when he thought that he was good at fixing things.

She's a few feet away from him, leaning against the railing, looking up at the lanterns, the fireworks, and the stars.

So much beauty, but her gaze is dim.

And he doesn't understand it.

Staring at chestnut curls. The vulnerable hunch of her shoulders. Freckles faintly spattered across the back of her neck.

He doesn't know how he could feel like this, when she's the reason he lost everything. So, he tells himself that he doesn't.

He reminds himself of the day his heart died.

Feeling it fracture and break and wither away.

He reminds himself that He Sheng is long gone. A weak child with nothing left to protect.

Surrounded by the broken things he couldn't fix.

Still, when she looks back over her shoulder, her curls stirring in the wind, his lips can't help but curve up slightly.

"...You're usually the life of the party," he comments.

Shi Qingxuan looks away with a shrug.

"You and gege both act like that's all I am," she mutters.

"...Nah," Ming Yi disagrees, his tone always marked with carefully tailored disinterest. "I just thought you had something to celebrate."

She frowns, rubbing the cold out of her arms.

"You were in the top ten," her friend points out, reminding her of how excited she was before.

"..." her eyes narrow slightly, determined. "I'll do better next year," She mutters.

After all, people aren't going to take her seriously if she doesn't start working harder. And her brother...

...Maybe he wouldn't be so worried about his calamity, if he knew she could take care of herself.

Ming Yi is quiet as he watches her, his gaze far away–unreadable.

"...Who gives a damn about next year," he mutters, reaching out. "You were eighth this year."

Shi Qingxuan stares at his hand for a moment, glancing up at him with a surprised smile, her eyes lighting up for the first time since the lanterns were counted.

"...Ming-xiong," she whispers, bouncing with excitement, "...are you actually offering to dance with me?"

He doesn't smile back–but there's the tiniest bit of warmth in his eyes, and it makes her own smile even wider.

"Don't push your luck."

"Okay, okay!" She agrees quickly, snatching his hand, "Not take backs!"

"How old are you, five?"

"And a HALF!" She laughs.

"Hey, Ming-Xiong–you're pretty good at this. Just who else have you been dancing with?"

"Lots of people."

"Hah?!" She protests, only to dissolve into laughter when he spins her around, "Then why did it take you so long to ask me?!"

"You make it hard to get a word in."

"I do not!" She cries. "Besides, what else are mouths good for, besides talking? I–!"

Luckily, they're alone–because then, Ming Yi shows her exactly what else mouths are good for, sparks of light showering in the skies overhead.

Refusing to think about next year.

Who knows what next year will look like.

This year – this year is all he needs to think about.

And this year, for the first time in many years, the Crown Prince of Xianle hasn't found the Mid-Autumn festival to be a depressing affair.

Not entirely.

There were moments of pain, remorse, and sadness.

But...it was also beautiful.

Enough so that, in spite of the encounter with Mu Qing and Feng Xin, he still smiles during the walk back to Puqi Shrine, reaching down to fiddle with the chain around his neck.

Of all of the belongings Xie Lian has had in his life, this has been with him the longest —longer than Ruoye, even, even if the ashes were in a different form back then.

And after tonight, he can't help but wonder... The prince stops, coming to a halt on the steps.

"...Ren Song?" He calls out cautiously, hearing some rattling and footsteps in the distance before he gets an answer.

"Welcome back, your highness! Did you enjoy the festival?"

"Yes," He replies, reaching over to touch one of the posts supporting the porch in front of the shrine

"What did you two get up to?"

"Oh..." Ren Song shrugs, leaning against the doorframe, twiddling his thumbs. "Nothing much. Just chatting, and all that..."

Guzi is already sleeping peacefully, Qi Qi tucked around his head like a fluffy red pillow.

"Did you get the lanterns?"

"...I thought that much would have been obvious," Xie Lian mumbles, glancing up at the lights floating in the sky overhead.

"..." The demon grins, "Oh, I guess so! You know, it's hard to tell, what with so many of them going up in the same night, all that..."

"...Shuo?"

"Yes?"

"The shrine didn't have steps when I left."

Not on the front part of the building, anyway—there are steps leading out back that San Lang built during his first week here, but the front is a simple step off, a foot and a half off the ground.

"Oh...I made them!" The teenager bobs his head, his tone ever eager, ever helpful. "I thought they'd be better then the step off, y'know? So Guzi won't trip!"

"That was kind of you," Xie Lian murmurs, all while the demon beams in response. "...I don't remember the porch being this stable, either."

"Ah, well..." Shuo shrugs, waving it off with a sheepish snort, "I know, I know, it's generous of me, but what can I say? I'm a thoughtful person."

"Yes..." Xie Lian agrees, lifting his hand from the post to press it against the shrine wall. "There's just one other thing."

"Hmm?"

"The shrine was made from balsa wood," the god murmurs, "this is cedar." There's a long, awkward silence—and the ghost finally grumbles—

"How the hell were you able to tell?!"

"Different smell," Xie Lian shrugs, lifting his palm off of the wall. "And texture."

"...Okay, well, first of all, balsa wood is terrible," Shuo grumbles, crossing his arms. "It's not structurally stable at all. And it doesn't even grow around here! What kind of bad luck—!"

"Shuo..."

"And cedar, y'know, that's rot resistant, it's sturdy—!"

"What happened?"

"Second of all," Shuo holds up his hands pointedly, as if the god could even see the gesture to begin with, "I'm not the trouble maker in this situation, got it? I'm the problem solver! You even have a second story now! That's an improvement!"

"Oh." Xie Lian blinks. "Really? Thank you."

That actually is a rather helpful improvement. What with all of the extra guests he's had recently, it's been somewhat cramped.

"You're welcome, your highness. It's like I said, I'm a generous—"

"What happened?"

"Okay, okay, thirdly," Shuo fiddles with the end of his ponytail nervously, "If you think about it, this is kinda your fault—no offense—"

Xie Lian's eyebrows shoot up, and he explains.

"I mean, I knew letting the prince stay was a bad idea, but you insisted..."

"What—?"

"And you know, if you think about it," Shuo tilts his head to the side, twisting his hair around his fingers a little faster, "You blew up my house first. And I didn't complain! I just rebuilt my house!"

"...The shrine was blown up?"

"No! Don't be dramatic!"

"And is paradise manor your home too?" Xie Lian questions, now feeling even more guilty about that than he did before. "San Lang wasn't clear on the subject..."

"Uh," Shuo wrinkles his nose (as he always does, when he's in intense thought), "yes, but also no."

Xie Lian stares at him, waiting, and the forest demon sighs.

"Well, obviously I'm high up enough that I have my own lair and all of that, but Yi—" He stops, frowning. "...The Waning Moon Officer isn't there."

"Is that a big problem?"

"Yeah," Shuo stares, like it's obvious. "He makes my snacks."

Xie Lian doesn't know whether to laugh, or cry.

"For the purposes of this argument, it's my house."

The prince blinks. “Are we arguing?”

“You’re practically interrogating me!” The ghost whines. “And I built you steps!”

“I’m just asking what happened…?”

“Okay, okay!” He cries, as though Xie Lian was shaking him by the front of his shirt and berating him.

(Rather than asking in a calm, very gentle tone.)

“So, you know, I’m feeding Guzi and the creepy fuck—”

“—Lang Ying—?”

“Yeah, whatever, I’m feeding them dinner, and Qi Rong picks that moment to be, y’know, himself.”

Xie Lian winces, not needing him to elaborate on why his cousin being ‘himself’ is a bad thing.

“He insists that he’s not gonna eat his food unless Lang Qianqiu feeds him.”

Oh—

Oh dear.

“And y’know,” Shuo makes a face, throwing his hands up, “I called him a pervert, thinking it would discourage him—”

Xie Lian sighs, immediately seeing how it went downhill.

The more outrageous a situation, the more excited Qi Rong tends to get.

“Well then, Lang Qianqiu did feed him, but kind of aggressively, y’know? And Qi Rong starts moaning every time he shoves the food in his mouth.”

Xie Lian’s face falls in his hands, and Shuo shrugs, “And y’know what? I laughed. The look on his face was hilarious! It was!”

Xie Lian has no idea what Lang Qianqiu actually looks like, so he can only imagine his expression.

“Then he’s yelling at ME, like ‘How can you laugh?! He murdered your brother!’”

(When Shuo impersonates him, he drops his voice, using an intentionally idiotic tone.)

“And then I was offended, because hey, just because Qi Rong and I have a DYNAMIC, that doesn’t mean I don’t HATE him! But fuck, he has a sense of humor, okay?! He’s FUNNY sometimes!”

Xie Lian is reluctant to admit that, but Shuo isn’t wrong.

“So, I kinda lost my temper—which isn’t my fault, he pushed me to it—and I said he was just mad because Qi Rong has gotten laid, and he hasn’t,” Shuo shrugs, his eyes wide. “I wasn’t expecting to be RIGHT, okay?! Then HE got angrier—”

Xie Lian pinches the bridge of his nose.

The idea of his cousin being sexually active with anyone at any point isn’t an image he ever needed, and now he has to live with that knowledge.

“Then—did you know he has a tiger?!”

“Yeah,” Xie Lian mutters, not looking up. “He has a tiger.”

“Did you know they were stupid matching hats?”

That draws a surprised snort from the prince, and Shuo continues.

“Anyways, I didn’t know—because how was I supposed to know?!—but Dian Dian HATES tigers, apparently.”

Now, Xie Lian can see where this is going.

“So, they start fighting, and I was worried about Dian Dian, so I started to break it up, then Lang Qianqiu thinks I’m going after his tiger, so he tackles ME, and—well—like I said, balsa is shitty wood, so…”

So, most of the shrine was knocked down. “But…I fixed it!”

Shuo points out. “I made it better, actually, if you think about it. I figured you and the kids could sleep down here, I could be in your newly installed attic—”

“And what about Lang Qianqiu?”

“Oh,” the demon waves that off. “I made a dog house out back, it should suit him.”

No, no—Qi Rong can stay there. Lang Qianqiu will just have to share with Shuo, if that’s how it’s going to be, but…

“…Where are they now?”

“Ah, well…” Shuo sighs. “While we were fighting, Qi Rong ran off—so Lang Qianqiu went after him while I rebuilt the shrine.”

Xie Lian’s expression pinches with concern, and Shuo is quick to reassure him. “He’s got him dianxia, don’t worry—they’ll be back relatively soon.”

“…How can you be sure?”

Shuo grimaces, crossing his arms. “I had to give him my private communication array password. Gross…”

The prince lets out a quiet sigh of relief.

Good, then—he doesn’t have to waste his time going off and finding Qi Rong himself.

“…You’re not gonna tell him, are you?” Shuo asks in a small voice, and Xie Lian pauses, confused.

“What, you mean San Lang?” He nods.

Xie Lian rubs his chin, glancing around the room. “There’s no harm done, so I don’t see a reason to…”

Shuo lets out a quiet breath of relief, and the prince raises an eyebrow. “But you did insist that he’s not in charge of you, so I’m not sure why you’re worried.”

“Okay, okay, look!” Shuo holds up a finger, “He’s the ghost king! Everyone listens to him! I’m just not like, an employee or a kid or something!”

“Do you take commands from black water too, then?”

“Huh?!” He gawks. “Hell no!”

Xie Lian crosses his arms, and Shuo falters.

“But…that’s completely different!” “It is?”

“Blackwater doesn’t take being a supreme seriously,” the demon explains, his arms crossed. “He and Hua Chengzhu are on decent terms, but he disappears for years at a time, and he only cares about…”

He stops himself, frowning. “Only cares about…?”

“…Himself,” Shuo concludes. “The point is—he doesn’t care enough to try to boss anyone around anyway.”

It’s interesting, because Xie Lian never would have guessed, based on Hua Cheng’s carefree demeanor, that he would take being a supreme so seriously.

“…Well,” the prince murmurs, placing his hand against the shrine wall once more, “I won’t tell him.”

Then, after a pause—

“…And thank you for the second floor.”

“You’re welcome! It’s like I said—I’m a thoughtful person!”

Yes, very.

(Even if the new addition is entirely for Shuo’s use, but Xie Lian opts not to focus on that.)

It’s not long before the demon retreats to the newly built attic, leaving the prince standing on the porch.

Watching the lights, still.

His fingers drift back down to the chain around his neck, and he finds himself contemplating—just as he was before.

He’s met so many people over the last eight centuries. Some good, some bad. In all of that time, few of them have stood out.

Jiang Chi. Lang Qianqiu. Banyue. Xiong Li. Lan An. And now, Hua Cheng and Shi Qingxuan.

The last two being unique in the sense that—Xie Lian doesn’t get close to people that quickly. It isn't easy for him to form attachments...not anymore.

And yet—Shi Qingxuan has already become a dear friend in so short a time. And Hua Cheng...

...Is also a friend, but not in a way that Xie Lian is accustomed to, or even has a word for.

And when he does form new attachments, he can't help but wonder... What Hong'er would think.

Even after all this time, Xie Lian always finds himself imagining what it would be like, if he was still here.

Because in the prince's mind, he should be.

He would have liked Shi Qingxuan, Xie Lian is sure of that much. The Wind Master is considerate, kind—and very supportive.

He can't say the same thing about Hua Cheng.

Hong'er wouldn't have liked him at all, and the thought of that makes Xie Lian smile.

After all—the boy was always respectful and deferential to him—but he loathed any other form of authority.

He would have found Hua Cheng's...assertive personality to be abrasive.

Even more so than that—Hong'er would practically bite anyone that tried to lay a finger on him—even casually.

Xie Lian can still remember an occasion when a man from the village was slightly too familiar, attempting to take advantage of the god's blindness to touch his face—

Hong'er didn't hesitate before breaking his nose.

And if he had seen Hua Cheng...well...healing Xie Lian's arm...

He would have certainly tried to rip his head off, ghost king or not.

The thought makes Xie Lian smile, lifting the ring up to his lips as he leans against the doorframe.

“…You always took such good care of me,” he whispers, squeezing his eyes shut. Xie Lian just wishes he could have given him the same.

And it’s hard, remembering that, standing here.

The shrine has changed so much over time—but the foundations are the same. The path before him is the one they walked together.

“I know you think I’m too trusting,” the prince whispers, stroking his fingers over the diamonds and rubies in the ring’s face.

“…But I like him,” he holds on tighter, his shoulders hunching slightly inward. He doesn’t know why he feels guilty, admitting that.

He’s had friends before. Plenty that Hong’er probably wouldn’t have approved of. But for some reason, this feels different.

“Give him a chance?” He mumbles, knowing he won’t get an answer.

He never does. Not from the one person he’s always wanted to talk to.

But when he looks to the sky overhead—

The lights are still there. Beaming down at him, a makeshift blanket of stars, drifting through the night.

And Xie Lian can’t help but smile, pressing Hong’er close to his heart.

“…Thank you,” he whispers, knowing that no one can hear.

Not knowing, of course, that someone can.

Miles away, leaning against a crimson column, a silver butterfly standing gracefully on his knuckles, his lips turned up into a soft smile as he looks up at the very same lights overhead.

Lanterns, drifting along the path to heaven.

He doesn’t need thanks.

That has never, not since he was a child, been the reason that Hua Cheng has prayed. He prays for the same reason his mother did.

Because someone gave him a reason to.

Silver wings flap delicately in the night, warm against his palm.

'It's always for you.'

That's what he wishes he could say.

'All of it—it's always for you.'

But Xie Lian—

Hua Cheng isn't the one he wants to hear that from.

His fingers curl inward, and the butterfly drifts away.

Soon.

He had to find a reason to return to his side soon.

There's trouble brewing overhead.

The heavens are stirring with unease—and when things begin to spill over, he needs— He needs Xie Lian to trust him, the way he did before.

Things aren't the same now, as they were back then.

Hua Cheng isn't a child, or a mere savage ghost.

He won't be helpless, in the conflict that lies ahead.

Regardless of what the cost might be—he'll be able to protect his god.

The question, in the end, is whether or not Xie Lian will allow him to.

Some people struggle with allowing themselves to be protected. Or comforted.

Especially when they need it.

And when someone is upset, and alone—they often fall into old habits.

For Xie Lian, that used to mean practicing his calligraphy. These days, he takes to his loom.

For Feng Xin, it was beating practice dummies on the training ring to a pulp. In close to a thousand years, he hasn't changed.

And neither has Mu Qing. Not really.

When he's scared, he'll hide somewhere small and closed off, like he's a child. But when he's upset...

Really upset, so distraught that he's almost sick with himself—

Mu Qing cleans.

That's what he's doing now.

His deputies have long since been ordered away—and the floor, he's been on his hands and knees, scrubbing it for hours, but—

But it doesn't feel clean.

Even though he can see his reflection in the tiles beneath his hands, it's always warped.

Like if he just scrubs harder, it'll go away. He'll feel better. It'll—

It'll get better, at some point.

It has to.

There's another knock at his door, and he glares, shoulders hunched.

"Go away, Feng Xin!"

His voice is thick and raw from crying for several hours on end—and —

That idiot is fucking persistent, Mu Qing will give him that. Pounding at the door for god knows how long, threatening to kick it down until Mu Qing re-enforced it with magic.

Of course, that was when the moron threatened to go get his bow and shoot the thing open. It's been quiet since then, and Mu Qing honestly thought he'd been caught up in other business, until—

Until he hears the door swing open.

"…" He slams the rag down on the floor, wiping at his nose irritably with the back of his hands as he whips around, his lips pulled back into a snarl.

"I said to GO THE FUCK AWAY!" He screams, his voice breaking. "WHY WON'T YOU JUST—!"

Mu Qing freezes, his face growing pale.

"Your…your m-majesty," he mutters, instinctively bowing his head low, then realizing how pitiful he must look—so, he scrambles to his feet, but still…

He can't meet the emperor's eyes.

"I—I thought you were—"

"Nan Yang?" The emperor questions softly.

"…" Mu Qing nods, still wiping at his eyes, his posture radiating shame.

"I thought so." Jun Wu sighs, glancing back over his shoulder. "I saw your argument, and…decided it would be best if I ordered him to help take the documentation of the festival to the archives."

Such a thing would normally be left to Ling Wen—but he's still off…enjoying the celebration. In his preferred form of company.

Mu Qing lets out a soft exhale of relief, swallowing hard. "…Thank you, your majesty."

"It was an emotional evening, I'm sure." Jun Wu murmurs.

The martial god's lips tremble—and now, he seems to remember that he still has the cleaning rag clutched in his hands, biting back a sniffle as he tosses it aside.

"Not for me," he croaks hoarsely. "I'm fine."

It's a pitiful attempt, but maybe they can both just pretend…

"…Of course you aren't," the words make Mu Qing wince, but…

Jun Wu's tone is…gentle.

"Seeing something like that would upset anyone, and…"

Silver eyes watch him closely.

"...I know how deeply you care about Xianle."

Mu Qing swallows thickly, his throat tight.

"I..."

"...I had my own guilt, you know. Watching that." Jun Wu shakes his head, his gaze far away.

Mu Qing's tears slow as he finally looks up, his eyes wide—swollen and red. "You...did?"

"How could I not?" The emperor smiles—but it's pained. "I was the one who banished him."

Of course, Xie Lian hadn't given Jun Wu much of a choice—everyone knows that, and no one blames him.

Mu Qing, however...

He just made a mistake.

A horrible fucking mistake. One he had no excuse for.

"...I don't know why he didn't pray for help," the emperor admits quietly. "I don't know how I couldn't have known."

"..." Mu Qing wraps his arms around himself, leaning back against the wall. "That's not your fault," he mutters. "Xie Lian doesn't like showing weakness."

(And neither does he.)

"...And it isn't your fault, either."

Mu Qing flinches away from the words of comfort, his eyes welling up with tears. "You don't..."

His voice wobbles, and Jun Wu's gaze softens. "You were so young, Xuan Zhen..."

He was. The youngest of the three of them—but everyone always forgot that. "When I was that age, I made far worse mistakes than being cruel to a friend."

"..."

He knows, then.

Xie Lian must have told him, at one point or another.

And Mu Qing knows, given what he did—he has no right to secrecy.

Still, it hurts.

"...You did?" Mu Qing whispers.

"..." Jun Wu tilts his head, glancing around the inside of Mu Qing's palace. He's never visited before. Not personally.

"I was under...an incredible amount of pressure, when I was young," Jun Wu explains. "Everyone relied on me, but, at the same time..."

His next words...strike an unexpected chord with Mu Qing.

"...No one ever put me first."

The martial god has always been pretty good at sniffing out a liar.

"Not even the ones who were supposed to protect me."

It...

"...It was lonely."

It doesn't feel like the emperor is lying.

"So many people admired me, but...the minute I failed, even in the smallest way..."

Crack!

Jun Wu snaps his fingers.

"That admiration turned to disappointment and anger. No matter how human the failure was—"

Mu Qing's stomach sinks.

"Because I wasn't allowed to fail."

It's hard hearing Jun Wu explain it. Because on some level—

When someone is born to wealth and privilege, it's easy to resent them for all of the things they have.

It's even easier to resent them for failing, or feeling sadness. Because where do they get the right?

"And I always thought—if I could fix it, if I could impress them again—save them, again—they would believe in me the way they did before."

Two tears slip down Mu Qing's cheeks, and he wipes at them irritably.

"...Make them love me again, the way they did before."

The ache in his voice is undeniable, and Mu Qing—he shakes his head.

"That doesn't...sound like a mistake, your majesty."

Jun Wu smiles faintly.

"...I did make one though," he looks down the halls of Mu Qing's palace, examining the paintings on the walls.

"I made a horrible mistake."

He's facing away from Mu Qing now, his hands folded inside his robes.

"And it did help the greater good, in the short run, but..."

His expression remains hidden.

"It destroyed so many of the people I loved. Even if that was never what I intended."

...And, of course, Mu Qing is more than familiar with that feeling.

So often, he's ended up hurting the people he loves, even if he never meant to.

He was only angry, hurt, and scared.

"...And I couldn't admit it was my fault, either," the emperor mutters.

"Because if I did, then that would mean I failed, and..."

…And they wouldn't love him anymore.

It's a cycle that's so easy to get trapped in. So impossible to escape.

"And I just blamed everyone else," Jun Wu lets out a heavy sigh, refusing to look at his own reflection.

"I was in a hole. And I dug deeper, and deeper, and deeper. Until I didn't know how to get out."

The only thing to do then, was lie.

Because if you've done something you can't be forgiven for, even if your intentions in the beginning were good—

You'll do anything to hide it.

"Eventually…I was alone."

There's such misery in his voice…such vulnerability, that Mu Qing can't help but feel slightly…

Uneasy.

"…And why are you telling me all of this?" He questions, surprised.

Because he certainly hasn't told anyone else.

"…I suppose it's because I see potential in you, Mu Qing," the emperor admits—and the martial god stiffens.

There are only two people left who call him that.

Xie Lian and Feng Xin.

It's been so long since anyone else called him his birth name—he's startled by it.

"After all, you've done rather well for yourself," Jun Wu turns his head, looking him over. "Most Martial Gods are unambitious, relying on only physical prowess, but…"

He eyes silver locks of hair closely.

It's too bad the change isn't permanent. It suits him.

"…You're well rounded, compared to them."

He undoubtedly has the potential to rise higher. The only thing that ever seems to get in his way are his emotions.

Mu Qing sniffs again, pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes for a moment, trying to soothe the burning.

“...they’ve never stopped seeing me as a servant,” he mutters. And he shouldn’t be surprised by that.

After all—the Heavens is filled with royalty. War heroes. Great scholars. Wealthy merchants...compared to them, he’s...

“It doesn’t matter where you start out.”

Mu Qing glances up, surprised.

That Jun Wu—presumably born of royal blood himself, and now higher above anyone else—would say that.

“My wife was born a commoner, you know.”

“...I never knew you were married at all,” Mu Qing admits. It’s never been mentioned before. Not once.

Jun Wu smiles faintly, his gaze unreadable.

“She knew me better than anyone.” His voice is undeniably fond. “...And she would have put any god in the Heavens to shame. And...I suppose that’s another thing we have in common.”

Mu Qing stares back at him, confused.

And Jun Wu’s explanation—it makes him go still, his eyes widening as his stomach plummets.

Because it was hard enough, being alone in that knowledge.

It feels painful—exposed, even, to have someone else drag the truth to light;

“She was in love with my best friend, too.”

Parenthood

Chapter Summary

> “My wife was FINE yesterday! You SAID SO!”
>
> …And he has a wife?
>
> Goodness, that’s rather shameless.
>
> “She was! She really was!”
>
> “Then HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN THIS?!”

Chapter Notes

> tw// similar to events in the book, this chapter depicts the loss of a pregnancy and mentions of abortion.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning, Xie Lian awakes to a mild crisis:

There’s no food left in Puqi shrine.

“Don’t look at me,” Ren Song grumbles, his arms crossed as he leans back in his chair. “I’m the only one here that doesn’t actually *need* to eat.”

From where he’s dangling from one of the rafters, slowly revolving from Ruoye’s grip, Qi Rong rolls his eyes, flexing his bound hands. “It was *obviously* me…”

Ren Song glances up, flicking a small pebble at his head.

“As the cannibal in the room, I’d keep quiet if I were you.”

“Oi! You eat people TOO you smug fucking BR—!”

Shuo manages to flick the next pebble directly into his mouth, making him choke and flail overhead.

“I eat other ghosts. Not live humans. Big difference.”

Xie Lian finds both options disturbing, but as someone…alive…he supposes he can’t really reflect on whether or not it’s ‘normal’ for a ghost to do that.

He'll have to ask Hua Cheng about it, the next time he sees him.

Hopefully soon.

Xie Lian had been hoping to pay a visit to Ghost City today, to thank him, but...

Well, given that he's currently responsible for a living, human child that could theoretically starve, the food shortage will have to be sorted out first.

"I think we're ignoring the obvious."

Ren Song turns his head to stare pointedly in Lang Qianqiu's direction, and the martial god huffs, immediately riled by the silent accusation.

"I only eat my fair share!" He cries.

"Which happens to be more than everyone else here!"

"Well, I'm bigger than the rest of you!"

"Dianxia is a grown man too, and he eats like HALF as much!" Shuo glares. And sure, Xie Lian is shorter with a slightly less bulky frame, but the difference shouldn't be *that* much!

"Ah, well..." The prince smiles, feeling somewhat awkward. "I've always had a poor appetite..."

(Not to mention the fact that, over the last eight hundred years, he...didn't do the best job feeding himself.)

It's not nearly as bad as it used to be, however. There was a brief stint (a few decades or so) where he was nearly skeletal.

But, you know, these things happen.

By comparison, Xie Lian would say that he's acceptably healthy.

"Maybe you should be saying he doesn't eat *enough* instead of saying I eat TOO MUCH!" Lang Qianqiu grouses. "Besides, you're dead! You don't know what it's like to NEED to eat!"

"HEY—!"

“Technically you don’t.”

Both of them stop, slowly looking over at Xie Lian, who shrugs. “Practically speaking, the only ones here who *need* food are Qi Rong and Guzi.”

“...” Lang Qianqiu stares, his brows furrowed. “...Sure, there are gods who can sustain themselves on pure spiritual energy alone— but I’m not one of them.”

“Oh, me neither,” Xie Lian agrees with a nod. “But even without it, you can go without food indefinitely. Even if your body enters the starvation stages—you won’t die.”

“...Indefinitely?” Lang Qianqiu questions slowly, and Xie Lian stops, thinking about it.

“Well, I suppose I can’t say for sure—but a very long time, at least.”

After all—Xie Lian went over a hundred years without a single ounce of food or water. He would know.

Since then, it isn’t often that he feels actual hunger anymore, either. The same goes for thirst.

Usually, he only eats when he starts to feel physically weak—that’s the only way he can tell.

“Either way, assigning blame doesn’t help solve the problem at hand.”

Ren Song nods, his gaze still remaining on Lang Qianqiu. “Aren’t you rich, anyway? Just go buy some food!”

The martial god glares right back at him. “Coming from Crimson Rain’s kid? Your boots probably cost more than a small palace!”

“HEY! He is NOT my dad!”

“That doesn’t change the fact that you’re *loaded!* Probably even more so than I am!”

Xie Lian sighs, pushing back from the table, turning around to pick up his hat, pulling it over his head.

“ *YOU* go and buy food!”

Next come his boots, and his outer robes.

“Why SHOULD I?!”

Of course he tells Guzi to be good, patting him on the head—

And by the time Lang Qianqiu and Ren Song finish arguing…

…He’s already gone.

“…Where’d he go?”

Guzi glances up from where he’s been playing tag, chasing Qi Qi around the floor. “Scrap-gege went to get food!”

“…”

“…”

Naturally, Xie Lian couldn’t bother the people of Puqi village. Most of them are poor farmers with little to spare, and they already help him enough, when and where they can.

The natural next step was to walk to the larger, wealthier town at the foot of the mountain.

Wherein Xie Lian manages to find an empty street corner, spreading an old, worn carpet beneath his feet before taking a seat, setting up a small, neatly written sign:

‘Clothing, tapestries, and other cloth wares for sale!’ With the addendum:

‘Tricks available upon request!’

Thankfully, if Xie Lian lays his wares out, he usually doesn’t need to be much of a salesman, people will approach him on their own.

Today is no different!

A finely dressed young woman stops in front of him, snapping her parasol shut as she bends over to take a look.

She smiles, reaching down to touch one of the robes delicately.

“Say, gege…” the young woman glances up at him, painted nails grasping the handle of her parasol delicately. “These are really nice.”

The god jumps, glancing in her direction with a friendly smile. “Thank you, miss! Very reasonably priced, too!”

Her lips twitch at the mention of price, but before she can say more, another voice pipes up.

“Say, I don’t think I’ve seen you here before!” This young lady is shorter, curly haired, and dressed in far more vibrant colors. “What’s your name, mister?”

“H—” Xie Lian starts, then stops himself.

(Not seeing the way the original young lady’s lips curve into a pointed frown.)

“The name is Xie,” he smiles again. “Anything catching your eye?”

“Hmmm…” she rubs her chin, leaning close.

“This pink dress is very nice, actually…”

“I was just thinking the same thing!” A third girl speaks up, this one taller, a slightly nasal tint to her voice. “I’ll take it!”

The shorter young lady straightens up with a glare. “Well if it isn’t Cui Ya!”

The newcomer, clearly some sort of rival, crosses her arms. “Ma Jian,” she sniffs. “I’m sorry I didn’t notice you before, I don’t usually look at the ground when I walk.”

Oh.

Xie Lian blinks, surprised.

They really don’t like one another, do they?

“What are you doing here, anyway?”

Ma Jian sniffs, balling her hands up into fists. “If you MUST know, I’m having tea with Mr. Mo on Sunday, so I thought I’d get a new dress!”

Cui Ya raises an eyebrow, staring down at her imperiously. “Is that so?”

The more she speaks, the more Ma Jian’s face reddens with fury. “Well, I happen to be going riding with Mr. Mo on Saturday…”

Xie Lian winces, and Cui Ya smirks.

“I’d invite you to come along, but your short little legs probably couldn’t reach the stirrups...”

Ma Jian’s nostrils flare, and Xie Lian can’t help but feel a little sorry for her.

“But if he’s not too exhausted the next day...I’m sure he’ll enjoy having tea with you.”

Is riding really that tiresome? Xie Lian never found it to be so.

“Well, good for Mr. Mo.” Ma Jian huffs, adjusting her sleeves delicately. “It’s kind of him to take BOTH of his horses out for a ride.”

Xie Lian makes a choked sound, and Cui Ya squawks with indignation.

“Listen here, you little bitch—!”

In the middle of their arguing, Xie Lian can’t help but notice that the third young woman, the first to arrive—has disappeared.

And with her, a simple black brocade Xie Lian has set out for sale—two gold pieces left in its place.

The prince frowns.

That’s three—no, five times more than what he normally charges for a garment like that, and more than enough to buy food for the shrine for a week or two.

He lifts them up, trying to call out to her to correct the mistake, but... She’s long gone.

In the background, Ma Jian and Cui Ya are still arguing.

“Look!” Ma Jian snaps, clapping her hands together. “Pretty dresses are for pretty young ladies! And YOU are a COW!”

Without thinking, Xie Lian comments—

“I thought you said she was a horse?”

“HEY!”

“She can be BOTH!”

Before any of them can say more, there's a loud crash as the doors of a nearby mansion crash open.

"STUPID DOCTOR!" A middle aged man's voice rages. "GET OUT!"

"Mr. Mo!" Someone cries in protest. "There really isn't anything he can do!"

...This is the "Mr. Mo" these two young women are fighting over?

He sounds too old for either one of them, if you ask Xie Lian.

"My wife was FINE yesterday! You SAID SO!"

...And he has a wife?

Goodness, that's rather shameless.

"She was! She really was!"

"Then HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN THIS?!"

"Well...!" The doctor and his assistant stumble back down the steps. "There's clearly some dark magic at work here! You'd be better off with a cultivator than a doctor!"

And suddenly, that's Xie Lian's cue.

"Ah!" He leaps to his feet, cutting off the two young women arguing in front of him. "I'm a cultivator, sir!"

The wealthy merchant stops shaking his fist in the doctor's face, slowly turning to look at...

A simply dressed—clearly blind—weaver.

"...I thought you made clothes!" Ma Jian frowns, and Xie Lian waves her off, picking up his hat and the gold pieces as he straightens up.

"That was a side gig," he explains casually. "I'm a cultivator by trade!"

A few of the locals stop to stare at the garments he's rather carelessly abandoned on the street—some of which are the finest they've ever seen.

A...side gig?

"Whatever the issue is, I'm sure I can help!" He smiles brightly, and his confidence is so clear that, well…

Even if Mr. Mo has his doubts, due to the blindness—it seems like the very best option that he has.

"…Very well, Mr…?"

"Xie," Xie Lian exclaims again, crossing the road, following the sound of his voice with ease. "The name is Xie!"

"…Mr. Xie, it's my wife!"

He's ushered inside the house quickly, the courtyard gates slamming shut behind him as Mr. Mo explains.

"She's expecting a son, my first son! And when the doctors came to check her yesterday, she was fine, but today…" He trails off fretfully.

The moment Xie Lian is led into the lady of the house's bedroom, he understands.

He can't see her—the way her complexion has gone pale and sweaty, her expression drawn with pain. But he can hear her pained cries, and more importantly—

The dark aura. Coming directly from…

"EVERYBODY, QUIET!" Xie Lian cries out, holding his hands up.

The merchant is so startled, he nearly falls over, the doctor and his assistant cowering near the door.

"There's something wrong with the mistress's belly!"

Mr. Mo braces himself against a dresser, turning pale. "Is she about to give birth?! It's too soon!"

No, Xie Lian very much doubts the poor woman will be giving birth any time soon. Maybe never.

He reaches onto his back, where he's kept Fangxin sheathed up until now—and when he pulls out the sword, gleaming like black jade, the merchant grows even more gaunt.

"Hey! What are you doing with that thing—?!"

“Everyone, stay back!”

After all—Fangxin is no ordinary blade, it’s a spiritual device.

It hovers in the air the moment Xie Lian brings it out, trembling, before finally moving towards the pregnant woman in her bed—drawing out her husband’s panic.

“WHAT—?”

“Don’t interfere!” Xie Lian warns.

Fangxin won’t harm the mother, that much is certain.

The prince holds Mr. Mo back firmly as the blade hovers over her stomach—and after a tense moment, broken only by the father’s protests, Mrs. Mo begins to hunch over, hacking and coughing.

“STAY CALM!”

“How cAN YOU SAY THAT WHEN MY WIFE IS ABOUT TO BE—?!” The merchant falls silent, trembling with fright when black smoke begins to pour out of Mrs. Mo’s mouth, filling the air around her in a cloud, swirling menacingly.

Waiting for this moment, Fangxin finally attacks.

Plunging down towards the cloud, piercing through it—but only doing a minor level of damage before it slips out the open window, leaving Mrs. Mo to collapse against the sheets, breathing hard with relief.

Xie Lian lets go of her husband, hurrying forward to check on her.

After a moment of inspection, he hangs his head, his expression grim. “...it’s gone,” he mutters.

“GOOD!” Mr. Mo stumbles over, trembling with relief. “I don’t know what you did, but thank goodness you were here! How is my wife?! And my son?!”

“Your wife will recover, but...” Xie Lian sighs, leaning back. “Your son is gone.”

Mrs. Mo is groaning, clearly not conscious or aware of what has happened—and Mr. Mo—

He just stares at the cultivator, his jaw hanging open with shock.

“W…What do you mean?! Did th—did that thing make her miscarry?!”

Xie Lian supposes the end result might be the same—but the process is actually radically different.

“No, that…” He turns his head, following the direction of evil aura with his eyes. “That cloud of black smoke…it devoured the unborn child.”

The merchant stares at his wife’s stomach, his expression grief stricken. “H…how could that be? My…my first son, and now, he’s…”

“…Well, to get to the bottom of it, I have to ask—and I hope you understand, sir, I mean no offense—”

“Of course, Daozhang! What is it?”

He seemed rather doubtful of Xie Lian initially, but now that the prince has proven some qualifications—he’s rather deferential.

“First—are there any other women in your life that might have been jealous of your wife’s pregnancy?”

“Well…” Mr. Mo hesitates.

Xie Lian already knows the answer—and he strongly disapproves—but he waits.

“I, ah…have several wives…and concubines…”

…On top of the women outside?!

“…and has your wife ever terminated a pregnancy?”

“Ah, well…” Mr. Mo scratches his beard. “When you have so many women in one house…they get competitive, you know.”

He can’t see Xie Lian’s eyes—they’re covered by the hood of his robes—but the cultivator crosses his arms, unimpressed.

“…Well, the last time she was pregnant, she found out it was a girl, and…”

The answer is obvious, if not somewhat grim.

Mrs. Mo found out she was having a girl—and proceeded to terminate the pregnancy, rather than lose status compared to the other women in the house.

“Is it...possible that this was the vengeance of the unborn girl?”

“...Maybe...” Xie Lian admits with a frown. “It’s difficult to tell. But in this case, you were clearly dealing with a fetus spirit. Given that your wife is no longer pregnant, it has no reason to linger.”

As he’s saying this, he’s making his way to leave, but... Mr. Mo stops him.

“...But if there was a pregnant woman in the house...the child be in danger?” He questions slowly, and...

Xie Lian fights the urge to press a palm to his forehead with exasperation. “Is there?”

“Well...” the merchant swallows thickly, his forehead beading with stress. “...One of my concubines is pregnant as well!”

Two pregnant women in one house?!

The merchant is repugnant, but...

It makes sense that a fetus spirit was drawn here.

“...Alright,” Xie Lian sighs. “I can help her, but you’re going to need to do exactly as I say.”

The merchant nods eagerly, his hands clasped in front of him in a pleasing gesture. “Anything you say, Daozhang! If it’s at my disposal, you have it!”

“Have the mistress sleep in a different room tonight. Actually—it’s better to have her stay awake if she can.”

Xie Lian knows that’s no small task. Pregnancy often makes women rather tired— surprisingly early in the process, too.

Despite what one might think, he’s actually spent quite a bit of time in the presence of pregnant women over the last eight centuries.

He’s been told he has a comforting presence, and he can’t feel pain when someone squeezes the life out of his hands, so he’s often helped with deliveries in the towns he’s found himself passing through.

“It’s not a problem, daozhang!”

"And if someone calls out for her, calling her mother—she absolutely must not answer, or open her mouth at all. Understand?"

"Yes!" Mr. Mo bobs his head quickly in agreement. "Absolutely!"

"I'll also need a dress—one loose enough to be worn by a man—and a lock of her hair."

No matter how strange Xie Lian's directions become, Mr. Mo agrees.

"Oh! And take this," Xie Lian mutters, fumbling around in his sleeve. After a moment, he retrieves a protection charm, handing it over.

"...What is it?"

"A protection talisman," The cultivator explains. "When all of this is over—hold that up and say 'please protect me, crown prince!'" Xie Lian concludes. "That way, all of this can be counted under my shrine."

"..."

"Good," He claps his hands, assuming that the merchant nodded in agreement. "Let's get started!"

As it turns out, wearing women's clothes is easier after the first time around. The dress they bring out for him is plenty big enough for what he has in mind—and even the makeup is easier this time around.

After all, Xie Lian paid close attention when Xiao Ying applied it back on Mount Yu Jun. He's slow and careful, keeping in mind the feel on his skin, the placement of the product—and when he has one of the maids check his work, she even compliments him on the end result.

After that, he goes about working his hair into a more feminine style—braiding the sides, using the piece Hua Cheng gifted him to clasp it at the back of his head.

(Though Xie Lian can't imagine this is how the Ghost King intended his gift to be used when he gave it to him.)

Finally, he's left with the final task:

To make himself a convincing pregnant woman.

Of course, therein lies two obvious problems:

It wasn't so difficult, pretending to simply be a small chested bride on Mount Yu Jun.

Pretending to be a flat chested pregnant woman, however…

That's harder to do. It's not that women like that don't exist—they do—but not often.

Of course, now that Xie Lian thinks about it…

…It wouldn't be such a terrible idea to use his female form, in a situation like this.

It's like Shi Qingxuan said, when he was trying to convince Xie Lian to do it in the first place.

Xie Lian isn't worshiped as a god, or a goddess these days. Regardless of his gender, his power stays the same. And the…Crown 'Princess' of Xianle, she…

…Isn't flat chested. So, in this case…

Xie Lian scrunches his nose, concentrating, trying to grasp whatever spiritual power he has remaining from his mission in Ghost City…

…And when he reaches up to grasp at his chest, it's still flat. "…Oh," he mutters, surprised to feel…disappointed.

He must not have had enough left over, then.

It's not as if he had his heart set on it—but he hardly got to be in that form for very long at all last time—and it would have been a nice chance to sate any remaining curiosity.

Ah, well.

He'll just have to be an expectant mother with a smaller chest, and hope the fetus spirit doesn't notice—there's not really much else he can do on short notice.

(Besides ringing up Nan Feng or Fu Yao to ask them to lend spiritual power—but he'd be too embarrassed to explain.)

And the second issue at hand, of course, is his belly.

In that case, it doesn't matter what gender he's in—he'll have to rectify it.

He feels around the mistress's bedroom, eventually finding a small, round pillow, pushing it up under his skirt.

It takes a minute of shimmying and adjusting to get it in place, but once it's wedged under the bust area, situated over his ribs...

Xie Lian rubs his hands over it, testing.

It's not exactly the same shape as a pregnant woman's stomach—but it's certainly close enough.

Of course, the only problem is that Xie Lian has to keep one hand over the pillow to keep it in place—which he does, carefully waddling sideways as he crawls into the mistress's bed, pulling the blankets up over him.

It's early in the night to be going to sleep—and maybe it's a little optimistic to assume that the fetus spirit would strike again so soon—but Xie Lian would prefer to finish this quickly.

"..." The god sighs, laying on his back, his hands on his stomach. ...He isn't sleepy.

Xie Lian has a lot of skills. Forcing himself to sleep when he isn't actually tired isn't one of them.

Particularly because the more he thinks about how he needs to sleep, the more anxious he becomes, and then he's even more awake, and—

You get the picture.

And normally, when this happens, Xie Lian has one strategy:

"...Ruoye," he starts—then realizes that he left his spiritual device guarding the actual pregnant woman downstairs—and he sighs.

(Xie Lian usually talks himself to sleep.)

He could try talking to Fangxin—but he feels weird about that.

Xie Lian carried the blade for five centuries, before losing it to Lang Qianqiu, but...he never developed much of a bond with it.

It's hard to forget where it came from.

Instead, he pulls at the chain around his neck, twisting the ring between his fingers thoughtfully.

"Hong'er," he starts again, feeling a little silly.

He talks to him every single day, but the circumstances this time are a little strange.

"...You know, we never talked about it," he muses, stretching his legs out, sinking down into the mattress.

It's far more plush than what he's used to, though not as comfortable in the bed in Paradise Manor. Not Hua Cheng's bed, obviously. The one in the guest room.

Xie Lian didn't even get around to sleeping in it actually, which feels like a shame.

...Anyway.

"We never talked about it, and I...don't really know why we would have, actually—but I...always wanted to be a parent, when I was young." The prince explains quietly.

When he was little—not even ten years old, he would strong arm Feng Xin into playing pretend with him. And of course, being so young, with little exposure to anything but what they had been raised with, they couldn't conceive a parenting set other than a mother and a father.

Feng Xin would have done whatever Xie Lian told him to do—but watching him attempting to act motherly was a little too out of character, even for a seven year old's suspension of disbelief—so, Xie Lian always took that up for himself.

The Queen was confused, watching Xie Lian carrying around one of their puppies, swaddled in a blanket, and Feng Xin marching behind him—grumbling about the economy, and being up past his bedtime.

(In Feng Xin's mind, that was the epitome of fatherhood.)

When she eventually found out what they were doing, she thought it was hilarious. The king, however, found Xie Lian's willingness and seeming ease with pretending to be a mother... 'inappropriate.'

Which resulted in a very awkward, confusing discussion with his father.

With the king waxing on and on about how, one day, Xie Lian was going to have a wife. That she would be the mother of his children. And that Xie Lian would be a husband, and father.

These were the things that were expected of the prince, someday.

But that was always the key word: someday.

Even if Xie Lian didn't feel anything when he held a girl's hand—he told himself that he would, someday.

Whenever he tried to imagine himself with a wife, her having his children—it felt like someone else's future. Not his.

And as he got older...

It felt like there was something wrong with him.

Because he didn't understand why, as he was entering puberty, Xie Lian didn't want those things.

Xie Lian was *supposed* to want those things.

But he didn't.

And then, he started to feel...other things.

First, there was denial. Then, fear. A slow process of coming to terms with what had always been framed to him as an abnormality. A moral failing.

"...But when I got older, and I realized I was never going to love a woman in that way..." Xie Lian bites his lip. "It didn't feel right to pretend to love someone, just so I could have a family." Not just to the potential wife in that situation, but to the children too.

Children deserve to be raised by parents who love each other. Xie Lian was lucky—his own parents loved one another deeply

"So...I decided to be a cultivator," Xie Lian explains. "And that seemed...like I was giving something up, but I was getting something else."

Sure, he'd never marry or have children—but he'd be a god, instead. When he was a child, it seemed like a fair trade.

Now, however...

He remembers how it felt, holding Banyue some nights. Singing her to sleep, keeping her safe.

When Xie Lian was young, he was too immature himself to be much good with children. He was well intentioned—but he had to learn how to make himself a safe place for them.

It's one thing, to be able to protect someone. It's another to be able to make them feel protected. Like they have a solid foundation underneath their feet.

It wasn't until Banyue that he felt like he could actually give that to a child. That Xie Lian could actually...

And, well...remembering how he failed in that case, it doesn't make Xie Lian feel like he could actually succeed at that now.

Actually—when he considers the weight of the shackles on him now—all three of them —

Xie Lian doesn't even feel like he has the right to try.

His life has never been easy—that isn't likely to change any time soon.

And he doesn't have the right to drag a child into that.

"...I think you would have been good at it, though," he mumbles, turning his cheek into the pillow.

Back then, Xie Lian never imagined it.

Hong'er died so young...in many ways, Xie Lian didn't realize that the mortal had actually grown up.

Not until he was gone.

(Which was, in large part, why Xie Lian didn't come to terms with the fact that his feelings had started to become romantic until after he died.)

And now, it feels especially unfair, because there were so many things that Hong'er never got the chance to do.

To fall in love for the first time. To get married. Having children of his own. And he was so protective by instinct, so caring and gentle—

He would have been a natural. Xie Lian knows.

But when Xie Lian tries to picture the two of them, having children together—

He struggles with that part.

Not only because Xie Lian struggles with seeing himself as a parent, but…

That requires thinking of Hong'er in a context that feels somewhat disrespectful to the dead.

And when Xie Lian tries to picture any other possibility of someone he could envision himself having children with, the only thing that comes to his mind is…

"…" Suddenly, the god's cheeks become rather hot, and he shoves all thoughts of that out of his mind.

"…You…" he repeats himself, swallowing down the butterflies in his stomach. "You would have been pretty good at it."

The prince squeezes his eyes shut, biting his lip.

Instead of talking, he tries to opt for rubbing his hands over his faux-belly, humming a song his own mother used to sing to him when he was small.

That, paired with deep breaths, and the warmth of the ring against his chest, slowly makes his mind begin to drift…

He doesn't actually realize he's fallen asleep at first—not until he opens his eyes. Because when he does—he can see.

Xie Lian can only see clearly like this under two conditions:

First, when he's dreaming.

Second, when he's under the effect of an illusionary spell.

This is more than likely the latter. First, because Xie Lian has no memory of this place. He never saw anything like it, back when he had his sight—and it's completely different from the layout of the room he fell asleep in.

And second—

The shackle in his eye is hurting.

The pressure of the demonic energy in the room is enough to cause strain—but once his eyes adjust...

It’s very clearly the room of a young woman.

Flowers sitting in a vase by the vanity.

Fine dresses hung in the wardrobe.

And when Xie Lian glances towards the chest of drawers against the wall...it’s clear from the baby clothes inside that the woman who once lived here was expecting.

Which means...this is likely the room of the fetal spirit’s mother.

“...” Still clutching the pillow under his ribs, Xie Lian sits up, slipping out of bed as he walks through the room, examining it for any further clues.

(All the while, keeping an eye out for a black cloud of smoke.)

But he does catch sight of something...surprising.

A protection talisman.

Not only that—but one of Xie Lian’s protection talismans.

Unlike the one he gave Mr. Mo, just a few hours before...this one isn’t simple at all.

No, this one is expensive—intricately designed, just like they used to be, during...Xie Lian’s first ascension.

He lifts up the charm, startled, finding himself wondering...

...How old is this fetus spirit, anyway? Could it’s mother have actually been a woman from Xianle?

And if so—?

Then, there’s a sound— Giggling.

And this laughter...

...It's familiar.

Xie Lian is left standing there for a moment, wondering just where he could have heard it before, and then—it hits him.

‘New bride…New bride…’

It was that night. Back on Mount Yu Jun.

‘Smile not under the bridal veil…’

…This fetus spirit was the one singing back then?

Startling from his thoughts, a voice cries out—

“Mom!”

Xie Lian doesn’t answer, knowing that’s part of the trick.

“Mom, hug me!”

His mouth remains firmly shut, and in a way, he almost feels bad for the spirit.

After all—Xie Lian isn’t exactly actual prey.

If this spirit tried to crawl into his ‘womb,’ it would be in for a disappointing surprise.

“MOM!”

Still, Xie Lian doesn’t open his mouth—but he does notice something else—

The child’s voice…is coming from underneath his dress.

It would seem the fetus spirit—falling for Xie Lian’s little charade—snuck up under his robes. But instead of devouring his ‘unborn child,’ well…

It ended up with a mouth full of pillow stuffing, instead. “BLEGH!”

‘Well, that’s what you get,’ Xie Lian thinks to himself.

The illusion is already starting to flicker—Xie Lian’s vision beginning to go black with it—but just before it does, he catches sight of one other detail—

The bed he had been laying in, before… It’s absolutely soaked with blood.

He...

“MOM!” The child shrieks again.

Certain pieces of the mystery are certainly beginning to come together—but then, the illusion dissolves entirely, and Xie Lian is left in the darkened bedroom, eyeing the swirling cloud of black smoke as it flies out from beneath his dress.

But it doesn’t flee.

No—it thinks it’s been cheated out of a meal, and that, if it can get inside Xie Lian’s mouth, a baby will be waiting in his belly for it to devour.

(And, given the fact that Xie Lian’s closest brush with motherhood was a swaddled puppy—it’s going to be disappointed.)

But in the meantime—that gives Xie Lian the chance to wound and capture it.

It isn’t easy to pinpoint it. After all, catching sight of a black cloud when his vision is already dark isn’t easy. But he can catch faint glimpses of it, tracking it’s movements.

And when he steps forward—he feels something that catches him off guard. A sharp prick on his right foot.

It doesn’t hurt, of course—nothing ever does—but it goes pretty deep. Enough so to catch his attention.

A needle, left standing upright. Probably a trick to try and get Xie Lian to cry out, opening his mouth so the spirit can fly inside.

Well, the joke is on it—because Xie Lian hardly noticed it enough to even be aware of the needle’s existence.

Honestly, short of amputating the limb, it has little chance of getting the prince to cry out in pain.

In any case, Xie Lian takes that chance to strike out with Fangxin—and this time, he does manage to hit the cloud’s form a second time, earning a pained cry.

It begins to retreat again, like it did earlier in the day—but not towards the window, like Xie Lian expected, overlooking a small lake.

No—instead, it moves towards the doorway, where the other occupants of the house are waiting downstairs, many still awake.

Talking and laughing, their mouths wide open.

It's a surprisingly manipulative trick, for a spirit of this nature.

(To be expected, given that it's supposedly old enough for it's mother to have been from Xianle.)

XIe Lian is forced to make a quick decision:

"...THE SPIRIT IS HERE!" He shouts as loudly as he can. "COVER YOUR MOUTHS!"

As soon as he's said it, he shuts his own mouth tightly, but...

It's too late.

He can already feel cold air running down his throat, into his chest—

Meaning he has to act fast.

If it was as simple as forcing himself to vomit, that would be easy.

See, Xie Lian has accidentally eaten quite a few poisonous things in his day. He's turned the act of regurgitating into somewhat of a learned skill.

(As unpleasant as that skill might be.)

This is different.

This is something that absolutely doesn't want to come up—meaning he'll have to purge it out.

The god reaches into his sleeve, performing a few quick hand signs before pressing a protection talisman against his stomach—forcibly cleansing his body of evil.

Which ejects the spirit from him, sure—rather forcibly.

The result is Xie Lian gagging and coughing, his eyes pricking with tears as he stumbles away from the door, practically throwing the spirit up and out of him as he leans back against the window, thinking.

It’s going to keep on attacking him now—and at this rate, it’ll keep on using the humans downstairs as a means of manipulation, too…

Which means Xie Lian needs two things: to lure the spirit away from them—and to think.

The solution is impulsive, but rather straightforward.

To reach up behind him, pushing the window open, leaping up onto the ledge—and when Xie Lian hears the spirit whip around, he knows he has it’s attention.

Just in time for it to watch the prince leap out the window, crashing down into the lake below.

SPLASH!

It’s cold.

It’s the middle of autumn, after all—and as a result, the water is unpleasantly cool around him, jarring him the rest of the way out of his grogginess as the prince allows himself to drift down to the bottom of the lake, thinking.

He glances up, struggling to find the shape of the black cloud again—but Xie Lian knows it must be hovering over the lake, waiting for him to resurface.

In which case, when Xie Lian takes his first gasp of air, the spirit will jump right back into his stomach.

What a mess…

It’s rare to encounter a fetal spirit with this much resentment. Is it because of its age, or simply the violent nature of its demise? And why was it on Mount Yu Jun? Would Qi Rong know anything about it?

In any case, that just means Xie Lian has to capture it, but…

Without spiritual power, that’s easier said than done. If Xie Lian could just catch a hold of it, he could…

Then—it occurs to him.

The easiest way to catch it would just be giving it exactly what it wants. Let it jump in Xie Lian’s stomach.

He can just pierce it with fangxin immediately after.

It’s not a big deal for him to do that, anyway. Xie Lian knows he’ll heal from it—and he’s used to the feeling, as it is.

But, just as he comes to that conclusion…

SPLASH!

Something plunges into the lake with him.

…Did the fetus spirit actually jump into the water with him?! Xie Lian had assumed it would be too cautious to do that much, but before he can open his eyes to look for it’s aura—

A set of arms wrap around his waist…

Far stronger than that of a fetal spirit, and—

There’s something soft against Xie Lian’s lips.

Soft, but giving, and slightly cold.

And maybe it’s been a very long time, but—

The prince knows what someone else’s mouth feels like.

But…who…why…is it…?

Chapter End Notes

> you waited 500k words for...the SECOND kiss! And you'll see it in action next chapter. <3
>
> Also, if you look in the related works section of this fic, you'll see there is a new Ukrainian translation available. Only one chapter is up, and I do not know if the translator has internet connection at the moment due to current events, but if you want to go and leave some love on the translation, every gesture of support, big and small, can mean a lot to people who are going through dangerous times. To any readers who are currently being impacted, my heart is with you.
>
> Stay safe,
> Evie.

Haven

Chapter Summary

> Initially, all that comes to Xie Lian’s mind is a wave of confusion.
>
> Then, as the initial shock starts to lose its charm—it’s followed by a rush of indignation.
>
> Going from a simple—
>
> ‘Who is kissing me?’
>
> To—
>
> ‘WHO the is kissing ME?!’

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Initially, all that comes to Xie Lian’s mind is a wave of confusion.

Then, as the initial shock starts to lose its charm—it’s followed by a rush of indignation.

Going from a simple—

‘Who is kissing me?’

To—

‘WHO the is kissing ME?!’

Flustered, he finds himself beginning to thrash, pushing against his captor’s shoulder, but the grip around his waist is like iron—even stronger than he is which—

Xie Lian’s never exactly been physically overpowered before.

Well actually, he has—but under far more unpleasant circumstances than this. And— honestly, it’s probably a fluke, he’s just surprised, he—!

The prince tries to twist his head, water flooding his mouth, making him choke as air bubbles pour out around him and—

There's a hand gripping his jaw firmly—startling the god to the point where he wrenches his eyelids open, cool water stinging against his flesh—

When Xie Lian sees the aura in front of him, he stops struggling. All around him, rather than endless darkness, is a sea of crimson. It—

It's Hua Cheng.

Hua Cheng is kissing him.

... *Ba-bump.*

What is he doing here—?

Just as he starts to wonder, the ghost king's thumb presses down firmly on his jaw, forcing the prince's mouth open.

Xie Lian's eyes practically bulge out of his head, his legs jerking, but—

When a cold stream of air is sent down his throat, soothing his burning throat and aching lungs, Xie Lian's confusion clears—and all that's left behind is absolute mortification.

O-Oh.

...Oh.

...It was just...

...Mouth to mouth...

And Xie Lian just...assumed...it was...

He's caught between two parallel trains of thought:

It's kind of hilarious that ghosts, who don't need to breathe, can give mouth to mouth resuscitation.

And;

'...Why did I assume he was kissing me? Why would he jump into a lake just to kiss me? ...Why would he kiss me at all?!'

And this doesn't necessarily compare to the other two kisses Xie Lian has had in his life, anyway.

The first was so horrific, violating, and traumatic—he refuses to count it. Refuses to even think about it.

The second was gentle, perfect, and laden with guilt. And this...

This isn't unpleasant. Not at all. And Xie Lian isn't frightened. How could he be? It's Hua Cheng, and—

And it isn't a kiss! Why is he caught up on that—?

In the middle of his panicked, disorganized thinking, Hua Cheng begins to swim for the surface, pulling Xie Lian with him.

When they break into the open air, Xie Lian leans back, expecting Hua Cheng to let him go, but—

The hand on his jaw locks in, holding him firmly in place—and Xie Lian is somewhat embarrassed of the high pitched, shocked sound that comes out of his mouth.

While he's left there, flailing like a fish, steam practically pouring out of his ears—

Hua Cheng's eye opens, narrowing in on the fetus spirit. Sharply focus on the task at hand.

Suddenly, through the haze of Hua Cheng's aura, Xie lian sees them—hundreds of Wraith butterflies.

Their wings as sharp as razor blades as they whip through the air, surrounding the spirit like a net, shrinking in as it screams in protest—throwing itself against them trying to escape—but unable to break free.

Xie Lian feels the hand on his jaw let go as Hu Cheng reaches into his pocket, pulling out a set of dice—but he's simply too stunned to try pulling away, half expecting to be stopped again.

Clack, clack!

The air around them shifts—and it's only when Hua Cheng starts pulling Xie Lian ashore that he understands the Ghost King's intentions—

He was stopping the fetus spirit from flying into Xie Lian's mouth again once they broke the surface, while still allowing him to breathe.

That being said, knowing all of that, he's still in a daze when they reach the shore—his mouth swollen and numb when their lips part, eyes wide.

Hua Cheng sets him down carefully, looking the prince over with a tense expression.

"...Your highness?"

Xie Lian remains perfectly still at first, eyes wide, his mouth hanging open.

"I...um..." he swallows thickly, all while Hua Cheng is staring at him rather expectantly. "I..."

(Part of Xie Lian desperately wishes to be as disconnected and uncaring as he was when he asked for a kiss from Wu Ming all those years ago.)

He has no idea how he did that now. Because—

That wasn't even a real kiss, and he still...

"...Thank you!" He blurts out suddenly.

Hua Cheng passed, his lips parted, and Xie Lian frantically explains—

"For the—air!" He croaks, pressing his hands against his face. "I...uh..."

"What—?"

"My hat!" He cries, feeling around on the ground. "Where did I—?"

He didn't lose it, did he?

"You still have it..."

What does he mean?! Xie Lian doesn't—!

...Oh.

Right.

It's hanging from a cord around his neck, sitting against his shoulders —like it always is.

The prince falls silent, clutching it between his hands, facing away from him.

"...Your—?"

"...It's cold..."

Hua Cheng falls silent, clearly taken off guard by Xie Lian's admission, the god's voice having become rather small, uncertain.

And of course—it's not surprising that Xie Lian would be cold. He just jumped into a lake—he's soaked to the bone.

What's surprising, in the end, is that Xie Lian admitted it.

Or that he's visibly shivering now.

Hua Cheng frowns, opening his mouth—

"...And I'm hungry!" Xie Lian mumbles, bobbing his head, like he's come to some sort of important inclusion. "So, I should just, um..."

Go somewhere else, and proceed to never think about the fact that he immediately assumed Hua Cheng kissing him was the most obvious reason for why the man would have jumped to the bottom of a lake ever again.

It seems like a solid plan.

"I'm just gonna go...get some...Oh!"

He tries to stand up, twists his foot around a rock in the process—and of course, Hua Cheng catches him before he falls to the ground—

(Which makes Xie Lian even more embarrassed, somehow.) —but in the process, he notices something else.

Blood trailing from Xie Lian's boot, onto the ground.

Naturally, the Ghost King reaches down, grasping him lightly by the calf as he examines the sole of Xie Lian's boot, and the prince feels somewhat lightheaded.

He forgot!

He'd been so focused on chasing after the fetus spirit, he'd forgotten about the needle in his foot.

“...What happened?”

Hua Cheng’s voice is calm when he asks, but there’s an undeniable tension in the air —

Like something’s upset him. Is that...Xie Lian’s fault?

“I...” The prince swallows thickly, trying to pull his leg back—but Hua Cheng shows no indication of letting him go—even if his grip is rather gentle. “I...stepped on something sharp,” he concludes.

“...” Hua Cheng falls silent, staring at the blood on the ground. Xie Lian can’t see it, but...

His expression is dark.

“...San L—?”

Before Xie Lian can ask, he feels himself being pulled forward by that grip on his leg, his heart suddenly kicking into overdrive.

“Wh—?”

And just like that—he’s scooped up in the calamity’s arms.

“W...What are you—?”

Xie Lian feels silent when he hears a din of voices, realizing what Hua Cheng must have been doing, when he was rolling the dice before.

He brought them to Ghost City.

Normally, Xie Lian isn’t easily embarrassed.

He’s been in plenty of humiliating situations before. He’s often the punchline of the joke.

But he’s never been carried down the street by a ghost king, soaked, wearing women’s clothing, with his lips swollen.

It’s that combination of factors that leads him to hide his face in Hua Cheng’s chest, his shoulders shrinking in.

“Say, say! Hua Chengzhu!” One of the ghosts crows. “Ya kidnapping someone?”

“Do you need any help??” Someone in the crowd offers. “We can tie them up for you —!”

The ghost king doesn’t seem particularly flattered by the offer—

“Get lost,” he growls, his arms tightening around the prince. Which leads Xie Lian to another question:

Why does Hua Cheng seem slightly older this time?

It’s barely noticeable—but still.

The last time Xie Lian saw him—that was his ‘true form,’ and it felt like he was in his early to mid twenties. Now—he feels mostly the same, but his voice is slightly rougher —and he isn’t exactly bigger than he was before—but there’s something more firm about him.

The ghosts part quickly after that, giving them quite a wide berth—but some of them whisper the same question under their breath—

‘Is that the lady that was looking for him before?’

Xie Lian’s cheeks might just spark into flames at this point.

‘The night Paradise Manor caught on fire?’

‘...But wasn’t that just the prince in disguise?!’

Xie Lian let’s out a soft groan of mortification, and Hua Cheng’s lips twitch. Even in his displeasure, he’s slightly amused.

“What’s wrong, your highness?”

“...People are going to start thinking I have strange habits,” he mumbles, somewhat pathetically.

“And so what if you did?” The ghost king shrugs, but Xie Lian remains quiet—not seeming particularly comforted. “...Dianxia thinks highly of the wind master.”

“That’s different.”

Xie Lian feels somewhat like a sulking child—and Hua Cheng smiles.

“What about me, then?”

It takes Xie Lian a moment to understand what the Ghost King is getting at—at first, he’s too distracted by the fact that Hua Cheng’s voice—

It’s changed.

The calamity’s arms feel somewhat slimmer around him too—but just as strong, and —

Before, Hua Cheng’s chest was firm, and now...

Xie Lian lifts his head quickly, actually finding himself dizzy with embarrassment.

“I’m sorry!” He chokes, only for Hua Cheng to throw her head back with a soft laugh.

“For what?”

She’s still rather tall, which Xie Lian finds surprising—though maybe he shouldn’t— and the prince doesn’t know why he’s reacting like this.

He’s never been affected by a woman’s presence before, not even remotely, and now— Xie Lian realizes something else.

‘Say, gege—these are really nice.’

“...That was you?!” He gasps, clapping a hand over his mouth.

Hua Cheng’s smile is half mischievous, half sheepish.

“I thought dianxia might insist on not letting me buy something.”

Well—she’s right. And Hua Cheng has already approached him in his older and younger forms—so switching into that of a young lady was actually rather clever—

Because Xie Lian never would have guessed.

“...You overpaid,” Xie Lian mumbles meekly, staring up into her face (and even though he can’t see it, he presumes she must be beautiful.)

Hua Cheng’s lips, painted the color of blood, curve into a soft smile.

“I could never,” she murmurs.

And there’s something else strange about this—

Hua Cheng just turned into a woman in the middle of the street, surrounded by other ghosts—and no one has said a word.

Not even out of politeness, fear, or respect—they just don't seem to find it particularly shocking.

"...Do you...do this very often?" Xie Lian questions, pressing his hands against his cheeks—trying to use the coolness of his skin to calm them down.

"I change form so often, nothing surprises them anymore," The ghost king drawls, then pauses. "Well, I suppose the dragon did."

"A—a dragon?" Xie Lian mumbles, unable to hide the shock from his voice—and Hua Cheng shrugs that off, her arms holding him a little more firmly as she ascends the steps to paradise manor, heels clicking quietly.

Ironically enough, her clothes are still that of a man. They must make quite the pair.

A man, wearing women's clothing, makeup, with his hair done—being carried by a woman in a man's clothes.

"Oh, that was centuries ago. I rarely have a fight that interesting." Xie Lian struggles to conceive a battle that might challenge her.

"...I didn't know you could change your appearance so drastically," He admits, swallowing dryly.

Hua Cheng seems to take mercy on him then, shifting back into the form he originally appeared in—his voice—and chest—returning back to that of a man's.

Xie Lian also realizes, now that he's back to normal—Hua Cheng's height didn't change at all.

Xie Lian has never encountered a woman that tall before. And, while he has no idea why—trying to imagine it makes his face hot.

"All powerful ghosts are shape shifters, your highness."

"Does...Blackwater change his appearance as often as you?"

"...He rarely wears his own face," Hua Cheng replies carefully. "But he doesn't use as many different forms as me."

No one does.

“Doesn’t it ever feel…strange? Seeing your own face so rarely?”

Hua Cheng shrugs, his expression becoming distant.

“…I’ve never felt particularly attached to it,” he mutters.

And why should he, when the only person he’s ever cared about showing himself to… can’t see it?

“…” Xie Lian frowns, reaching up to press his palm against the Ghost King’s cheek without thinking.

His skin is soft—but the jaw lying beneath is sharp.

Hua Cheng falls silent—watching him intently, his footsteps stopping, and Xie Lian…

Slowly lowers his hand, looking away.

“…That’s a shame,” the god mutters, slowly—cautiously—leaning his head back against Hua Cheng’s chest.

He thinks the ghost king’s face is in no need of any false skins or disguises. He’s already perfect, just as he is.

Hua Cheng’s gaze softens.

“I’m glad dianxia thinks so.”

As he’s carried through the halls of Paradise Manor, Xie Lian almost asks Hua Cheng to put him down, but…

When he remembers the Sinner’s Pit, that seems like a somewhat futile request. Hua Cheng will put him down when he’s ready, not before.

So, instead…

“…Can you change your form into anything you want?” Xie Lian questions, feeling sorry for the water dripping from his clothes, leaving a wet trail on the floor—but Hua Cheng doesn’t seem to mind.

“To the limits of my own imagination,” Hua Cheng shrugs.

“Can Blackwater do the same?”

The calamity quirks an eyebrow. “You seem pretty curious about him.”

Whenever he asks if Hua Cheng can do something—the question ‘can Blackwater do it too?’ Always seems to follow.

Xie Lian pauses, having only just realized he was doing that.

“...Well...he’s the only other ghost king,” Xie Lian explains. “I suppose I was just wondering if some talents were exclusive to calamities, or...”

Well, come to think of it—Ren Song can shape shift as well, and he’s only a savage ranked ghost.

Not as frequently or with the same level of ease as Hua Cheng—but he can.

“...We each have our own talents,” the calamity shrugs, and instead of offering up any information about Blackwater, he adds—

“I’m better at changing my shape than him.”

Xie Lian bites back a smile, his face pressed against Hua Cheng’s robes. “Oh?”

Hua Cheng doesn’t expand on it further.

Personally, he finds He Xuan’s female form unconvincing, and more oriented around what Blackwater himself likes in a woman, rather than something believable. After all—disguises aren’t meant to be designed around what you’re attracted to. It’s more about what others want to see, getting what you want out of them.

He’d never considered showing his female form to his god before—only intending to make Xie Lian less self conscious.

...But that reaction wasn’t bad.

“He almost always remains in a human form, anyway.” Hua Cheng shrugs. “That isn’t difficult.”

“But you don’t?”

“When I want to go unnoticed? It’s rare that I pose as a human.”

It’s the simplest means of hiding in plain sight.

He Xuan prefers digging into things, ingratiating himself in the lives of his targets, getting to know them inside and out.

Hua Cheng has always found getting that close to be a double edged blade. He'd much rather be a cat, listening as he lazes on a street corner instead.

Or a fox, hiding beneath the bushes as travelers walk by. A hawk, sitting on the roof eaves overhead.

Part of the background—but rarely an active participant.

Of course, those aren't the only reasons he'll take an inhuman form—he's done such things in battle before.

Actually—during his early days in Mount Tonglu, before he became completely accustomed to fighting with E'Ming, he often opted to simply change into the form of a beast, tearing his enemies apart with claws and fangs.

As a wolf, a tiger, and the like.

Xie Lian is curious—simply because he's never heard of anything like that before, but...

There's the sound of a door swinging open as he's carried into a private room, then the sound of it sliding shut behind them.

Hua Cheng pauses briefly, considering. "...San Lang?"

Finally, the prince feels himself being set down—this time upon a cushioned stool. (Hua Cheng doesn't seem keen on the idea of allowing him to walk or stand just yet.)

Before Xie Lian can question what they're doing—or why they're here—something is placed into his hands.

...Clothes.

A changing screen appears between them rather suddenly—and even still, Hua Cheng turns around, crossing his arms.

"Wh—?"

"You're cold."

Xie Lian holds the garments between his hands, his heart warming slightly in his chest.

Always so thoughtful and considerate.

Honestly—Xie Lian is cold, but not enough to be truly bothered by it. He only blurted that out beside the lake, because…well, he hadn't known what else to say.

Still, he's grateful.

The act of peeling off his wet dress is slightly difficult on his own—which no doubt occurred to Hua Cheng, but when warring with the need to be helpful and the desire to be respectful, he seemed to submit to the latter.

But, for once, thinking of how intent Hua Cheng was that Xie Lian not aggravate his foot any further…

…The prince is actually careful with one of his own injuries, not wanting to waste the ghost king's efforts.

He leans against the stool when he slips out of the dress, wincing when it lands on the floor with a wet thud—feeling sorry for the mess, but Hua Cheng genuinely doesn't seem to care…

He hops on his good foot to step out of it, using the stool for support—and a towel awaits.

Xie Lian's skin is mostly just damp at this point—but he still uses it to pat the remaining moisture from his limbs and stomach, squeezing it out of his hair as best as he can.

Unlike his last visit—these clothes don't fit perfectly.

The sleeves and pant legs are overlong, and wide in the shoulders.

In short, they're too big. Which is surprising, since Hua Cheng's clothes for guests had been perfectly fitted before, and Xie Lian had assumed the size magically adjusted to the wearer, but—

Sensing the prince's confusion, Hua Cheng frowns, seeming somewhat torn.

"I'll have something more suitable brought for his highness. But it seemed like anything would be preferable to wet clothes."

Meaning—

Oh.

Hua Cheng, in a hurry, probably just gave Xie Lian...his own clothes.

“It...um...” Xie Lian swallows hard, his fingers suddenly unsteady as he tries to work the belt on the pants, which seem to slip down each time he tries to lean over to cuff the legs. “I...I see...”

“...Have I offended dianxia?” The calamity questions, concerned.

“No!”

Now, Xie Lian is silently cursing his eating habits.

He used to feel an odd level of pride in how little food he could live off of, considering it ‘economical.’ Now, struggling to keep another man’s pants up over his hips...

...Maybe he really should eat more...

...If only to avoid situations like this...

To be fair, they don’t fall down completely. But they won’t sit over his waist—the decent place for them to be—rather falling past his hips, only to be caught by the wider area of his thighs and backside, which even now, are still...

...The point is, they don’t sit at an appropriate place on his body, no matter how much he tightens the strings at the waist, and even still, they’re long enough that his feet just won’t...

Xie Lian’s face is hot, feeling the cool air against his hips and navel.

...This isn’t decent, not decent at all...

“S...San Lang doesn’t need to worry about that,” he mumbles, fumbling for the rest of the inner robes. “I can just make something for myself, after this...and give these back, of course!” He adds frantically, feeling silly.

It’s not like Hua Cheng would have been worried about Xie Lian stealing them. What is he thinking?

“Dianxia doesn’t have to—”

“I-I know!” He agrees, finding the rest of the inner robes less of a headache. “I just like making my own, if that’s alright!”

They're too long, yes—and they keep slipping off of one shoulder—but he's not fighting to keep them on his body. And with the heavier outer robes overtop of it— he's very warm, at least.

Part of him contemplates forgoing the pants underneath entirely, given how long the outer robes are, it's not like anyone would really be able to tell, and it would be easier to walk, but…

Xie Lian hasn't ever been in a state of undress around…well…

Pretty much anyone, aside from Mu Qing—and that was different. It was perfectly businesslike, and it was something they did every day and every night. Part of the routine.

This isn't like that, and he…well…

Xie Lian keeps the pants on, awkward as holding them up might be.

Once he's finished, he grasps the edge of the stool, hopping on one foot (feeling somewhat ridiculous, but trying to be respectful of Hua Cheng's concern) to move back around the changing screen, but…

The minute the ghost king realizes Xie Lian is decent, he's picked back up.

And when he's set back down again, Xie Lian realizes he's been set at the foot of a bed.

A very comfortable one, giving gently under his weight, silk sheets beneath his palms.

And Hua Cheng wastes no time kneeling in front of him, making Xie Lian stiffen once again.

"Wh—?"

Then, when long, cool fingers envelop the prince's ankle—Xie Lian lets out a surprised yelp, his eyes widening.

"S-San Lang—?!"

He jerks slightly with protest, but Hua Cheng holds him firmly, lifting his foot up for inspection.

"Apologies, your highness…" He murmurs.

Xie Lian tilts his chin back, feeling slightly lightheaded—

And suddenly, desperately relieved that he didn't choose to forgo the pants, because that would have left Hua Cheng right in the middle of his...uh...

"This might be uncomfortable."

Xie Lian is caught between two different spheres of thought.

First: Hua Cheng's fingers easily wrap all the way around the bones of his ankle, overlapping in places. Xie Lian has no idea why, but there's something exceedingly distracting about that fact.

Second...

"...W...What are you going to—?"

Then, the answer becomes clear.

Hua Cheng's fingers hover over the arch of his foot, claws slightly extended, using them for the careful precision required to draw the needle out of his foot.

T...the...

Xie Lian smacks a hand over his mouth so hard, he inadvertently slaps himself, falling backwards, his shoulders bouncing slightly when they hit the bed.

Hua Cheng doesn't let go—but his voice is filled with concern. "Is it too painful?"

"..."

Xie Lian swallows thickly, shaking his head.

"...No..." He croaks between his fingers, his voice cracking slightly—but not from pain. "It...doesn't hurt..."

(In truth, he was so startled when he felt Hua Cheng's claw against his foot—he couldn't help but thrash slightly.)

"..." Hua Cheng frowns, his gaze filled with concern—but he draws the needle the rest of the way out. It hovers above the ghost king's palm for a moment, sparking with dark energy—and he glares.

"...That's a nasty spirit you were hunting," he mutters. "The poison was potent."

Oh, was it poisoned? That explains why Xie Lian's foot went somewhat numb, after. He had just assumed it was because of the cold from the—

Something else presses against the arch of his foot now. Soft, gentle. It's—

Xie Lian's eyes snap wide open.

He just—

The prince sucks in a startled gasp, his leg jerking. "S-San Lang—!"

The Ghost King leans back, letting his ankle go. "There," he murmurs, rising to his feet. "Better?"

Xie Lian is frozen in place, his hands covering his face. "..."

Right.

...Right.

Xie Lian's mind races back to the tunnel, after Hua Cheng swept him away from the heavens.

That—

That was medical, just healing Xie Lian's arm faster than he could have otherwise.

...The prince wiggles his toes cautiously, hearing an affectionate snort in the background.

Regardless—his foot isn't numb anymore, and feels relatively back to normal, so...

Hua Cheng was just being helpful.

Xie Lian swallows thickly, clearing his throat.

"...It's...It's much better, San Lang..." He mumbles, waiting for the heat in his face to go down. "...Thank you..."

"You're very welcome, dianxia." The ghost king replies easily—then pauses with a slight frown. "...Excuse me for just one moment—I'll be right back."

"…Is something wrong?"

"No," Hua Cheng quickly assures him. "Just an insignificant matter, rest a minute."

Xie Lian falls silent, listening as the door opens and shuts once more, still laying back on top of the bed. It must be massive, just from the feel of it. Far more so than the guest bed he was placed in before.

As a matter of fact, the entire room is larger.

Not that the space Hua Cheng placed Xie Lian in before was drab or small at all—it certainly wasn't.

But this room has several adjoining areas. A slightly more…lived in feel. And when Xie Lian places his hand on the bedside cabinet—there are reports under his fingertips.

Xie Lian immediately shrinks his hand back up on feeling them.

He's already snuck through Hua Cheng's things before once—he doesn't want to violate the ghost king's trust like that again. Especially not without good reason, but…

…Is this…

…Is this Hua Cheng's bedroom?

That seems like the most logical conclusion…which means…

…Xie Lian is in Hua Cheng's bedroom…wearing his clothes…in…

His fingers bunch up in the sheets underneath him, his heart skipping a beat.

…In Hua Cheng's bed.

Which—that shouldn't be a big deal.

They've shared a bed before, in Puqi shrine. For several nights, in fact.

But…that was before…and…

…They never wore each other's clothes…or…healed one another's injured feet, with their…In Xie Lian's…

He rolls over onto his side, pulling his feet up against his chest. He's never been in a situation like this before. He doesn't know...

Only a few minutes after leaving, the door opens again—and Xie Lian sits straight up, damp hair slightly askew.

"S-San Lang—was everything alright?" He mumbles, trying his best to sound... unaffected by everything

"Oh," The Ghost King leans against the doorframe, one eye fixed on the sight of the crown prince. "It was fine. Some fool was in the gambler's den, causing a fuss."

"...A fuss?" Xie Lian's eyebrows raise.

"Insisting on a meeting with me," Hua Cheng shrugs. "Very annoying."

But Hua Cheng obviously came back instead of dealing with him, so...

Xie Lian frowns, feeling somewhat...guilty.

"I don't want to get in the way of your business..." He mutters, fiddling with his hair— which is slightly tangled now—and Hua Cheng shakes his head.

"No."

Xie Lian glances up, startled—and the calamity explains:

"I didn't want to deal with him. Dianxia hasn't done anything but give me something better to do. He can wait."

Xie Lian's lips twitch up from their frown, reluctantly soothed. "For how long?"

Hua Cheng shrugs.

"Until I feel like it."

That's fair—after all, it's his territory. And for someone to approach the gambler's den of all things, demanding an audience with Hua Cheng...

Thinking of that—Xie Lian realizes something.

Or, more like—he remembers something—and his brow creases.

Hua Cheng is quick to notice the change in the prince's expression, tilting his head. "...Is something wrong?"

"No," Xie Lian mutters, shaking his head. "No, it's just..."

"Just...?"

"..." His frown deepens as he struggles to formulate his question.

"...San Lang..."

"...Yes?"

"Before, ah...In the water..." Xie Lian squeezes his eyes shut, forcing himself to just spit the words out—

"You were just trying to help me, right? Making sure the fetus spirit wouldn't..."

The Ghost King stiffens, his expression suddenly guarded—and that tension is back. "...if your highness already thinks so, why ask?"

"Well..." Xie Lian swallows hard. "Technically speaking...I still owe you one."

Hua Cheng's eyebrows raise sharply.

"From when I lost back then. And I wasn't sure if that was...well..."

Slowly, as he recovers from the shock...

...The ghost king smiles.

"I wouldn't want to presume what his highness would count as a kiss."

Xie Lian pauses, his expression slightly vexed as Hua Cheng's eye flashes.

"Does dianxia think it counts?"

"..."

Xie Lian swallows—

No, he gulps.

"I...don't...I'm not really..."

He’s practically squirming, trying to wrap his mind around the correct answer.

“I don’t really have enough experience to…”

Somehow, Hua Cheng’s eyebrows raise even higher.

“But his highness has kissed someone before, he told this San Lang.”

“…”

…Heavens, he did say that…

Hua Cheng’s lips quirk up into a smile so wide, so amused, it’s almost painful.

(It’s moments like this when he’s glad he doesn’t have to manage his expressions around the prince.)

“…With a man,” he adds innocently, just as Xie Lian had in the gambler’s den, weeks before.

Xie Lian’s pallor is rapidly beginning to resemble that of a tomato.

“San Lang!” He chokes, burying his face in his hands. “You’re making fun of me—I’m being serious!”

“So am I,” Hua Cheng presses a hand over his heart, eyes wide. “I’m referring to gege’s expertise.”

…It’s the first time he’s called Xie Lian gege since they reunited, and that alone eases the god’s anxiety somewhat.

(He really was worried that Hua Cheng was upset with him, but too polite to say so.) “…Hua Cheng almost certainly has more experience than me,” he mutters.

The ghost king doesn’t seem particularly embarrassed either way. “What makes gege so certain?”

“Um…” Xie Lian glances in his direction, then looks away, staring down at the bed blindly. “I don’t know…just…um…a feeling…”

Hua Cheng tilts his head to the side, seeming content to watch him flail.

“I…ah…” Xie Lian bows his head, feeling somewhat pitiful. “San

Lang…you do have experience, yes?”

After a pause, Hua Cheng finally takes mercy on him.

“I do, dianxia.”

“Then…you know…”

Hua Cheng twists at the end of his braid lightly, rolling something between his fingertips.

“My intention was to protect gege from the fetus spirit,” he explains, watching Xie Lian’s expression. “That…isn’t the way I kiss a person.”

For those who would like to continue reading on twitter, you can start from HERE.

Chapter End Notes

see you next chapter <3

xoxo,
Evie

A Settled Debt

Chapter Summary

> “I don’t think it counts.”
>
> Hua Cheng stops, biting back a smile as his eyebrows raise. “Oh?”
>
> Xie Lian shakes his head, refusing to look up—even if he couldn’t make eye contact with Hua Cheng anyway.
>
> “It’s all about...intention, right?”

Xie Lian pauses, eyes wide.

“But, if gege thinks it counts...”

“I don’t think it counts.”

Hua Cheng stops, biting back a smile as his eyebrows raise. “Oh?”

Xie Lian shakes his head, refusing to look up—even if he couldn’t make eye contact with Hua Cheng anyway.

“It’s all about...intention, right?”

“...I agree,” The ghost king agrees, and Xie Lian could practically cry with relief, but... “...Still, I won’t collect the debt unless gege says it’s alright.”

The prince desperately wishes the ghost king would stop putting the ball so firmly on his side of the court.

It...

Xie Lian feels...awkward...he just...

He doesn’t know whether to laugh, or cry.

He clears his throat, lifting his chin. “It’s fine!”

Hua Cheng watches him closely.

“I already told San Lang back then...I’m really...”

The mattress sinks slightly in front of him, and Xie Lian gulps.

It's really fine.

It's better this way, actually.

He'll feel better, when he doesn't have this hanging over his—

Cold fingertips brush over his cheek, delicately pushing a lock of hair behind the prince's ear.

Such a small, gentle touch. The god shivers.

Those fingers drift down, ever so carefully. Caressing the shape of his jaw, before finally grasping his chin.

He's close, he must be—and when he speaks, the sound of his voice is a confirmation, making Xie Lian jump slightly, surprised.

"You're sure?"

Xie Lian feels like his heart is in his throat, and he's fighting to swallow it down. "Yes," he whispers, trying to sound more firm than he feels. "Yes, I—"

His voice cuts off with a surprised sound as lips press against his jaw, drifting higher in such a gentle, familiar way.

Just like...

The fingers on his chin grasp him slightly more firmly, and Xie Lian's breath hitches.

Like...

Then, those lips are on his, and there's no thinking at all.

No shyness. No anxiety or second guessing.

Just the gentle press of another mouth against his own.

It is different.

Not only because it isn't so sudden, forcing Xie Lian's mouth open so he can push air down his throat, but—

Because Xie Lian saw it coming.

Because the prince reaffirmed it, each step of the way before he felt

Hua Cheng's lips on his.

And each time he died that—

It built anticipation. To the point where he was silently wondering what it would feel like. Aching. Wishing he would just get it over with, and now—

Now, Hua Cheng's lower lip slides between his, and it's like Xie Lian can't breathe. Xie Lian hasn't been kissed very many times in his life.

The first—he refuses to think about. Refuses to count.

The second was perfect, but his motivations were wrong.

(After all, Xie Lian had simply wanted to reclaim his first kiss as his own.) But this—this is different.

Because it was entirely up to him. And in the end, he could have easily saved face and said that the mouth to mouth counted, but—

'That isn't the way I kiss someone.'

That made Xie Lian...curious. Because...

...How did Hua Cheng kiss someone?

The answer is...

Sweetly.

Slowly, and...Intimately.

His hand cups the back of Xie Lian's neck again, stroking gently, holding him in place.

The prince can't resist another shiver. But it doesn't stay that way.

Eventually, the ghost king moves like he's about to lean back, and Xie Lian's stomach sinks.

Already? But—

Then, Xie Lian realizes it's probably because he hasn't done more than sit limply in Hua Cheng's hold, and—

The prince's arms lift up from where they've been stiff as a board, braced behind him on the bed—instead wrapping around the Ghost King's neck.

And he's struck again by a familiar thought. Bittersweet, swelling in his chest: Just a little longer.

He mumbles those words—not even realizing it, or meaning to—and Hua Cheng's hand tightens on the back of his neck.

Just...a little bit longer.

Hua Cheng is frozen for a moment, his mind far away. Thoughts so far beyond the prince's imagining, he couldn't even guess.

But he does as his god wishes.

The hand on the back of Xie Lian's neck slides up into his hair, cradling the base of his skull, guiding him to tilt his head further back.

When he does, their lips part—and the kiss deepens.

Xie Lian takes a shuddering breath, his eyelashes fluttering.

Oh.

It's alien at first, tasting someone else for the first time. And Xie Lian realizes—

Hua Cheng must have had something to drink, when he went to check on the gambler's den—there's a faint hint of whiskey. Not unpleasant—just—

...It feels odd, describing someone that way, but Hua Cheng...

...He tastes expensive.

And Xie Lian can't help but chase it, his arms tightening around the ghost king's neck, pulling himself closer, and closer, until...

They tip backwards.

Whether it was because Xie Lian forgot his own strength, or because Hua Cheng simply wasn't expecting the prince to pull on him so tightly, it's hard to say.

Either way, he catches himself with one hand on the bed, braced next to Xie Lian's head.

His other arm is around the prince's waist, and his knee...

Well, to keep himself properly lifted away from Xie Lian's body, it's braced against the bed...between the god's thighs.

This...

Xie Lian's hands flutter unsurely, grasping at his shoulders, clutching onto him.

It's so...

There's something about the feeling of Hua Cheng's form hovering over him, practically enveloping him. His arm around him. His mouth on Xie Lian's—

Having someone on top of him.

There's something about it that flips a switch in the prince's mind.

And it shifts his focus.

Before, he was really only thinking about curiosity. Wondering what Hua Cheng meant. And, of course, what his intentions were, pulling him out of that lake.

Right now, Xie Lian isn't thinking about curiosity. He isn't thinking about what Hua Cheng meant

He isn't thinking about wagers, debts, or anything like that. He isn't thinking about the fetal spirit—or even his original task, buying food for the shrine.

All he's thinking of, at that moment—is that he does *not* want Hua Cheng to stop.

If he does, Xie Lian might die.

Just then, the ghost king gives his lower lip a gentle suck—and Xie Lian feels his soul float away from him, drifting somewhere in the rafters, aimless.

The sound that rips out of the back of his throat is quiet, and— Weird.

Xie Lian's never made a sound like that before.

But it pulls a reaction out of Hua Cheng, because—

He growls.

Xie Lian's heard him do that before. Always at other people, and mostly when he was angry.

But he certainly doesn't seem angry right now, and—

There's a difference between hearing Hua Cheng growl at someone else, and *feeling* Hua Cheng growling against his lips.

It goes straight into him, reverberating straight down to the bone, settling in the pit of the prince's stomach until it does backflips, and he...

Xie Lian finds himself melting under every touch, completely pliant, his fingers loosely gripping the ghost king's robes—and he wonders;

...What happens if they don't stop? What happens then?

Does Hua Cheng keep kissing him until he simply can't anymore? What comes after that?

Tragically, Xie Lian doesn't think about it further than that—doesn't get the chance to —because Hua Cheng pulls back.

The first time their lips part, he's panting for air, shivering all over—just to find his mouth covered once more by one last kiss, this one chaste and sweet.

Xie Lian's eyes blink open, staring ahead blankly—lips parted and swollen, his face flushed—and Hua Cheng whispers something to him, such a simple question, but it takes Xie Lian's brain a moment to catch up—

"Are you still cold, gege?"

He—Oh—

"...N...no," the prince whispers.

The calamity smiles softly, leaning up to press another kiss against his god's forehead —taking advantage of the fact that Xie Lian is far too dazed to take much note of it.

"Dianxia wasn't lying before..." He murmurs, sitting up. Xie Lian blinks hazily. "A...about what?"

Hua Cheng's smile hasn't faded as he leans back, carefully pushing Xie Lian's hair from his face.

"Gege really does have experience—I was barely keeping up."

"..." The prince throws an arm over his face with a sheepish groan. "San Lang, don't tease me."

"I wouldn't dare."

Oh, but he would.

Still—

Xie Lian can't really seem to bring himself to mind.

So—that's what it's like, when Hua Cheng intends to kiss someone. It's... Xie Lian doesn't lift his arm from his face, biting his lip.

"...gege?" Hua Cheng questions, and Xie Lian—

"...I'm hungry," he mumbles, his voice unsteady.

Hua Cheng stares at him for a moment, stunned—and that was exactly what Xie Lian said before, when he pulled him ashore.

The prince hears the ghost let out a soft laugh, and he bites his lip.

"I really am, this time!"

"Alright, alright..." Hua Cheng shakes his head, still chuckling as he leans back.

Xie Lian half expects the calamity to insist on having an entire feast laid out again— but instead, Hua Cheng simply has several plates brought directly to his room.

By the same officer Xie Lian saw during his first visit to ghost city—the one Ren Song called the "Waning Moon officer."

Xie Lian takes a bite of mantou, chewing thoughtfully.

Hua Cheng watches a bare sliver of shoulder before the prince seems to notice his outer robe is slipping down again, adjusting it.

"...So, these are the snacks," he mumbles, swallowing another bite.

Hua Cheng arches an eyebrow, intrigued. “Hmm?”

“Well...” The god smiles. “Ren Song said he has a place of his own—but that the waning moon officer isn’t there,” he explains, chewing carefully. “And he makes his snacks.”

“...” The ghost king snorts, shaking his head. “Gege’s guess is correct, as usual. Has he been causing you any trouble?”

“Who?” Xie Lian blinks. “Ren Song? No...” He shakes his head. “He’s actually been very helpful.”

Hua Cheng raises an eyebrow. “Has he?”

“Mmhm...” The prince hums, popping a slice of pear into his mouth. “...He built me an attic.”

“How generous.”

“He’s a very generous person...” Xie Lian mumbles, repeating Shuo’s words.

Hua Cheng might have had several plates brought, but Xie Lian only eats one mantou, along with half of a pear before he leans back, full.

Part of him can’t help but wonder if he’s supposed to feel... Different. Given what they just did.

But...

Hua Cheng is behaving normally. He doesn’t seem bothered, so...

...Why should he?

After all—that was just...squaring a gambling debt. Obviously.

Still, there’s a relaxed air between them. A sense of ease that Xie Lian...isn’t used to.

Even when Hua Cheng carries the plates off, and Xie Lian expects him to return and discuss the fetal spirit, but...

Instead, the ghost king sits on the bed behind him, a comb in hand...And he begins to brush Xie Lian’s hair.

The prince pauses, startled, because...

He really can't remember the last time someone did that for him. Mu Qing did, when he was posing as a bride—but those circumstances were so different.

"Oh, San Lang—you don't have to—"

"I want to." Hua Cheng shakes his head.

"After all, it was my fault gege got soaked..."

Xie Lian frowns at the implication—but leans back into the comb nonetheless. "I was the one who jumped in a lake, San Lang..."

"Yes," he agrees with a hum, delicately working at the ends of Xie Lian's hair.

"But I should have intervened before it reached that point."

Xie Lian opens his mouth to argue, because it certainly wasn't Hua Cheng's responsibility to deal with that—and how could he have? But...

He was already in the area.

'Say, gege...'

(Suddenly, his ears are hot.)

And if Xie Lian had been nearby, and a friend had been in a difficult situation...well, he would have felt guilty about it too. So, he can't completely fault Hua Cheng for that.

Still.

"Well...you did help me, though," Xie Lian mumbles.

"Besides, I've been in more difficult situations than that—and I had a plan for dealing with the spirit, so..."

"I imagine you did." Hua Cheng agrees, his voice...distinctly disapproving. Xie Lian sits a little straighter, staring straight ahead innocently, but...

"...Did that plan have anything to do with hurting yourself while the fetal spirit was trapped inside of you?"

Xie Lian's silence is equivalent to an admission, and Hua Cheng sighs deeply.

“Dianxia.”

The prince remains quiet, his lips pressing into a thin line.

“...You shouldn’t harm yourself unnecessarily,” the ghost king mutters, staring down at his fingers as they work through his god’s hair, silently self loathing.

Still, Xie Lian doesn’t respond, his shoulders hunched.

Hua Cheng stares at his back. How slumped and vulnerable Xie Lian looks at this moment.

“...What are you thinking about?”

Oddly enough—

No one has ever asked Xie Lian that before, and it leaves him feeling...

Almost self conscious.

“...You don’t want to know, San Lang.”

No one ever really wants to know what Xie Lian is actually thinking.

Even in the very beginning, when he had everything—people only wanted him to say what they wanted to hear. The uglier things—those went unsaid.

And aside from that—

No one wants to listen to Xie Lian anymore.

“...What makes you think I don’t, your highness?”

His voice is gentle, his eye focused on the task at hand, even if he occasionally sneaks glances at Xie Lian’s posture.

Still so tense and guarded.

“...It isn’t exactly...a pleasant topic,” the god mutters.

Hua Cheng is quiet for a moment, and at first—Xie Lian thinks he might have successfully steered him away from the subject. But...

“...I’m sure you’ve heard things...about how ghost kings are born.”

From Jun Wu, yes.

About the incredible level of pain and torment it takes.

“Do you really think there’s a subject too unpleasant for me?”

No, he supposes not.

And there’s something…oddly comforting about that.

Xie Lian’s most painful memories are his, and his alone. There is no one left alive to share them with.

No one that could…understand.

“…During the festival,” Xie Lian’s expression is hidden from view like this—and his voice is low, calm. “Did you…hear about the plays that took place in the Heavens?”

There’s a pause before the Ghost King answers.

Xie Lian doesn’t doubt that he knows.

Hua Cheng has spies in the heavens—Jun Wu told him as much.

“I did.”

“And did you…hear about mine?” The god asks quietly.

“…Yes.”

Xie Lian couldn’t stand to admit it to Shi Qingxuan, Feng Xin, or Mu Qing, but…

“…That really did happen.”

With Hua Cheng…it comes easily.

The ghost king doesn’t react strongly, like he’s surprised—if anything, he just sounds…

“…Is dianxia trying to say…compared to that, being stabbed is nothing?”

Hua Cheng sounds just as guarded as Xie Lian feels, but the prince doesn’t know why. “No, I mean…yes, but…”

Xie Lian closes his eyes, biting his lip—his hands balling up into fists in his laps.

“…Nothing hurt, after that. Not even when I tried to…”

“Tried to what?”

Xie Lian swallows hard.

“When I tried to die.”

It feels a little…different, admitting something like that to a ghost. Maybe somewhat self centered. After all, if given the choice, he’d most likely rather be alive.

And here Xie Lian is, remembering how badly he wanted to be… Not even dead—just…gone.

“…Do you still want to?”

It’s a reasonable question, even if Hua Cheng asks it calmly. “Not anymore,” Xie Lian replies quietly.

It’s only half true.

Unlike other times in his life, he doesn’t actively crave oblivion.

But there are always passing moments of temptation.

That’s the thing about it that no one tells you. The ugliness to suicide that never makes it into the pages of books or the lines of poems.

Because sometimes, you don’t die.

And living with the fact that you wanted to isn’t so simple that it could be slipped into the pages of a book, or a few lines of verse.

Something cracks open, in your mind, when you admit to the possibility of just… giving up.

Just…stopping everything. And you’re so tired.

It’s like a dark hole that opens up in the corner of any room that you’re in, one that has a gravity of its own.

And if you just don’t look at it, you’re alright, and it isn’t there. But if you do look, it drags you back in.

For Xie Lian, that's enduring:

Not looking at it.

But he did look, during the festival.

He looked, and he looked, and if he hadn't been with Shi Qingxuan, or Feng Xin, and Mu Qing—or Shuo after that—

Xie Lian doesn't think he would have looked away from it so easily.

"...Nothing hurts, anymore." He explains quietly.

Except that isn't exactly true.

Now, Xie Lian often finds himself hurting when he should be happy, and feeling nothing at all when he should be in pain.

Like those wires were severed by Bai Wuxiang, then reconnected to the wrong parts.

"But sometimes, I...need it to," he admits, feeling somewhat ashamed. "Just to know that I..."

That he's still capable of feeling it.

"...I must sound so ridiculous," the prince shrinks, finally seeming to remember to be self aware of how...horrible it all must sound. "I'm sorry—"

"You don't." Hua Cheng hasn't spoken, not since Xie Lian used the words, *'When I tried to die.'*

"Remember what I said before?"

About ghost kings, and how they're made.

About how nothing is too terrible for him to hear. Xie Lian nods quietly, his shoulders still slumped.

"I used to feel that way, too."

Now, that—

That leaves Xie Lian surprised, turning his chin slightly—even if he can't see Hua Cheng when he looks back at him.

The ghost king reaches out, stroking his fingertips over the prince’s cheek. “...You did?”

"When I was very, very young," Hua Cheng explains. "I never craved the ability to feel pain, but I was subjected to it so often, I..."

The mind finds ways of protecting itself.

Hong'er knew it hurt, when he was being beaten--but the feeling was removed from him.

The night he died–he felt it, each time Qi Rong cut him. It was more painful than anything he had ever experienced. Only to be surpassed by when his soul was dispersed, as Wu Ming.

But Hong'er didn't scream. Even in a frail, mortal body.

He suspects that's why he thrived on Mount Tonglu.

After all–it takes more than mere grit, to claw out your own eye.

"...Do you feel it now?" Xie Lian whispers, biting his lip.

Searching for some reassurance that, at some point–that numbness begins to fade.

"...I do," Hua Cheng answers slowly, thoughtfully. "My tolerance will always be high, but...that doesn't mean I don't feel it."

Which makes Xie Lian wonder.

Is it simply that...he can't feel pain, or...that his mind has simply learned to ignore it?

Some things do hurt, after all. And when they do, it's almost a relief.

The cursed iron shackle Wen Jiao placed upon him in Gusu--that hurt. More than anything in nearly eight centuries.

And now, upon contemplation...

"...How did it get better?"

Hua Cheng's answer is refreshing in it's simplicity:

"I became so strong, nothing could hurt me anymore."

Yes, that is rather believable.

It's difficult, trying to imagine someone powerful enough to wound Hua Cheng. Certainly Jun Wu, but anything short of that...

"It came slowly, but...once I started to believe that I was safe, and the pain wasn't coming...I started feeling things again."

"..." Xie Lian's lips turn up at the corners, but his eyes...are saddened. "I wish I could do that."

The comb pauses in his hair. "Why couldn't you?"

The prince remains silent for a moment, pulling his legs up against his chest, wrapping his arms around them.

Feeling rather small, and hopeless at that moment. Like a child he once knew.

"I'm not like you, San Lang," he whispers.

The ghost king sets the comb aside.

"Not like me?"

"...I'm not strong."

That admission feels terrifying, because physically speaking–Xie Lian knows that he isn't weak. He never has been. HIs body has always faithfully done what he needed it to do.

His mind, however...

A palm presses against his back. So gentle, rubbing smooth circles into Xie Lian’s skin.

“You have always been strong, your highness.”

Far, far stronger than Hua Cheng.

Every single moment of pain the ghost king endured—he did so with a purpose.

Knowing his god was waiting.

If he hadn’t...

He wouldn't have made it very far.

Without Xie Lian, he wouldn't have even made it past that day, when he fell from the city walls.

But the prince has endured so much with no hope of relief.

And that sort of strength is beyond Hua Cheng's imagination.

Still, Xie Lian doesn't seem to believe it, slumped forward, shrinking in on himself.

"...And until you start to believe that..."

(I'll keep you safe.)

"...You can feel other things, besides pain."

Xie Lian almost asks what he means, until he feels Hua Cheng take his hand.

Xie Lian's palms, being that of a god, heal from every scrape and callous—leaving them as soft and delicate as when he was a sheltered prince.

Even if everything else about him has changed.

Hua Cheng's are rougher, with long, slender fingers—gently squeezing his own.

"...Thank you, San Lang," he mumbles. It doesn't feel...like he deserves any comfort. Not after putting the ghost king through so much trouble, or taking up so much of his time, but...

Hua Cheng certainly doesn't seem to mind.

At some point, he starts combing Xie Lian's hair again

And now...it's hard not to lean into it. To relax under Hua Cheng's touch—taking comfort in it.

Even if Xie Lian struggles to justify allowing himself to do so.

There's something inherently soothing about it, and without realizing it at all...

He's being held.

Only a few hours before, he was struggling to force himself to fall asleep—and now, he can barely manage to keep his eyes open.

...When has anything ever been this easy?

“I forgot...” he mumbles, his words broken by a yawn.

He doesn’t see it, but the ghost king smiles.

“Forgot what?”

“To thank you...” Xie Lian sighs, his eyes sliding shut.

“Dianxia doesn’t need to thank me.”

But he does, he does...for...

There’s faint humming in his ear. So, so familiar, but Xie Lian can’t put his finger on when he’s heard the melody before, but...

And of course, if Xie Lian could remember his dreams, he would know.

Because the minute he drifts off, he's in a very different scene, from so long ago.

Sleeping beside the fire, his cheek pressed against a bamboo sleeping mat.

So comfortable.

So safe.

"...Hong'er?" He mumbles, pushing himself up, rubbing his eyes. "I don't think I've heard that one before."

The teenager is stoking the fire, keeping it burning bright. He should be sleeping, but he's always off doing chores by the time Xie Lian wakes up.

"...It's just some song my mother used to sing, dianxia, I didn't mean to wake you." He says it so offhandedly, but...

Hong'er has almost never spoken about his mother before.

"Did she sing to you often?"

The boy pauses, considering it.

"I think so. Most nights."

His tone is half apologetic, half mischievous. "I was terrible about going to sleep."

The thought of that makes Xie Lian smile.

The song is beautiful. Wistful. Simple lyrics, but with a satisfying melody, rising and falling like the tides, the sound gently rocking him.

It's a perfect lullaby.

"Sleep a little longer, dianxia."

A hand reaches for his, squeezing in quiet reassurance.

"You're tired."

And he is.

Xie Lian is so, so tired.

But he doesn't want to go yet.

He wants to hear that song...just a little longer.

He...

(Please, just a little longer.)

Xie Lian never gets to see him anymore, and he just wants to see his...

"...Stay with me?" He whispers, curling up on the floor, basking in the warmth from the fire.

For just a little longer?

"I won't leave you, your highness."

That's right.

Hong'er would never, ever leave him.

Just...

That didn't mean that someone else wouldn't take him away.

The Ghost King watches his prince sleep, tucked between his arms, stroking his fingers through his hair.

For so long, this was all Hua Cheng ever wanted. To know that the crown prince was safe.

To hold him.

To protect him.

But now, they're here. Xie Lian is right here, and...

Hua Cheng presses his face into his god's hair, squeezing his eye shut.

'When I tried to die.'

Dying isn't so hard, actually.

Dying was among the easiest things that Hua Cheng has ever done.

Choices are harder.

Hua Cheng could make the choice to keep him here. Locked away from the world, where nothing could ever hurt him again.

Here, within Paradise Manor, nothing ever could. But he can't do that.

There's a line between love and possession. The division between being that of free will.

Hua Cheng would never rob Xie Lian of the ability to make his own choices. To walk his own path.

Just as he knows his god would do the same for him. But it's hard, sometimes, to watch.

And he knows he should be grateful, because now, he has the chance to walk that path beside him.

But Hua Cheng was an awful child. A difficult teenager. Now, he's a selfish man.

His arms tighten around the prince, holding him closer. And he wants so much more.

His past, everything that he was, everything that Xie Lian remembers–all of it is locked away, as though sealed beneath an impenetrable layer of glass.

Hua Cheng can see it, but he cannot touch.

And he...

He wants his name.

He wants Xie Lian to call him, and he wants to answer.

He wants Xie Lian to know that, never once, has he ever been truly alone. The ghost king wants, and he wants, and he wants.

But for now, this...

He doesn't say *'I love you.'*

His lips form the words, but he doesn't give them sound.

Because the crown prince wouldn't want to hear those words from him.

They're for Hong'er, not him.

For now, holding him will have to be enough.

Walking beside him will have to be enough.

Even if, in the not so far future, that means walking straight into hell.

When Xie Lian awakes several hours later, he sits up with a gasp, his eyes blinking groggily.

"The lanterns!" He exclaims, only half awake, pressing his fist into his palm as he remembers.

There's a soft rumble against his back, and that's when Xie Lian realizes—

"What about them?"

He's practically lying on top of Hua Cheng.

The prince scrambles to the side, clearing his throat. "I forgot to thank you," he explains, hiding his expression. "...For the lanterns!"

And then, something else occurs to him–the missing piece of information that everyone had been wondering that night, watching the lanterns pour into the sky.

"...San Lang?"

"Yes?"

"...Where is Qiandeng temple?" The ghost king's silence is... Somewhat sheepish.

"...Here, in the city."

Xie Lian sits there for a moment in quiet shock.

...He has a temple...an *entire* temple...in Ghost City?

"...Could I see it?"

There's a pause, and Xie Lian wonders if, perhaps, he wasn't supposed to ask, but...

"That would be for the best, actually."

Xie Lian is curious about what that's supposed to mean–and why Hua Cheng seems...almost embarrassed, but before he can ask, he's being lifted up again.

"...San Lang," he mutters, lightly reprimanding him, "there's nothing wrong with my foot anymore..."

"I know, dianxia."

"Then why...?"

His answer comes in the form of rattling dice.

Clack, clack!

"I thought, until his highness changed clothes, he might want to avoid walking through the street like this."

Like...as in...

Right.

Xie Lian remembers now, his face hot.

He's still wearing what are very obviously Hua Cheng's robes.

Parading through the streets of Ghost City like that...would be pretty embarrassing, actually.

(Given the prior exposure the ghosts have had to him, especially.)

"Right," he clears his throat. "That makes sense."

The Ghost King steps through a small portal, though Xie Lian can only tell by the shift of the air, and the soft clinking of the bells on his boots.

When he sets him down again, he's careful, holding Xie Lian's hand until both of his feet are firmly planted on the ground.

The prince smiles gratefully, thanking him before he steps away, carefully feeling around.

There's a stillness to the air–and yet, even the softest sounds of his bare feet against polished marble manage to echo, conveying the size of the place, and it's method of construction.

Unlike most temples, there aren't sharply hewn steps leading to the entrances or the altar, only gently sloping inclines that feel natural under one's feet.

"...Was this place built...just for the festival?" Xie Lian questions, thinking certainly not.

How could it have been?

Hua Cheng is leaning against a pillar behind him, watching, his fingers twisting the end of his braid restlessly.

"...It was built many centuries ago," he explains softly. "It went unused until recently, but..."

Xie Lian lets out a sigh of relief. Oh, good, it was already...

"...I'm sorry." Hua Cheng blurts out, and the god pauses, his fingertips outstretched towards the altar.

"...What?"

"It's not entirely suitable, dedicating a temple to his highness in a place as chaotic as this..."

"You mean Ghost City?" Xie Lian questions.

The Ghost King usually remembers to give a verbal answer, but in this case, he can barely do more than bow his head in shame.

After everything he's done, he's sorry for building Xie Lian three *thousand* lanterns, and dedicating an entire *temple* to him...

...Because of location?

"...San Lang," Xie Lian tilts his head to the side, staring in his direction blindly. "I really like Ghost City."

One eye snaps up to look at him, watching his face intently.

"...You do?"

The prince smiles, nodding. "I was surprised at first, but...it's an exciting place."

'Exciting,' is one way of phrasing it, but...

"And I've been to lots of places," Xie Lian adds. "Most of them didn't leave much of an impression on me, one way or the other. So..." He places a hand on the altar, his lips curving up into a small smile.

"I'm happy."

Obviously, Hua Cheng will probably rededicate it to another purpose eventually. Xie Lian hardly expects such a temple to be permanently dedicated to him, but...

A shrine in Puqi, a shrine in Gusu, and...a temple in Ghost City.

Xie Lian's three favorite places.

The calamity stands behind him, wide eyed and breathless.

(He's always breathless, but this time he couldn't take a breath, even if he wanted to.)

"...It's also good that you don't have any cushions for kneeling," Xie Lian adds, turning away, scratching his head bashfully.

He's never agreed with that sort of thing, anyway.

"Really, this place is amazing San Lang, I'm really..." Xie Lian pauses as a thought crosses his mind–something Shuo said before.

That Hua Cheng was attending to 'renovations,' in Ghost City during their weeks apart.

...Was he...?

"It's not perfect, though." Hua Cheng speaks up. "It still needs an establishment plaque."

"...Oh," Xie Lian tilts his head, surprised. After all, that's one of the first things to include in a temple, but...

"Well, you said yourself, it was unused until recently! I'm sure San Lang will get around to it eventually when he–"

"Actually, I was hoping that gege could make one."

"...Me?" Xie Lian questions, surprised, then...somewhat hesitant. "Oh, San Lang...it's been ages since..."

Xie Lian can get by, his handwriting is still somewhat precise, but...

It's far, far less impressive than it used to be. If any of his calligraphy masters could see him now, they would faint with shame.

And in Xie Lian's defense, it's far more difficult when you can't...well...

"Gege's would be better than anything else," Hua Cheng states firmly, and Xie Lian can't help but raise an eyebrow.

"...What makes you so sure?"

"..."

"...San Lang–?"

"...I have poor handwriting."

Xie Lian pauses, open mouthed, and Hua Cheng grimaces. "I know, it's —"

"It's really not such a big deal, San Lang..." Xie Lian shakes his head, "I'm just...surprised."

After all, Hua Cheng seems to be good and just about, well...

Everything.

"I'm told it's more difficult if you don't learn when you're young," he shrugs.

Xie Lian remembers hearing something like that, actually.

Back when Mu Qing first started going to lessons with him, his instructors always insisted it would be impossible for the servant to catch up, but...

That didn't stop him, or even slow him down. The prince smiles.

"Well, I'd be no good at it right now, but...if I ever lose the shackles, I'd be happy to teach you what I know."

Of course, that's a big 'if,' because Xie Lian doubts he'll ever lose them. But...

Hua Cheng smiles. "When you do, I'll be happy to be in your care, your highness."

"..." Xie Lian's expression softens, and he nods.

The prince isn't accustomed to someone having such faith in him anymore. So readily, at that.

"...And I had another reason for bringing you here," Hua Cheng admits, prompting Xie Lian to arch an eyebrow.

"Oh? What?"

"Gege insisted on making his own clothes to return back, so..." Xie Lian is carefully led to an adjoining room in the temple, more private than the main hall, and awaiting him...

Is a loom.

A rather fine one, actually. Far more elegant than any the god has ever used.

"Oh, San Lang...thank you," Xie Lian has said that so many times today, the ghost king might just tire of hearing it, but...

He never seems to.

And, of course, there are countless options for thread, neatly organized and labeled by color for the god's choosing.

Of course, for most weavers, just making the appropriate amount of cloth would be a task that might take days, sometimes even weeks.

But for a god—one with eight centuries of practice, no less—Xie Lian can finish such a task in the span of an hour.

All with Hua Cheng sitting beside him, one leg propped up, chatting lazily. At one point, when Xie Lian needs to switch colors, he feels around for a knob to tie one thread to (so as not to lose track of which color he was working with) Hua Cheng reaches out, offering a finger.

He repeats the gesture several different times, with several different threads, until the bolt of fabric is complete, and Xie Lian is simply cutting and sewing the new garments together.

And he finds himself thinking, as he completes his work, and later, when Hua Cheng steps out of the chamber, giving him privacy to change...

It felt so natural, tying that thread off on his finger. There was an ease between them, as he worked.

Almost like they'd done it before—

"FIRE!!!" The voices are shrieking in the distance, but even here, through the thick stone walls of the temple, Xie Lian can hear them clearly. "THERE'S A FIRE IN PARADISE MANOR!"

Xie Lian's stomach drops.

"...Another one?!" He exclaims, hurrying to finish getting dressed.

He hurries out into the main hall, adjusting his sleeves, and Hua Cheng, seeming completely unconcerned by the situation, stops to admire him.

This time, he opted for white inner robes with a deep blue outer layer, simple detailing—but rather elegant, like the rest of his work.

Normally, he doesn't work with such rich colors. Not only out of a feeling that airs of luxury no longer suit him—but also because he simply couldn't afford them.

Hua Cheng, however, didn't provide inexpensive thread—and all of the colors available were rather vivid.

"Oh, San Lang, I'm so sorry," the prince frets, hurrying towards the exit.

"...What are you sorry for?" He questions, seeming absolutely puzzled as he follows his god into the street.

Xie Lian wipes a hand down his face with a groan. "Every time I visit, there's a fire!"

The calamity waves that off, seeming entirely unconcerned. "Nah, that isn't gege's fault. Besides, what's a little fire to me? But really, you don't even have any shoes--"

"I DON'T NEED ANY!"

Not when Hua Cheng's home is about to burn down for the second time in the same month!

Xie Lian proceeds to hurry through the streets, following the shouts of, *'Fire, fire!'* and *'Hurry, come quick!'*

But even as he approaches the front gates of Paradise Manor, such screams are already beginning to calm down, a crowd gathered around the entrance.

Xie Lian stops among them, sniffing the smoke in the air, whipping his head around with concern. "Is anyone hurt?!"

"Huh?" One of the ghosts pauses, stretching his arms over his head. "Ah, if it ain't the crown prince!"

There's a few respectful cries of greeting in response. Which is...surprising.

Xie Lian doesn't usually get a warm response when he arrives on the scene of an unlucky situation. Especially not when people recognize him, well...

A god of misfortune.

"No need to worry your highness, it wasn't a big fire! We put it out already!"

Xie Lian lets out a low breath of relief, because from the sound of it—there wasn't too much damage.

He presses a hand against his chest, shoulders slumping for a moment as he catches his breath.

(Not that he was exhausted—but he'd been holding it with anxiety.)

"Oh, thank goodness!" He straightens up, clapping his hands together as he turns to face the crowd, bowing his head gratefully. "Good work, everyone!"

The crowd of ghosts pauses, not seeming...to know what to do with themselves, receiving praise and thanks.

A couple of them adjust rather quickly though, the first among them sniffing, rubbing his mustache, looking rather pleased with himself.

"It was NO TROUBLE, your highness, NO TROUBLE AT ALL!" "SIMPLY DOIN' OUR DUTY!"

"..." Xie Lian smiles widely in return.

...Yes, of all places, Xie Lian is happy to have a temple here—in Ghost City. But there's a different problem at hand now, with the fire out.

"...Do we know how it started?" He frowns, glancing in the direction of Paradise Manor with worry."

"Mmm! Seems like someone set it!"

"...Set it?" Xie Lian questions, rubbing his chin.

In that case, the motivation seems somewhat obvious—and all the more concerning.

To create a distraction.

...But what for?

Suddenly, another voice speaks up, this one familiar.

"My lord, the fetal spirit is missing."

...And there's the motivation. But who would want to steal a fetal spirit, and why?

Xie Lian turns his head at the familiar sound of Hua Cheng's footsteps, boots jingling as he walks.

"...San Lang, we should ask the guards what they saw."

The ghost king raises an eyebrow.

"What guards?"

Such a casual response gives Xie Lian pause, because...

...Is he really trying to imply that a place the size and scale of Paradise Manor is just...?

"...You don't have any?"

Hua Cheng shrugs, coming to a halt by the prince's side, crossing his arms.

"It isn't necessary." Xie Lian blinks, trying to wrap his head around the concept, and Hua Cheng seems to take mercy on him by explaining:

"You wouldn't have seen, dianxia—but every door on Paradise Manor has a seal on the inside."

He's right—Xie Lian had no idea.

"If anyone tries to leave with something that's mine," Hua Cheng shrugs, "they'll be locked inside automatically."

Xie Lian thinks that over, rubbing his chin. "...And you were the one who caught the fetal spirit, so technically..."

"It would have been in my possession, yes."

"That's...a very unique enchantment, San Lang."

Honestly, Xie Lian's never heard of something quite like it. Actually, it seems quite economical! An excellent way to save on secu—

"Ghosts are territorial by nature, your highness. Even so—" Hua Cheng's gaze settles upon him. "I've never allowed people to touch what's mine."

...security.

It's not as though it's out of character for Hua Cheng to say something like that. In fact, he said something along similar lines to Lang Qianqiu in the gambler's den, but...

Xie Lian's ears burn, all the same.

"So, ah..." Xie Lian clears his throat, trying to focus on the matter at hand. "That would mean the thief is, ah..."

"Still here, yes, likely hiding among the group who came to help with the fire." Hua Cheng turns his head, surveying them.

"Whichever one of you it was—step forward now."

No one does—and Xie Lian isn't surprised. He wouldn't eagerly admit to stealing from a ghost king either.

Hua Cheng has never seemed menacing to him, but...

To others, he can (apparently) seem rather frightening.

After giving it a moment, the calamity shrugs, looking towards the Waning Moon Officer. "Have them line up."

Because, little does the thief know—they were doomed to be caught from the start. Once they're spread out, single file, one person can see the truth quite clearly.

Xie Lian's condition rarely, if ever comes in handy.

In this situation, however, he can see the cloud of dark, malicious energy, swirling malignantly among the other ghosts. And when he points--a familiar voice cries out in response.

"What?! You're pointin' the finger at me cause I yelled at you for cross dressing last time?!"

Hua Cheng's eye narrows, all while Xie Lian's widen with recognition.

Ah, Lan Chang.

"...Well, technically I wasn't cross dressing," Xie Lian corrects her, albeit awkwardly.

"I was actually a woman at that point in time, so..." Maybe that wasn't his usual form, but he wasn't cross dressing, no.

Lan Chang shrinks away from them both, her arms wrapped around her middle, hiding something beneath her dress.

"E-Either way, I'm sorry for what I said, I didn't mean any harm in it!" She protests, hunching over as she attempts to keep her hands tight around herself. "Would ya—would ya quit it?! Stop—stop messin' around!"

It's hard for Xie Lian to understand at first, but...

When he sees the dark cloud swirling and sparking irritably in her direction, he quickly begins to put it together.

First: that Lan Chang isn't hiding the child under her dress, but rather... Well, like Xie Lian before, it's inside her.

And second...

"Lan Chang..."

The prince steps forward, his tone sympathetic, but...she doesn't seem particularly comforted by it. "Are you the child's mother?"

Lan Chang glares, trying to stumble backwards—but bumping into the ghost officer before she can get very far, glaring at his mask before giving up.

"...I know he might've caused trouble, but he just hadn't had anyone to help him!" She exclaims, holding her middle tightly. "I'll raise him better, I promise—he won't bother anyone again!"

Xie Lian frowns, his expression turning sympathetic.

He doesn't doubt that she means it.

That being said...

"Lan Chang, you need to let the child leave your body..."

It's clear that she means to try to carry the child to term—something she wasn't originally able to do, clearly—but it's fruitless.

Hua Cheng even says as much.

"That thing is way stronger than you."

Even as he explains, his tone is detached—all together uncaring, as though her decision means very little to him.

“Leave it that way, and it’ll rip you apart and escape on it’s own.”

Even with that warning, Lan Chang holds onto her stomach stubbornly—and Xie Lian is fretful.

“San Lang...”

Of course, while he is somewhat ambivalent to the woman’s fate—it only takes one concerned word from Xie Lian for him to intervene.

“Don’t worry, your highness.”

And of course, the calamity snaps his fingers—with every intention of forcing the spirit out.

Which he does—but his magic has another, unintended result.

There’s a flash of light. So sudden, so bright—even Xie Lian starts, prompting Hua Cheng to step in front of him protectively, but...

The god isn’t frightened, no—just confused.

Because that might...wasn’t demonic.

No, the aura of it...is clearly from the Heavens.

Hua Cheng stares, watching as that light fades—and once it does...he sees.

“...Your highness, it would seem that she’s in possession of a golden belt.” Xie Lian’s eyes widen.

“Ah.”

Most gods in the upper court have them.

Golden belts are often viewed as a symbol of prestige and status. Just to have one is an accomplishment. At the height of his power, Xie Lian had somewhere north of twenty, but he lost count.

They can’t be stolen, either. If not willingly given—they always return to the owner.

And to be gifted with such an item by a martial god...that really only has one meaning.

Xie Lian’s eyes widen with understanding, and the other ghosts don’t seem to be far behind him.

“Lan Chang, did some Heavenly Official leave you and your kid high and dry?!”

“SHUT UP!”

Lan Chang glares, clutching the squirming, screeching fetal spirit against her side—but before she can try to push him back into her body once again, Hua Cheng snaps his fingers, sealing the spirit inside of a jar.

The female ghost turns to him, pleading.

"M-My lord!"

She drops to her knees, her tone changing drastically.

Before, she was loud—combative, clearly not caring who she was speaking to.

Lan Chang doesn’t keep up that persona around Hua Cheng.

“Please, he—he’s just a child, and I’ve been looking for him for centuries, I—!”

There’s little sympathy to be found in his eyes.

“I’ve given you shelter in this city for many centuries, Lan Chang.”

Slowly, the ghost bows her head.

“You know what the rules are.”

She does, of course, like everyone else.

No one steals from a Ghost King without consequence.

Still, Hua Cheng doesn’t seem angry at the moment, no.

His gaze is focused on that golden belt, his expression unreadable—but clearly, he’s deep in thought.

Xie Lian, in any case, takes pity on her.

“...San Lang,” he murmurs, turning to the calamity. “I should take her."

Hua Cheng grunts for a moment, so far away that he doesn't even seem to process the request—which is startling, because he's always listening to Xie Lian rather intently, but...

"...To the Heavens?"

The prince nods. "If the father is a god, then..." He should take responsibility.

For Lan Chang and her child—there's no excuse that either one of them should be left to suffer if the father has the means to help.

"And...you were the one who got the fetal spirit, but could I—?"

"You would have caught it eventually without my interference, dianxia."

Hua Cheng shrugs, seeming to come out of whatever stupor he was momentarily pulled into. "You don't need my permission—go on and take them both, if you'd like."

Xie Lian nods gratefully, opening his mouth to order Ruoye to— The prince pauses, his expression falling.

"...Your highness?" Hua Cheng looks at him, raising an eyebrow. "Is something wrong?"

Xie Lian groans, pressing his hand against the side of his neck, remembering now that...

"...I left Ruoye protecting the mistress in Mr. Mo's house," he admits, mortified. "I can't believe I did that..."

After all, leaving one's own spiritual device lying around is horribly irresponsible. And it's true, Xie Lian hadn't planned on being swept off to Ghost City, but...

"I see," Hua Cheng murmurs.

Crack!

With a snap of his fingers, a set of manacles appear around Lan Chang's wrists, not so different from what he used on Lang Qianqiu in the gambler's den, many nights before.

"That should hold her for dianxia in the meantime."

Xie Lian nods gratefully. After all, she isn't particularly powerful, he could have simply carried her—but this is far more convenient, and leaves Lan Chang a little dignity.

Not only that, but—

Crack!

There's another snap of his fingers, and this time—something lands around Xie Lian's neck.

The prince reaches up, surprised—to feel a choker sitting around his throat, covering his shackle.

(Without Ruoye or his usual bandages, it was left exposed.)

"..." Xie Lian smiles, his hands grasping his throat lightly for a moment before he lets go. "Thank you, San Lang."

After all—Hua Cheng has expressed disagreement with the idea that Xie Lian should have to hide his shackles in the past, even if he did so subversively, but...

...He's also seen that Xie Lian, as unbothered as he may seem...even in situations where it's allowed, he prefers, for the most part, to keep them private.

"I'll be sure to return it—"

"Don't worry about it, diaxia," he waves him off. "It's nothing."

Considering how expensive most of the items Hua Cheng owns are—Xie Lian finds himself very much doubting that. Still, he doesn't protest for now.

"I'll be going then," Xie LIan sighs, turning to collect Lan Chang.

"Next time, I'll be sure to host you properly."

Host him properly?

He rescued Xie Lian from a lake, allowed the god to wear his clothes, fed him a meal, he even slept in Hua Cheng's bed—

How much more hospitable could he have been?

“No, no—I’m the one who owes you,” Xie Lian shakes his head.

“The next time you come to Puqi shine, I’ll be sure to make you a proper meal!”

After all, he’s been observing Shuo in the kitchen for weeks now…he thinks he’s learned a thing or two.

Anyone else would look horrified by the prospect—but Hua Cheng smiles. “I would be honored.”

The god and his newfound captives leave shortly thereafter, and Hua Cheng turns back in the direction of Paradise Manor, only…

To find Yin Yu standing before him, his expression…fretful.

“…Hua Chengzhu, there’s something that requires your attention.”

The ghost king arches an eyebrow.

“Yin Yu.”

“…Yes, sir?”

“You’ve worked for me for a long time.” Hua Cheng points out evenly.

“…I have,” the former official agrees quietly.

“Do you think, at this very moment, that I am willing to deal with whatever that might be?”

“No,” Yin Yu agrees. “I wouldn’t be bothering you with it, not unless —”

That’s when Hua Cheng hears it.

The faint commotion filtering down the street. Not the bad kind, like before, with people running and shouting for help from a fire.

No, this…is certainly excitement.

“Did you see him?!”

“In the gambler’s den!”

“I can’t believe he’s here!”

And all of these exclamations are paired with a name: one belonging to a ghost who hasn't been seen in decades.

Not in public, anyway.

"Blackwater..."

Hua Cheng's eye narrows.

"...He's in Ghost City!"

"...He couldn't wait?" Hua Cheng growls under his breath, his expression darkening.

After all, he was the one who showed up in the middle of the night demanding an audience—which Crimson Rain firmly denied.

The Ghost King's god was in his bed, after all.

But apparently, the moment Xie Lian was no longer in the city—Blackwater seemed to decide that Hua Cheng had suddenly become 'available.'

"...I could try to tell him—"

"No," Hua Cheng mutters rolling his shoulders as he walks towards the gambler's den. "I'll deal with it."

Of course, for obvious reasons, He Xuan hasn't been seen in one of his publicly recognized forms in a significant amount of time.

When infiltrating the heavens, of course, his making the decision to lay low with his true identity became necessary.

Which makes his decision to resurface publicly...

Not a good sign.

The gambler's den is as loud as ever, with ghosts and every other array of creature cackling as the struggle to capture a win—but it takes the mere sound of Crimson Rain's footsteps to quiet the room.

Clink!

Clink!

The doors for the gambler's den part for him without question, and at the head of the highest table...

Is He Xuan.

The skin he wears for ‘Ming Yi’ is youthful—handsome, in an almost boyish sort of way.

Not so different in age from the form Hua Cheng took when he appeared before Xie Lian on the ox cart near Puqi shrine.

But this form—

It’s as far removed from ‘Ming Yi’ as ‘San Lang’s’ appearance from his true form.

Far taller, broader, equal in height and build to Crimson Rain himself.

And still, this isn’t He Xuan’s true form.

Hua Cheng, even among ghosts, is lucky. After all—

Before he became a Ghost King, he ascended as a god. However briefly, even if he cast himself down immediately.

As a result, even in his true form—only the paleness of his pallor and other minor features point to his transformation into a ghost.

That, and the scar that hides beneath his robes. As a drowning victim, however...

He Xuan’s true form remains in such a state. But not this one.

In this form, he still has dark hair, and golden eyes—but he’s older, in his late twenties. Square jawed, with a dangerous set to his smile as he leans back in his chair, clapping his hands slowly.

“Well, well...Crimson Rain Sought Flower finally has the time.”

Hua Cheng quirks an eyebrow, crossing his arms.

“I wouldn’t say I have the time,” he drawls. “Simply that you’ve made a public nuisance of yourself.”

The Water Demon shrugs, unbothered, rolling a glass of liquor against his palm.

“What do you want, He Xuan?”

“No need for the hostile tone,” the other ghost king smirks, setting his glass down. “I simply wanted to do a little sightseeing with a brother in arms.”

If one were to simply assume He Xuan’s personality was exactly that of his persona as ‘Ming Yi,’ they would be incorrect.

He Xuan is cold, yes. But not completely unsociable.

Ironically enough, it makes him even more compatible with his supposed enemy than he pretends to be.

“Sightseeing?” Hua Cheng questions flatly.

“I couldn’t help but notice how many ghost fires are around…”

He Xuan nods in the direction of paradise manor, where an entire courtyard full of them is waiting. “It’s been a long time since you made a trip, hasn’t it?”

In truth, Hua Cheng hasn’t ferried anyone since his god ascended to the Heavens for a third time.

“I thought so.”

The Water Demon rises from his seat, dark robes drifting around him as he walks.

“I’ll go with you, this time.”

Hua Cheng eyes him, wary.

He’s never asked him for such a thing before, but there can only be one reason: and a rather simple one.

There are very few places in the three realms where one can speak openly—without risk of being overheard by spies.

The Heavenly Emperor enjoys privacy in his private palace, of course. Even He Xuan hasn’t managed to penetrate so deep into their security.

Then, there’s the Kiln.

But that place has an effect on them both—and, if possible, they avoid returning.

Which leaves one final option: a place between.

A realm from which only one being has ever come and gone from as he pleases: Hua Cheng.

And He Xuan has never asked to be brought there.

Which means, whatever he wants to discuss with the ghost king...

Hua Cheng very much doubts that it's something he actually wants to hear.

Still.

"..." The Ghost King turns on his heel, walking back towards the exit, his shoulders squared.

"Come on, then."

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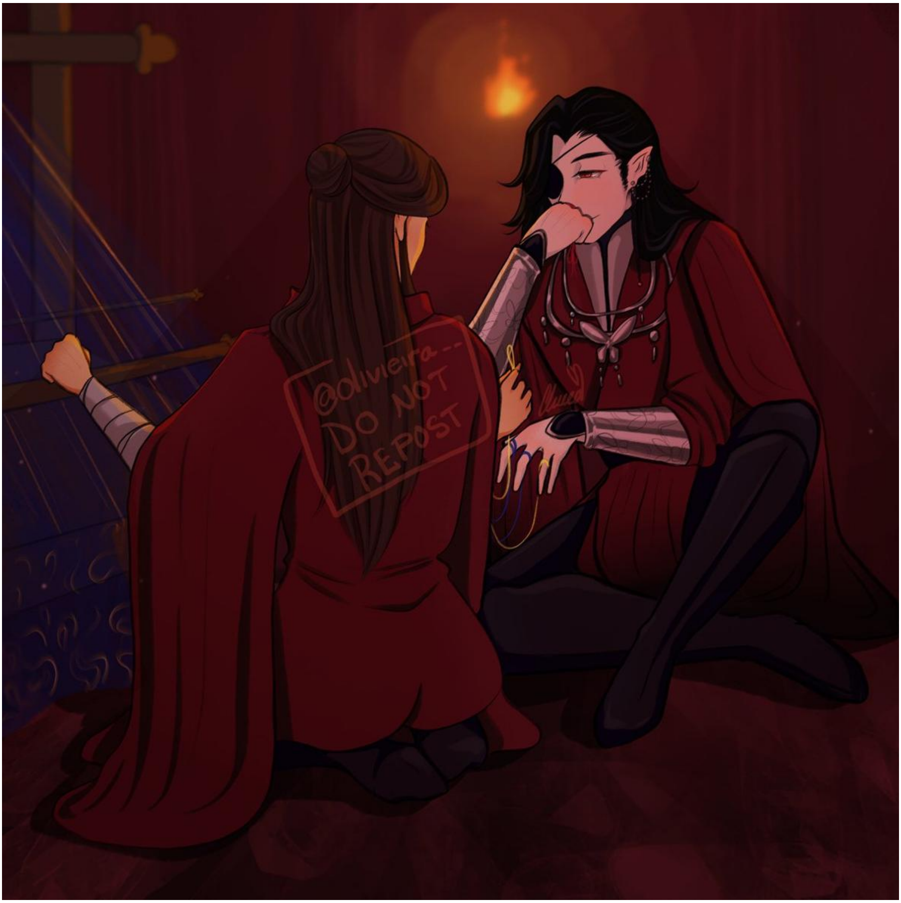
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The Tipping Point

Chapter Summary

> "It's...uh..." Everyone waits, expectant—
>
> "...YOU!"
>
> Dead silence follows, and Xie Lian glances around, waiting for someone to respond to the accusation, after all, it's rather shocking, but...
>
> No one does.
>
> "Uh..." Shi Qingxuan clears her throat. "Your highness..."
>
> Xie Lian blinks, looking in the direction of her voice. "Yes?"
>
> "She's...pointing at..." The Wind Master trails off, glaring at the others, who seem to be biting back laughter.
>
> Slowly, after a moment—it begins to dawn on him, and he feels a little faint from the shock.
>
> "...ME?!"

Chapter Notes

> content warnings for this chapter: mentions of sexual assault, torture, and references to PTSD symptoms

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Upon his arrival to the heavens, Xie Lian wastes little time, leading Lan Chang with one hand, holding the jar containing her child's malicious spirit in the other, calling out in the general communication array—

'I'm sorry everyone, but something serious has happened!'

Now, when Xie Lian first returned to the Heavens—very few people listened to what he had to say when he suddenly spoke up in the array.

After the cases on Mount Yu Jun, Banyue, and then Ghost City, however…

It's guaranteed entertainment when the Crown Prince is involved.

'Please, make your way to the Great Martial Hall!'

Drawn by either curiosity or a sense of duty, there are already several gods gathered by the time Xie Lian leads Lan Chang through the doors.

"Your highness!" Shi Qingxuan is the first to greet him.

'Oh,' Xie Lian thinks to himself, slightly surprised. *'She's still in her female form.'*

Xie Lian isn't disapproving of it—not in the way that her brother is—but he's surprised by how often the Wind Master uses this shape.

"Where have you been? And—is that a ghost?!"

Lan Chang shrinks away, moving to stand behind Xie Lian as more and more of the gods present in the heavens filter into the room.

Jun Wu's voice rings out next, and…

"…Ah, Xianle."

He sounds…slightly odd. Unlike himself.

In Xie Lian's experience, the emperor always sounds…relaxed. Like the calm surface of a lake.

he doesn't necessarily sound upset now, but…

There's an underlying tension, and Xie Lian can't determine the source of it.

"What's going on here?"

"Well…" Xie Lian scratches the side of his head, trying to decide how much he can (or should) explain about the incident, but…

"I was helping a group of locals with, ah…"

"…Your highness?" Mu Qing steps into the room, with the Water Master not far behind him, clearly looking to see where his sister rushed off to. “Who is that woman?”

“Well…” Xie Lian is still scratching his head. “I was tracking a…”

“Say,” Shi Qingxuan leans forward. “Is there something going on with her stomach? It almost looks like…”

(Of course, it hasn’t completely flattened since Hua Cheng expelled the spirit from her body, there hasn’t been enough time.)

Just as she reaches over, the jar in Xie Lian’s hands rattles menacingly—as if angry to have someone approaching it’s mother—

And The Water Master’s fan closes with an irritated snap. “QINGXUAN!” He barks, “What on earth are you doing?!” Shi Qingxuan jumps back, startled.

“I was just—!”

“If a martial god drags a ghost into the great martial hall stating there’s an emergency, don’t just run up to her and try to touch her stomach!” Shi Wudu glares, gesturing for his sister to return to his side. “Use some common sense!”

“She’s clearly chained up, gege…” The Wind Master grumbles. Still, she walks over to stand beside her brother, her arms crossed. “I’m not a child.”

“And you still haven’t outgrown the urge to touch everything you find interesting.” Ah, Pei has arrived.

Xie Lian clears his throat, speaking up—

“This is Lan Chang. I was tasked with tracking down a fetal spirit attacking pregnant mortals…and, as it turns out, she’s the mother.”

“Even so,” Ling Wen speaks up, entering the room—still in his male form. “Why bring her here?”

“Well…” Xie Lian reaches into his sleeve, procuring the golden belt—and with it, he hears several gasps of shock from around the room. “She had this.”

Naturally, it doesn’t take long for everyone else to come to the same conclusion that Xie Lian did.

It’s not a crime for a god to be intimate with a mortal woman. It’s not even unheard of for gods to sire children with mortals. On even rarer occasions, goddesses have made similar mishaps.

But for it to escalate to a situation like this… That would be a first.

“…In that case, she should just point out who the father is,” Feng Xin shrugs, stopping to stand beside Mu Qing, who…

Isn’t looking at him, staring straight ahead.

Across the room, Lan Chang grits her teeth, her face downturned.

“…I agree,” Jun Wu murmurs, slowly pulling his gaze from the Crown Prince of Xianle, turning it to the woman he brought with him. “Go on and point him out.”

In the face of an order from the emperor, Lan Chang can hardly refuse. She sucks in a deep breath, squirming.

“It’s…uh…” Everyone waits, expectant—

“…YOU!”

Dead silence follows, and Xie Lian glances around, waiting for someone to respond to the accusation, after all, it’s rather shocking, but…

No one does.

“Uh…” Shi Qingxuan clears her throat. “Your highness…”

Xie Lian blinks, looking in the direction of her voice. “Yes?”

“She’s…pointing at…” The Wind Master trails off, glaring at the others, who seem to be biting back laughter.

Slowly, after a moment—it begins to dawn on him, and he feels a little faint from the shock.

“…ME?!” Xie Lian flinches away, shocked. “That’s not even possible!”

“Sure it is!” Lan Chang glares, pointing her finger at him stubbornly. “It’s YOU! It’s definitely you!”

“Then I think we’re witnessing a miracle,” Shi Wudu rolls his eyes, fanning himself.

"The first virgin to father a son. What a sight."

(Xie Lian can't even speak, swaying on his feet from the shock.)

"...Virgin?!" Lan Chang scoffs, crossing her arms. "How would ya even know?! He could be faking!"

"He was tested with magic not even two days ago!"

Shi Qingxuan huffs, placing her hands on her hips as she speaks up in his defense.

"Why—I bet his highness hasn't even held someone's hand before!"

Xie Lian opens his mouth to agree with her, but...ah...

Actually, he's held Hua Cheng's hand several times by now.

"..." The prince bows his head, fiddling with his fingers, and Shi Qingxuan...

She clears her throat, standing a little taller.

"Well! He's CERTAINLY NEVER KISSED ANYONE BEF—" She stops, noticing Xie Lian quickly making an 'X' motion with his arms, pleading with her to stop.

"...Oh...uh...he's probably never shared a b—no? Uh..." She rounds back on Lan Chang, pointing. "Well—YOU DON'T SEEM LIKE HIS TYPE!"

On that, Xie Lian nods weakly with agreement.

Lan Chang balks—but she's not as offended by that as she probably should be, given the implication.

"...Fine, fine, I got it mixed up—it's—it's HIM!" This time, her finger points directly at...

Ling Wen.

"..." Pei barks out a laugh, clapping a hand over his rips. "LING WEN! You sly dog!"

"...It's not funny," The civil god glares, crossing his arms.

Even Shi Wudu is snickering, hiding it behind his fan. "Such a heartbreaker…”

Ling Wen’s gaze snaps to him, clearly betrayed. “Shui-Xiong, even you?!”

“I can’t believe you won’t take responsibility, aiyah…”

“You—!”

Lan Chang looks around, confused, and Xie Lian takes pity.

“…That’s the Civil Goddess, Ling Wen. He’s just in his male form for the mid autumn festival.”

“…” Lan Chang’s finger slowly curls inward. “…Oh.” She mutters, shaking herself out of it, and—

Naturally, she points to the man right beside him.

“YOU!”

Now, no one immediately laughs or calls it unrealistic—but still.

“See,” Ling Wen crosses his arms with a sigh, “If you had accused him first, everyone would have believed it.”

Pei gawks in his friend’s direction, aghast. “HAH?!”

“I don’t know…” The Water Master shrugs. “I still kind of believe it.”

Pei rounds on him, “No you DON’T!”

“I mean…you have a past…”

“Yes,” the emperor speaks up, and Shi Wudu’s amused smile immediately disappears. Something that Pei notices, his eyebrow raising. “Pei does have quite a history, to be sure.”

“…It wasn’t me, your majesty,” the general clears his throat, turning around to face him. “Regardless of how many women I’ve been with—I do keep track of them. If I had fathered a child, and a thing such as this happened…I would know.”

His tone has become somewhat…distant.

Jun Wu arches an eyebrow. “…You mean to say you’ve never given a golden belt to a mortal, then?”

"...I have," Pei admits, and whatever may have remained of the Water Master's amused expression completely fades. "Which is how I know she's lying—because it wasn't her."

It's clear from the atmosphere in the room that most people don't know whether or not to believe him, and...

"...He's telling the truth," Xie Lian, the last person anyone expected, speaks up quietly.

"...Your highness?" Feng Xin pauses, surprised. "How would you know that?"

"The woman in question," Xie Lian explains. "Ming Guang was looking for her during the war in Xianle—he mentioned it to me before entering my territory." He turns towards Pei, "Am I guessing correctly?"

"...Yes," Pei agrees, his expression guarded. "It was her."

Xie Lian looks to Mu Qing, who has been uncharacteristically quiet—

(And the prince knows, it's because of the way they left things the night before.) "She's the woman I asked you about, back then. The one who..."

The Martial God's eye widens, remembering.

"...Oh," Mu Qing frowns, looking away. His hair is back to it's normal color—jet black, trailing down his shoulders. "...I suppose it is true, then."

Feng Xin glances over at him, raising an eyebrow, but...he seems relieved, just to see Mu Qing here, speaking normally.

He never was able to get Mu Qing to let him in that night. And even the day after, the martial god wouldn't let Feng Xin anywhere near him.

"..." Lan Chang looks back and forth between the two, and when she looks at Mu Qing...

She grits her teeth. "It was YOU, then!"

"..." Mu Qing stares her down, crossing his arms, and Xie Lian sighs, shaking his head.

"That can't be right either, Lan Chang—but why not just be honest? I'm sure, whoever it is, he'll..."

"It IS him!" She claims, stomping her foot stubbornly. "You can't prove it isn't!"

"...Mu Qing's cultivation method is the same as mine," Xie Lian explains. "It forbids any kind of...carnal pleasures, and we've both been cultivating continuously since we were teenagers."

Meaning in Mu Qing's case—there's simply no window of opportunity.

Of course—Xie Lian, having the demeanor that he does, can pull off such a statement rather well. Old rumors from very long ago tainted his image for years—but once they were dispelled, people quickly adjusted.

After all, the crown prince acts like someone with few indulgences. However, Mu Qing...

People are aware of his cultivation method, certainly—but few actually believe he's still practicing it. Most assume he's switched to something else entirely.

(Mu Qing and Feng Xin have both always been baffled as to why everyone assumes that.)

"...This is ridiculous," the Water Master groans, seeming to be in a foul mood now, compared to when he was teasing Ling Wen and Pei Ming over their potential fatherhood. "Qingxuan, let's go."

His sister frowns, her lower lip jutting out. "But I wanna see who it is!"

Shi Wudu rolls his eyes, throwing his hands up. "She isn't going to say, and I doubt the father is even in this room, anyway."

"How can you know?!"

"Because she's accused just about everyone aside from you, me, Nan Yang, and the emperor."

He doesn't have to explain why it isn't Jun Wu, that goes without saying. If Jun Wu wished to have someone in his bed, he has royalty, scholars, and gods and goddesses at his disposal.

And, given that he's near omniscient, if he was the father—he would know.

“If Nan Yang recognized her and there was a possibility of his being the father—he would have said so.”

Absolutely no one can argue with that logic, and Feng Xin nods, seeming to agree.

“It can’t be you, because if this woman knew you for any amount of time—she would have recognized you in this form.”

(After all, Shi Qingxuan uses it so often—anyone close to the Wind Master knows it.)

“Wait—is she not a goddess?!”

“See? And it obviously wasn’t me.”

“How is that obvious?!”

Shi Wudu shrugs, holding his fan aloft with one hand, examining his nails with the other.

“I have standards.”

That finally manages to draw a squawk of indignation from Lan Chang, and Ling Wen speaks over her.

“If it’s no one here, then who is it?”

The Water Master doesn’t look up from his cuticles.

“Ming Yi isn’t here.”

Shi Qingxuan glares, her hands on her hips. “It ISN’T Ming Yi!”

“Oh, and how do you know?!”

“I just DO!” She huffs. “I’d sooner believe it was Mu Qing!”

The Martial God jumps, sending a frown Shi Qingxuan’s way. “Don’t drag me back into it!”

“Well she hasn’t pointed the finger at anyone else since you, has she?!”

“It should be easy enough to disprove,” Ling Wen cuts the Shi brothers off. “The Emperor simply has to bring out Yan Zhen again.”

The mere mention of that sword makes Mu Qing stiffen, his expression growing slightly pale—

“Enough,” Jun Wu murmurs, holding up a hand. “The Water Master is right, this is clearly going nowhere.”

He looks over at Lan Chang, who shrinks slightly under his gaze. “If she isn’t going to be forthcoming, and the child is a danger...we’ll simply have to keep her here until the truth can be determined.”

Of course, Lan Chang has committed no crime—but the child has.

Keeping her here while they determine what to do seems far less cruel than separating the two again.

And now, with the debate dying down, Shi Qingxuan leans close to whisper in Xie Lian’s ear, green eyes bright with curiosity.

“Your highness—where did you get that choker?”

“Oh?” Xie Lian blinks, tilting his chin down. “Well—it’s actually a little embarrassing —I left Ruoye behind when I was chasing the fetal spirit, and I had nothing to cover my shackle with, so...San Lang gave this to me.”

Shi Qingxuan leans closer with a nod— “I thought so.”

Xie Lian raises an eyebrow. “You did?”

Just as they’re discussing it, Feng Xin finally glances over, seeming to notice the choker for the first time.

“Your highness! You should take that off!”

The prince glances over at him, baffled. “What are you talking about?”

His former guard glares at the necklace, his brow pinching with suspicion. “It’s probably cursed! Or maybe he’ll use it to track you!”

“Huh?” Xie Lian frowns, reaching up to brush his fingertips over the jewelry. “San Lang wouldn’t give me anything dangerous.”

And when he does—he understands how Shi Qingxuan realized rather quickly where the choker came from.

The choker itself is made from black ribbon—but dangling from the front, just at the base of his throat...

It's a butterfly.

A silver one, from the feel of the metal.

And, to Xie Lian's chagrin, there are clearly gemstones set into the details along the wings.

What was the ghost king thinking, saying this was nothing?

The prince is going to have to give it back, it really is too much...

"And San Lang can see me whenever he likes." Xie Lian concludes with a shrug. "There's no need to track me."

"...Well, I think it's beautiful, your highness!" The Wind Master Shrugs. "It's wonderful that you have such a generous friend!"

Feng Xin chokes at the words 'generous' and 'friend,' but Xie Lian smiles.

"Thank you!"

From the other end of the room, the Water Master rolls his eyes—tired of all the spectacle.

Instead, he turns his attentions.

"Xuan Zhen."

Mu Qing glances in his direction, surprised. "Yes, Lord Water Master?"

Shi Wudu turns to leave. "I need to speak with you."

Of course, he clearly means privately—and with the way he exits the room, there's the clear presumption that Mu Qing will follow.

Which the Martial God does. After all—after Jun Wu, few are higher in the Heavenly Court than Shi Wudu.

His requests are given a certain weight.

Xie Lian chats with Shi Qingxuan amicably, offering small details about his trip to ghost city.

(Not the embarrassing ones, anyway.)

Part of him wishes he'd had the chance to speak with Mu Qing and Feng Xin, given how they left things, but…

It isn't the right time.

Lan Chang watched the scene unfolding before her, averting her eyes from the only truly familiar face, clutching the jar containing her son against her chest.

"…It's alright," she whispers, following the guards as they escort her from the martial hall.

They don't drag her or treat her roughly. The cage she is being escorted to is a comfortable one. And still…

When Heavenly Officials watch her from the streets, it's with only one thought—

'Monster.'

Lan Chang bows her head, holding her son close.

He isn't a monster.

To be a beautiful woman is to learn cruelty from a young age.

Lan Chang has seen many, many monsters over the course of her existence. Mortal and undead.

They wear many shapes and disguises.

Her son is not a monster—he never had the chance to be one thing or the other.

You can't be a monster, in the end, if you never had a choice.

CLACK! CLACK!

Each rattle of the dice clicks loudly against the emptiness of the space, echo spiraling upward, higher, higher, disappearing into the endless heights of the ceiling above.

Two Ghost Kings stand in a hall of the Dead, surrounded only by the soft flickers of light from the ghost fires around them.

“So, when your soul dispersed…” Blackwater glances around, his arms crossed. “This is where you ended up.”

Hua Cheng doesn’t reply.

He stares at a stone table. One that has gone unused for centuries, accompanying benches unoccupied.

A set of black dice sitting on the surface, identical to his own.

He remembers waking up here, as Wu Ming—to a rattle that would become so familiar.

CLACK!

CLACK!

‘…Oh, the little pup is finally waking up.’

‘Which way do you think he’s gonna go, Xiang?!’

The ghost king tears his gaze away, finally, his tone unfeeling. “You don’t remember? We saw it on the…”

The Kiln.

When they used Mount Tonglu to look forward—most of those memories, Hua Cheng lost when they left the confines of the Kiln itself, but…

His eyes turn toward the black door, looming at the far end of the hall.

He remembers seeing that door swinging wide open.

That memory is crystal clear.

A gaunt young man, broken and bleeding. A cultivator, claiming to go by the name ‘Lan.’

“…I lost most of it,” He Xuan admits.

But it isn’t the black door that draws his attention, no.

No, he looks to the other end of the hall.

He walks to the red door, standing in stark contrast to the darkness.

Hands clasped behind his back, his chin tilted up.

"...What are we doing here, He Xuan?" Hua Cheng questions, crossing his arms.

Blackwater doesn't look back at him, staring at that door.

"I came to make my final report on the Heavenly Court," the calamity murmurs, his eyes unmoving.

Hua Cheng raises an eyebrow at the word 'final.'

"...What is it?"

"It's as we originally suspected," He Xuan explains. "A group of lazy, privileged, incompetent individuals."

One ghost fire lands lazily against Hua Cheng's shoulder. The ghost king does little to disturb it, allowing it to rest there.

"That isn't surprising."

"No," He Xuan agrees. "...But it's by design."

No one can control who does or does not ascend. That is up to fate.

But one can certainly exert influence over who lasts in the heavenly court. Over who stays on for years, and who fades on into memory.

"The three most powerful among them—known as the three tumors—by and large perform most of the critical work involved in running the Heavens."

That much isn't new. The three tumors aren't particularly popular among their peers —but the adoration they receive from mortals has been well earned.

"For whatever reason, the emperor has been systematically undermining Ming Guang for the better part of a century."

Even Hua Cheng has noticed.

Ming Guang is among the only gods the calamity can remember from his childhood that remains in power—but recently, cracks have appeared in his foundations.

"Ling Wen has always been regarded for her efficiency," Blackwater's voice is low, recounting details like they're something distant, far removed from him. "But she's been given such a volume of work, even she is beginning to make mistakes."

Mistakes that prompt hints of doubt.

"But there's more." He Xuan braces himself, "When it comes to the crown prince of Xianle."

Hua Cheng's attention is a heavy thing–suddenly sharpening, all of it settling on the Water Demon's shoulders at ounce.

"...What about him?"

"In your honest estimation--just how powerful was he, during his first ascension?"

The Calamity falls silent, thinking.

Of course, from his perspective back then—Xie Lian had been omnipotent. And with his own biases, it takes a moment to truly consider it.

"...About as powerful as Pei is now," the Ghost King finally replies. After only seventeen years of cultivation, compared to Pei's centuries.

"The emperor clearly desires to keep a friendship with the prince," He Xuan murmurs. "But he remains in shackles."

Using Yin Yu, the two of them have done quite a bit of research on Cursed Shackles in the last century.

To the best of their knowledge, they can only be removed through two methods:

First, the spell caster removes them.

Second, being exposed to high levels of spiritual power.

And even through their experimentation, they were never even able to place a crack in Yin Yu's shackle–implying that the amount of energy required must be enormous.

"...The shackle in his eyes was fractured," Hua Cheng murmurs, his eyes narrowing with thought.

"In Gusu, yes."

Fighting the demon Wen Jiao.

"...In all honesty," He Xuan tilts his head back, peering into the endless darkness of the ceiling, trying to find a light at the end—and finding none. "Do you think a savage ranked demon could crack a cursed shackle?"

No.

Hua Cheng doesn't.

And if he was that powerful—Xie Lian, with all of his spiritual powers sealed, would not have been able to kill him with physical prowess alone.

"Which leaves two possibilities," Blackwater holds up his hand. "First," he lifts a finger, "there's a powerful entity in the ghost realm that neither one of us is aware of, and they were the one behind Wen Jiao."

Which seems unlikely.

"Or second, it was the emperor. Holding Pei's oldest stronghold captive, and whittling away at his power."

Which, if Jun Wu was already targeting Pei...

Hua Cheng's eye widens with understanding.

...It makes sense.

"Jun Wu's targeting of Pei has only worsened since Gusu. And after the mid autumn festival...it's become clear: something is coming."

Naturally, after hearing something so ominous—Hua Cheng stiffens. "...What?"

"I don't know," Blackwater admits. "But he's consolidating his power. And if it's enough to make Jun Wu worry--you should be preparing as well."

"...If you haven't figured it out, why are you telling me now?" Hua

Cheng raises an eyebrow. "Why here? ...And why would this be your final report?"

He Xuan's shoulders square themselves, his posture becoming firm.

"Consider the warning a matter of professional courtesy," the calamity mutters. "Because the prince will become a target, sooner or later. I'm letting you know in advance."

It's no small favor.

After all—Hua Cheng has been tracking him, but...

What He Xuan is implying—that kind of threat means that Crimson Rain will have to remain by or very close to the prince’s side for the foreseeable future.

“And, with Ming Yi dead...” He Xuan grits his teeth, his tone prickling with anger. The other ghost king glares.

“That wasn’t Shuo’s fault.”

If anything, he spared He Xuan from being exposed immediately.

“I didn’t say I blamed him,” Blackwater mutters, his shoulders hunching. “But I can’t keep up the charade for much longer with him gone.”

Once again—that’s the difference between them.

If Hua Cheng desired to pose as a Heavenly Official—as someone who has actually ascended—it wouldn’t be difficult for him. He’s capable of wielding Heavenly power.

(Hence why he’s able to hear prayers, and gain strength from them.) He Xuan, however, never ascended.

His ability to pose convincingly as a god was based on his holding the real Ming Yi prisoner. Using his spiritual power—and his worshippers—to shroud himself in a heavenly glow.

And now...

“I can keep it up for a few more weeks, at most.”

At which point, he’ll be left with two choices:

To reveal the truth behind ‘Ming Yi,’ or fake his own demise.

“...You couldn’t just take up another disguise?” Hua Cheng questions.

After all—He Xuan is a far better actor than anyone else Hua Cheng has ever met.

Man or woman, young or old. Whatever role he needs to be—he’s never struggled with playing it off.

Still, Blackwater shakes his head.

“...No,” he mutters, his voice...

...Empty.

“It will be too late for that.”

Hua Cheng’s stomach begins to sink.

Of all places, He Xuan asked to be brought here.

The younger ghost king reaches out, pressing his palm flat against the red door, staring down at ancient, worn carvings in the wood.

“...No more games, Hua Cheng,” his voice carries through the dark—chilling. “It’s time.”

There’s no need for explanation or specification.

With He Xuan, there has only ever been one thing on his mind. One goal.

One end to this story, a narrative he never asked to be written into.

Hua Cheng stares.

“...Isn’t that playing right into the emperor’s hands?”

He Xuan’s fingers dig into the wood, finding it harsh and unforgiving under his touch.

Maybe.

“...I don’t care,” he mutters, lowering his hand. “If I wait longer, I won’t have a chance.”

“How could you know that?”

“...He received over seven hundred lanterns, Hua Cheng.”

Barely short of the emperor's count. All from individual temples and worshippers, scattered throughout the continent.

Not simply because Hua Cheng was feeling affectionate, and wanted to make a grand gesture.

That's power.

"He's facing a third calamity soon."

Meaning that—absent interference, Shi Wudu is about to become even more powerful than he was before.

So powerful that, if He Xuan doesn't kill him now—he won't be able to afterwards. "...If that's true, then won't Jun Wu—?"

"Attack him?! Yes!" He Xuan slams his fist against the door. "But if he's going to be struck down, why shouldn't it be me?! Haven't I earned that?!"

Crimson Rain proposes no argument, falling silent in the face of a rare show of emotion from the other calamity.

He Xuan has been facing away from him for the entirety of the conversation, never turning his eyes away from the door that lies before him.

"...And what about the Wind Master, then?" Hua Cheng asks quietly, watching as Blackwater finally flinches.

"What will become of her?"

He Xuan takes a moment to respond—and when he does, his voice is low. Tightly controlled.

"...I know I made a mistake with Shi Qingxuan," he mutters. That's more than he could admit a month ago, anyway.

"I won't kill her."

In fact, he'll even give her a chance.

To make amends for her part in it. To make the right choice, once she knows the truth.

It's more of an opportunity than anyone has ever spared him. "And what about after?"

He Xuan squeezes his eyes shut.

It's always that question.

That stupid, inescapable fucking question.

'What's left of you after, He Sheng?'

"...I don't care," he mutters, his eyes narrowed into slits, the redness of the door blurring in front of him. "Maybe I'll walk through this door when it's finished. After I fight your war with you—I haven't forgotten my promise."

Hua Cheng knows that, in the end, if Blackwater is set on this—he can't stop him.

And it won't interfere with Hua Cheng's own plans. He has no compelling reason to stop him.

But still.

"...It won't bring them back, He Xuan."

Blackwater's shoulders hunch sharply.

He knows.

There are some moments when he still can't understand it.

That, after everything He Zhong and Qin Meirong suffered through—when they came to this door, they walked straight in.

They moved on. They're at peace. But He Xuan can't. He can't move on. He can't rest.

He can't live.

"Well," Blackwater's voice lowers down to a snarl—and when he finally turns his head to look back at Hua Cheng...

His eyes burn hatefully.

"...Aren't you a fucking hypocrite."

Crimson Rain narrows his gaze in response.

"When you were Wu Ming, you felt it all the time, didn't you? The blade in your heart." He Xuan turns around, his hands balled into fists.

Of course, he did.

When you die, all wounds heal.

Except, that is, for the blow that killed you.

Hong'er felt it, drifting behind his god in the dark, a ghost fire flickering in the night.

Felt it in that temple, screaming with rage and agony as he watched Bai Wuxiang rip his love apart.

That blade was still in Wu Ming's heart when he watched Qi Rong suffer the same fate.

It was cutting him when he stood on the streets of Lang-er Bay, turning Fangxin on himself, and with it, the curse of ten thousand souls.

Even when Hua Cheng woke up here, to the rattling of dice and the crows of two gamblers, he still felt that wound.

It didn't go away until he forged E'Ming.

Until the sky filled with light, and Hua Cheng stood at a point where two paths diverged, forced to choose.

"...I still feel it." He Xuan glares, pressing a clawed hand against his chest. "Every second of every day."

His form flickers, and for just a moment--Hua Cheng sees the truth beneath a handsome mask.

The bloodshot eyes, ruptured blood vessels in the cheeks and throat, spidery dark veins stretched over pale, waxen skin.

"Not just in my lungs," the calamity rasps. "But the weight."

The weight of all of that water at the bottom of the sea, crushing down on him.

Dragging him down. Squeezing every breath, every passing glimpse of happiness away from him.

He still feels the fatigue.

The endless exhaustion.

And oh god, then there's the emptiness.

A ravenous, stripping sort of hunger. One that robs a man of his senses, with only one thought:

To feel something, anything, other than that void.

He Xuan has spent four centuries desperately struggling to fill it.

With food. Liquor. Women.

Nothing ever satisfies.

"...And I won't ascend, even if I get my fate back." He Xuan mutters, staring ahead, his eyes somewhere between rage and numbness.

Shi Qingxuan already ascended, after all.

That opportunity has been used up.

"So, I will *always* feel it." He spits out the words.

"What is dying, compared to that?!" He shakes his head vehemently, golden earrings clinking together. "What is ANYTHING I could do to them, compared to what they've taken from me?!"

Nothing. It's comparable.

Everything is, when a person is faced with four centuries of drowning.

"And you sit here, and you preach to me like some paragon of forgiveness," He Xuan sneers, "When you're called the bane of the heavens—and for what?! Because they INSULTED the prince?! They told rumors about him?!"

"Careful," Hua Cheng cautions him coldly.

"NO!" He Xuan swats a ghost fire away from him, his eyes burning in the dark. "My sister—she took her own life to escape being raped."

Hua Cheng's expression remains unchanged.

Unreadable.

"My fiancé was beaten to death before she could suffer the same fate."

That's the face he sees every night, when he manages to steal even an ounce of sleep. Qin Meirong, blood bubbling past her lips, fading away in his arms.

Trying to reassure He Sheng, rather than being afraid for herself.

Telling him it would be alright.

"...But you cut every single one of those gods down in battle, didn't you? Burned their temples to the ground. All because they called the crown prince false names."

He Xuan shakes his head.

"I would never call you wrong for that. So don't you DARE preach FORGIVENESS to me!"

"I'm not asking you to forgive him, He Xuan." Hua Cheng shakes his head. "But there's a cost to what you plan to do."

Hua Cheng didn't kill those officials out of revenge. He killed them because they broke their end of a bargain.

Revenge, in its purest form, only breeds more resentment. And with that, comes curses.

Fai and Xiang had every right to feel hatred, even in death. But it was their inability to let it go that spurred on a curse.

One that Hua Cheng inadvertently made worse, lengthening their lives the way he did. Even if he only had good intentions.

And that's the thing about curses.

You never know where they'll land, or who will get hurt.

In the end, it's rarely the person you were aiming for.

"I don't care," He Xuan shakes his head. "I have nothing left to lose, Hua Cheng. Even if I get dispersed—I don't care."

Hua Cheng actually believes that. But still.

"I wouldn't assume that you have nothing to lose," he mutters.

And oh, Blackwater finds that laughable.

"That's easy for you to say," he mutters, looking Hua Cheng over. "It's so easy for you, to play the charade."

And everyone calls He Xuan a talented actor.

"After all, I wasn't as lucky as you," Blackwater sneers. "To fall in love with someone who can't die."

Hua Cheng couldn't call that a blessing—and he knows Xie Lian wouldn't either. He's glad to have his god alive and breathing, but...

It would actually be far easier to protect Xie Lian, if the prince was a ghost.

"I'm sure having that—having ONE thing to hold onto, helped."

He Xuan bows his head, his shoulders trembling.

Grief gnaws at him like a starving dog, trying to get at the bit of marrow left inside a bone.

Persistent, stinging. Slowly breaking him down.

"But he took EVERYTHING FROM ME!"

His roar rattles the walls in it's ferocity.

The break in concentration hits him then, and with it—comes that weight. The crushing, ever present weight of black waters, dragging him down.

It forces He Xuan down to his hands and knees, taking desperate gasps of air—and they don't help.

He shouldn't need to breathe.

But still, he always tries. Desperately tries to cough that water up and out of his lungs. It always remains.

"...You can think I'm a monster," he rasps, clutching at his throat. "I don't care."

He doesn't care.

He doesn't care.

He doesn't *care* .

"If it makes you feel better to pretend you're not, then fine," he shakes his head.

After all, he wants to be loved by his god. To be seen as something better than what they both are. He Xuan can't fault him for that.

"...But I don't have a choice."

That was taken from him.

"..." Gently, Hua Cheng nudges the ghost fire from his shoulder, kneeling down before his fellow calamity, elbows resting on his knees.

"No," he murmurs, his tone even. "You aren't a monster, He Sheng."

The mention of his childhood name makes Blackwater tremble.

Hua Cheng's eye has grown impossibly dark, glimmering under the lights from the fires around.

"But I am."

Blackwater's gaze flickers up, and when he makes eye contact with the older ghost...

Hua Cheng's gaze seems bottomless.

A wide, gaping void. Vast in its frigidity.

"That's the difference between you, and me." He explains calmly. "You say you don't have a choice. But that isn't true. If you didn't, you would be an animal. You're not."

He Xuan was a good man, once. Warped now by pain and hopelessness. But beneath, there's human decency.

Hua Cheng possesses no such thing.

"You talk as though we're the same, or our suffering can be weighed against one other on a scale, and the winner gets to determine what justice means." Hua Cheng arches an eyebrow. "Is that what you want to do?"

He Xuan clenches his teeth.

"That conversation won't go well for you."

They both know one another's lives, to a certain extent.

How He Xuan was born into a relatively poor family, but a loving one. Up until his fate was switched, life was kind to him.

Life has never been kind to Hua Cheng.

"I've seen—"

"No," Hua Cheng cuts him off, shaking his head. "You haven't seen it all."

Blackwater's eyes widen slightly at the implication.

In the Kiln, their very souls blurred, tearing through each other's memories. But...

Could Hua Cheng have kept something hidden?

"No one gets to see what happened to my mother," Crimson Rain explains with such detachment. His voice calm, his gaze remote. "Not you. Not even Zhao Beitong."

That memory remains locked in the very pits of his soul.

"But you guessed, I remember."

It's difficult to explain the feeling that goes through one's mind, in the Kiln.

Having someone walking through the halls of your memories, putting moments together like broken shards of glass.

Hua Cheng's earliest memories were like a crime scene. Scattered, hidden.

One moment, his mother was alive—and Hong'er was a normal, if not slightly ill behaved child.

In the next, she was gone, and the boy who remained...

Was utterly unrecognizable.

"It was her husband," Hua Cheng explains. "She ran, to hide me from him."

But not Hong'er's father.

His father was a soldier, and he loved his mother very much.

Up until this morning, those were the only two things Hua Cheng knew about the man.

Until he saw the golden belt hidden underneath Lan Chang's robes.

As for how that confrontation is going in the Heavens—he wouldn't know. He's been too preoccupied with He Xuan to watch.

"And just as the light was fading from her eyes," he continues, "he grabbed me by the chin, and he made me watch."

'You did this.'

That was what he said.

'This is what happens to anyone who protects a little mongrel like you.'

And he wasn't wrong.

That was all Hong'er could think, watching his god endure the same thing, sacrificed upon his own altar.

"...I stopped feeling certain things, after that." Hua Cheng admits. "I still don't."

And in the years that followed—even if he never hurt anyone, simply because he was too weak to do so much as even defend himself—

That didn't mean that Hua Cheng wasn't a monster.

That didn't mean he wouldn't have done horrible things, if he could.

"And after I became Hua Cheng..." The Ghost King explains, never breaking eye contact, "I found him."

Old, miserable, ill-contented. Married twice over since then, with one daughter.

"The things I did to him are beyond your imagination, even now."

Because there are certain things that only monsters do. Things that other people just don't think about.

"His wife fainted. His daughter fled to the room, and I let her." Hua Cheng tilts his head. "That seemed fair. But not his parents."

Hua Cheng made them watch.

He allowed them to beg for their son's life, and he pretended to consider. Just to watch that last glimmer of hope in his eyes.

And then, he laughed.

All the while, they never understood why the ghost king was torturing him. Because Hua Cheng couldn't say his name.

"You've been speaking as though there's some layer of human cruelty beyond my understanding. That I'm telling you these things because I simply can't comprehend the scope of your pain."

The ghost king shrugs.

"I understood those things centuries before you were born."

And once you allow yourself to take joy in someone else's suffering, you gain a taste for it.

For most people, a nasty temper is like an angry dog lurking underneath one's patience, waiting to bite.

Hua Cheng's wrath is like a tiger—and it's always there.

It's always hungry.

Lurking in the corner of every room, watching him with an opportunistic gaze. It won't ever leave.

Hua Cheng had to learn to stop looking at it.

To stop feeding it.

"...I know you," Hua Cheng mutters. "There are limits to the things that you are willing to do."

And it is those very limits that will haunt He Xuan, when he inevitably takes this too far.

When he does something that he can't take back.

Because He Xuan was a good man, once.

But Hua Cheng isn't.

Hua Cheng has never once, in all of his life, been a good man. He was a miserable child. A vengeful teenager.

"...The only things I won't do are the things I can't justify to the god I pray to."

Not because of some moral judgment he's made, no.

Simply because, above all else—

Hua Cheng is a selfish man.

He cannot allow himself to become something Xie Lian wouldn't forgive him for. Hua Cheng was a monster. Every moment of every day, he could become one. And each time, he makes the choice not to.

In the end, monsters don't exist.

Only humans who make monstrous choices.

He Xuan finally breaks away from Hua Cheng's gaze, bowing his head.

"...I have done everything you ever asked of me," the calamity whispers, his shoulders trembling. "Everything I promised I would do—I've delivered."

He isn't wrong.

"You made me a promise, Hua Cheng."

The older calamity sighs, rising to his feet.

He knows he did.

Centuries ago. A bargain struck, bound by blood and fate.

Hua Cheng won't break it now.

"...I won't get in your way," he mutters, swallowing down the bitter taste in his mouth.

"But if he gets involved..."

If Xie Lian gets involved, Hua Cheng will assist him. He Xuan knows that.

"...Just don't actively work against me," He Xuan replies. "I think that's fair."

Oh, Hua Cheng doubts that.

They have ventured beyond fairness, at this point—wandering deep into muddled, black waters.

In the heavens, things remain similarly unclear.

“...So,” Mu Qing steps into the Water Master’s sitting room, arching an eyebrow. “You wanted to speak to me?”

Shi Wudu takes a seat on one of the sofas, setting his fan aside. “I did.”

“About what, exactly?”

“...” The water god pushes his hair behind his ears, glancing away from him. “... Something’s wrong with me,” he mutters.

Mu Qing stares, baffled. “What?”

“I have my third heavenly calamity coming up, and something is wrong with me. Medically.” Shi Wudu repeats, irritated.

“Isn’t that your area of expertise?”

“It is.” Mu Qing agrees slowly, confused, because...

Physically, the water master looks absolutely fine.

“Then are you going to examine me, or not?”

“Alright, alright...” the martial god grumbles, rolling his sleeves up to the elbow.

“Undress from the waist up.”

Shi Wudu complies, shrugging out of the sleeves of his robes, allowing them to pool around his waist, pushing his hair behind his neck.

“Have you encountered anything strange lately?” After all, he’s a god.

Unlike mortals, he isn’t susceptible to the same illnesses and injuries. Not in a way that could seriously harm him.

When a god takes ill, it’s usually because of exposure to demonic energy.

Shi Wudu shakes his head.

“Not at all.”

Mu Qing performs a basic exam initially, and...

There really isn’t anything immediately concerning.

His color is good—along with his lungs and his pulse. The only thing worth noting is weight loss, since the last time Mu Qing examined the Water Master.

He still isn’t underweight—his body is toned, visibly healthy, so...

“...What are your symptoms, exactly?” Mu Qing questions, leaning back to glance over the water god’s shoulder.

“My appetite is gone,” Shi Wudu mutters with a shrug.

That explains the weight loss, then.

“I get these terrible headaches, I can barely sleep, and when I do...”

Mu Qing waits, expecting him to say something about horrible nightmares or anything of the like, but—

“...I can’t remember any of it.”

“Any of what?”

“Dreaming.”

Which is bizarre—for him, at least.

Shi Wudu has always been able to remember his dreams. Often in vivid detail—and sometimes, to his own detriment.

"Is there anything else?"

The Water Master falls silent, hesitant, and Mu Qing leans back, crossing his arms.

"All of this is confidential, Lord Water Master."

"..." Shi Wudu crosses his arms, looking pointedly in the opposite direction—as proud as ever. To the point where Mu Qing assumes that he isn't going to answer—

"I get these...attacks." He mutters, his shoulders hunching in. Well. That's wonderfully vague.

"...Attacks?"

The water master nods, keeping his face turned away.

"I used to get them back when I was mortal, but recently...they've come back."

Which explains why Shi Wudu assumes the issue is medical, Mu Qing supposes.

"...What are these attacks like?"

There's still hesitation on Shi Wudu's end, but...

He sighs.

"They always come out of nowhere—and when they do, I can't breathe," he mutters. "My heart beats rapidly. If it gets bad enough, I'll get sick to my stomach."

The more Mu Qing listens, the more he...

"...Lord Water Master," he isn't usually so tactful—but that's a choice. "Has anything...upsetting happened to you recently?"

Mu Qing is capable of handling a conversation delicately, when he desires to.

"...What?" Shi Wudu asks flatly, finally looking back at him.

"Well..." The martial god thinks it over, struggling to phrase this in a way that won't conflict with the Water Master's pride. "I was a soldier, as you know—and sometimes, after the war...many of my comrades experienced attacks very similar to that."

"...No," Shi Wudu finally answers, shaking his head. "I'm not a soldier, and I've never been in any war. Especially not recently."

"It can happen to people who aren't soldiers." Mu Qing disagrees quietly.

His own mother had them when he was young.

His little sister, too.

Feng Xin got them after his father died. There would be days when Xie Lian was off, arguing with the heavens, and Feng Xin...there was no battle, no present danger—

But he couldn't stop shaking.

Holding Mu Qing so tightly, the young general had felt like his ribs would break.

When Mu Qing said as much, Feng Xin would whisper that he was sorry.

He would apologize, and hold Mu Qing even tighter. Like he was worried that, if he let Mu Qing go for even a moment—the world might end.

"...So, if something's happened, even if you might not think it was serious enough to warrant that—"

"No," the water master mutters, looking away. "There's been nothing like that."

Somehow, Mu Qing...

He doesn't believe him.

"But..." Shi Wudu pulls his robes back up. "...If my attacks were like theirs—is there a treatment for that?" Of course, therein lies the problem.

"Not that I know of," Mu Qing admits. "Most of the guys I served with would self medicate. Alcohol. Gambling. Women. That sort of thing. Whether or not that works..."

Then it occurs to him.

"Honestly, Pei has more experience with this sort of thing than I do," Mu Qing offers, standing up. "You might want to ask—"

"Thank you," Shi Wudu cuts him off coldly. "I'll remember that. I apologize for wasting your time."

He did no such thing, but...

"...Oh, and by the way," The Water Master glances up in the middle of adjusting his hair, carefully working each strand back into a perfectly placed style. "The emperor seems to have taken an interest in you recently."

Mu Qing shrugs, looking away "I think he was just concerned."

"...Be careful with that," the Water Master advises, checking his appearance in the mirror.

Mu Qing glances back at him, adjusting his sleeves. "What?"

"The emperor's attention," Shi Wudu shrugs, his tone blasé. "His concern. People tend to forget what he is."

"...What he is?"

The Water Master levels him with a pointed stare.

"A man." He explains flatly. "If he's being kind to you—or anyone—it's not out of the kindness of his heart. He wants something." Shi Wudu looks him up and down. "I thought you were cynical enough to understand that."

It isn't exactly a glowing review of Jun Wu's character. Particularly not coming from his...

Mu Qing's eyes drift back down to the Water Master, widening slightly. ...His favorite among all of the Heavenly Court.

"...I am," the martial god finally replies.

"But thank you for the warning, Lord Water Master."

He leaves not long after that—but now, he finds himself...

Wondering if the relationship between the Emperor and The Water Master was... something far different from what he originally understood.

And what that means, if true.

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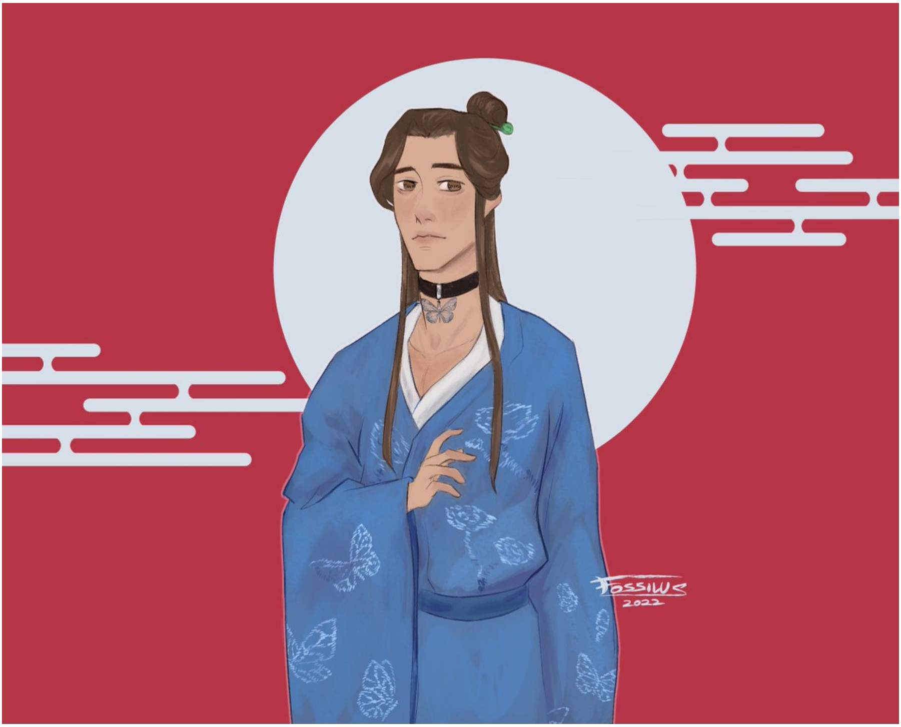
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2022

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Chapter End Notes

> thank you to laki and fossil for their amazing artwork, and allowing me to share it!
>
> xoxo, Evie

Educational Purposes

Chapter Summary

> A slow smile spreads across the prince's face as he stands back up.
>
> He hurries back up the path, far more eager than he was before, calling out—
>
> "San Lang?"
>
> After a moment, a lazy voice comes back in response—
>
> "Welcome back, dianxia."

Chapter Notes

> this chapter is very long, but NOT angsty, so consider it a nice little interlude before the blackwater arc !

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Xie Lian descends from the Heavens, feeling no worse for wear—which is a first, after his first three missions since his third ascension. Each one left him more exhausted than the last.

But, well…

(He slept very well, the night before.)

Still, he can't help but feel guilty.

Xie Lian left to get food for the shrine—and now, he's returning empty handed.

He has no doubt that Lang Qianqiu and Ren Song wouldn't have allowed Guzi and Lang Ying to starve in the meantime, but still.

The children are in his care—it's his responsibility.

Xie Lian still has the gold pieces that Hua Cheng gave him in exchange for the garment he took—but he hasn't actually bought any food yet.

Which he feels even worse about, considering how he spent the evening stuffing his face with mantou and…

Being pampered by a ghost king.

He silently chides himself, walking up the path to Puqi shrine. It's difficult to remember sometimes—he's so accustomed to being alone, he forgets about other people.

He has to be more mindful of that.

The prince is so lost in thought—he really doesn't hear it coming.

Not until something slams into his chest—hard enough to knock him over, sending him sprawling in the grass.

And of course, being the trained warrior that he is—Xie Lian sits up immediately, prepared to fight back, but...

"...Ruoye?"

The spiritual device trembles, rubbing underneath Xie Lian's chin, and the prince sighs sympathetically, reaching down to pet the silk bandage.

"I'm so sorry," he mutters. "I didn't mean to leave you behind back there. But...how did you make it back?"

Just as he asks that, Xie Lian hears faint wailing in the distance, his ears perking.

"...C'mon, gege, stop!"

Coming from a rather familiar voice.

"I'm gonna DIE! I don't deserve this! I DIDN'T EVEN START IT!"

A slow smile spreads across the prince's face as he stands back up.

He hurries back up the path, far more eager than he was before, calling out—

"San Lang?"

After a moment, a lazy voice comes back in response—

"Welcome back, dianxia."

And then there's Shuo's voice, whining. "Your highness! Tell him I didn't do anything! I...I HELPED!"

A soft laugh slips from Xie Lian's lips, and his eyebrows raise. "...Are you alright? You make it sound like he's torturing you."

"Oh," Hua Cheng's voice is distinctly sarcastic. "I really am, gege. He's suffering."

"I AM!" Shuo flails his arms. "All the blood is in my HEAD!"

He's being held upside down, the back of his head bumping against the small of Hua Cheng's back, his legs held mercilessly over the Ghost King's shoulders.

"Stop acting like you're going to have a stroke."

"Maybe I AM!"

"You're dead."

"SO?!"

Hua Cheng rolls his eyes, leaning against the doorframe of the shrine.

He's still in his older form—eyepatch in place—but his hair is pulled up into a lopsided ponytail, not so different from when he appeared in the beginning, calling himself 'San Lang.'

His clothes are the same as back then too—with his red outer robes tied around his waist.

"San Lang, are you bullying him?"

The ghost king's eyebrows raise innocently.

"Oh, no, dianxia. I never bully."

(Even Xie Lian knows that not to be true, he's been Hua Cheng's victim.)

"Gege, Hua Chengzhu—c'mon, this is SO embarrassing, PUT ME DOWN! I MADE HIM AN ATTIC!"

"You made yourself a bedroom," Hua Cheng shrugs, a piece of weed grass between his teeth. "You know how to get down."

Shuo slams his head against Hua Cheng's back, incensed. "I'm not FIVE!"

“Could’ve fooled me,” The ghost king counters lazily. One of the farmers glances over at the scene, walking down the road leading past the shrine—and Hua Cheng shrugs, calling over.

“He’s at that age, y’know?” Xie Lian bites back a snort.

After all—Hua Cheng does look very much like a young father, disciplining an unruly son.

“Oh, I understand!” The farmer calls back with an easy going smile. Shuo glares at the interior of the shrine, his hair dangling in his face. “My oldest was a handful during that phase!”

“I’m almost eight centuries old!” Shuo whispers furiously.

Hua Cheng just smiles, nodding his head politely as the villager disappears down the path.

Xie Lian bites his lip, his expression brimming with amusement as he leans against the railing of the steps.

“Does he do this to you a lot?”

Shuo glares, crossing his arms over his chest. “It’s his way of bullying me into doing whatever he wants.”

“I don’t bully,” Hua Cheng corrects him easily, watching Xie Lian with a lopsided smile, repeating:

“He knows how to get down.”

“Meaning?” Xie Lian questions, raising an eyebrow.

“...WISDOM!” Shuo shouts, leaving the prince absolutely baffled, but Hua Cheng just snickers, rolling the piece of wheat grass between his teeth.

“You’ve already tried that one.”

“HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO REMEMBER?!”

“Is it...uh...that one poem you like?! The one with the mountain?!” Xie Lian perks up.

Hua Cheng likes poetry?

“Nope.”

“…What is he trying to guess?”

Shuo sulks, blowing his hair out of his face. “He’ll only put me down if I do what he wants, or…”

He groans, frustrated.

“I have to guess what his tattoo says!”

Xie Lian’s eyebrows raise. “…San Lang, you have a tattoo?”

“Mmhm,” The ghost king hums in agreement, letting go of one of Shuo’s ankles, reaching out so the prince can feel it.

His sleeves have both been rolled up to the elbow, revealing toned, muscular forearms—and when Xie Lian brushes his fingertips over the ghost king’s skin, he can feel the raised points where it’s been marked with ink.

“These…are characters?” He mutters, raising an eyebrow. Only in the point of view of an insane person, surely.

Thankfully, neither one of them can see just how sheepish Hua Cheng’s expression has become.

“…I got it when I was very young,” he explains with a shrug.

“Well, uh…I like it!” Xie Lian smiles up at him.

“It’s got style!”

“I’ve been trying to guess what it says for eight hundred years,” Shuo grumbles. “And I’ve NEVER gotten it!”

(Implying that Hua Cheng does this to him quite often.)

Xie Lian can’t blame him—the characters are completely illegible.

“You say this as if you don’t have another option,” Hua Cheng muses, the bells on his boots clinking softly as he crosses his legs, easily holding the ghost upside down with one hand around his ankle.

“…” Shuo huffs, clearing his throat. “…Your highness?” Xie Lian looks up.

“…I’m really sorry for messing up your shrine,” he mumbles, his tone low and sulking. “Even if was made out of balsa wood—OW!” He whines when Hua Cheng bounces him sharply, his head thunking against his back again.

“Good apologies don’t have qualifiers attached, brat.”

"Alright, ALRIGHT!" Shuo grumbles, rubbing the back of his head. "I'm just SORRY, okay?!"

"And?"

Xie Lian really wants to say it's enough, that the poor demon as already suffered enough, but–

"...Are there any improvements I can help with that aren't self-serving?"

"Oh...I don't know if the attic was self-serving..." Xie Lian smiles, tilting his head. "I can make use of it, even when you aren't staying here!"

"Please dianxia," he mumbles, going limp in Hua Cheng's hold in surrender. "He won't let me go until you come up with something..."

"San Lang..."

"Don't take pity on him, gege," Hua Cheng shakes his head. "He's playing on your sympathies."

"Am not!"

"Ah..." Xie Lian rubs his chin, thinking. "Well, he already built a second level, and unless the foundations were built out, there really isn't..."

"Don't worry about that," the ghost king assures him. "He can handle whatever you need."

Ah, well…in that case…

"...A separate sleeping area on the lower floor might be nice?" Xie Lian offers. "But if that's too much work—""It's not," Hua Cheng glances over his shoulder."Isn't that right?"

"...No..." Shuo grumbles. "It's no trouble at all..." With that, he's dropped back down—landing on his palms, performing a brief handstand before rolling to his feet, rubbing his back.

"Tyrant..." He grumbles, to which Hua Cheng smirks.

"What was that?"

Shuo clears his throat, clasping his hands in front of him innocently, "Thank you Hua Chengzhu, for this AMAZING lesson in personal accountability! I'm so grateful!" He adds a sarcastic little spin, for good measure.

"You're welcome."

"Die..." He grumbles, walking off.

"Hmm?" Xie Lian turns his head in Shuo's direction, frowning slightly. "Where are you going?"

He just got back, after all.

"To get some stone, I'll be back..."

He can conjure the wood out of thin air, but the other building materials...require heavy lifting.

And Hua Cheng wasn't offering, implying that Shuo has to go and get it himself.

"...You're a bit hard on him, San Lang," Xie Lian murmurs—but there's little bite to it. "Did you come all the way here just to discipline him?"

"Mmm..." The calamity shrugs. "And to bring Ruoye."

That draws out the smile Xie Lian's been biting back since he arrived. "Thank you for doing that," he reaches over, squeezing Hua Cheng's forearm again. "I still can't believe I left him..."

"I'm the one who stole you away," the ghost king shrugs. "I didn't mind."

There's something about the way he says 'stole you away' that makes Xie Lian's train of thought go sideways, though he couldn't say why.

"Did you just come for those reasons, or...?"

Hua Cheng raises an eyebrow. "Am I being a nuisance?"

"No!" Xie Lian exclaims immediately. Then, realizing how vehemently he denied it, his ears grow slightly pink. "No, I was very happy to find you here," he admits. "I was only wondering how long San Lang planned on staying."

"Hmm..." Hua Cheng thinks it over, rubbing his chin. "I thought I might like some time away from Ghost City, and gege offered to host me—so, I thought I would stay here a while."

(Hua Cheng's heart leaps slightly, when he watches the way Xie Lian's expression brightens.)

"Would that be alright with you, your highness?"

Xie Lian smiles—widely and honestly, nodding quickly with agreement.

"Mmhm!" Then, for the first time since he arrived—he remembers. "Oh—where are Qi Rong and Lang Qianqiu?"

The children are exactly where they're supposed to be, playing inside, but those two... "Ah," Hua Cheng waves that off. "You think I only disciplined Shuo?"

"..." Xie Lian's smile doesn't fade—he's too pleased to be upset, really, but…

"...Are they here?"

"Yes, dianxia."

"Are they daruma dolls?"

"As always, his highness is excellent at guessing."

Xie Lian knows he should probably demand that Hua Cheng let them both go right now, but…

The ghost king seems to be having the same thought, tilting his head to the side. "Gege isn't bothered by it?"

"Well..." The prince scratches his head.

"...They're both a bit of a handful, and I've been away from the village for a little while, so I have a few errands to run. I couldn't ask you to deal with them while I'm gone..." Xie Lian explains.

Clink!

Hua Cheng's boots jingle softly as he steps away from the doorframe.

There's such an ease to him as he approaches the prince, reaching out and carefully tucking a lock of hair behind Xie Lian's ear. A touch Xie Lian enjoys, until he remembers…

Hua Cheng did that last night...right before he…

'That isn't the way I kiss a person.'

Ba-bump.

...Why is he thinking of that right now? That was just—

Hua Cheng pulls his hand back, flicking away a leaf that had been caught in the god's hair.

"Can I accompany gege on these errands?"

A leaf! Just a leaf, that's all. He…

Xie Lian clears his throat.

"Ah...of course, San Lang—if you want to. I can't imagine it'll be very interesting, but—"

"Then gege can lead the way."

When he speaks again, it's in the same voice he used when he first appeared on the ox cart—and, Xie Lian suspects, the same younger form.

Hua Cheng did say he should *'lead the way,* ' but the moment Xie Lian picks up his bag, the Ghost King insists on carrying it for him—and on Xie Lian holding his elbow, using Hua Cheng to steady himself when he encounters an unexpected dip in the road.

The villagers recognize him as they pass by, and a few call over, delighted. "Well, if it ain't Xiao Hua!"

"You finally came back from your parents house, huh?"

"What a strapping young man!"

A smile tugs at Xie Lian's lips, his hand tightening slightly on Hua Cheng's arm.

It reminds him of, years ago, in the very same village, doing this with Hong'er. How fond the local farmers were of him.

For being so diligent, looking after the local blind taoist.

Usually, remembering something like that makes him ache, but…

Not when he's with San Lang.

When he's with him, the memory feels...more sweet than it is bitter, even if there's always a hint of both. But there's something else now, tugging at his mind. A memory so old, so far back in his recollection, he struggles to bring it back, but…

There was something the farmers in the village said back then, about Hong'er...and it feels important--but Xie Lian can only remember his response.

'No.'

'My Hong'er was a soldier.'

But...what were they asking him? And why is Xie Lian thinking about that now? He—?

"Gege..." Hua Cheng speaks up when they're in the market, holding a basket as Xie Lian begins to buy food, along with other odds and ends for the shrine. "I've been wondering about something."

"Oh?" Xie Lian turns his chin in Hua Cheng's direction, tilting his head back.

"Back when I took you from the Heavens, and Lang Qianqiu chased after us..."

Ah, yes. The memory of Lang Qianqiu walking in on them in a...easily misunderstood position is still a little embarrassing, but Xie Lian doesn't react to that.

"Yes?"

"Did he actually propose to you?"

Xie Lian's smile freezes in place, the wind knocking out of his chest.

"I...what?"

"He said...right before everything happened...that he proposed," Hua Cheng shrugs. "And you didn't deny that was the case."

"Ah, well..." Xie Lian quickly looks away, rubbing his neck. "I mean...he didn't explicitly...say anything like that," The prince mutters, suddenly feeling...very sheepish. "But it was pretty clearly a confession of sorts..."

"But then An Le's men attacked the banquet, and you had to leave in the middle of the conversation."

"Exactly," Xie Lian nods, relieved that there's really nothing else to say about it—

"But how did he say it?"

The prince nearly drops the potatoes in his hands, just choosing randomly before hurriedly dropping one of them in the basket.

"What do you mean?"

"Well," Hua Cheng walks beside him as they move to the next stall, "he clearly seemed to think of it as a proposal, but you found it less so. I'm simply wondering exactly what he said."

"Ah..." Xie Lian purses his lips. "To tease him, or me?"

“I would never.”

Maybe both, then.

Xie Lian sighs, rolling the chain around his neck between his fingers.

“...Well, he gave me flowers,” the prince starts, adding— “No one in the palace knew I was blind, so he thought I could see them—San Lang, are you laughing?!”

“No,” Hua Cheng lies smoothly, even as his shoulders are trembling with amusement.

It’s just so easy to see the scene unfolding in his mind’s eye—because, knowing Xie Lian, even if he had no idea what the flowers looked like, he would still say—

“I’m sure they were beautiful!”

“I’m sure, I’m sure...” Hua Cheng agrees lightly, waiting for Xie Lian to continue.

"..." The prince swallows hard, turning his attention to a display of fresh onions, making sure the ones he selects are fresh. "Well...then he went on about how I should stay with him, in Yong'an..."

Hua Cheng seems to have gotten his fill of laughing now, at least, listening to Xie Lian quietly.

"...And about how he would protect me, and never let anyone hurt me..."

"...Gege..." Hua Cheng shakes his head, wiping a hand down his forehead. "What?"

"...That couldn't more clearly be a proposal."

Xie Lian stops, an onion in each hand, his jaw going slack. "Huh? Just because of the 'protecting me' part? By that standard, Feng Xin proposed to me when I was seven."

Hua Cheng doesn't seem amused by the comparison.

Seeming to conclude that the onions in his hands are up to par—Xie Lian pays for them, dropping them both in the basket.

"Besides, most of the proposals I've received have been far more direct," he adds offhandedly, not seeing the way the ghost king does a full blown doubletake.

"...Just how many proposals have you received?"

Xie Lian scrunches up his nose, thinking. "Oh...I'm not sure I kept track. Most of them were when I was mortal, or during my first ascension. At least once a week back then...maybe more."

Hua Cheng is slightly more pale than usual.

"Oh!" Xie Lian recalls, holding up a finger. "There was actually an interesting one. See, after the war between Xuli and Yushi, followed by Ming Guang's ascension— there were a lot of petty warlords trying to follow his example."

Though none matched Pei in his conquests.

"Well—there was one—I don't remember his name anymore, but he was causing a bit of trouble in Xianle. Raiding villages, stealing horses, that sort of thing."

Xie Lian's father had been aware—but simply hadn't thought him more than a local nuisance.

"Well, eventually he got a pretty big ego—and eventually, he got the idea in his head that my parents were lying about my gender."

Hua Cheng's eyebrows shoot up. "Really? I've never heard of such an accusation against his highness."

"Well, he was the only one who ever made it." Xie Lian explains. "He thought that no one would ever speak of a man's beauty the way everyone spoke of mine."

(He does feel a little sheepish, recounting that detail.)

"And he thought, given the fact that my mother couldn't bear more children after me, they simply lied."

It wasn't entirely unheard of, particularly not then, for families without a male heir to raise their eldest daughter as a son—in order to avoid losing political face.

"So, he rode upon the capital, planning to take the city hostage and demand my hand in marriage."

There are many surprising things about the story—but the first of them to Hua Cheng is the fact that he hasn't heard it before.

"...I'm assuming he wasn't successful?"

"Oh, no—father was furious, he wanted to unleash the entire army on him and his men—but I didn't want that."

Xie Lian had felt it would be unfair for the warlord's men to die because of their master's arrogance—so he came up with another proposal.

"See, back in the old days—maybe you remember—you could win someone's hand in marriage through combat."

"...So you made him such an offer?"

Xie Lian nods. "I sent a messenger to tell him that, if he could defeat my champion in single combat, I would marry him. After he agreed, he was escorted to the palace. I think my father was expecting me to appoint Feng Xin, but…”

Hua Cheng glances his way. “But?”

The prince shrugs. “I fought him myself.”

And obviously, the man lost—rather badly, too.

“I’m sure it was a crushing defeat for him.”

“Yes,” Xie Lian agrees. “I actually felt sorry for him at the time, but looking back on it…I feel like I let him off too easily.”

Hua Cheng tilts his head to the side, surprised. “That isn’t like you to say, your highness.”

“…I know,” Xie Lian frowns, stepping back from the vegetable stall. “But while that man might have doubted my gender—he knew very well that I was fourteen, and he was a grown man.”

Hua Cheng’s expression immediately darkens. “…I see. What did you end up doing with him, then?”

“During the battle, I cut off his sword wielding hand,” Xie Lian shrugs. “After that, he couldn’t be much of a threat to anyone else. Then, he was imprisoned.”

But still.

It disturbs Xie Lian at times, having lived so long, remembering the things that were treated as…normal, back then.

Now, eight centuries after the fact—the thought that a grown man had viewed him that way—as many other adults did, to be honest—is disturbing.

But at the time…

Xie Lian was the ‘illustrious crown prince.’ A national treasure of Xianle. One moment, he was a child—and the next, he was an adored public figure.

But now, when he remembers the stories of his beauty, the poems and songs that were written in his name…

Those accounts largely came from poets and bards. Grown men, in most cases— speaking of Xie Lian’s looks from the ages of fourteen to seventeen.

Now, part of him knows that it wasn't appropriate. And still…it's difficult to completely condemn it.

Those years were the height of his power and popularity. And it's a heady thing, to have the entire world adore you.

To discount all of that as inappropriate attention towards a child would cast one of the few happy times of his life in a…less than favorable light.

"The point is—compared to what I had seen before…Lang Qianqiu's proposal wasn't as direct." He concludes.

But all of this talk of the old days, crossing blades with an old warlord—it brings something else to Xie Lian's mind. Something he meant to ask about.

Well, actually, Xie Lian meant to ask the question ages ago, though not necessarily to Hua Cheng—but he seems knowledgeable enough.

"Can I ask you about something, San Lang?"

"Dianxia can ask me about anything he likes," the ghost king replies easily.

"…What's missionary?"

Xie Lian nearly stumbles when Hua Cheng comes to a sudden halt, his back ramrod stiff.

"San Lang? Are you alright?"

It takes him so long to answer, Xie Lian is becoming genuinely worried, until… "Where did you come across that term, your highness?"

His voice is a little odd—Xie Lian has never heard him use that tone before. Slightly hoarse.

"…Well, back on Mount Yu Jun, Feng Xin and Mu Qing were arguing…I think it had something to do with Feng Xin punching trees…" the prince muses, rubbing his chin. Then he catches himself, clearing his throat. "I mean—Nan Feng and Fu Yao, their deputies. Slip of the tongue—"

“Yes, yes,” Hua Cheng waves off Xie Lian’s meager attempts at protecting his friend’s dignity. “And that term came up?”

“...” Xie Lian nods, wondering why Hua Cheng is reacting so...sharply. “Well, Fu Yao said Nan Feng acted like a man who only knew how to do ‘missionary,’ but I had never heard of that fighting style before.”

And he never got the chance to ask either of his friends about it either.

“...It’s not...” Hua Cheng starts, then stops, struggling to formulate his answer—all while Xie Lian stares up at him blindly, his gaze trusting.

“Not what?”

“...Not...A fighting style, gege,” Hu Cheng explains carefully.

Xie Lian blinks, baffled.

“Then what could it be?”

Hua Cheng is quiet for several moments, weighing his options.

"It's intimate by nature," the Ghost King explains quietly, and Xie Lian's eyebrows knit together, wondering what to make of that.

Intimate.

"...As in?"

Hua Cheng bites back a sigh.

"It's sexual, your highness."

Oh.

Xie Lian's eyes widen.

Oh.

"...It...it is?" He frowns, his face slowly heating up. "...But why would Mu—Fu Yao be saying something like that to Nan Feng? Surely in that context, it must mean..."

Hua Cheng looks at the sky, long suffering.

"I'm fairly sure that's what he meant, your highness." Xie Lian stares, and Hua Cheng takes a deep breath. "He was saying that he was boring."

The prince stops walking, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "Boring?" He repeats, tapping his chin.

"But isn't that sort of thing...the opposite of boring?"

Xie Lian's never been interested in it, not really. But on the two occasions that he *has* thought about that kind of intimacy...

It wasn't boring.

"If you're with someone who is good at it, it isn't." Hua Cheng agrees.

'Oh,' Xie Lian thinks to himself with a frown, *'I'd probably be very boring, then.'*

And it's not that the prince actually wants to know—after all, he isn't going to be in that sort of situation any time soon—but—

He doesn't like coming off as ignorant.

Especially not when Mu Qing and Feng Xin are apparently talking about...

Besides, Hua Cheng is his friend. A dear friend. If Xie Lian can't ask him, then who else?

"So, when he said Nan Feng was like a man who 'only does missionary,' how did that mean he was boring?"

"..."

Xie Lian waits patiently, knowing that Hua Cheng wouldn't laugh at him for asking something like that.

And he doesn't, but...it does take him a moment to reply.

"...It's the most common position used during love making, your highness," he explains carefully.

Is 'love making' the word that Hua Cheng would typically use? No. Absolutely not. Is he going to say any other moniker in his god's presence?

No.

Absolutely fucking not.

"It refers to the partners being face to face."

"Ah..." Xie Lian nods, taking that in.

As one might expect, the prince has somewhat of a nuanced view of the concept of sexual intimacy.

Xie Lian is aware of the existence of sex, obviously. He doesn't find the concept of other people being intimate with one another upsetting or embarrassing.

It's only when he conceptualizes *himself* in such situations that he feels ashamed, or wrong.

His cultivation creates a wonderful excuse, but in reality—it wasn't that Xie Lian never wanted to be with someone.

Rather, he was taught to be ashamed of what and who he wanted.

So, in this situation, discussing the details as they would relate to two other people—that isn't embarrassing, or uncomfortable for him.

Actually, it creates a rare opportunity in which he doesn't mind discussing the subject.

And poor Hua Cheng, in this case, is knowledgeable.

“...And face to face is boring?”

“Ah...” Hua Cheng clears his throat, helping Xie Lian step up and over a small footbridge on their trek back to the shrine. “Every position has upsides and downsides. I think that one is just considered boring because it’s standard.”

And because of the issue with the angle, particularly with two men—but Hua Cheng would rather be suspended upside down in a pit of burning tar than explain that to the prince.

"But there are other positions that are more exciting, so saying that someone only does missionary..."

Makes them boring.

Xie Lian nods, thinking. In that sense, that actually does sound a little bit like Feng Xin.

But in that case, how would Mu Qing know?

Unless...

...Was that why he got so nervous at the mention of Yan Zhen in the martial hall?

The mere gravity of that revelation leaves the prince rather shaken, and he struggles to force his mind from that train of thought.

"...I really don't understand how it could make so much of a difference," he mutters.

Hua Cheng glances around with a small sigh.

"There's an easier way to explain this."

Xie Lian feels the ghost king stop walking, then hears the sound of the basket hitting the ground with a low thud.

"Gege?"

His voice is slightly strained, and Xie Lian looks up with wide eyes, looking in his direction.

"Yes, San Lang?"

"You understand that never do anything untoward, don't you?"

Well, that's not exactly true. He's been forward, but his desires to be physically close to his god have always been limited by his respect.

But he really never would do something...truly inappropriate.

Not without his god's permission, and Hua Cheng isn't sure that he could ever pluck up the courage to ask.

If Xie Lian requested it, however...

"..." The god raises an eyebrow, confused. "Yes?"

"And you trust me?"

"Of course I do, San Lang." Xie Lian frowns.

Isn't that obvious? He—

Before Xie Lian can contemplate the matter further, there are hands on his shoulders, pushing him back.

In any other situation, Xie Lian would immediately defend himself—and he almost does.

But this is Hua Cheng, and the prince trusts him.

He feels his back press against the trunk of a tree—not roughly at all, but—

Hua Cheng's hands land on the bark above his head, his arms caging him in, and the prince can't help but swallow thickly, his voice cracking as he asks—

"What are you—?"

The prince falls silent when Hua Cheng's forehead presses against his, his flesh perfectly cool against Xie Lian's burning skin.

Xie Lian's heart stutters in his chest as he bites his lip, fighting the urge to breathe. There's nothing to worry about. This is just...just...

"For the sake of demonstration," the ghost king explains, his voice far more even than what his own flushed expression might convey, "this is missionary."

...An explanation. A demonstration.

Hua Cheng already said—he wouldn't do anything inappropriate.

This—this is fine.

"...People do it standing up?" The prince whispers hoarsely, and he can actually *feel* the lopsided smile on Hua Cheng's face, with the ghost king's mouth so close.

"No, your highness." The ghost king murmurs. "But I would never put you on the ground."

Xie Lian's lips tremble slightly.

"It's dirty."

Similar to what he said in the Sinner's Pit, but it takes on an entirely new meaning now.

"Just imagine it like this, but laying down." As in laying down on a bed.

Like…like…

Oh.

Suddenly, all of the blood in Xie Lian's body seems to go rushing into his cheeks, making his face burn so hot, he feels like he might melt into a puddle.

"…Like last night?" He blurts out the words without thinking, because —

It was very similar to this. And in a bed. And…

They were…

He can't see it, but Hua Cheng's eyes are as wide as they could possibly be. And in his form, as the young man the villagers know as 'Xiao Hua,' he's visually less intimidating. Far more like…

A young man, nervous but excited, with his first love in his arms.

"Very similar to that, your highness, yes." Hua Cheng nods, his voice low. "With only a few minor differences."

Xie Lian fights the urge to cover his face with his hands. He's too old to react in such a way, really. And he wishes that he could force himself to be quiet, but…

"…Differences?"

Hua Cheng would argue, despite appearances, that he is a man with excellent self control.

He just has one minor vice. A failing, if you will.

Something that Yin Yu picked up about him very early on, as a matter of fact.

At his core, Crimson Rain Sought Flower is somewhat like a cat.

A jaguar that lives in the house, so those close often just treat him like a house cat— when, in reality, he could rip you limb from limb.

The point being…

When someone in his clutches makes some attempt at fleeing or flailing, he has this tendency to…

Play with his food, as one might say.

And he can sometimes get so caught up in that playfulness, a slightly sadistic form of amusement, that he forgets himself.

So, in that moment, forgetting all forms of pretense or nervousness—the ghost king turns his head, whispering in the prince's ear.

"They would be between your legs, dianxia."

Xie Lian's eyes couldn't possibly get any wider, his breaths coming to a complete halt.

"Or you between theirs," the ghost king amends, his breath brushing lightly against the sensitive skin of Xie Lian's ear as he speaks, prompting a slow shiver.

Xie Lian honestly doesn't know how he's managing to form thoughts, much less words.

"I…never thought of it like…"

He falls silent, and Hua Cheng's smile widens, a hint of a sharpened canine glinting at the corner of his mouth.

"Oh? How did you think about it, gege?"

Xie Lian falls silent, swallowing hard. He's never actually imagined…being with someone. It was only ever a distant concept.

Even when he considered asking Wu Ming to take his first time—that was only because he was afraid…that Bai Wuxiang, after what he had done wearing Feng Xin's face, might intend to take it by force.

It's the only reason Xie Lian could think of, for why he stopped those men in the temple for trying to…well…

Xie Lian doesn't want to think about that. Especially not right now.

The point is, he never actually envisioned what being intimate with Wu Ming would have been like.

Xie Lian struggles now, to imagine what would have happened.

Certainly, Wu Ming would have said yes. He wouldn't have denied Xie Lian anything.

And the mere thought of the fact that Xie Lian nearly took advantage of that wracks him with guilt.

But...then what?

Wu Ming certainly must have had experience, even if he was young. He had his beloved that he was working so hard to get back to. Surely, when he was alive, they must have been...

Still, with the way Xie Lian was back then, he doubts he would have been comfortable with someone...

'Between his legs,' as Hua Cheng so delicately phrased it.

Still, that was likely exactly what Bai Wuxiang intended to do to him, so Xie Lian can't say what they would have done, or how they would have done it.

The only thing he does know, in the end, is that Wu Ming would have been kind. He would have taken care of him.

That was exactly why Xie Lian almost asked.

Because even then, in his most broken, distrustful state—

The prince felt safe, with Wu Ming.

He hadn't felt that since.

It never occurred to him to be intimate with Kuo, for example—not even once, despite the fact that the founder of the Jiang sect had always been kind and respectful to him.

(And he made Xie Lian very, very aware of his keen interest in being lovers.)

Actually, looking back on that incident in the bath house— Kuo wasn't always respectful.

But he was kind, and absolutely harmless, so Xie Lian forgives him for being a little too shameless in his advances at times.

And of course, others made advances over the years. Men, women. Big and small, young and old.

Of course, even if Xie Lian had been open to such things—he wouldn't have been attracted to the women. But still, he knew what impact his attentions could have on the self esteem of a young lady.

Sometimes, especially when he was the Guoshi of Yong'an—he would find a young woman who was dejected and alone, and he would ask her to dance.

Not out of attraction, but simply out of the desire to make her feel beautiful, because no one deserves to feel so unwanted.

Even if Xie Lian isn't attracted to women, he knows they feel safer around him. Perhaps subconsciously aware of his lack of interest.

He has always treasured that.

The ability to make someone feel safe. To make them feel wanted, and worthwhile.

He adored that feeling, when he was with Hong'er.

Slowly making the boy believe that Xie Lian cared for him. That the prince wasn't going to become disgusted or cast him out.

Xie Lian has never forgotten the way the teenager began to tremble, when he called Hong'er 'handsome.'

He hasn't been able to bring himself to call a man handsome since, even when encountering someone who would be objectively viewed as more 'attractive' by societal standards.

If Xie Lian said that to anyone else, it would feel less sincere.

Because they wouldn't be his Hong'er.

His handsome, brave, Hong'er.

But he never imagined himself with Hong'er like that, either. He died too young, and Xie Lian was so focused on his own worthlessness, he didn't consider things like intimacy, or having a future with anyone.

He supposes, in the eight centuries that followed, the one who came the closest as an actual 'option' was Lang Qianqiu.

Not at the time of the Gilded Banquet, no. Xie Lian simply viewed him as a naive teenager at that time.

But if Qi Rong and An Le's attack had never happened...

'I promise—I won't let anyone hurt you. Not ever again.'

Xie Lian can't deny that he would have been tempted by that, if Lang Qianqiu had kept the same attitudes as he grew into a man. A king.

The prince isn't weak, even with his shackles. He can protect himself quite easily. But still...

There's some small part of him that craves the feeling of being protected, the way that he used to be.

If Xie Lian has any weakness, it's to the sensation of being so honestly and sincerely cared for.

Even if he knows that he doesn't deserve it.

So, if he had remained by Lang Qianqiu's side as the prince of Yong'an grew older...

He might have said yes, eventually.

But when Xie Lian tries to imagine how that would have transpired, he really can't do it.

The idea of Lang Qianqiu on top of him, between his legs...

It doesn't really make him feel much beyond the concept of sparring, which they often did. Even so, that always ended with Lang Qianqiu disarmed on the ground, with his Guoshi standing several feet away, calmly sheathing his own blade.

And the other way around isn't any better.

Then, it just feels like taking advantage of a former student.

And in part, that might have something to do with the fact that, while he's sure that Lang Qianqiu is good looking, Xie Lian has never been attracted to him in that sense.

Actually, come to think of it—the number of men Xie Lian has found attractive in... *that* sense is very small.

The first is the most obvious, and the most embarrassing: Feng Xin.

If Xie Lian was sixteen, and you asked him to imagine sexual intimacy and how it would go…

His first thought probably would have gone to his guard—and, even more mortifying —exactly the way Hua Cheng had initially described it:

Between his legs.

(Apparently that's the only way Feng Xin knows how to do it, anyway.)

Hong'er can't be included in that category—because even now, trying to imagine the teenager in a sexual way feels inappropriate.

Sure, he would be eight centuries old by now, had he lived as long as Xie Lian—but he didn't.

He's tried to imagine the man Hong'er might have grown into plenty of times—but anything more than that feels wrong.

And of course, Xie Lian found Wu Ming attractive, even if he was only vaguely familiar with what the savage ghost looked like.

He was tall, and broad. Xie Lian remembers that. With long, soft hair…gentle hands.

But the thing Xie Lian remembers most vividly about him, oddly enough, is such a small detail. One that isn't even related to what Wu Ming looked like.

Wu Ming's clothes.

Xie Lian knows, from the briefest of glimpses before the ghost was dispersed, that Wu Ming wore all black—but that isn't what sticks out in his memory.

It's far more tactile than that.

When they were outside the palace of Yong'an, and Wu Ming was holding him… kissing him, before, and after…

They were that of a soldier. Scaled armor on the chest and forearms—but with gaps around the elbows and biceps, where Xie Lian held onto him.

The fabric was layered and padded underneath, creating a soft, giving feel—almost like a thick coat.

And when Xie Lian rested his cheek on Wu Ming's shoulder, even if only for a moment—it smelled like campfire smoke in a forest after the rain.

It's those details that built into attraction, and Xie Lian can't explain why.

Even if he'll never know what Wu Ming's face looked like, beneath that mask—just remembering the smell of him, the feel of him, makes Xie Lian's chest ache with an inexplicable amount of yearning.

Since then, he can't say he's been firmly attracted to a man since.

Pei, he supposes, is attractive. But Xie Lian only assumes as much from the sound of his voice, and with how many people the general has had in his bed. But he's never imagined being intimate with him, either.

Even now, if he tried—Xie Lian isn't excited by the prospect. And then, very, very recently, things changed.

Because Hua Cheng...on an objective level, is very attractive. That isn't unusual. Everyone seems to think so.

But it's odd that Xie Lian does, as well.

It's difficult, especially now, in this position, resolving himself to that fact.

Because it isn't about the ghost king's physical appearance. After all—he has the same effect on the prince, regardless of what form he's in.

(Even his female form, which was the most surprising.)

It's a number of factors pulled together. Some tactile, others not.

It's how tall he is. How broad his shoulders are. The size of his hands, and how they feel on Xie Lian's waist.

It's the way his voice sounds when he smiles.

Or, how it rumbles and snarls when he's angry. The way his laugh can be cocky and arrogant, or soft with fondness.

It's the way he smells so familiar, even if Xie Lian knows it isn't the same, not after the humiliating spectacle he made on Mount Yu Jun.

It’s how strong he is—the only person who has ever been able to physically overpower Xie Lian.

(Aside from Bai Wuxiang, but the prince refuses to take that into account right now.)

How surprised Xie Lian was at the fact that being overpowered by Hua Cheng didn’t frighten him.

Actually, it did the opposite.

It’s in the way that just the sound of the bells on Hua Cheng’s boots can bring a smile to Xie Lian’s face, his heart warming with the knowledge that he’s here.

(San Lang is here.)

All of those things—they build into attraction.

Xie Lian hasn’t been silent for that long, his mind moving at a mile a minute, but he’s slowly coming to that dawning realization, the truth cresting over him like a wave, slamming into his psyche with force.

He’s attracted to Hua Cheng.

Not because he’s objectively attractive.

He is, but that’s not why.

It’s because *Xie Lian* finds him attractive.

‘How did you imagine it then, your highness?’

And when Xie Lian imagines being with *him* …

His mind goes back to the night before.

How his thoughts seemed to go sideways, with Hua Cheng on top of him.

The way his heart lurched when he felt Hua Cheng’s knee between his thighs.

Oh.

“I…” Xie Lian swallows thickly, squeezing his eyes shut. “I…”

And when he tries to imagine it the other way around, with the ghost king's long, strong legs around his hips, he…

That image is far more intimidating, because Xie Lian would have no idea what to do, and Hua Cheng…

He makes every aspect of intimacy seem so easy, the thought of being in that position makes the prince feel somewhat insecure.

But he can certainly imagine it.

And the idea of it—while all of this is a stretch for Xie Lian, because any image of sexual intimacy conjures up instincts of repression and shame—it certainly isn't unappealing.

But right now, when they're like this, with Hua Cheng looming over him…

The thought of having the ghost king underneath him makes Xie Lian excited. Nervous, embarrassed—but excited.

But at this very moment, the thought of having Hua Cheng between his legs?

That sets him on fire, and Xie Lian isn't sure what to make of it.

"I'm…"

"Yes?"

"…I don't think I would be picky," the prince answers, mortified by how meek his voice sounds.

Hua Cheng's smile only widens. "I would expect no less, gege has never been self centered."

His eyes slide down, watching Xie Lian's pulse, throbbing beneath his skin.

The way his Adam's apple bobs up and down each time he swallows—making the choker around his neck move with it.

As though the ruby encrusted butterfly wings adorning it are about to burst into flight.

"But that isn't the same as what you imagined."

"…I wouldn't know what to imagine, San Lang," Xie Lian mutters—and that's half true.

He knows the vague mechanics of sex, but he can't conceive much more beyond something highly rudimentary.

"It's very simple, your highness," the ghost king—

Oh good heavens, he's *purring* .

"If you were with someone, in this position—how would you imagine it?"

At first, Xie Lian can't understand why Hua Cheng is asking. After all, it's not like Xie Lian is ever going to be intimate with anyone, but…slowly, the logic behind the question clicks into place.

This is a demonstration.

Hua Cheng even stated beforehand—this was just the easiest way for him to explain the position. Making it very clear—he would never do something untoward.

The only one making this…more than that, is Xie Lian.

(Because he's attracted to Hua Cheng.)

That realization is still slamming into him over and over again, spiraling behind every thought.

But you can still be friends with someone, and be attracted to them. Xie Lian handled that with Feng Xin very well. And eventually, he got over it.

Xie Lian doesn't see Feng Xin that way now. He can't imagine being…intimate with him now, not anymore.

So, eventually, he'll get over this…physical reaction to Hua Cheng, too. And everything will be fine, just like it was before.

In the meantime, however, that doesn't make answering Hua Cheng's question any less embarrassing.

Still—he's trying to be helpful, so…

Xie Lian mumbles something unintelligible under his breath, and the ghost king leans closer, his nose brushing the hollow beneath his ear.

"What was that, your highness?"

Xie Lian's lips tremble.

"...On top of me," he croaks.

It's probably for the best that he doesn't see how Hua Cheng's pupils dilate sharply in response.

To say that the calamity has imagined every feasible scenario would be an understatement.

And he would be eager—honored, beyond words, in fact—to live out any one of them. But hearing his god say that, *like* that...

Then, Xie Lian realizes that his answer doesn't entirely line up with what Hua Cheng said—so he struggles to correct himself.

"I...I mean...between my..." Hua Cheng's knee bumps against his, and Xie Lian finally surrenders to the urge to cover his face with one hand, his cheeks burning.

"...Legs..." He concludes in a small voice, worried if he speaks any louder, it might crack.

A mortifying sound does slip out of him, however, when one of Hua Cheng's hands grasps the prince's wrist, pulling it away from his face, pinning it against the tree overhead.

Xie Lian's eyes snap wide open as he breathes in sharply through his nose, and...

Hua Cheng's forehead is pressed against his own once more—the coolness of it almost soothing.

If not for the fact that their noses are bumping together, and their mouths are so close, Xie Lian can almost feel it.

"Apologies, dianxia," the ghost king murmurs.

(He says this, not sounding sorry at all.)

"But the benefit of this position comes from being face to face, remember?"

The prince presses his lips together so tightly, they feel almost numb.

Right.

For once, Xie Lian is relieved by the fact that he can't see.

If he could, making eye contact in a position like this...

That would be too much.

(He's relieved now, that Hua Cheng decided to push him against a tree to demonstrate. Otherwise, the prince's knees would have buckled long ago.)

"...I don't know if this demonstration has been very helpful," the prince swallows thickly, his wrist limp in Hua Cheng's grip, and the Ghost King raises an eyebrow, his expression briefly coloring with concern.

"Oh?"

Xie Lian bites his lip.

"...This isn't boring, San Lang."

And, according to Hua Cheng's description, that's exactly what this position—or the position similar to this, Xie Lian supposes, is supposed to feel like.

But Xie Lian doesn't think he's ever been less bored in his entire life.

"..."

The calamity smiles.

"But I already explained, your highness."

Did he? Explain what—?

"If you're with someone who is good at it, it's never boring." Oh.

Xie Lian's throat feels dry all of the sudden, his tongue latching to the roof of his mouth.

Hua Cheng did say that, didn't he?

And...it seems almost obvious that Hua Cheng would be good at this.

A natural aspect of life, actually.

"Is this too much, gege?"

It's a sudden question, and if Xie Lian is being honest—maybe it is.

Not because he's uncomfortable, but simply because he's so...overwhelmed. But admitting to that seems far worse, so he simply shakes his head.

"No," he whispers, taking deep, steadying breaths, like he does when he's meditating. "I'm alright."

He is, that isn't a lie—he's just worried that his sudden feelings of attraction might become too obvious.

"You're sure?"

The prince nods again, and— It happens quickly.

Hands grip his waist, spinning Xie Lian around until he's facing the tree, his hands scrambling for purchase—only for Hua Cheng to gather both of the prince's wrists up in one hand, pinning them over his head.

Before, it felt like Hua Cheng's arms were caging him in.

Now, it feels like the ghost king's entire body is surrounding him.

His chest against Xie Lian's shoulders, a hand wrapped around his hip—his knee pressed against the back of the prince's thighs.

Oh.

/Ba-bump./

He—

Now, it feels like Xie Lian really couldn't breathe, even if he wanted to.

His heart is hammering in his chest—which is mortifying, because he knows Hua Cheng must be able to hear it, and—

The ghost king leans down, his mouth hovering just over the nape of Xie Lian's neck.

"Every position is enjoyable, if you're with someone who is good at it," the ghost king explains calmly, watching goosebumps rise across the prince's skin.

"Some of them are just a little more exciting."

"..."

Well, Xie Lian was wrong.

Almost comically incorrect.

Hua Cheng was actually giving an absolutely helpful demonstration. Perhaps the most accurate illustration of a concept that Xie Lian has ever experienced.

"...I get it..." He mumbles, his voice cracking in two places.

"Do you?" Hua Cheng smiles, leaning closer, until his lips are just a hair's breadth away from the skin of his nape. "Does gege have any more questions?"

After this, Xie Lian doesn't know if he'll be able to ask them without...hoping for another demonstration.

Which is wrong.

Xie Lian shouldn't take advantage of Hua Cheng's willingness to help.

"...No," the prince rasps, shrinking slightly, shuddering when the calamity leans in after him, his chest pressed against Xie Lian's back. "T-thank you, San Lang, this was a...very enlightening demonstration..."

Hua Cheng seems to take the hint that Xie Lian is becoming quite overwhelmed, letting go of his wrists as he leans back, giving the god a moment to compose himself.

Which Xie Lian endeavors to do, pressing his face against the tree bark, catching his breath.

"You're welcome."

Hua Cheng sounds sly—but gentle, and Xie Lian...

His lips tighten at the corners as his hands grip either side of the tree trunk, more than aware of how ridiculous this must seem.

After all, the ghost king barely touched him—and certainly not inappropriately, just as he promised—

But here the prince is, practically hugging a tree, weak in the knees.

And that realization is still ringing in Xie Lian's head:

(He's attracted to Hua Cheng.)

The Ghost King watches the back of Xie Lian's head, his arms crossed over his chest. Comparatively, he might seem more composed, but...

(That certainly isn't the reality inside Hua Cheng's head.)

"Are you alright, your highness?"

"Yes," Xie Lian agrees quickly, his voice much more composed than it was before— even if it's still slightly unsteady. "Yes, I'm sorry—I was just surprised."

Hua Cheng arches one eyebrow. "By what?"

'Oh, just the fact that I'm attracted to you. No big deal, really.'

Honestly, what is he supposed to say?

"Oh...just that Fu Yao would say something like that to Nan Feng," he mutters, clearing his throat. "I really never thought they'd discuss that sort of thing with one another."

Hua Cheng tilts his head, rocking back on his heels. "Maybe they do more than discuss it."

Xie Lian chokes, whipping his head around in Hua Cheng's direction—still braced against the tree. "San Lang, you don't mean that they...?"

His companion shrugs, kneeling down to pick up the baskets from their shopping trip once more.

"Who can say, gege," he replies airily, "they're strange. But there are rumors."

Xie Lian doubts he should put much stock in those—after all, there were so many rumors about him over the centuries—and nearly all of them were wrong.

Ironically enough, the only story he heard about himself that was actually true (in the heavens, at least) was that horrible play.

Better not to assume, then.

When they make it back to the shrine, Shuo has already returned. And, to Xie Lian's surprise—like Hua Cheng, he works fast.

Most of the actual construction on the new addition to the shrine is already finished, and while he adds the final touches, Xie Lian prepares a meal for himself and Hua Cheng.

Not for the children, of course—Xie Lian still entrusts Shuo with that. He does offer the forest demon a serving, however—which is politely declined.

Now, the prince could choke down just about anything—he's had to learn that skill. As such, his own cooking doesn't bother him.

But still…it's for Hua Cheng, and it's intended to be a thank you, for everything the ghost king has done for him recently—so the prince does his best, applying what he's learned from following Shuo around in the kitchen for the last few weeks, and…

It has to be better, right?

Even E'Ming helped, to Xie Lian's surprise. Despite being such an infamously 'dangerous' spiritual device, in the prince's experience…

There's something endearing about the scimitar, like an overeager puppy as it rushes forward to assist him with tasks.

"Is it in the way, gege?" Hua Cheng questions, leaning against the counter, sending E'Ming a harsh look—but Xie Lian shakes his head.

"Oh, no—E'Ming is being helpful, honest!"

Just the smallest compliment makes the blade shiver with delight, its eye spinning wildly in it's hilt.

It seems so unused to receiving praise—Xie Lian almost feels sorry for the blade. After all—he and Ruoye got off to a difficult start…

(For completely obvious reasons.)

But it's important to get on well with one's spiritual devices.

Xie Lian can't say he completely lives up to that belief. Not when it comes to Fangxin, anyway.

He's known the weapon for just as long as Ruoye, and still...

It's never felt like his own. Not even now, centuries after the fact.

But Hua Cheng doesn't seem to have a negative history with E'Ming. He's already told Xie Lian that E'Ming was the first weapon he ever forged.

Shouldn't that be a fond memory?

Before long, the stew is finished (and hopefully, edible.)

Rather than eating it inside, at the table—Hua Cheng opts to sit on the porch, his legs dangling over the ledge. Lazily swallowing mouthfuls of soup as he enjoys the breeze.

Xie Lian waits, almost fretfully, and the ghost king speaks up— "It's good."

His face brightens.

"Really?"

Honestly, he can't taste that much of a difference from usual—but after their conversation the other night, Xie Lian wonders if he's just learned not to notice the way things taste.

After all, he used to be a picky eater, and now—he'll eat anything.

He used to be a child who would weep and cry for his mother over the smallest scrape on his knee, only to be consoled when she would kiss it better.

"Mmm..." Hua Cheng hums in agreement, swallowing down another bite. "A little thick, but it's got flavor."

The fact that he doesn't claim the dish is perfect makes Xie Lian find the praise somewhat more sincere, and he smiles, sitting on the porch beside him, picking at his own serving.

"Dianxia seems to be in a good mood this evening,"

Hua Cheng is watching him from the corner of his eye, rolling his spoon between his fingers.

Xie Lian shrugs, a persistent smile still tugging at his lips.

It’s a silly thought—Hua Cheng wouldn’t tease him if he shared it, but still.

He just...

He never would have thought that, eight centuries later, someone would still be kissing his cuts and bruises better.

Hua Cheng seems tempted to pry him for an answer, but before he can ask, a group of villagers come down the path, returning from the fields.

“Say...” One of the villagers stops, glancing in Hua Cheng’s direction curiously. He’s back in his form from before—the slightly older version of his true form that pulled Xie Lian from the lake. “Doesn’t he look a bit like Xiao Hua, to you?”

“It’s a pretty strong resemblance!”

Xie Lian’s smile turns from one of quiet fondness to that of awkwardness as he struggles to fumble for an explanation.

“Ah, well...you see...!”

Hua Cheng smiles, stretching his legs out in front of him, leaning back on his elbows lazily.

“He gets the good looks from me.”

“...Ah, you’re the boy’s father?” One of the women in the group raises an eyebrow, surprised. “You don’t look old enough to have a son that age!”

Xie Lian expects Hua Cheng to correct them with some other explanation, but he simply shrugs.

“I’m older than I look.”

Xie Lian has to bite back the sudden urge to laugh.

Hundreds of years older, as a matter of fact.

“You know the parents of that other lad that’s been around? Shuo, wasn’t it?” This reply comes as easily as the last—

“He’s one of mine, too.”

That directly undermines everything Shuo has said on the matter—even if it's just a tall tale that Hua Cheng is telling the villagers.

"Really? You two don't look very much alike."

After all—Shuo's hair has a different shade and texture—and his eyes are lighter.

Hua Cheng tilts his head to the side, unbothered.

"He gets his looks from the wife, actually."

At first, Xie Lian doesn't think very much of that statement—after all, it's just a few easy little white lies to sate their curiosity.

And Hua Cheng obviously isn't married.

He wouldn't be going around offering a kiss as a means to settle a gambling debt if he was. Other men might—but Hua Cheng isn't that sort of person.

"Ah, is she in town with you?"

"Back home, I'm afraid," the ghost king murmurs, just as Xie Lian lifts his spoon to his lips.

"She's a bit under the weather." "Oh, is it serious?"

"Nothing too bad—" The corner of his mouth curves upwards. "She just took a swim in some cold water recently, and it didn't sit right with her."

To which Xie Lian promptly chokes, covering his mouth and coughing.

"Ah, you gotta be careful!" One of the farmers frowns, shaking his head. "That sort of thing will knock you down real quick!"

"I know," Hua Cheng sighs, disapproving. "What am I going to do with her?" Xie Lian stares into his bowl blindly, warmth slowly creeping up his face.

"Are you sure she'll be alright back home by herself?" The farmer's wife frets. Hua Cheng smiles, shaking his head.

"Oh, there's always someone looking after her—don't worry."

"Are you sure?"

"Mmm," the ghost king hums, setting his empty bowl aside. "Like a proper princess."

Poor Xie Lian hasn't even had the chance to clear his airway before he's sent coughing again, his shoulders hunched.

"You alright, daozhang?"

"Ah, he's fine," Hua Cheng answers for him as Xie Lian chugs down some weather. "Just a long day."

One of the villagers in the group glances at the sun, slipping down beneath the horizon. "...It's getting pretty late boss, don't you think we should...?"

"Yeah, yeah," the farmer rocks back on his heels, adjusting his belt. "We should get going. It was nice meeting you, Mr...?"

"Hua," the ghost king confirms with an easy going smile. "It was nice meeting you, as well."

Xie Lian can't help but notice that there seems to be an ease to Hua Cheng when he's here. Quite unlike anywhere else.

Even in ghost city—he has a gravity to him. One of authority. But here...

Hua Cheng seems younger, relaxed. Like he's...

Like he's happy, in Puqi Shrine.

The thought of that makes Xie Lian smile, even as his tone turns scolding. "San Lang..."

The ghost king glances up, a picture of innocence.

"Yes, gege?"

"Shuo was right."

"Oh?" Hua Cheng turns to face him, raising an eyebrow. "About what?"

Xie Lian just as soon turns away, picking up their empty bowls as he rises to his feet.

"You *are* a bully."

The ghost king gasps, clasping a hand over his heart as though he’s been gravely wounded.

“Me?!”

“You.”

Cool fingers grasp his wrist as Xie Lian steps towards the door, Hua Cheng stretched out on the porch to reach for him.

“You don’t mean that...”

And of course he sounds oh so pitiful.

Xie Lian turns his head away. He’s almost forgotten how to be haughty, but he manages a small sniff, tilting his chin up.

“I think I do.”

Briefly, Hua Cheng is just caught staring at him, and while Xie Lian can’t know his expression—

His eyes are wide, openly endeared.

After a moment he shakes himself out of it, his voice sly.

“Gege doesn’t think I’m a bully...” He whines, tugging at the prince’s wrist gently. “He thinks I’m boyish and charming.”

Xie Lian lowers his chin, working so hard not to smile, the corners of his mouth ache.

He’s become so accustomed to faking smiles, he forgot what it was like to try to hide one. Or to even need to.

“Boyish and charming?”

Hua Cheng bobs his head in agreement, “Yes, that’s exactly what gege thinks.”

The corner of Xie Lian's mouth stubbornly tugs upwards, no matter how hard he tries to stop it.

"And what else do I think?"

Hua Cheng's grip on his wrist has loosened now, but the prince doesn't make an effort to pull away.

"...I wish I knew," the ghost king admits softly.

Xie Lian falls silent for a moment, his heart thumping unsteadily, eyes averted.

"...About you?" He questions—his voice shifting from playful to unsure.

And if he could see the yearning in the calamity's eyes--he would take mercy on him.

But he can't.

"About everything."

That draws a disbelieving snort.

"San Lang would get sick of the sound of my voice if he wanted to know everything I ever thought," Xie Lian mutters, trying to laugh it off, but...

Hua Cheng's thumb strokes the inside of his wrist. A small movement, but…

Intimate.

"Never."

Xie Lian swallows hard.

It's difficult, sometimes, how being around Hua Cheng can go from moments of almost blissful ease to that of sudden intensity.

Having become so unaccustomed to the weight of another person's attention...Xie Lian can't help but shrink back from it.

He moves to pull his wrist from Hua Cheng's grip with a small smile, shaking his head.

"You're so insincere..."

But before he can, the ghost king's hold on him tightens.

"I swear," he murmurs, his eyes never leaving Xie Lian's face, even as he tries to duck his head.

"You'll never find anyone on heaven and earth more sincere than me."

It's the same line he said that night after they returned from the Half Moon Kingdom, and he still...

Xie Lian bites his lip, breathing in deeply through his nose—wishing his heart would settle down.

There's a question lingering in the back of the prince's mind. Maybe it was always there—but it's a seed that has taken root.

And every moment he spends with San Lang, it pushes deeper into the forefront of his mind, becoming more and more difficult to ignore:

'Why do I feel this way when I'm around you?'

The chain around his neck has never felt heavier.

Suddenly, a voice calls out from inside the shrine—

"Are you gonna stop messing with dianxia or not? I'm finished."

Xie Lian jumps, finally pulling his wrist away.

"What?"

He whips around, clutching the bowls from their dinner in both hands.

Shuo stretches his arms over his head, shaking the sawdust from his hair. "With the new room? It's all done."

The prince arches an eyebrow, all while Hua Cheng stares sharply over his shoulder. "Already?"

"Mmmmhm," the demon nods, rolling a small wooden doll in the palm of his hand. "Once the foundation was in place, the rest was easy."

"Oh," Xie Lian blinks, then smiles. "Well, thank you! That was very—"

"It's the least he could do," Hua Cheng interrupts, brushing himself off as he stands up. "No need to thank him."

The forest demon sticks his tongue out at him, rolling his eyes. "At least his highness thinks you're a bully too."

"A huge bully," Xie Lian agrees, still smiling.

Hua Cheng practically drops to the ground, clutching at his chest as though mortally wounded by Xie Lian’s betrayal.

“I was only following gege’s lead, if you think about it.”

Xie Lian opens his mouth to say he doesn’t know what he means, but—

Then, he remembers.

Not very long ago, he was in ghost city. Appearing as a woman. Claiming to be looking for her husband. Calling herself...

Well. Hua Cheng actually does have a point, mortifying as it might be.

“...Better not to dwell on it,” the prince mutters quickly, turning around.

“San Lang, could you change the other two back now? Surely it’s been long enough...”

The Ghost King lets out an irritated huff, but he shrugs.

With a wave of his hand, there are two puffs of green and red smoke.

Qi Rong lays upon the floor, coughing and wheezing.

“You FUCKER!”

His hands are bound behind his back, giving him little more to do than roll around and scream out curses.

When Shuo looks down, however, instead of a doll in his hand—there’s someone else’s hand.

A man’s hand.

He and Lang Qianqiu stare at one another for a moment, shocked.

The demon recovers first, his eyes narrowing as he yanks his hand out of the god’s grip, using it to slap Lang Qianqiu upside the head—hard.

“The FUCK are you doing, creep?!”

“ME?!” The prince of Yong’an cries.

“You were the one holding me when I changed back!”

“I was TAUNTING you!” Shuo huffs, hands on his hips. “That doesn’t mean I wanna hold your sweaty ass HAND!”

"I'm not sweaty—and maybe you shouldn't have been—OW!" He clutches his head when the demon smacks his skull again.

"Don't blame the VICTIM!"

"Would you stop hitting me?! YOU aren't the one who spent the entire day as a DARUMA DOLL!"

Shuo looks away, crossing his arms with a sniff.

"I suffered in other ways."

His dignity, primarily—and even in doll form, Lang Qianqiu got to witness it.

The prince snickers, even with his ears wringing, and he adjusts his robes.

"Yeah, nice piggy-back ride..." Shuo stiffens, his shoulders hunching, and Lang Qianqiu can't resist the urge to tack on—

"Getting to that age, huh? No wonder your old man—!"

He can't even finish that sentence before he breaks off with a wheeze, falling down to his knees, clutching his throat.

Shuo shakes out his fist with a glare.

"In the next twenty minutes it takes that body of yours to reconstruct your voice box, I'd learn to watch your mouth."

"Shuo..." Xie Lian starts, exasperated, half wishing he had allowed Hua Cheng to keep the two as Daruma dolls until morning, but the ghost king speaks first.

"It's an important lesson for him to learn, dianxia."

"Is it...?" The prince questions, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Sure," Hua Cheng shrugs, placing a foot on Qi Rong's throat—if only to stop him from wailing so loudly. "Don't taunt someone stronger than you if you can't back it up."

It's a rather simplistic way of phrasing it. After all, Shuo was taunting him too, but...

Lang Qianqiu probably could stand to learn not to mention a sensitive subject. And the parental nature of Shuo's relationship with Hua Cheng, for whatever reason, is clearly one of them.

But it's even more odd to consider the fact that Hua Cheng is correct.

Perhaps it only feels counter intuitive because he's far smaller in size —

But Shuo is quite a bit stronger than Lang Qianqiu is.

"In any case…" Xie Lian sighs, looking to Qi Rong. "I suppose we can't let him starve while he's in that body."

"FINALLY!" Qi Rong snaps, rolling onto his back, thrashing with annoyance. "Did the kid finally make me some fucking FOOD?!"

Shuo's eye twitches and Xie Lian sends him a disgusted look.

"No, I did."

He has no way of knowing—but Qi Rong's undead pallor pales even further.

"…I'm not hungry."

Hua Cheng flicks his wrist, and suddenly the green ghost's body is being lifted up, slid over, and slammed down into one of the kitchen chairs.

"Don't be ungrateful, Qi Rong."

Xie Lian's cousin sends him a hateful glare. "I said I'm not FUCKIN' HUNGRY!"

"You don't want that body to starve, do you?" Xie Lian smiles serenely, filling up another bowl.

"I'd rather eat DIRT!"

"That can easily be arranged." He hums, tapping the excess soup off of his spoon. "San Lang?"

"Yes?"

"Hold him still for me."

Not the most enjoyable job, Xie Lian knows—but the ghost king doesn’t complain.

“Of course, gege.”

He steps over, wrenching Qi Rong up by the hair, forcing him to sit properly, gripping his jaw tightly until his mouth is forced open.

“HEY—YOU—MOTHERFU—!”

Xie Lian is usually slightly more graceful, blindness and all—but this time, he simply opts to ram the wooden spoon into Qi Rong’s mouth carelessly, clacking against his teeth, chipping one of them in the process.

“Don’t speak with your mouth full. It’s unsightly.”

A snarling, gagging noise escapes him with each bite that Xie Lian rams down his throat, but with Hua Cheng holding his jaw open, he doesn’t form any more coherent words until the entire bowl has been emptied.

“There,” the prince leans back, carrying the dishes to the sink.

“You can look forward to meals like that for as long as you’re in that body.”

The ghost sputters and glares, his face turning the same color as his robes. “You think you can force me out?! YOU WON’T!” He coughs and gags, thrashing in Hua Cheng’s grip. “I’LL STAY IN THIS BODY AS LONG AS I WANT!! I’ll stay until IT DIES!”

“...” Xie Lian pinches the bridge of his nose. At this rate, he’ll wake Guzi and Lang Ying up, screaming so much. “San Lang?”

“Hmm?”

“Now that he’s eaten, I’m not sure that he needs to speak anymore.”

Qi Rong squawks, struggling even more vigorously in Hua Cheng’s grip. “YOU CAN’T JUST—!”

Crack!

He disappears in a green puff of smoke, clattering to the floor woodenly.

Hua Cheng kicks the doll aside.

"Better?"

Xie Lian sends him a grateful smile, rinsing off their used dishes.

"Much, thank you."

At this point, Lang Qianqiu seems to have healed enough to speak, wheezing as he slams his hand on the kitchen table, rising to his feet.

"You—!"

Before he can protest his ill treatment—which Shuo seems eager to hear, crossing his arm with a smirk, ready to punch him in the throat at another moment's notice—

Xie Lian steps between them, cutting Lang Qianqiu off. "It's been a long day," he mutters, shaking his head.

"I'd say it's time we all got some rest."

It isn't that late, actually—but Xie Lian would rather go to bed early than have these two knock down his shrine a second time.

After all—with Hua Cheng here, he doubts the Ghost King would take so kindly to that.

Shuo brightens, seeming all too pleased with the prospect.

"Oh, perfect." He drags his gaze over to Lang Qianqiu, his eyes glinting with smug satisfaction. "I already made the perfect spot for you to sleep—"

"No," Xie Lian cuts him off, picking up the Daruma doll. "Qi Rong can sleep in the dog house, since you were kind enough to build it." Shuo raises an eyebrow, about to ask what that means for—

"And Lang Qianqiu can sleep upstairs with you."

A soft cry of indignation rips from the demon's throat, "But—!"

A sharp look from Hua Cheng makes him fall silent, and when he speaks again, his voice is far more measured.

"But...your highness, he isn't—!"

"The upper level seems plenty big enough for more than one person," Xie Lian shrugs.

The size is downright luxurious, if you ask him.

“But if it’s an issue, you could always sleep down here.”

Which doesn’t leave Shuo with any good options.

Because if he sleeps downstairs, that means sleeping with the kids.

And Shuo would rather sleep in a lava pit than anywhere near Lang Ying.

The other option would be sleeping with Hua Cheng and Xie Lian.

And that is uncomfortable for an entirely different reason. Really, it would serve Hua Cheng right if he *did* decide to bunk with the two of them, but—

“Fine,” the forest demon grumbles, marching towards the steps. He shoots Lang Qianqiu a nasty look before ascending. “If you get within five feet of me, I’ll skin you alive.”

To which the martial god rolls his eyes, crossing his arms. “Don’t talk to me like I’m some sort of pervert, I haven’t done anything to you!” He grumbles.

Then, as he moves to follow, his eyes drift to Hua Cheng—then, back to Xie Lian, narrowing slightly.

Clearly remembering what happened the last time he caught the two alone together.

(If only he had known what happened in the last twenty four hours, it would make Hua Cheng’s ‘medical assistance’ seem rather tame.)

“Or…I could always sleep down—”

“You can sleep upstairs,” Hua Cheng interrupts him, his voice firm.

The two stare at one another, glaring.

Xie Lian turns away from the sink—unable to see their heated expressions, but certainly able to sense the tension in the air.

“…”

And, naturally, he misinterprets Lang Qianqiu’s concern.

"Oh, you don't need to worry—I've slept with San Lang plenty of times already."

A soft wheeze, almost similar to a death rattle, wrenches itself from Lang Qianqiu's throat, his eyes bulging out of his skull.

Normally, Hua Cheng would feel obligated to correct such a presumption. For the prince's honor, if nothing else.

In this situation, however...

"He's correct," the ghost king recalls sagely. "Every night for an entire week, the last time I was here."

If Lang Qianqiu grew any paler, he might be mistaken for a ghost himself.

"For an entire week—?!"

Xie Lian tilts his head to the side, confused.

"Well, if it was okay the first time, why wouldn't it be okay all the other nights?"

Implications about Xie Lian's theoretical endurance (or prowess, depending on Lang Qianqiu's assumptions) aside, Hua Cheng can't help but pour more fuel on the fire.

"Oh, but I would always ask first, your highness. I never assume." Xie Lian smiles faintly.

That's true, isn't it? Even over something as small as sharing a bed for the evening, Hua Cheng always waits to be invited, first.

"That's true, San Lang—but you don't have to."

After all, it's a small thing—but Xie Lian has always adored sleeping beside someone he trusts. When he was a child, he loathed to sleep alone, and would often crawl into the bedroom of his parents, pleading to sleep with them until his father relented.

Even when he became old enough to feel embarrassed about sleeping in the same bed as his parents—he would often find excuses for Feng Xin to sleep in his room with him, and later Mu Qing.

And even then, when all of those who were beside him before had gone, he slept beside Hong'er. Claiming that he was cold, just so the boy would come in from sleeping on the steps outside the shrine.

For centuries after that, he slept alone. The only break in that was Banyue. Falling asleep with her in his arms beside the campfire each night.

And sharing his bed with Hua Cheng now—there's a level of comfort in it. A sense of security borne from trust.

"Really, Lang Qianqiu—there's nothing to worry yourself over," Xie Lian assures him.

"..." The prince locks his jaw, looking back towards Hua Cheng, who is positively smirking from ear to ear, looking quite like the cat that's caught the canary.

"...Alright, Guoshi...if...if you say so," he mutters, turning and skulking up the steps without another word.

Xie Lian lets out a tired sigh, reaching out to feel his way around, looking for the door leading to the new bedroom—but another hand quickly finds his own, squeezing gently as he leads the way.

A small smile spreads across Xie Lian's face as he follows. "Thank you, San Lang."

The new bedroom is plenty spacious enough for him—with sparse furnishings, given how little Xie LIan had to begin with, but with an improved sleeping mat, far more comfortable than the bamboo bedroll he had been using before.

It's different lying in bed beside Hua Cheng now, than it was his first night in the shrine. Xie Lian isn't so carefully distant, curled up on his side with his limbs folded in. Hua Cheng seems just as relaxed, his hands folded underneath his head, lying beneath the same blanket

The prince is far more quiet than usual—but Hua Cheng doesn't press him on it, seeming to attribute Xie Lian's silence to fatigue, but...

In reality, it's because the prince can't stop thinking. Turning one thought round and round in his head, over and over again.

'I'm attracted to Hua Cheng.'

Ever since he realized that a few hours ago, it's like the thought comes back to haunt him each time it even comes close to slipping his mind.

Xie Lian hasn't been in the position of being so…actively aware of something like this.

Not since he was a teenager, just becoming aware of the fact that he was attracted to men at all for the first time.

And it's not as though Xie Lian doesn't understand why he feels the way he does. There are plenty of things about Hua Cheng to feel drawn to.

But Xie Lian also understands that most people—most normal people—feel passing attraction for those around them relatively frequently, and it doesn't always mean anything significant.

For Xie Lian, it's been eight centuries.

Isn't that inherently significant? Does it mean…?

Even considering the possibility makes Xie Lian feel…guilty.

His finger finds its way to the chain around his neck, slowly winding it around his knuckle.

Grief is a complicated, selfish beast.

Making room for new people in your heart can often make it seem as though there's less space for those that you have lost. And that—that feels like a betrayal, even so many years later.

And even placing that aside—who is to say that Hua Cheng even returns those sentiments?

After all—in all of the time Xie Lian has spent with him, he seems like a rather straightforward person. Blunt, even.

If he felt that way, wouldn't it be more likely that he would just say so? But still, even as sleep begins to creep over him, his mind wonders.

And when he's finally drifted off—his back is pressed against the Ghost King's side, with Hua Cheng's fingers twisting lazily through his god's hair.

He's lost in thoughts of his own. His being of a slightly less savory nature.

'This isn't boring, San Lang.'

'On...on top of me...'

His eye squeezes shut. There's no need for air in his lungs, and still—he takes careful, even breaths through his nose.

'Between...between my legs...'

It would be dishonest of Hua Cheng to say that he had never imagined the prince in certain situations.

Even if he felt guilty for doing so, his imagination is overactive and rather...vivid.

Once, after a night of particularly sharp loneliness and self loathing, he even made a clone that looked like...well...

(And felt so ashamed, he dispersed the illusion before too much could come of it.)

It isn't the carnal desire that Hua Cheng feels ashamed of. He never had such an upbringing where he was raised to believe that desiring someone in that way was wrong.

As a matter of fact, when he was just a teenager, Xie Lian himself reassured Hong'er that there was nothing wrong about wanting someone, be it man or woman.

Of course, Hua Cheng doubts the god meant anything sexual about it at that time, and was likely referring only to emotion.

But, given the fact that Hong'er had only ever felt romantically attracted to one person in his life, and in all of the years since—he took it in a slightly different way.

He's always been a greedy, selfish creature. Coveting everything his heart desires. That is reflected by his behavior upon becoming a ghost king.

Building a palace filled to the brim with the rarest of treasures. Gorging himself (though maybe not quite so voraciously as He Xuan) on the finest meals and wines.

Hua Cheng has never once felt guilty for that.

The only thing he has ever felt guilty for desiring, in the end, is his god.

Because he knows he isn't worthy of it.

But even through the guilt, desire still lingers, eating away at him.

Remembering the soft moan Hua Cheng felt against his lips the night before.

Dissecting every single shiver that his god lets out when he's around him. The way his skin sometimes flushes pink after Hua Cheng speaks.

It makes long burning heat smolder into a spark. A desire to take more than what he's already been given.

And if his god wasn't sleeping beside him at this very moment, he...
The ghost king forces his eye shut, taking a deep breath.

They're the wrong thoughts, for the wrong time.

And who knows if there will ever be a right one.

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AHHHAHH
OH! OH!
AH! AHH
OHDEAROHMY
HHHAH!!
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Chapter End Notes

thank you to Dru for their amazing artwork, and allowing me to share it!

xoxo, Evie

The Fire Social

Chapter Summary

> With a flick of her fingers, all of the windows and doors of the shrine are sealed as well, which makes the situation even more curious.
>
> What has Shi Qingxuan so worried about being overheard?
>
> “Your highness…have you ever heard of a Jinx Monster?”

Chapter Notes

> content warnings for this chapter: mentions of suicide

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When the next morning arrives, a tentative sort of peace falls around Puqi Shrine.

Shuo wrangles Qi Rong and the children under an annoyed but watchful eye, with Lang Qianqiu ‘helping,’ if it could even be called that. More like observing and offering unhelpful suggestions.

And each time he comes in and out of the shrine, he sees the two of them together.

Shuo has had the time in the last few weeks to observe the crown prince. To learn more about his personality and mannerisms.

But he’s never had the chance to see the way he is around Hua Cheng.

The difference is subtle, but…noticeable.

There’s a slightly more relaxed set to his shoulders. He smiles often, and laughs more.

There are moments when, as Shuo watches Hua Cheng help Xie Lian make some ‘adjustments’ to the soup from the night before, when he remembers…

‘I’d love to see him.’

That was what Xie Lian had said the afternoon before the mid autumn festival. Shuo hadn’t thought much of it at the time—after all, it’s just a phrase, but…

Watching them together now—it makes him wonder.

Morning turns into afternoon, and sometime after lunch, the other inhabitants of the shrine choose (or in Qi Rong's case, he's left outside tied to a tree) to make their way to the village to scrounge up some lunch.

The alternative, after all, would be eating Xie Lian's "improved" stew, which no one seemed to be leaping upon the opportunity to do.

In any case, Xie Lian doesn't mind—sweeping the floors of the shrine while chatting back and forth with the Ghost King—

That's when he hears it.

It's in the distance still—but with sensitive ears like Xie Lian, he can hear farmers whispering among themselves from the bottom of the hill.

"You ever seen a set of young ladies like that?"

"Lookin' mighty fine! Rich, too!"

Xie Lian stops, a basket in hand, tilting his head.

"…San Lang," he murmurs, "it sounds like someone's here."

Hua Cheng doesn't look up, working on washing the dishes from their lunch in the sink. "Does it?"

Xie Lian is too focused on the mystery to notice the hint of tension in his voice.

"Yes, I think—?"

Knock, knock!

The sudden and insistent knocking at the front door of Puqi shrine cuts him off, and the god quickly turns his attention to it, moving to answer.

It's strange, after all—who would be coming here?

The moment he answers the door, a familiar voice solves that mystery.

"Your highness!"

The prince stops, his eyebrows raising gently with surprise.

"...Lady Windmaster?"

Shi Qingxuan beams in greeting, pushing the hood of her cloak back as she steps through the threshold of Puqi Shrine.

"The one and only!"

Which means the other 'beautiful' and 'rich' young woman traveling with her is most likely...

Another dark haired figure stands on the threshold of the shrine, seeming far more hesitant.

Ming Yi.

Who, to Xie Lian's understanding, hasn't seen Hua Cheng since she was revealed to be a traitor.

The Earth Master remains frozen in the doorway, all while Hua Cheng remains in front of the sink, calmly wiping the suds of soap from his hands with a dish cloth.

Shi Qingxuan seems to notice him first, leaping backwards with surprise, nearly knocking Ming Yi over in the process.

"Crimson Rain Sought Flower!" She cries, pulling her fan out of the bodice of her dress. "What are you doing here?!"

(Ming Yi grimaces, clearly disapproving of how Shi Qingxuan chooses to deal with her female form's lack of pockets.)

"He's my guest," Xie Lian answers first, and with one quick sidestep, he's placed himself between the calamity and the wind master.

Hua Cheng smiles at Shi Qingxuan, relatively relaxed as she tosses the dish cloth aside.

"I'm surprised by the hostile tone, Lady Windmaster. I was on the impression that we last saw one another on good terms."

"I—Well—" Shi Qingxuan pauses, lowering her fan. "...I suppose we did," she admits, her expression quickly going from wary to friendly in the space of only a few moments. "It's good to see you again!"

Hua Cheng nods—but all of the warmth in his expression saps away the moment he turns his gaze to the earth master.

"Get out."

Ming Yi's eyebrows knit together as she glares, crossing her arms over her chest. "Coming here wasn't my idea!"

"Yeah!" Shi Qingxuan agrees, shifting her stance in front of the earth master, similar to what Xie Lian did when Shi Qingxuan raised her fan to Hua Cheng before. "Ming-Xiong is here to help me out! Besides, you shouldn't be mad at her for the stuff that happened before, the heavenly emperor was the one who asked Ming-Xiong to do it! What was she supposed to do, say no?!"

Hua Cheng's stare doesn't become any less frigid. "Yes."

"...Well..." Shi Qingxuan pauses, her mouth hanging open, clearly not having expected that answer. "That's just...unfair!"

Xie Lian sighs, not seeing this conversation going anywhere productive. "Lady Wind Master, what brings you and Lady Earth Master to visit?"

Shi Qingxuan looks back towards him, clearly reminded of her original purpose. "Ah, yes, I—!"

Just then, a voice from outside calls in.

"Oh, THAT'S the slutty Lady Wind Master everyone is always talking about?! HA! She really DOES have a nice rack!"

"..."

"..."

"..."

"..."

Xie Lian pales, horrified by his cousin's language, Hua Cheng's expression remains unchanged, glaring at Ming Yi, and Ming Yi, well —

She looks vaguely angry, but in a far more conflicted way than Crimson Rain. Shi Qingxuan...

Her smile remains stubbornly in place.

“Your highness, who is that?”

Before Xie Lian can answer, Qi Rong, in an obliviously self destructive effort, cries—

“Don’t you recognize me, you stupid bitch?! I’m the NIGHT TOURING GREEN LANTERN!”

Xie Lian’s face falls into his hands, and Shi Qingxuan turns around.

“Just a second,” her voice is as cheerful as ever as she steps back out the door, “I’ll be right back!”

It slams shut behind her, and before Xie Lian can say another word—
He hears the sound of several aggressive smacks.

And Qi Rong, whose only ‘talent’ seems to be having a somewhat high pain tolerance, wailing and shouting with pain.

“Haven’t you heard, the only men who call women things like that are the ones who could never get a woman in bed to begin with?!”

There’s another thud, followed by a sharp scream, implying that she just kicked the green ghost somewhere particularly painful.

“Just say you’ve never satisfied a woman before, it’ll TAKE LESS TIME!”

“Who cares if she’s satisfi—?! MOTHERFUCKER, THAT HURTS, YOU—OUCH!”

Funny, it’s not actually that different from what Pei said, during the mid autumn festival feast.

Honestly, Xie Lian finds General Pei and Shi Qingxuan similar in some respects, even if those similarities are limited.

Making the fact that the two don’t get along far more ironic

“There,” Shi Qingxuan steps back inside, brushing off her dress as she steps back inside, “Sorry about that, where were we? I—”

She stops again, and at first, Xie Lian is worried his cousin might have done some other idiotic, offensive thing, but—

“Oh, have you been cooking?”

Xie Lian pauses, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. “Oh, well, ah…yes, I made that.”

The pot of stew is covered, still sitting on the stove—but the smell of it is far more appealing than it was the day before. With Hua Cheng’s help, it’s almost tempting.

“Really?”

Shi Qingxuan’s eyes widen, intrigued. “I’ve never had something that was prepared by royalty! Could I try?”

“Oh,” Xie Lian blinks, somewhat hesitant. “Well, I…”

Hua Cheng lifts up his own bowl, which he hasn’t quite finished. “You should both try some.”

Ming Yi seems wary.

After all, Xie Lian seems hesitant to let them try it.

“…Is it any good?”

Hua Cheng makes a show of ladling himself a large spoonful, swallowing it with ease. “It’s delicious,” he replies calmly. “Very flavorful.”

“…San Lang’s been helping me practice,” Xie Lian offers. “It’s definitely better than what I used to make.”

Shi Qingxuan seems satisfied by Xie Lian’s word alone, hurrying over to ladle out a bowl for herself, as well as Ming Yi. “Oh, good, I’ve been starving all day! I’ve been so busy lately, it makes me work up an appetite!”

“Being busy seems to agree with you,” Hua Cheng comments, taking another bite of his soup. When Shi Qingxuan looks up at him curiously, he adds— “You’re looking very…healthy.”

Xie Lian tilts his head to the side, because it’s…an interesting way to phrase a compliment.

Ming Yi seems irritated by it, sending Hua Cheng a sharp look, but…

The ghost king did take a bite himself, right in front of them—and she's never been one to deny a meal.

So, she takes a seat beside Shi Qingxuan at the table, grabbing a spoon.

"So," Shi Qingxuan starts. "I came to see you, because—" She pauses, taking a bite at the same time as Ming Yi, swallowing quickly.

"..."

"..."

Xie Lian glances around, confused.

Why did everything get so quiet all of the sudden?

BAM!

Ming Yi collapses against the table face first.

Her bowl rolls to the side, nearly falling to the floor with a clatter—but Hua Cheng, helpful as he is, catches it before it can splatter everywhere and make a mess.

"I..." Shi Qingxuan's voice sounds very different now, rasping and choking, tears streaming down her cheeks. "I..."

"...Lady Wind Master?" Xie Lian questions, concerned.

Her pallor has turned a violent shade of green. Xie Lian can't see as much—but even her aura of spiritual power seems to be trembling from a sudden disturbance.

"...MING-XIONG!" She cries, scrambling to her feet. "YOU HAVE TO GET UP! OPEN YOUR EYES!"

"Lady Wind Master—!"

"YOU HAVE TO PULL THROUGH THIS!" Tears pour down her cheeks, dripping from her chin. "I NEED YOU! I CAN'T DO THIS ALONE!"

"Shi Qingxuan!"

"PULL YOURSELF TOGETHER! YOU'RE THE—!"

"That is a BROOM!"

The same broom that Xie Lian was using to sweep the floors only a few minutes ago, but now, Shi Qingxuan is clutching it against her chest, shaking it as though she's trying to wake the dead.

"San Lang..." Xie Lian mumbles, looking around anxiously. "What's wrong with them?!"

"Mmm..." The calamity hums, watching the other two immortal beings, one collapsed, the other flailing around with a broomstick. "Bad taste."

Xie Lian shakes his head, glancing back at the other two, shocked.

...Was the stew really that bad? But Hua Cheng had an entire bowl!

Even if the two of them each only managed to swallow one bite—it takes the better part of half an hour for the two heavenly officials to recover.

When Ming Yi eventually lifts his head, he's returned to his male form—and he's staring sourly at Hua Cheng.

"You're a sick bastard, you know that?"

Hua Cheng quirks one eyebrow, crossing his arms over his chest. "For what?"

The earth master opens his mouth to point out exactly what Crimson Rain had done, but—

He doesn't dare insult the crown prince's cooking in his presence.

Which places him in the annoying position of closing his mouth, glowering silently.

BANG!

Shi Qingxuan smacks her hand on the table, still faintly green as she rises to her feet, swaying back and forth unsteadily.

"That...that was...very rich, your highness!" She rasps. "Very flavorful, like...like Hua Cheng said! I-I think I'm full, though!"

Xie Lian almost wishes she would just say the food was horrible, that would be easier than listening to her lying through her teeth—though he supposes he appreciates the effort.

"…You were trying to say something before?" He prompts quietly, hoping to move on from the debacle entirely, and Shi Qingxuan seems relieved to do the same.

"Right!" She exclaims, sitting back down at the table. "I came to ask for your help!"

Xie Lian pauses, surprised.

"…Me?"

After all, few have ever asked him for anything of such a nature—knowing his bad luck is likely to ruin any endeavor before it begins.

"You were the first person I thought to ask!"

But still, Shi Qingxuan has helped him so often recently, he agrees without question.

"Of course, I'll help with whatever the issue is—but what seems to be the issue?"

"Oh, I'll explain everything," Shi Qingxuan bobs her head. "But why don't the two of you take a seat, first? It might take a moment to explain."

Hua Cheng and Xie Lian take their seats opposite Shi Qingxuan and Ming Yi—and the moment they do, the room suddenly goes dark, lit by only one candle in the center of the table. A cold wind blows through, thunder rumbling in the distance.

"It starts like this…"

Hua Cheng looks around, raising an eyebrow. And while Xie Lian can't see the darkening of the room, he does notice the wind and the sudden change in temperature.

"…Lady Wind Master, what are you doing?"

"Oh?" Shi Qingxuan blinks, pausing in her story. "What do you mean?"

"I mean…the wind, the thunder—what's with all of that?"

"Oh," the Wind Master shrugs, explaining earnestly— "I was trying to create some atmosphere!"

"…That really doesn't seem necessary…"

"Ah, well," Shi Qingxuan waves that off, after all, it's all details. "At least the mood is set."

With a flick of her fingers, all of the windows and doors of the shrine are sealed as well, which makes the situation even more curious.

What has Shi Qingxuan so worried about being overheard?

"Your highness…have you ever heard of a Jinx Monster?"

At the very same moment, far from the halls of Puqi Shrine, in a very different setting, a Heavenly Official is facing a very different obstacle.

Ling Wen is not particularly fond of running unnecessary errands. Much less of being a messenger, as a civil god of his rank.

He tilts his head back, using his fingers to shield his eyes as he squints at the sun overhead.

It's humid here, the air thick with moisture, cicadas buzzing obnoxiously all around. Winter hasn't come around to frost them out for another seventeen years.

"…Mister?" One of the local children stops, a basket of barley balanced on top of her head, staring up at the unfamiliar man, clad in black robes. "Are you lookin' for someone?"

Ling Wen stares down at the child, his brow pinched. He's never had to deal with children before.

Is the term 'take me to your leader' too complicated to explain?

Everything about this place is irritating him. The tall grasses are like a breeding ground for bugs, gnats and mosquitos all around, and there's sweat beading at the back of his neck—

"He's here to see me."

The woman who speaks has the voice of a young lady—high pitched and delicate, which is all together contradicted by the manner in which she carries herself.

Spine straight, shoulders thrown back, chin raised.

She's neither tall, nor short, with a slim frame and calm demeanor.

Her skin has long since been sun kissed from working in the fields—but her features are still rather refined. Full lips and clear eyes, with a dark, heavy curtain of hair falling down her back.

And, of course, a bamboo hat sits atop her head, shielding her eyes from the sun.

"…Your majesty, Lady Rain Master," Ling Wen acknowledges her calmly, bowing his head slightly with deference.

"I am no longer 'your majesty', Ling Wen." The goddess corrects him gently. She has a careful way of speaking, her words never coming out rushed.

Slowly, she looks him over—and before Ling Wen can make some droning statement explaining how royalty still retain their formal titles after the dissolution of their countries, she comments—

"I hope you aren't wearing that form on my account." The civil god pauses.

"…Pardon?"

The veil on the Rain Master's hat blows gently in the breeze. The white, transparent material does almost nothing to hide her face from view, but, as Ling Wen now understands—

It likely keeps the bugs out.

"If that is the form you prefer, I don't mind," Yushi Huang explains. "But if you are wearing it as a means of obtaining respect, or because you expect to be engaging in combat in my territory—"

(It is his more powerful form, after all.)

"—those concerns would be unnecessary."

Of course, Ling Wen has little concern about getting into a skirmish with a group of farmers.

However…when outside the heavens on official business…he does often use his male form.

For precisely the reason that Yushi Huang described.

Which, Ling Wen supposes, when dealing with a fellow goddess…

Perhaps it is unnecessary.

His eyes flicker around, uncertain—

But the Rain Master shakes her head, assuring him, “The people here have seen me change forms often. You won’t frighten them.”

Frightening them wasn’t really his concern—Ling Wen would simply rather avoid causing a scene, but he nods.

In the blink of an eye, she’s back in her original form—and even still, her stature is several inches taller than that of the Rain Master.

"There," Yushi Huang smiles, a curtain of dark hair swaying in the breeze as she turns around, gesturing for the civil goddess to follow. "Come."

Ling Wen is hesitant at first, scrolls clutched under her arms--but after another mosquito attempts to bite her, she follows.

Unlike every other heavenly official from this term (and many prior), Yushi Huang simply never made a permanent move to the Heavens after her ascension.

Rather, in the millennia since, she has spent her time among the descendants of the Kingdom of Yushi.

Having known that, and that the village in which she resided was comprised mainly of farmers, Ling Wen would have expected her to live in a small hut, or something of the like.

And nine centuries ago, that would have been true. Now…she arrives to a rather surprising sight.

The Temple of the Rain Master—her first and largest place of worship—is not nearly so ostentatious as temples for other heavenly officials, but it’s far larger than what Ling Wen anticipated, and well maintained at that.

Yushi Huang glances back over her shoulder. “You seem surprised.”

Ling Wen means to deny it at first, but quickly gives up. “I wasn’t expecting such a remote place to host such a grand temple.”

“Mmm…” The Rain Master turns her chin away, and when she lifts her skirts to climb the steps, Ling Wen notices her bare feet. “I thought it was unnecessary at first, but the mortals use it for administrative purposes, and to house refugees during times of flooding. I suppose it’s useful.”

Ling Wen arches an eyebrow, glancing around as they step inside.

Most temples are hollow places.

Vast halls of wealth and prayer, hushed and quiet.

The Temple of the Rain Master could not stand in greater contrast.

Of course, there is a divine statue—a rather fine likeness, actually—along with a recreation of her famous Ox, but any resemblance ends there.

There’s an altar, but it’s being used as lounging space by a large barn cat. Scrolls are scattered on tables all around, marking out numbers from the harvest. Song birds dart between nests among the rafters, and despite the place seeming well maintained, vines climb the walls.

Yushi Huang strides through the main hall, slipping her hat from the top of her head, allowing it to hang about her shoulders as she acknowledges the farmers and children milling about, leading Ling Wen to the entrance of the private section of the temple, through a side door.

“You’re comfortable with one of your temples being used that way?” Ling Wen questions, arching an eyebrow.

Yushi Huang’s private quarters are equally large, but far more modest than what would be expected of a goddess or princess.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

She hangs her hat up by the door, moving over to tend to a pot of tea left to steep. "It's their temple. They built it, they keep it up. They should do with it as they will."

It's an…interesting perspective.

Ling Wen can't say she's heard anyone other than Xie Lian speak in such terms.

"Well," She clears her throat. "I suppose I should get to why I'm—"

She stops, staring at the table, where Yushi Huang has set a plate.

Steaming hot rice, vegetables, and meat.

"Have a seat."

The Civil Goddess complies, however reluctantly. "I really don't need —"

"I can tell when someone hasn't been sleeping or had a proper meal." Yushi Huang shrugs, pouring herself a cup of tea. "We can discuss why you're here while you eat."

Ling Wen stares, feeling rather...

...Ruffled.

After all, she isn't typically in the position where she's allowed to take breaks, or to feel tired. The implication that she might need rest feels almost like an existential threat.

Coming from a young woman holding a cup of tea and wearing no shoes. Still, she's a guest in someone else's house, and it feels rude to decline. As such, she takes a seat—however stiff her posture may be.

"I'm here on orders from the emperor, regarding the girl Banyue."

Yushi Huang sips her tea calmly, inhaling the aroma before she replies.

"And what business has the emperor tasked you with?"

"He's commanded that I take the young lady into my custody and return her to the heavens," Ling Wen replies easily.

The corner of the Rain Master's lips quirks up into a small, knowing smile. "May I see the order?"

Ling Wen hesitates, and the Rain Master nods, having her suspicions clearly confirmed.

"The emperor didn't send you."

The civil goddess stares at the fork in her hand, her expression unchanged. "Perhaps he hoped such an old friend would honor a simple request."

"Mmm..." Yushi Huang sets her cup of tea aside. "I admire your commitment to your story, but the emperor does not have friends. He has subjects. And I am the eldest among them."

She might physically look younger than Ling Wen, but the gaze that settles upon her feels ancient.

"He knows me enough to understand that I would not turn that girl over unless forced."

She doesn't need to say the rest—it's implied.

If Jun Wu meant to force Yushi Huang to do something, he would have sent Shi Wudu, who is far more formidable than Ling Wen in combat.

Yushi Huang might not look much like a warrior—but the sacred blade hanging on the wall behind her tells a very different story.

"Pei sent you," The Rain Master concludes. "You are a kind friend, but he has wasted your time."

Ling Wen finds herself fighting impending fatigue.

"Is there no room for negotiation?"

"No." Yushi Huang's voice is kind, it rings with sympathy—but it leaves absolutely no room for doubt that she means what she says. "If he would like to discuss the issue of Banyue, he is welcome to come and make a case whenever he likes."

Which of course means that he'll never do it. Pei might seem like a man who faces all of his battles head on--and generally, he does—but in this case, he has turned nine centuries of avoidance into somewhat of an art form.

"Why be so determined to protect her?"

"I told Shi Qingxuan that I would," the goddess replies simply. "And I understand that she has an important relationship with the Crown Prince of Xianle. These reasons are enough."

She doesn't have formal alliances with either—so Ling Wen can't fathom the point of her efforts.

"...Well, if you're waiting for Pei to come here, you might as well resolve yourself to have that girl in your care until the end of time," Ling Wen grumbles, taking a bite of her food.

And, goddamn it all, it's very good.

Tender, flavorful. The perfect temperature.

Ling Wen glowers as she takes another bite.

"Pei is uncomfortable with women who threaten his ego." She grumbles, swallowing down a particularly buttery slice of beef, her eyes rolling back into her head.

And, to her shock...

"Mmm...I don't think that's true."

Yushi Huang actually speaks up in Pei's defense.

"Pei would not be such close friends with you if he was threatened by a strong woman."

Ling Wen pauses, her eyebrows knitting together as she glances at Yushi Huang from the corner of her eye.

"That isn't the same."

After all, Pei doesn’t view Ling Wen in the same way that he does other women: As potential romantic partners.

Yushi Huang sets her tea to the side, using her palms as leverage to hop up and sit on the edge of the kitchen counter, beads in her dress clinking as she does so.

“I understand that you’re different,” she murmurs.

As she speaks, her skirts shift ever so slightly from the change in position. Exposing her right leg in part. The shape of her calf, the bend of her knee. The barest hint of delicate skin leading to her thigh.

Ling Wen finds her eye locked on that spot for the briefest of moments, unable to stop herself—and when she looks up, she meets the Rain Master’s gaze, meaning—

Yushi Huang knew exactly what she meant when she chose the word 'different.'
The civil goddess quickly looks away.

Her expression remains smooth—but her heart is beating unsteadily with self consciousness.

The Rain Master, by contrast, is completely at ease.

As should be expected, Ling Wen supposes. She's lived in the countryside for centuries, and likely has no care for propriety.

"Even so, think of Xuan Ji," Yushi Huang continues. "She isn't a meek woman in the least, and she never was—and Pei had a relationship with her anyway."

An affair that he's regretted ever since, but Ling Wen supposes there is some merit to her point.

"He still won't come here."

"I know," The Rain Master agrees. "But that doesn't mean he isn't aware of the fact that he could. You can tell him as much when you return."

And Yushi Huang is far more aware of the reason why than Ling Wen. Possibly more so than anyone.

After all, she's known Pei the longest.

The Rain Master remembers what the general was like as a young man.

A very young, very mortal soldier. One with all of the talent in the world, and the weight of it upon his shoulders.

A weight she too had to carry, however briefly, when she was far too young.

Still, she keeps her attention on Ling Wen, whose mood has rapidly soured since learning there was no hope of returning with Banyue in tow.

"General Pei isn't unfair," the Rain Master assures her quietly. "He won't blame you."

Ling Wen doesn't look at her, staring at her plate.

Whether she likes it or not, she knows that her demeanor has become somewhat similar to that of a sulking child.

“...I don’t like failing.” She admits flatly.

Even in the most seemingly minor of tasks, she takes failure to perform rather personally.

“Everyone fails sometimes.”

Ling Wen clicks her tongue against the roof of her mouth, shaking her head. “Not me.”

“Then people might understand if you come back empty handed, once or twice.”

“I’m sure that’s an easy point of view to have when you’re hiding out in the mortal realm—” She stops herself.

“...That was rude,” Ling Wen mutters, shaking her head. “I apologize.”

Yushi Huang swings her feet slightly where they dangle over the edge of the counter, tilting her head to the side.

“I don’t mind,” the Rain Master replies. “But I don’t think you see your position clearly.”

Ling Wen glances back at her, raising an eyebrow. Despite claiming not to be hungry, her plate is already half gone.

“That would be news to me.”

Yushi Huang shrugs, reaching for her cup of tea once more. “I’ve been around for quite some time.”

Of course, Ling Wen is aware.

Very few Heavenly Officials have been around as long as Pei—and Yushi Huang is the only goddess among them.

“In all that time, I’ve never seen anyone as indispensable to the Heavens as you.” The Rain Master explains. “That’s a position with few obvious disadvantages.”

Meaning that she can afford to fail every now and again, so long as her services remain unparalleled and necessary.

Ling Wen finds some small amount of comfort in that—but there's something else to Yushi Huang's statement that catches her attention.

"...Does that mean there's a disadvantage that isn't so obvious?" Ling Wen questions, looking up at her.

The Rain Master stares back at Ling Wen, her gaze unwavering.

"Being indispensable to a powerful man means he will never get rid of you, but..."

Her lips gradually curve downward into a frown—and the next words out of her mouth send chills down Ling Wen's spine.

And in the weeks and months that follow, they will haunt her.

"But a powerful man who is dependent upon you is not likely to let you go, either."

Back in Puqi Shrine, however, Xie Lian is experiencing a very different form of haunting.

"...A Jinx Monster?" He replies slowly, rubbing his chin as he wracks his mind, pouring through countless memories. "You mean...like a Venerable of Empty Words?"

"Yes!" Shi Qingxuan whispers quickly, still rather pale, even in the dark—and clearly afraid of being overheard. "You've encountered one before?!"

Xie Lian blinks, rounding up the incidents in his head. "Twice, I'm afraid."

Everyone in the room is staring at him by now, and Xie Lian can sense it—so the prince takes a deep breath.

"Many centuries ago, if I didn't have a loom or had to lay low for some reason, I would take to busking."

This isn't surprising, lots of people know that about the prince

"One day I was sword swallowing, and I heard the most peculiar story."

Shi Qingxuan is too ashamed to admit that she had heard tales of the crown prince sword swallowing, but...

She thought it had been in more of a figurative sense, though now it's obvious that wasn't possible.

"It was about a young lady in the city who was being targeted by a malicious spirit," Xie Lian recalls. "She was a renowned beauty, but her family had a poor reputation. As such, she had difficulty securing a marriage."

Shi Qingxuan frowns. "That seems horribly unfair."

"If that girl's family had done something wrong, then why should she be the one to pay for it?"

"People are unfair that way," Hua Cheng comments.

Shi Qingxuan misses the sharp look he seems in Ming Yi's direction, but the earth master seems more invested in Xie Lian's story.

"Yes," the prince agrees. "It was unfair—but she was unwilling to become a concubine. With no education to fall back upon, she decided to make her living by entering into beauty contests."

The Wind Master raises an eyebrow. "Can you really make a living that way?"

"If you're talented enough," Xie Lian agrees. "Which she was. She had managed to build quite a name for herself, and was likely on track to secure a profitable marriage —and that was when the creature attacked."

Xie Lian can still remember how terrified she was, begging for help.

"Every time she would be preparing for a pageant, a voice would suddenly call out— telling her that she would trip and fall, or that she would be doomed to lose to another contestant. At first, she blamed nerves and stress—but then, she really did begin losing."

"That doesn't seem like the worst thing in the world," Hua Cheng muses, leaning back in his chair lazily.

"For a young woman defendant on such a thing, it was," Xie Lian sighs. “And the spirit’s threats only became worse overtime. Eventually—it became violent.”

A Venerable of Empty Words thrives on misery, after all—and it will escalate its threats until its victim is robbed of all happiness, lingering in a pit of fear until… eventually…they succumb.

More often than not, they end up taking their own lives or perishing in other ways.

“She became so desperate, she ended up seeking help from a cultivator—and that’s where I came in.”

Hua Cheng smiles faintly, recalling how quickly Xie Lian offered his services when Mr. Mo took to the streets a couple of days before, complaining about the fetal spirit.

Shi Qingxuan leans forward, hopeful.

“Did you manage to help her?”

“Um…” Xie Lian wrinkles his nose, thinking about it. “Yes.”

The Wind Master brightens. “That’s—!”

“—But also no.”

Her face immediately falls. “…Huh?”

“Well…” Xie Lian scratches the side of his neck.

“In order to investigate the case, I posed under her identity and participated in the Beauty Pageant myself,” he explains, not seeing the way that Ming Yi and Shi Qingxuan’s jaws drop to the floor. “We had similar features, so I was able to pull it off on stage.”

Hua Cheng, however, doesn’t seem surprised in the least.

“…Wouldn’t your height and frame have been an issue?” Ming Yi questions, looking Xie Lian over with disbelief.

“Not necessarily,” Shi Qingxuan shakes her head. “Ling Wen is taller than him, you know.”

“She is,” Xie Lian agrees, not particularly offended by the assertion. After all, he was always shorter than Mu Qing and Feng Xin growing up—but neither of them could either beat him in a fight, either. “And

I was smaller back then."

For was more difficult to come by, after all.

The mention of that draws a frown from Hua Cheng, but Xie Lian carries on as if he's said little of note.

"I took her place in the contest—and when the creature appeared to taunt me, believing I was her, I was able to attack and capture it."

No small feat, but Xie Lian would argue that the Venerable of Empty Words in this case was particularly weak, targeting peasants rather than figures with grand destinies, its usual prey.

"But then…you did help her, right?"

Xie Lian winces.

"I did capture the spirit, but…"

It's honestly embarrassing, when he recalls his original task, but…

"Even after I revealed my identity and the original woman came to participate in the contest…the judges still chose me for first place instead."

Shi Qingxuan chokes, half from amusement, half from surprise.

"Since I had already captured the Venerable of Empty Words…the woman I was working for began to think she was permanently cursed…and she proceeded to have a breakdown," Xie Lian sighs, shaking his head. "It's very difficult to protect mortals from creatures like that."

Shi Qingxuan doesn't seem particularly comforted by that statement, but she nods. "…And…what about the second time you encountered?"

"Oh," Xie Lian blinks owlishly, his shackle gleaming in the candlelight. "That one attached itself to me."

Silence falls over the group.

"…So…they can attach themselves to heavenly officials?" Shi Qingxuan questions in a small voice, and Xie Lian nods—his expression surprisingly calm.

"Yes—but I found it much easier to deal with in that case."

“Really?” Hua Cheng questions, watching him closely. “How so?”

"Well, it first appeared after I had built myself some shelter," Xie Lian explains, leaning back and crossing his arms. "It shouted in my ear that my tent would collapse in two days."

Shi Qingxuan is biting her thumbnail anxiously. "And...what did you do?"

"Well," Xie Lian tilts his head to the side. "I was excited. I told the spirit that was twice as long as my last tent had lasted."

Ming Yi bites back a snort as Hua Cheng's expression darkens.

After all, as Xie Lian explains—his luck had been such that the Venerable of Empty Words had little means of making it worse.

More often than not, before it could even come up with something horrible to tell him, Xie Lian would end up encountering some horrible luck on his own.

At certain points, he even enjoyed the evil spirit's company. It had been months since he encountered another person, and he found its silly little predictions amusing. Sometimes before it even spoke, Xie Lian would ask if it had something new to say.

"Eventually...it gave up."

Xie Lian is a little sheepish about the fact that he was actually disappointed when the spirit left. It was a nice break to the daily monotony, however briefly it lasted.

The room is filled with silences of different kinds.

Shi Qingxuan is simply stunned, and almost...jealous.

Ming Yi's expression is carefully schooled, as if he's more than aware that he'll be punished for reacting with amusement, and Hua Cheng...

He simply watches Xie Lian, his expression silent and tense.

"But...why are you asking me about jinx monsters, Lady Wind Master?"

"Ah..." Shi Qingxuan smiles tiredly, rubbing the back of her neck. "Well, you see...I've encountered one recently, and I wasn't sure how to deal with it."

Xie Lian arches an eyebrow. "Is it harassing one of your worshipers?"

"No," she grimaces, shaking her head. "It attached itself to me."

Xie Lian's eyebrows arch sharply.

Now, it isn't out of the realm of possibility for someone like him to encounter a Venerable of Empty Words. He has three cursed shackles, leaving himself vulnerable to such things—even if he won't die.

But for a fully fledged heavenly official like Shi Qingxuan, one at full power, no less—that's a rather bold move.

"...It must be particularly strong then," Xie Lian frowns. "You might just have to wait for it to realize it can't make a meal out of you—then it'll move on."

Shi Qingxuan winces, shaking her head. “Maybe that would be true if I had first encountered it as a Heavenly official, but...”

She trails off with a sigh.

“I met this creature when I was a mortal.”

That catches Xie Lian’s attention, just as Hua Cheng grimaces.

After all, he remembers.

Meeting a little boy disguised as a girl, cheerfully promising to introduce him to the ‘Shi’ family in exchange for sweets.

The Wind Master sucks in a deep breath—and she begins to tell the story. The first story she ever knew—and the most frightening.

“When I was born—my parents gave out food to the poor, they...”

It all seems so ironic, now.

“They wanted to bring me good luck,” Shi Qingxuan mutters, her lips turning up into a tired, bittersweet ghost of a smile. “That was how they came across a cultivator.”

Ming Yi leans his elbow on the table, watching her closely, his gaze distant.

“He was among the homeless who came to take the donated food—and he offered to tell my fortune. That’s when...” Shi Qingxuan’s smile. “He told them not to throw any feasts for me.”

Of course, Shi Qingxuan’s parents had been shocked by such a request. After all—a second son to secure an ancient family line, why shouldn’t they celebrate?

But Xie Lian immediately sees the problem at stake, given the mention of a Venerable of Empty Words.

The creature must have sensed a great destiny in Shi Qingxuan’s future and staked claim over the child at birth.

“And my parents...they didn’t listen. They feasted for two days and two nights, setting off firecrackers in the city.”

The prince grimaces.

‘The higher they rise, the further they fall’ is a phrase for a reason.

To a Venerable of Empty Words, it’s like advertising a possible feast.

“But when my father began to make a toast...a voice shouted out, ‘Wretched beginning, wretched end.’”

That marked the start of it.

The story Shi Qingxuan tells from then on is something of a horror.

The cultivator advised her parents to raise her up as a girl as a means of hiding Shi Qingxuan from the creature. To never let Shi Qingxuan shine—but rather, that the child must live an unremarkable life.

Then, she might be safe.

Less than four years later, Shi Qingxuan’s parents were dead, slain by robbers—only sparing the children in the house because they didn’t know they were there.

One of her earliest memories is of her brother pulling her from a hiding spot. Telling her that it was safe now. That the scary men were gone.

He carried her from their family home with his hand covering her eyes—because he didn’t want Shi Qingxuan to see.

And she never did see her parents again. When they returned to the house later, they were gone.

Along with any sign of what had happened.

After that, it was only Shi Qingxuan and her brother.

And the new rules that they had to live by.

The new name she had to answer to. The veils she had to wear when traveling outside. Only ever allowed to play freely in their courtyard.

Shi Qingxuan had been so miserable back then. Yearning to make friends. To be as happy and loud as she wanted to be.

Ironically, looking back on it—miserable as she was, those years were among the happiest of her mortal life.

When her brother was handling the family business—he was still busy, but they were together every day. Even if Shi Qingxuan was bored—she was never alone.

All of that seemed to change after he came.

A handsome young cultivator, going by the name 'Bolin.'

Later, her brother would explain that the cultivator had told him that removing the creature from Shi Qingxuan's path was impossible. That their best option was to follow the original advice.

But Shi Wudu refused to accept that—and that was when he decided on a new path.

If he couldn't save Shi Qingxuan as a mortal—then he'd simply become a god, instead.

He made arrangements for the business—and then he took Shi Qingxuan away from Qinghe, off to study cultivation under a master on a nearby mountain.

And from then on—it was lonely.

He would train from sunrise to sunset—and Shi Qingxuan would wait in the village at the foot of the mountain, day in and day out.

But one day—everything changed.

"After we had been on the mountain for almost a year…gege lost track of time—and he was late getting back."

Which was unusual for him—after all, he'd never been late before.

"I started to bring food up the mountain for him, but..." Shi Qingxuan pauses, clearly sheepish now, recalling the incident. "I had no way of realizing something was watching me, so I...stopped to relieve myself."

Which, unfortunately, revealed to the waiting Venerable of Empty Words that Shi Qingxuan was, in fact, the second son that the spirit had claimed all those years before.

"When I continued down the mountain, someone screamed that I was going to fall, and...I did."

It asked Shi Qingxuan for her birthday, and she gave it. It asked for her name— And she gave that too.

As she recounts the details, Ming Yi's face slowly shifts into a mask of frustration. "Why would you answer it?"

Shi Qingxuan bites her lip, looking at him anxiously.

"...Do you really think my brother told me what was hunting me?" She mutters, shaking her head. "I was...maybe eleven years old when this happened. I didn't even know what a jinx monster was, and no one would ever tell me. I...just assumed it was some sort of stalker. A human one."

Xie Lian's heart aches sympathetically.

After all, while the circumstances were far different, and he was far more capable of defending himself than an eleven year old child—

He's been stalked before, too.

And in those frightening, helpless moments—you want to appease them.

Shi Qingxuan had likely thought that giving the voice what it wanted was the best means of survival.

"...And you couldn't have just lied?" Ming Yi mutters—to which Xie Lian replies—

"When you're so young and frightened—you don't always remember to lie."

Of course—Xie Lian wouldn't have recommended that Shi Qingxuan blurt out her actual name or birthday either—

But frightened children operate on reflex, not logic.

"...And after that, it started all over again," the Wind Master explains, biting her lip.

There was no end to it.

Every waking moment of every day, she was being hunted. Tortured.

The Wind Master pauses in the middle of recounting the story, her expression twisting with hesitation—because she knows what they're all thinking.

She's a heavenly official now. What does she have to fear?

"...I wasn't like my brother," She admits, lowering her head. "I've never been the strong one."

The muscles in Ming Yi's jaw work silently.

"I knew it was only a matter of time before it pushed me to the edge—and so did he. I wasn't going to make it much longer."

After all—for a spirit that feeds on terror and pain, someone easily frightened is a perfect meal. And in that time, Shi Qingxuan was being quickly consumed.

"It wasn't until my brother ascended and brought me to the heavens with him that it stopped," she recalls.

Even then, it took time for Shi Qingxuan to believe that it was really over. But when her brother placed her in the middle court, showering her with treasures, and she eventually ascended herself...

She began to feel safe again.

She began to *believe* that she was safe.

"I had always assumed that the Venerable of Empty Words had given up or died out, but..." Her expression turns grim—and now, the reason for the Wind Master's sudden appearance in Puqi Shrine becomes clear.

"Last night, a voice told me I would never see my brother again."

Xie Lian's stomach sinks. "And...you're sure it's—?"

"I couldn't forget that voice, your highness," Shi Qingxuan mutters, shaking her head. "Not ever."

Which presents a difficult situation all around.

"...San Lang," Xie Lian turns to him. "Have you encountered one before?"

Hua Cheng remains silent for a moment, then he turns his attention to his god, answering his question calmly;

"Not personally—but I know someone who has."

Xie Lian waits for him to offer up more details—but when the Ghost King isn't forthcoming, he asks—

"And what do you think of them?"

"..." This time, the pause doesn't seem to stem from reluctance—more so, it's as though Hua Cheng is choosing his words carefully. "They're particularly difficult to deal with—they aren't ordinary pests."

And coming from Hua Cheng...

For someone as powerful as him to say that a creature like that isn't easy to deal with —that's no small thing.

"So...will you help me, your highness?"

And naturally, if it's so dangerous—and even more difficult to deal with—

"...Of course," Xie Lian agrees.

After everything Shi Qingxuan has done to help him since he returned to the heavens —the crown prince can't leave him to deal with this on his own.

(And he doesn't see it now—but Hua Cheng's expression falls sharply.) "But...wouldn't your brother be the best person to ask?"

Shi Qingxuan's jaw locks stubbornly, and she shakes her head.

"Not right now. He's about to face his third Heavenly Calamity. It'll be more dangerous than the two he's faced before—if I allow this to distract him…"

It could end up costing her brother his life.

"…Alright," Xie Lian takes a deep breath. "They're tricky creatures to catch—but if we do get our hands on it…"

He's confident enough that he can deal with it.

"I already have a plan to draw it out," Shi Qingxuan pushes back from her chair, rising to her feet.

"I've reserved a room in the most luxurious restaurant in the capital—I'm going to host plays and set off fireworks until it shows itself."

The apple doesn't fall so far from the tree, clearly—but Xie Lian can't say it's a bad plan for drawing out the Venerable of Empty Words.

"Alright—in that case, if we're going to be gone for a while, I'll just need to make sure that someone can look after the shrine while I'm gone," Xie Lian muses, turning back to Hua Cheng once more. "I'm sorry to be leaving so soon after you arrived, San Lang."

The calamity leans back, crossing his arms. His posture is lazy, his legs stretched out, ankles crossed—it doesn't convey the tension in his eyes.

"I can have my people make sure the shrine is looked after while you're gone," he murmurs. "But do you mind if I come along?"

He rises to his feet in tandem with the crown prince, ignoring the harsh look that Ming Yi sends his way in the process. "I've never seen a Venerable of Empty Words personally—it sounds interesting."

And of course, there's Blackwater in their private array, seething.

'What happened to staying out of it?'

"Oh," Xie Lian smiles, slightly less disappointed than he was before. "If you'd like to come along—then that would be a great help."

Hua Cheng smiles, falling in behind him—but his eye turns towards Ming Yi, gaze sharpening by the second.

'That was before you brought this to my doorstep.'

Technically, Ming Yi did no such thing—and it's Xie Lian's doorstep, not Hua Cheng's —

But given how angry the elder of the two ghost king's sounds, he doesn't dare argue.

"Ming-Xiong," Shi Qingxuan reaches over, tugging him by the sleeve. "We should get going—draw the traveling array for us?"

Secret internal deliberations aside—the earth master lets out a long suffering sigh. "Fine."

He walks over towards the door—and he begins his work.

Compared to the travel array that Feng Xin drew up for them when they were traveling to the Crescent Moon Kingdom—this is a far more elegant specimen, one that Ming Yi draws with complete confidence, his fingers never pausing.

As he works, Shi Qingxuan turns to Xie Lian.

"Your highness—who was that foul mouthed little man from before?"

Xie Lian pauses in the middle of picking up his bamboo hat, tying it under his chin. "...Didn't he already tell you?"

The Wind Master's eyebrows shoot up. "...That was really the night touring green lantern?!"

He rubs the back of his head with a sheepish wince. "And my cousin."

"...Huh." Shi Qingxuan frowns, hands on her hips. "I thought he'd be taller."

A snort slips out of Hua Cheng as he covers his mouth, shaking his head.

"Most people tend to say that."

Outside, Xie Lian can hear his cousin squawking with indignation—meaning he overhead Shi Qingxuan's little comment.

"...That's not his actual body," Xie Lian comments, brushing some dust from the hem of his sleeve. "His actual form is even shorter."

That only makes the sounds of indignation from outside grow even louder—but before Qi Rong can finish screaming out his grievances, Ming Yi lifts his hands from the array.

"Let's go."

Hua Cheng steps forward first, walking over to push the door open just a crack—

And the moment he does, Xie Lian instantly becomes aware of the fact that something is wrong.

There's no sound or chatter that he would expect from a restaurant in the imperial city—only silence, cold, and the faint smells of mold and dust.

Shi Qingxuan frowns. "What—?"

Just as she speaks—the candle on the table blows out, plunging the room into darkness.

Everyone else seems to panic for a moment, scrambling to find something to grab onto, feeling around in the dark.

Xie Lian, however, remains perfectly calm—his gaze focused ahead.

On the one thing he can see—a dark aura, burning with resentment so intense, it almost stings.

Lingering just behind the door.

And now, there's a voice.

Dark, low, rattling with hatred as it echoes throughout the room. "Step through this door—and it will lead you to hell!"

Shi Qingxuan lets out a choked, petrified sound, taking a step away—but Xie Lian steps forward, lifting his foot and kicking the door open, prepared to deal with the creature on the other side.

But as soon as he does—the dark aura disappears in a cloud of smoke. Just...gone.

"..." He steps through the door, with Hua Cheng following quickly after him—and Xie Lian quickly gets the sense that something is very wrong.

It's cold and damp—drafty. Without the sound of any other humans in earshot. "...This isn't a restaurant in the imperial city."

"No," Hua Cheng agrees, falling step behind him. "It isn't."

"But…" Shi Qingxuan follows cautiously, gripping Ming Yi's sleeve. "I don't understand. It was only us four in the Shrine. How could it have gotten in without us noticing?"

It's troubling Xie Lian as well.

After all—he should have been able to detect the evil aura immediately, but he only noticed it after the array had been disrupted.

"Could it have snuck in when the candle went out?"

Shi Qingxuan frowns, holding onto Ming Yi tighter as she shakes her head.

"The array had already been tampered with before that."

And, of course—it couldn't have been waiting outside and slipped in when Hua Cheng opened the door either, given that the array was etched on the inside of the door.

"…But Crimson Rain was the one who opened the door."

Shi Qingxuan is quick to point that out, clearly floundering for some sort of explanation—and Hua Cheng raises an eyebrow.

"And Ming Yi was the one who created the array. What's your point?" He questions dryly.

"Ming-Xiong wouldn't do that!" The Wind Master protests vehemently. "He came all this way to help me, and his arrays are the best! He even handles all of the traveling arrays for the heavens!"

Xie Lian supposes that shouldn't come as a surprise. After all, he remembers something about the earth master being an engineer of sorts.

Or maybe that was the earth master before Ming Yi. Xie Lian faintly recalls the official who used to be the earth master being the same engineer who constructed the Walls of Gusu, long before even Xie Lian was born—far too old to be Ming Yi.

As a matter of fact—Xie Lian is fairly sure that he would have been alive during the time of the Royal House of Xianle's founding ancestor, Xie Bolin. Given that the Royal Capitol and Gusu were built at similar times.

Could it be the case that every earth master is selected for an engineering background?

Hua Cheng chooses that moment to speak up, startling Xie Lian from his thoughts.

“And what would I have to gain from bringing us to a place like this?” He questions, crossing his arms.

Shi Qingxuan opens her mouth, instinctively about to say that it would be to cause some sort of mischief. That’s what her brother would say, after all—coming from a ghost king.

But then she stops, her eyes sliding over to Xie Lian, who is investigating their surroundings.

She actually doesn’t doubt that Hua Cheng might send her and Ming Yi somewhere frightening as a means of practical joke, but...

He wouldn’t do that to the crown prince of Xianle, even if that’s not what he’s explicitly saying.

“...You’re right,” she mutters, relenting. “Sorry.”

Hua Cheng shrugs, not seeming to accept or decline the apology one way or the other —and Xie Lian’s palm finally finds the wall of the structure they’re standing inside of, finding the familiar texture of smooth marble underneath his palm.

“...Is this a temple?” He mutters.

It must have fallen into disrepair, if that were the case...and even if the Venerable of Empty Words has disappeared...

There’s a heavy aura of hate here. So palpable, it leaves a bitter taste on the prince’s tongue.

Shi Qingxuan finally comes to her senses enough to look, and...

All of the color drains from her face, leaving her expression ashen as she whips her head around, taking in the sight around her.

“It’s...” She wobbles, grabbing onto a nearby pillar for support, feeling slightly nauseous.

And this time, not from the prince’s cooking.

“...It’s a temple of Wind and Water, your highness.”

Xie Lian's jaw goes slack.

How could that be?

After all—Shi Qingxuan is a popular goddess in her own right. But her brother? He's the god of mortal wealth. No one hates money. So...why desecrate one of their temples?

The Wind Master almost trips over something on the floor, barely managing to catch herself—and when she looks down...

Xie Lian hears a tiny, petrified shriek—and luckily, he has good instincts, because he's able to catch Shi Qingxuan when she leaps into his arms.

"YOUR HIGHNESS!" She shrieks, clinging around his neck.

Xie Lian whips his head around blindly, looking for the aura of the Venerable of Empty Words—but he sees nothing, cradling the Wind Master in his arms.

"What is it?!"

(Ironically, it's a reversal of the position they were in back when they were looking for clues in Paradise Manor, and Xie Lian was screaming and demanding Shi Qingxuan kill a giant spider.)

"It's...It's...!" She looks down, trembling, and her eyebrows knit together. "It's...me!"

"...What?" Xie Lian blinks, moving to set her down—but Shi Qingxuan just holds on tighter, shaking her head.

From behind them, Hua Cheng frowns, eyeing their position with distaste.

"My divine statue!" She exclaims, staring down at its broken form on the ground with horror.

At first, the statues were so lifelike—she actually thought that they were corpses. Now, she realizes...

They're actually the likenesses of her and her brother.

Her own statue has been split in half in the middle, a painted smile melted into a horrified scream.

And her brother…

His is even more horrific, with a gash in it's throat cutting so deep, it's nearly been decapitated.

"…Who would hate us enough to do this?" She whispers, finally allowing Xie Lian to set her down—but sticking close to him when he does.

In all honesty—Xie Lian has seen this sort of thing with his own temples before, but that was entirely different. He was being blamed for the downfall of a kingdom, cursed as a good of misfortune—

These are two gods who are, arguably, at the peak of their power. Still, Xie Lian attempts to assuage her fears.

"As long as you have people who worship you—there will also be people who curse you. That's simply the way of things."

Shi Qingxuan frowns, her lips trembling—and Ming Yi gives a far less elegant form of comfort.

"Are you gonna be able to do this?" He questions flatly. "If you can't, we ought to go back."

Shi Qingxuan presses her lips together tightly, determined, clutching her wind master fan close to her chest.

"No," she mutters, shaking her head. "I'm not running away!" After a moment she eyes the exit to the temple, and she takes a deep breath. "It has to be around here somewhere still, right? I'm going to go and see what this thing is made of!"

She marches off towards the exit, her spine stiff, and while her sudden wave of courage isn't likely to last—Ming Yi follows her.

Hua Cheng moves to follow—but Xie Lian stops him with a hand on his arm. "San Lang?"

The Ghost King looks down at him, raising an eyebrow.

"Gege?"

"…I was just thinking," Xie Lian lowers his voice, leaning up on the balls of his feet in order to whisper close to Hua Cheng's ear—and the Ghost King is kind enough to lean down to assist in his efforts.

“Do you think we should exchange communication array passwords?”

The pause that follows is enough to leave the god feeling slightly insecure. “...Is that a strange thing to ask? If so, never mind—it’s really nothing so serious—”

“No,” Hua Cheng interrupts him, and rather than sounding uncomfortable...

Actually, he sounds quite pleased.

“It’s not strange—I’m happy you asked me.”

Xie Lian pauses, surprised—and beside him, where he’s leaned down to allow them to whisper more easily—Hua Cheng is smiling.

“...You are?”

“I was wondering when you would, but you never brought it up.”

Xie Lian has never felt put at ease so quickly or so easily.

“I began thinking you just didn’t like sharing your password with other people. And now that you’re finally asking me, you say it’s not a big deal?”

It almost sounds like he’s sulking, and Xie Lian looks away. “San Lang, don’t tease me about it...”

“I’m not,” the ghost king insists, but there’s still a smile tugging at his lips, even as he needles the prince. “I’m being perfectly serious.”

(Somehow, Xie Lian doesn’t believe him when he says that.)

“What’s your password then, gege?”

“Oh,” Xie Lian looks back at him, his eyes widening earnestly. “Just say the ethics sutra a thousand times.”

Hua Cheng’s eyebrows arch for a moment—and then, after a slight pause—

‘It’s just the phrase that you have to say three times, isn’t it?’

Xie Lian smiles, pleased.

‘No one’s ever guessed it that quickly before!’

There’s a difference in tone, when it comes to speaking inside someone’s private communication array. It’s something that Xie Lian himself does rather rarely—a necessity, when his spiritual power is so limited.

He forgot how intimate it could feel—having someone speaking directly into his mind.

Of course, he’s spoken to Ling Wen—and in the general communication array—but there’s something different about this.

(Or maybe, it’s just because it’s Hua Cheng.)

The Ghost King chuckles.

“It’s a good joke, your highness.”

Mu Qing certainly didn’t think so—as a matter of fact, he was incredibly annoyed when he figured out what the password actually was, even if it only took him a few minutes.

It took poor Feng Xin over two years, and he still forgets at times.

But when he did realize—instead of being angry, he absolutely roared with laughter, rolling around on the ground, clutching his stomach until Xie Lian thought he was going to get sick.

Naturally, it made Mu Qing even more pissed off—but it couldn’t be helped. Feng Xin will laugh at any and every joke, no matter how good or bad it is.

But hearing Hua Cheng say he finds it amusing—that makes Xie Lian smile a bit, in spite of the situation.

“And what about your password, San Lang?”

“You want to know?”

The prince nods rather eagerly.

This time, Hua Cheng leans very close, whispering the words directly into Xie Lian’s ear.

It’s not a very long password. Rather succinct, actually.

And when the prince hears, his face flushes red—all the way from his cheeks to the tips of his ears.

"...That's—San Lang, that's not really it, right?" He chokes, silently hoping that the ghost is joking, but—

"No," Hua Cheng murmurs, his lips still close to Xie Lian's ear. "Why don't you try it out and see for yourself?"

Oh—

Xie Lian can't.

He absolutely cannot.

"That...If I said that, it would sound like I wanted you...to..." Xie Lian trails off weakly, knowing that it's just a password, but still. It...

"...I couldn't say that."

It's rare that Hua Cheng lets something slip out unintentionally—but he mutters something under his breath:

"Dianxia almost said it yesterday."

Xie Lian pauses, his lips parted. What is he—?

Then, that memory hits him like a stack of bricks.

Oh.

Oh.

Being against that tree, with Hua Cheng whispering in his ear.

'What did you imagine, your highness?'

The martial god chokes.

"San L—?!"

"Your highness?"

Xie Lian nearly jumps out of his skin, whipping around in Shi Qingxuan's direction.

"Nothing!" He blurts out, pulling up the hood of his robes to hide his flushed expression.

"...What do you mean, nothing?" The Wind Master tilts her head. "All I did was call your name."

“…” Xie Lian swallows thickly, clearing his throat. “Right, right—what is it?”

“I was just wondering if you two were ever going to come along—there’s a village outside, we found a place to regroup.”

“Right,” the prince agrees, hurrying forward—glad to have an excuse to get away from *that* conversation. “Coming!”

Hua Cheng watches Xie Lian hurry out the door for a moment, his lips curving up into a fond smile—and he’s quick to follow after him.

As it turns out, the place Shi Qingxuan and Ming Yi found to ‘regroup’ has turned out to be a restaurant, one with large, open windows that face out onto the street—and Ming Yi is all too eager to eradicate any memory of Xie Lian’s soup from his palette, ordering the entire menu.

“I’ve been thinking,” Xie Lian pipes up, sipping from a cup of tea. “This venerable of empty words—it must be pretty old, to be so strong. Meaning it’s had targets before you—and if it’s still around, it’s devoured mortals since. Did your brother ever investigate the matter?”

“Oh—of course he did,” Shi Qingxuan nods, reaching into her sleeve to pull out a scroll. “I had the records from it pulled before I came to ask for your help. The only way they could really track it was by finding cases of other victims over the centuries.”

All of the deaths listed in the document as Shi Qingxuan reads the information out are suicides at first glance—but it’s the circumstances that set them apart.

Famous generals who watched their countries burn. Titans of industry left penniless. Scholars who ended their lives in disgrace and with little recognition for their work.

All individuals who could have achieved greatness—who even seemed set on that path, in some cases—only to crash back down to earth in sudden failure.

“…” Hua Cheng listens to the same information, crossing his arms over his chest with a frown. “This scroll isn’t much good, half of it is wrong.”

Shi Qingxuan stops in the middle of reading, whipping her head around to stare at him. “Huh? What do you mean?!”

The ghost king leans over, surveying the names on the list for a moment, nodding when he's confirmed what he already suspected.

"Several of these weren't targets of the Venerable of Empty Words."

"Huh?!" The Wind Master sputters. "How would you know?!"

Hua Cheng's reply is simple, if not slightly chilling.

"Because I was the one who killed them."

Shi Qingxuan's jaw drops open while Xie Lian turns to the ghost king, slightly confused.

"But San Lang...it says they all took their own lives."

Hua Cheng shrugs.

"I would send a messenger to inform them that I was coming, and they would usually just off themselves before I arrived." He tilts his head to the side, glancing around the table while raising an eyebrow. "Doesn't that count as my kill?"

Neither Shi Qingxuan or Ming Yi make any arguments to the contrary, and he continues—

"Did your brother even take this investigation seriously? How could the only document on the matter be so riddled with errors?"

"Of course he did!" The Wind Master cries vehemently. "He takes everything to do with my safety incredibly seriously! If there was a mistake, then it wasn't his fault!"

Even now, she's her brother's most ardent believer.

In some distant way, Hua Cheng supposes that he can sympathize. "Who prepared this document, then?"

"..."

The degree to which Shi Qingxuan deflates says enough for everyone to know the answer before she says it.

"...The Palace of Ling Wen," she mutters.

And for an investigation from her palace to have so many errors, well... It's unusual.

Still—Xie Lian doesn't find room for suspicion in that. If there's anything he's learned after spending time with Hua Cheng—it's that the Heavens don't seem to know much at all when it comes to the ghost realm.

Just then, a waiter arrives—and when he does, Xie Lian turns his head to ask him— "Excuse me sir, do you mind telling us the name of this place?"

The waiter raises an eyebrow, filling all of their glasses.

"You aren't familiar with our town of Fu Gu, sir?"

When Xie Lian shakes his head, the waiter straightens from where he's been setting several plates in front of Ming Yi, surprised.

"I assumed that you folks were in town for the fire social—it's what we're famous for."

"A fire social?" Shi Qingxuan questions.

Xie Lian smiles faintly. "You've never seen one before?"

Fire socials are rare occasions—but always enjoyable.

"They're festivals put on during folk holidays. There are parades, firework shows, and busking—local plays too. They're definitely worth watching."

He remembers going to a festival just like that when he was a teenager, sneaking out of the palace in peasant's clothes to surprise Mu Qing's little sister for her birthday.

They're beautiful affairs—and in the years since, he's regretted the fact that he can't see them now.

"...But there's not even a holiday," Shi Qingxuan mutters, fidgeting in her seat, a glass of wine in hand. "Tomorrow is the end of autumn—but that's not exactly something worth celebrating."

No one is happy when winter comes, after all.

"Fire socials are held for many reasons." Xie Lian explains, feeling around for his own cup of tea from where he set it down, only to have someone place it in his hand for him.

"...Thank you, San Lang." He murmurs. "Fire socials can be held to celebrate events, or to remember people—it depends on the place."

"Fu Gu's is pretty famous," the waiter smiles, stepping away from their table. "I hope you folks enjoy the show."

Xie Lian smiles politely, taking a sip of his tea. After all, he doubts he'll be able to enjoy the show much at all—but there's something to be had in listening.

Hua Cheng watches him wordlessly, his arm thrown over the back of his god's seat—a movement so subtle, Xie Lian hardly noticed it—and his expression has become unreadable.

And watching them both is Ming Yi, his mouth set into a grim line.

After all—the situation is complicated.

Shi Qingxuan doesn't seem focused on anyone else once the conversation dies out, her eyes flickering down to settle on the table, her fingers constantly twitching with anxiety.

Partly, for reasons that are quite obvious.

The other reason, however, isn't quite so clear.

Eventually, her eyes drift out the window—and when they do, she sits up straight in her seat from the shock.

"...What is that?!"

She almost moves to get up—but she's stopped by Ming Yi's hand on her arm, holding her down.

"Ming-Xiong, let me go!"

Lately, when Xie Lian's been in a situation like this—the one who would explain to him what was going on was Shi Qingxuan herself. Now, he leans closer to Hua Cheng, murmuring—

"San Lang—what's happening?"

Hua Cheng turns his head to look out onto the street, fingers curling ever so slightly around the edge of Xie Lian's chair, a silent display of protectiveness that goes unnoticed.

"...It would seem that there's a troupe passing through with very realistic prosthetics."

"Prosthetics?!" Shi Qingxuan shakes her head, still struggling against Ming Yi as she attempts to leave the table. "Those people are wounded!"

"No," Hua Cheng contradicts her calmly. "It's all fake."

And just like that, Xie Lian inhales sharply with understanding.

"Oh!" He leans forward, intrigued. "This is quite an occasion!"

Shi Qingxuan looks over at him, utterly baffled—still vexed about the perceived danger. "What are you talking about?!"

"This is a bloody fire social!" Xie Lian explains. "It's truly a rare opportunity to see one!"

They're a practice that has become more and more rare over time, after all—Xie Lian has never had the chance to witness one himself.

And even now, he's missing out on the most notable part.

"The performers in bloody fire socials are famous for their makeup artistry."

It's a secret technique that isn't passed down—which is why the practice is becoming so rare.

"...That's all makeup?!" Shi Qingxuan mutters, her eyes wide. "...But it looks so real!"

The group of performers trailing down the street are...

Truly grotesque.

Some of them have axes splitting their skulls open, brain matter and gore trailing down over their faces. Others have their innards spilling out through their ribs. Some are even missing limbs—groaning and screaming as they walk through the center of town.

It's truly the most horrifying sight that Shi Qingxuan has ever seen, leaving her covering her mouth, fighting back nausea all over again.

From across the table, Xie Lian sighs—wistful, wishing he could see such a rare sight. "There are some truly talented people in this world."

For a moment, she can only stare at the prince like he's completely lost his mind—but when she recovers, she manages to mutter—

"...I thought you said fire socials were supposed to be celebrations." Even now, she can see women at the front of the crowd fainting.

Children are screaming and running away the minute they see the actors coming close.

"Well—even if this one is particularly gory, it's probably still trying to tell some sort of story," Xie Lian explains with a shrug. "You should watch."

"But I already am watching!"

"But watch for the story," the prince implores her. "The Venerable of Empty Words switched the array around to bring us here intentionally—on the night of this fire social. It might have intended for you to see it."

Shi Qingxuan frowns, her brow creasing—but she watches.

All of the actors seem to be swirling and crawling around one character.

A tall, gaunt looking man, dressed in black. An ax dragging on the ground behind him, cutting a deep track in the dirt as he moves.

And there's something...odd about his movement. The way he walks.

He staggers, swaying from side to side, stumbling in an odd zig-zag pattern through the street. Almost as though he's drunk, but...

There's a deadness to his eyes—no fog that one would associate with being intoxicated, simply...

A lack of humanity. In short—

A madman.

The procession slowly makes its way to the end of the town's Main Street—and when it reaches it's destination, the man in black, the leader of the troop, stumbles into the river, leaving only the ax behind him.

He disappears into the water—all of the other actors collapse.

Like puppets with their strings cut, a pile of bodies, strewn around on the ground.

Hua Cheng quietly relays the details of the scene to Xie Lian, whispering close to his ear, and the prince frowns.

It clearly sounds like the man in black is the protagonist—and the mutilated crowd surrounding him are his enemies, villains who wronged him.

But what does this have to do with the Venerable of Empty Words—and what is Shi Qingxuan supposed to learn from it?

Just then, the waiter returns to their table, with…

Even more food for Ming Yi, who at this point is surrounded by the shredded remains of an entire roasted chicken.

"…Ming-Xiong, how can you eat after watching that?!" Shi Qingxuan grumbles, her face in her hands.

The earth master glances up, his cheeks puffing out similar to a chipmunks, crammed full with food.

"What? It's all fake."

"That doesn't make it less GROSS!"

Xie Lian overlooks their bickering, waving to get the waiter's attention.

"Excuse me, sir—do you know the story behind the performance that just took place?"

"Ah," the water smiles pleasantly, pouring the prince another cup of tea. "People from out of town don't usually know the story—but it's about the most famous man who ever lived in Fu Gu."

Once he's finished with Xie Lian's drink, he sets the teapot aside, lifting up a bottle of whiskey, filling up Hua Cheng's glass once more.

"He was a renowned scholar by the name of He—and while his family was rather poor, he was an extraordinary young man."

The tale the waiter tells is a surprisingly harrowing one.

"He was known to be brilliant in any subject or craft he happened to take part in. He was the son of a Shipyard worker, but by the time he was a teenager—he was the one engineering the ships himself."

No small accomplishment—and it sounds like a person with a bright future ahead, but—

“The only thing that ever got in his way…” The waiter sighs, shaking his head, “was a string of bad luck.”

Surely, he never knew the man in his mortal life—but he sounds deeply sympathetic.

And Xie Lian doubts it could truly be that bad—until the waiter begins listing events off like the major plot points of a book—and if this was a book, well—

It would be a horror.

“He studied to take the state exams—and despite being more than capable, his scores always came back as zero. Because the proctors—for whatever reason—switched his scrolls out for blank ones.”

Hua Cheng normally asks questions during stories like this—but now, he remains silent.

“His fiancé was a childhood friend—well known for being a kind, beautiful woman, compassionate to everyone around her. But both she and Scholar He’s little sister were abducted by a wealthy family, intending to force them into being concubines.”

The way he says it initially makes Xie Lian hope that they were unsuccessful—but that’s quickly doused by the truth:

“The sister took her own life, rather than living with the shame—and his fiancé was beaten to death when she refused to obey their wishes.”

Ming Yi’s chopsticks don’t pause, making their way to his lips in a calm, purposeful motion. There’s almost a forced, unnatural rhythm to the action.

“When Scholar He went to confront them to get his loved ones back—his fiancé died in his arms.”

Xie Lian sets his cup of tea down, a faint memory pulling at him—but so far gone, he doesn’t even know what he’s trying to recall.

“She pleaded with him not to take vengeance with her final breaths—and in that moment, he did not. But her killers imprisoned him anyway.”

Shi Qingxuan bites her lip as she listens to the story, shocked by the cruelty of it.

“His parents were old—and without another child to look after them in their later years, they pleaded for mercy—but Scholar He received none.” The waiter shakes his head, his tone grim.

“They imprisoned him for years—starving him to the point of near death. His poor mother was so sick, she passed away before he was released. And once he was, well—” The waiter looks toward the street, to where the lead actor is pulling himself from the river.

“Scholar He had a way of never staying down for long. So, when he was free again—he went into business, and he thrived. So much so that it made the other merchants in the town jealous—and they sabotaged him as a result, leaving him drowning in debts.”

“Eventually, his father passed away—and when he did, the merchants in town refused to even help Scholar He bury him, saying that it only took one man to bury a dog.”

The tale itself feels truly hopeless—not one at all worth celebrating—Until he reaches the ending.

“Scholar He picked up an ax—and one by one, he slaughtered every man in the village who had wronged him. These men had long terrorized the people of Fu Gu—so no one stood in his way, they only watched.”

Which explains the gory scene of the parade.

“He attacked them again and again—until every single one of them was slain. And the people cheered him—but in one final stroke of bad luck, the cliff side he stood upon crumbled beneath him, and he plunged into the sea.”

Xie Lian jaw drops, taking that in.

Who could have such horrible luck, other than him?! He’s never heard of such a thing!

“And...you hold this festival to honor him?”

In spite of only just recounting a truly gruesome tale, the waiter beams. “Of course! Our town has worshiped Scholar He as a god ever since!”

Shi Qingxuan pauses, tilting her head with surprise.

"...A god? The story makes no mention of him ascending."

"Aye, you're right," the waiter nods. "But the man was clearly destined for greater things—almost like a curse stole it all away from him."

The restaurant has gone somewhat quiet, the other residents of Fu Gu growing quiet to listen to the tale.

Hua Cheng glances around, surveying the room.

Qinghe—the city of his own birth—is only forty kilometers from here. But the people of Fu Gu couldn't be any more different.

They're hardened—mostly dressed in black. Hua Cheng himself switched into the skin of a young man in black robes when they stepped out of the temple in order to blend in.

Shipbuilders and fishermen. People who have spent their entire lives being worn and weathered by the sea.

One of them—an older man with a beard shot through with gray, his skin prematurely roughened from the wind and salty air, comments—

"You respect a man's destiny, young lady—whether he got the chance to live it out or not."

The waiter nods in agreement.

"Ever since, our people have worshipped him here in Fu Gu—and we throw him a fire social every year on the anniversary of his death in remembrance."

Hua Cheng hasn't ordered any food—but he flips a chopstick between his fingers, his expression pensive.

"What kind of god is he?"

After all—every god, even those who aren't real—are patrons of one thing or another.

"He's known as a god of retribution, punishing those who insult or harm others with their arrogance. We actually have another tradition," he looks out the window, pointing to the cliffs.

The very same cliffs from which Scholar He fell, centuries before.

“We throw coins into the sea from there—and it’s said if you do, you may lay a curse upon someone who has wronged you, and Scholar He will answer.”

It doesn’t sound like a very ‘godly’ thing to do.

But then again, they’ve made the point many times—

This scholar ‘he’ never ascended to begin with. Meaning, if he still lingers on...

It would be as a ghost.

A powerful one.

Just as Xie Lian begins to ponder the matter—

That voice comes back.

Louder than before—screaming.

“BEFORE THIS IS OVER—YOU’LL LOSE YOUR BROTHER AND YOUR CLOSEST FRIEND, AND IT WILL BE ALL YOUR FAULT!”

Shi Qingxuan was rattled before, when she heard the voice—screaming and hiding. But this time, when it directly threatens her loved ones—It draws out a very different reaction.

Her expression twists, her cheeks becoming flushed with anger as she launches herself out of her seat—and before Ming Yi can stop her, she leaps through the open window, charging towards the crowd.

“Show yourself you COWARD!” She shouts, shoving through the actors.

Xie Lian rises from his own seat, moving to go after her. “Lady Wind Master, wait!”

“For what?! Didn’t you hear it?! It—It’s HERE!” She whips her head around, her hair swirling around her as she examines the mortals around her, trying to find something sinister, but...

There’s nothing recognizably threatening—and that infuriates her even more. “WHAT ARE YOU HIDING FOR?! SCARED?! COME OUT!”

Xie Lian struggles through the crowd at first. He can seem spiritual energy after all— but normal mortals have very little, and it leaves him stumbling.

But just when he trips over an actor's foot, a hand wraps around his bicep, pulling him back onto his feet before he can hit the ground.

Xie Lian doesn't even have to look beside him to know that he'll find a sea of crimson there—and he nods gratefully.

"Thank you, San Lang."

It feels like that's been every other word out of his mouth lately—and now, the crowd parts for him easily, shifting out of his way like water as he hurries to Shi Qingxuan's side, grabbing her by the arm.

"It won't come out when you're expecting it!"

After all—it gains power from the fear it creates by surprising her. And for a demon this ancient and powerful, hiding itself is an easy task.

Even from Xie Lian, it would seem—because he can't see any sign of that dark aura anywhere.

Shi Qingxuan's face sinks into her hands, earrings clinking as she whips her head from side to side, utterly miserable.

"Ming-Xiong, did you hear it?! It threatened you too," she groans.

The earth master arches an eyebrow, resting one hand on his hip.

"When?"

"It said it was going to kill my best friend!" She cries, grabbing him by the sleeve. Ming Yi stares down at her, unimpressed.

"Who is that?"

Shi Qingxuan's expression falls, her eye twitching with irritation.

"MING-XIONG! CAN'T YOU BE NICE TO ME AT A TIME LIKE THIS?!"

Xie Lian sighs, rubbing a hand against his forehead, knowing at this rate—they aren't getting anywhere.

"Lady Wind Master, here," he rummages through his pockets for a moment, holding something out to her. “You should use these for now.”

Shi Qingxuan looks down at her palm.

“...Earplugs?”

“Yes,” Xie Lian nods. “We can continue speaking in our group’s communication array —but the reverend of empty words has always used its voice to taunt you. Cutting yourself off from its words ought to help.”

Unable to argue with that logic—Shi Qingxuan agrees.

Once she has them in her ears—Xie Lian speaks into the private array between the four of them:

‘See? It makes no difference, there’s nothing to be afraid of.’

Shi Qingxuan smiles, letting out a shaky breath.

‘Thank you, your highness.’

Xie Lian reaches over, patting her arm.

'And you're already in your female form because it's more powerful, right? The Venerable of Empty Words would be a fool to attack you right now.'

After all, while Shi Qingxuan does love her female form—more often than not, she chooses to appear as a man.

For her to be in this form the entire time is a testament to how frightened she must be.

"..." Shi Qingxuan nods, only seeming mildly comforted, replying into the communication array,

'Thank you, your highness.'

As they walk back towards the Temple of Wind and Water, planning to regroup, a very different conversation is unfolding.

One that Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan have no way of knowing about--because they don't even know the private communication array in which it's occurring exists.

'Hua Cheng.'

It's a repeated call that he's been echoing since Shi Qingxuan leapt from the window of the restaurant--one that the other ghost king has been stubbornly ignoring.

'Hua Cheng.'

He stares straight ahead, arms crossed, falling into step beside Xie Lian--

'Wu Ming.'

It's an admittedly low blow, referring to him by that name--but it has the intended result, Hua Cheng's posture stiffening as his eyes flicker in Ming Yi's direction.

'He Sheng.'

Another name that the other loathes to hear, and for the very same reason.

Because they can no longer hear their names from those that they love. One by curse, the other by fate.

'That wasn't me.'

Hua Cheng rolls his eyes, turning his gaze back ahead.

'I'm sure.'

'Hua Cheng—'

'Look, I'm playing along with your stupid little freak show.' Hua Cheng grumbles into the communication array, gritting his teeth as he walks beside his god in silence. *'It's your own fault that I got dragged into this.'*

'This isn't about—wait, how is that my fault?' Ming Yi frowns.

'Who did you think Shi Qingxuan was going to ask for help?'

After all—his brother wouldn't be an option. And after that, the best option would be to choose a martial god. But they aren't known for being particularly discreet.

In that case, Xie Lian, a trusted friend, was the obvious choice.

'I didn't think—'

'No, you didn't.'

Normally, unless under serious strain—or speaking about his revenge—He Xuan isn't easily ruffled, and is the type to speak calmly.

'Would you shut up and listen?!'

Hua Cheng has to fight the urge to whip his head around and bare his teeth at the use of that tone.

'What?!'

'The voice in the shrine was me.' He Xuan admits. *'The traveling array—that was me too.'*

'I fucking gathered.'

'But the voice in the crowd just now—that wasn't me.'

Now, Hua Cheng falls silent, his gaze narrowing.

'I'm trying to lead her to the truth, ' Blackwater mutters. *'I'm not trying to torture her.'*

Hua Cheng would argue that pretending to be the monster that hunted her for the duration for her childhood is, in fact, some form of torture—but he doesn't point that out.

'You couldn't have just had a sleepover and braided each other's hair?'

The other calamity doesn't immediately reply, but given how irritated Hua Cheng has been by the entire experience, he's happy to let the sarcasm fly.

'You could have even worn that female skin of yours, and then you could have spilled your secrets to one another.'

'Shut up.'

'I've been wondering—the rack, is that because the wind master likes them, or are you just projecting?'

'I said SHUT UP! You think I would have gone to all this trouble if I could have just told her the truth as Ming Yi? How do you think that would have gone?!'

Hua Cheng can see his point, however reluctant he is to give blackwater *any* credit right now.

It would require admitting that he had been lying to her for decades, all while becoming her lover at the same time.

Once that trust was broken, why would she believe him?

'You don't think she's going to be traumatized anyway when you assassinate her brother? ' Hua Cheng points out, the dryness in his tone hiding the uncertainty underneath.

After all—he has little care or sympathy for the Water Master...and yet.

Memory is a pesky thing.

The first time Hua Cheng met Shi Wudu, he wasn't a god. He wasn't even a man.

He was a teenage boy. Proud, clearly wound up tighter than a broken clock, desperate to save his little brother.

Hua Cheng has been desperate to protect someone before.

His empathy for the water master is limited—certainly not so great that Hua Cheng would intervene to save his life, but still.

He takes no joy in watching his demise unfold, either.

(Though, perhaps—if Hua Cheng had known everything, he would have stopped it.

But he didn't.)

'You don't think it'll be easier when she sees that he's a fucking monster?'

Hua Cheng can't make the argument that Shi Wudu hasn't done monstrous things—so he doesn't try to.

'Families are more complicated than that, He Xuan.'

'And how would you know?!' Blackwater snaps.

There's a beat of silence before Hua Cheng replies, his voice frigid—

'I certainly hope you're speaking about having siblings, because while I may have been an only child, I had a mother.'

A mother who loved him fiercely, and fought to protect him until her very last breath.

And maybe Hua Cheng lost her far too young. Maybe most of his memories of her have faded.

But he remembers having a mother. He remembers being loved by one.

It was a small, broken family—but it was still his family, and he remembers being a part of one.

'...I'm just trying to give her a chance,' He Xuan finally replies, his tone significantly less combative. *'I know she'll hate me after it's over with. But she'll have a chance at understanding.'*

Hua Cheng doesn't reply, waiting for the rest in frigid silence.

'...I wasn't the one who screamed out in the crowd,' He Xuan repeats. *'Which means someone or something else is following us.'*

Which is baffling.

The obvious explanation, of course, would be for the culprit to be the real Venerable of Empty Words from all those years ago, but...

He Xuan devoured it shortly after becoming a calamity, absorbing its power—which is why he's able to impersonate it so effectively to begin with.

Which begs the question: what could be interfering here, and why? Who else would even know about this situation?

'...Then I suggest you figure it out,' Hua Cheng replies flatly, placing a hand on Xie Lian's elbow as he helps him up the temple steps. *'I'm here to look after dianxia. I already told you—I won't get involved.'*

Which means he won't help He Xuan, either.

'San Lang,' Xie Lian speaks up in their private communication array, and Hua Cheng cuts off Blackwater without another thought.

'Yes, gege?'

'I need your help with something.'

He tilts his head, curious. *'And what would that be?'*

‘I have a plan to test and see if someone is the Venerable of Empty Words.’

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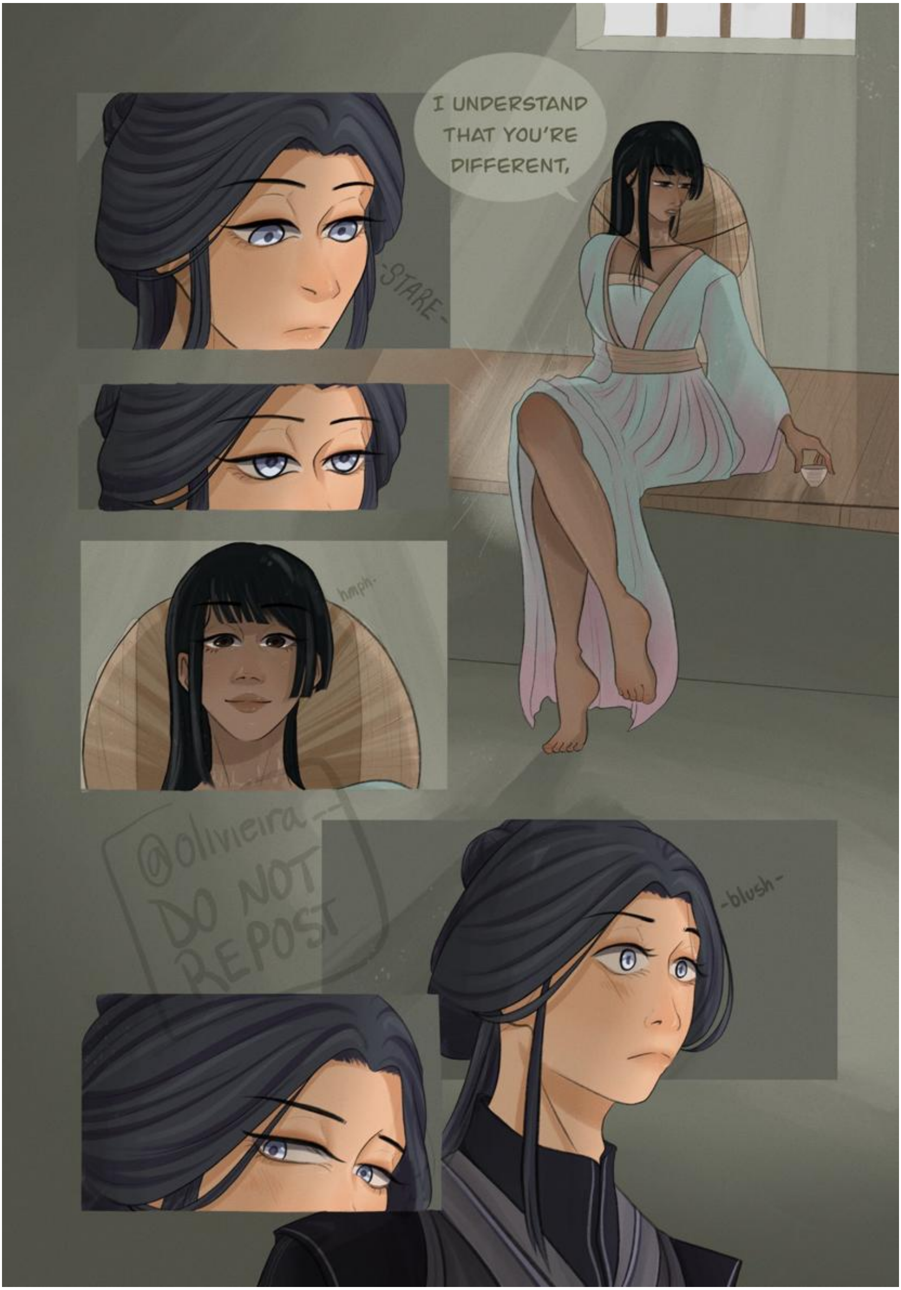
I UNDERSTAND THAT YOU'RE DIFFERENT,
-STARE-
hmph.
@olivieira DO NOT REPOST
-blush-

CREDIT: **OLIVIEIRA**

Chapter End Notes

thank you so much to Olivieira for your amazing artwork, and allowing me to share it!

xoxo, Evie

The Reverend of Empty Words

Chapter Summary

> ‘...Alright—I have an idea to get you away, but I need your permission.’
>
> Beside him, Hua Cheng stiffens—and Shi Qingxuan agrees immediately, not even asking what it is.
>
> ‘You have my permission, your highness!’
>
> Hua Cheng suddenly grips his hand firmly, his eyes locked on Xie Lian’s face. “...The soul shifting spell?”
>
> It’s exactly what it sounds like—allowing the two people involved to switch souls. The cost of using it is enormous—and most aren’t willing to allow their body to be inhabited by someone else anyway, but Xie Lian doesn’t see another way.
>
> “That’s right.”

Chapter Notes

> content warnings: this chapter contains horror elements, be warned!
>
> also, check the end of the chapter for an exciting announcement!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ah.

Oh dear.

Hua Cheng bites back the urge to grimace.

Of course, his god is clever. Which is why him being involved in this situation is such a complication.

‘Whatever his highness needs, I’ll do.’

They exchange words quietly in Xie Lian’s private array, and all the while, Shi Qingxuan paces inside the temple of Wind and Water, fiddling with the earplugs.

'…Can't we do something to pass the time?' She grumbles in the array with the four of them, irritated. *'Something fun!'*

Ming Yi doesn't look the least bit impressed.

'You're really trying to mess around right now ?'

The Wind Master huffs, pacing even faster. *'Well, why shouldn't I?! This monster wants me to be miserable?! Well I WON'T! I'll have the time of my LIFE!"*

She turns towards the exit, puffing her chest out. *'I hope that makes it so angry, it DROPS DEAD!'*

Xie Lian speaks up over their bickering, trying to make use of her suggestion: *'…Why don't we play dice?'*

Shi Qingxuan stops, looking over at him curiously.

'Dice? You'd think after last time, you'd have sworn off of it.' Before Xie Lian can respond, she throws up her hands, sitting down. *'I'm up for it! What should it be, highs and lows?'*

'That's what I was thinking,' Xie Lian agrees. *'And why don't we play on teams?'*

When he says this, Hua Cheng automatically moves to sit beside him—and Shi Qingxuan frowns.

'Isn't it unfair if you and Crimson Rain match up? After all—his luck is insanely good, right?'

'That's true,' Xie Lian shrugs, pointing out *, 'But mine is phenomenally bad, remember? It evens out.'*

That explanation seems to satisfy Shi Qingxuan—and Ming Yi makes no protest of his own, but he continuously glances in Hua Cheng's direction from the corner of his eye.

The dice are passed out—and the first roll goes about as one would expect.

Hua Cheng rolls a six, Xie Lian rolls a one, and Shi Qingxuan and Ming Yi roll a five and four respectively.

'HA!' Shi Qingxuan laughs, the tension in her shoulders easing slightly, glad to have something to focus on other than her fear.

'HAHAHAHA! Your luck really is SO BAD!'

Xie Lian isn't offended—he's relieved that she's no longer in distress, but he pretends to grumble. ' *Do you have to be so happy about it, Lady Wind Master?'*

'...Ahem, right, sorry,' She moves on, *'What do we get for winning? Can we make the other team do something?'*

'I don't see why not,' Xie Lian smiles, *'what would you like us to do?'*

'Hmmm...' Shi Qingxuan leans back on the heels of her palms, looking back and forth between the two of them. *'You should...'*

Then, her smile turns mischievous.

'Take off each other's clothes!'

Xie Lian chokes, his face immediately going red as he leans back from the group, flailing his hands in front of him nervously.

'W-What?!'

'You said I could have you guys do something!' Shi Qingxuan shrugs, waggling her eyebrows in Ming Yi's direction. *'Right?'*

The earth master doesn't respond one way or the other, but he doesn't offer a new suggestion either.

Xie Lian frowns, clearly dismayed—and Hua Cheng speaks into his private array once again.

'Apologies gege—but if you want your plan to work, we'll have to go along with it.' Xie Lian frowns deeply—but Hua Cheng is right, and he doesn't see another way.

'...How much should we take off?' He questions reluctantly, to which Shi Qingxuan grins even wider.

'Just one layer for now! We can save the rest for later, hahahaha!'

The prince grimaces, turning to Hua Cheng—and he feels a little silly, but since he can't really see what the ghost king is doing, he simply holds his arms up, half in an act of surrender, half in order to make it easier for Hua Cheng to remove his outer robe for him.

Which he does—rather quickly and efficiently, his fingers never lingering inappropriately, or adding enough pressure that Xie Lian really feels his touch at all. The only sign of its presence is the way Xie Lian's outer robe slips down his shoulders, so he can set it aside.

It's chilly outside—but even in only his inner robes, Xie Lian doesn't complain.

His own hands are a little uncertain as he reaches for Hua Cheng, fumbling slightly as he looks for the latches in his robes—but when he senses Xie Lian's difficulties, the ghost king assists him.

His fingers wrap around Xie Lian's wrists, gently guiding them to the correct place along his robes, allowing his god to gently undo the clasps before slipping his arms out of the sleeves, allowing his outer robes to fall to the floor in a heap.

And of course—Xie Lian remains calm, not showing any strong reaction to the situation one way or the other, but internally...

The prince swallows hard, pulling his hands back when the work is finished, willing the heat out of his face.

'Is that good enough?'

'It's perfect!'

They roll again—and this time, Xie Lian and Hua Cheng roll the same results: a one and a six. And as for Shi Qingxuan and Ming Yi—

It's two fours.

Xie Lian frowns when Shi Qingxuan erupts into cheers, speaking in the private array.

'San Lang—?'

'Sorry gege—' The Ghost King replies, his tone markedly apologetic. *'That one was my bad. But didn't you say we should let them lose a couple of rounds first?'*

Yes, but that was BEFORE Shi Qingxuan started making them strip!

'HA—!' She starts, but Xie Lian interrupts.

'No more stripping this time! ...Why don't you ask us questions? Any question will do, and we have to answer honestly!'

'Oh?' Shi Qingxuan tilts her head curiously . *'That's fine—Crimson Rain, you go first— what's the worst kind of suffering in the world?'*

The smile on Hua Cheng's face quickly fades, and his expression darkens.

'...I mean, don't get me wrong, I don't mean anything bad by it!' Shi Qingxuan clarifies, holding her hands up in a neutral gesture. *'I'm just wondering what a ghost king would call 'painful,' you know?'*

'What do you think that would be?' Hua Cheng replies quietly—not necessarily sounding upset, only pensive.

Shi Qingxuan falls silent, thinking it over, and eventually she guesses —

'The Kiln in Mount Tonglu?'

That actually draws a small smile.

It's the obvious choice.

'The Kiln has never frightened me. I think of it as the place where I was born.'

And it is the one place on earth where he can speak his name.

'...Then what is it?'

Hua Cheng's smile fades once more, his eyes growing dark as he watches the fire Ming Yi built before.

'...Seeing the person you love be insulted and cast down before your eyes, and being unable to do anything.' He answers conclusively, the flames reflecting in his eyes. *'That's the worst suffering in the world.'*

Hearing this, Xie Lian goes still, his stomach slowly sinking.

...The person he loves?

'Ah,' Shi Qingxuan finally replies—not seeming to know what to say about that. Instead, she turns to Ming Yi. *'That's all I had—what about you?'*

That could mean so many different things. There are so many different ways to love someone, but—

But just one person? *The* person he loves? Who—?

'Your highness,' Ming Yi's eyes drift over to him, and Xie Lian straightens up, pulled free from his thoughts.

'Yes?'

'What is the greatest regret of your life?'

Xie Lian falls silent, surprised.

After all—given the silliness of Shi Qingxuan's first request, he wasn't expecting either of the questions the two of them asked to be so serious in nature.

And for Xie Lian—there are so many options for what his greatest regret might be. After all, he's made so many mistakes.

Some of them stand out more brightly than others.

The fall of Xianle. The way he sent Feng Xin away. His last conversation with his father. His treatment of Wu Ming. The guided banquet. His failure to protect Banyue.

The most recent addition to his list of regrets—but by no means a small one—is his admission after the mid-autumn festival.

That the events in the temple—they transpired after the last argument he had with Feng Xin and Mu Qing.

He still hasn't gotten that sound out of his head.

The pained, broken sound that wrenched from Mu Qing's lips when he realized what had happened.

The sound of him beginning to blame himself.

Out of all of those things, the most obvious candidate for his greatest 'regret' would be his second ascension.

What he almost did to the people of Yong'an. The creature he nearly became. The way that Wu Ming paid the price for it.

Of all of the things he has done in his life, that's the choice that he thinks of the most. The thing he's the most ashamed of.

Still.

'...I used to be a deep sleeper.'

The answer is shockingly succinct, given the complexity of the question. Ming Yi's eyebrows quirk, his head tilting.

'That's your deepest regret?'

Xie Lian offers no further explanation.

'Yes, it is.'

But when his fingers grasp the chain around his neck, Hua Cheng's eyes darken with understanding.

Ironically enough, the fact that Xie Lian was a deep sleeper back then was his greatest source of comfort.

Wu Ming had to experience the alternative. Watching.

In a strange way, Hua Cheng's idea of the most profound suffering and his god's deepest regrets are parallel to one another.

Watching the greatest love of his life being cut into over and over again, trapped within the palm of Bai Wuxiang's hand.

Just as he watched his mother suffer.

And Xie Lian's deepest regret—

Not being able to spare Hong-er from the same fate.

But in that state, Hua Cheng knows—his god would have tried with all his might, but he couldn't have saved him from that.

He only would have suffered more.

Staying silent was a final act of sacrifice.

Of protecting the Crown Prince from the most painful experience there is.

(But, even after eight centuries of trying—

Hong'er cannot spare his god from that forever.)

'...Are you finished?' He mutters, sending one harsh stare in Ming Yi's direction.

When the earth master doesn’t reply one way or another, the dice are rolled once more—and when they land, Xie Lian lets out an exhale of relief as the numbers are read out.

He rolled a one again, Hua Cheng a six—

And both Shi Qingxuan and Ming Yi have each rolled a two.

By heaven official’s blessings—they won!

‘ *HA!’* The Wind Master’s response is the same in defeat as it was in victory, crossing her arms defiantly. *‘Give me your WORST!’*

‘I will,’ Xie Lian agrees. *‘But Ming Yi can go first—I need you to answer these questions for me, and you must be honest.’*

Shi Qingxuan grins, chuckling as she slaps her friend on the back.

‘That’s easy! Ming-Xiong is the sort of person who doesn’t even know how to lie!’

Hua Cheng coughs, covering his mouth with his hand, and Xie Lian continues— *‘First—who am I?’*

Ming Yi sends him an odd look, his expression impossible to read.

‘The Crown Prince of Xianle, Xie Lian.’

Xie Lian reaches over, placing a hand on Hua Cheng’s arm. ‘ *And who is sitting beside me?’*

There’s a brief pause, one that Xie Lian wasn’t expecting—and Ming Yi reaches up, pressing one hand to his temple with a wince.

‘Ming-Xiong?’ Shi Qingxuan frowns, reaching up to touch his cheek. *‘Are you alright?’*

Ming Yi leans away sharply.

‘I’m fine,’ he mutters, shaking his head. *‘Just a headache.’* Slowly, he turns his gaze to Hua Cheng—and he replies evenly. *‘The Lord of Ghost City, Crimson Rain Sought Flower.’*

Xie Lian is slightly baffled by the response—but they’re still on track.

Finally, he lifts his finger in Shi Qingxuan’s direction, asking his final question firmly —

'And who is sitting beside you, Earth Master Ming Yi?'

Once again the dark haired official falls silent, watching Xie Lian with an intent, narrowed gaze.

That's the one benefit of spending nearly six months with a Venerable of Empty Words following him—Xie Lian learned quite a bit about the spirits.

Including the fact that, for every three sentences out of a Venerable of Empty Words' mouth—at least one of them must be a lie.

He's answered the first two questions truthfully—and now, it's just about seeing what he does with the third.

Ming Yi's silence stretches even longer this time, and Shi Qingxuan rolls her eyes, elbowing him in the side. *'What are you holding up the round for?! Just answer!'*

Of course, it might be easy for someone else to hide such a trait—but for someone as soft spoken as Ming Yi, who is monosyllabic most of the time, always curt—

It's impossible to disguise a lie when he speaks so plainly.

'...He is one of the five elemental masters. The Younger brother of Water Master Shi Wudu. The Wind Master, Shi Qingxuan.'

Well.

Xie Lian fights back the urge to frown, back to being completely stumped.

That answers his question.

But while Xie Lian might have achieved his goal—discerning whether or not the jinx monster was among them—he's also drawn the earth master's suspicion.

"We only asked one question before."

The Crown Prince smiles.

"Ah, but I never said you could only ask one."

That might be true—and maybe Shi Qingxuan would be willing to laugh that off and prattle on about how Xie Lian was being a sneak, but…

Ming Yi has just as much reason to be suspicious of them as they do of him, doesn't he?

"…Crimson Rain, what are you playing at?"

He stares at Hua Cheng, whom he hasn't addressed directly since they used the traveling array. "What does a Ghost King gain from meddling with a game of dice?"

"…" Hua Cheng raises an eyebrow—and his response is subtle, but resoundingly clear.

He stretches one leg out in front of him, the other pulled up against his chest, leaning back on one palm—and his stance might seem lazy, but in reality…it leaves him leaning far closer to the prince than he was before.

A casual show of intent.

"I'll do whatever amuses me."

He drawls the words, his tone dripping with cocksure arrogance.

'…Why did you all start talking out loud and not in the communication array?' Shi Qingxuan speaks up, with a frown, looking around the group and crossing her arms. *'I'm this close to taking these out!'*

By that, of course, she means the earplugs.

'Let's not be hasty!' Xie Lian interrupts her quickly, holding his hands up—and when he does, Hua Cheng's eyes drift to the side, taking in a startling sight.

The divine statues in the temple of Wind and Water…have begun to bleed. Well, that wouldn't be entirely accurate.

In truth, they've started to cry tears of blood, rivers of red dripping down white marble cheeks.

'That's pretty fucking theatrical.'

He Xuan's reply, sharp, anxious, makes his skin prickle with a chill.

'That wasn't me either.'

The smirk slowly fades from Hua Cheng's face.

And if it isn't He Xuan—he has no reason not to interfere.

He leans over, whispering in Xie Lian's ear to let him know what's happening—and the crown prince straightens, turning to Shi Qingxuan.

'Lady Wind Master—cover your eyes!'

He shouts that in the array all of the sudden, and Shi Qingxuan's first instinct is to panic, whipping her head around until she sees the blood—and when she does, she chokes with terror.

'What—?!'

'The Venerable of Empty Words must have realized you can't hear!' So, it's decided to find another way to get its message through.

The blood is streaming across the floor, crawling up the wall at an unnatural angle— beginning to write something, and Shi Qingxuan scrambles behind Ming Yi, her breathing speeding up.

'W-Wha—I-I don't—!'

She's clearly not listening—and Xie Lian takes matters into his own hands, his expression turning grim.

"Rouye!" He orders, his spiritual device unfurling from around his neck, flying over to wrap itself around Shi Qingxuan's head.

'Oh!' She gasps, *'What—?'*

'It's for your own good,' Xie Lian explains, *'If you can't see it or hear it—it can't do anything to you.'*

Then, out loud, he speaks to Hua Cheng and Ming Yi, "We should all get out of here. Having her in this place is clearly only agitating things further."

They hurry down the steps, and while Xie Lian is more than used to navigating without his sight, poor Shi Qingxuan is stumbling every other step, grabbing Ming Yi by the arm.

'M-Ming-Xiong?' She mumbles into the private array, trying to distract herself.

'What now?'

'Before, when you were answering t-the prince's questions—'

Ming Yi stiffens, absolutely certain that she's about to ask him what was going on, but —

'Why didn't you just say 'my best friend' instead of all of that other stuff?! ' The earth master pauses, looking down at her.

Even with her eyes hidden behind Rouye and her ears plugged, she manages to look slightly indignant—her lower lip jutting out, hands on her hips.

And now, when she can't see, for the briefest of moments— His gaze softens.

'Who is that?' He asks flatly.

'...MING-XIONG!'

'That's what you get for worrying about something like that at a time like this.'

'A time like this?! You should be NICE to me at a time like this!'

Xie Lian reaches up to rub his temples, wondering if they're going to get anywhere at this rate, and then...

It becomes clear that leaving the temple was a mistake.

At first, Xie Lian just hears the rush of a crowd moving toward them—mortals, and from the disgusted sounds of onlookers nearby, the prince can guess as to what's going on:

The night march of the Bloody Fire Social.

The same troupe of actors painted in gore, all dressed in black cloaks—but this time, the four of them are standing directly in the troupe's path—

And they quickly become surrounded.

"Say, say! What do we have here?"

"Guests in our town of Fu Gu?"

One actor leers close to Xie Lian, not seeming to realize that the prince can't see him —or the gaping wound of his throat, slit ear to ear.

"Won't you spare a lowly offer some change, kind sir?" He reaches out with a blood soaked grin.

Ming Yi doesn't speak or react, his eyes locked on the wound painted into the actor's neck—but Hua Cheng is quick as a flash, slapping the actor's hand away.

"Who do you think you're speaking to?" He questions coldly.

The man stops, looking up at him—and quickly grows pale, even beneath the deathly pallor of his makeup.

Because the young man standing before him is tall, slender—by all means simply a well dressed youth.

But the moment the actor reached out for the white robed priest beside him, his eyes burned bright red, like two points of hellfire within his skull.

The actor staggers back, and Hua Cheng grips Xie Lian's elbow firmly, keeping the prince by his side.

Xie Lian isn't about to complain, disoriented by the crowd of actors milling around them—and that's when he feels it.

This sharp, cold, prickling feeling rushing down his spine as a breeze rushes by, and with it...

Xie Lian sees that dark aura once more. "IT'S HERE!"

It rushes past him in a dark cloud—and this time, the prince isn't too stunned to react. He reaches out, striking with the flat of his palm—and when he does—

He feels that dark, resentful energy coalesce into something solid. An arm.

But it darts back into the crowd.

Xie Lian grits his teeth in frustration—and in a moment of desperation, he does something that he hasn't resorted to before, looking up at his companion. "San Lang —I need some spiritual power, I'll pay you back later!"

Hua Cheng's response is instantaneous. "Alright."

The hand on Xie Lian's elbow slips down to grasp his own, and with it, Xie Lian feels a rush of soft warmth.

Then, without hesitating, he lifts his palm—firing off a bolt of light in the direction of the dark figure.

When Xie Lian borrowed spiritual energy before—whether it was from Shi Qingxuan or Nan Feng, they always gave him as much as he needed.

But not like this.

The amount of power that leaves Xie Lian's body is so great, it even startles him—and when it crashes into the building they just left—the temple of wind and water—the entire structure collapses into a pit of rubble.

"..."

"Was that enough?" Hua Cheng questions innocently, still holding Xie Lian's hand. "You can have as much as you like."

The prince fights the urge to turn his head and gawk at him, after all —

Perhaps Xie Lian is accustomed to having no spiritual energy—but this is immense.

Nothing compared to what it felt like without his shackles, certainly—but far more power than any normal god would be able to give out on a limb, much less a ghost.

Hua Cheng doesn't even sound winded.

"...No, no," Xie Lian shakes his head, his voice faint. "That was plenty."

The ghost king shrugs, not seeming troubled either way, and Xie Lian speaks out into the communication array.

'Lady Wind Master, where are you? We should find a different place to regroup and make a new plan.'

There's faint groaning, and Xie Lian hears her mutter in reply;

'Do you have to shout your highness? Ming-Xiong led me through the crowd with all of you, I'm right here!'

Slowly, Hua Cheng turns his head to see Ming Yi standing beside them, and Xie Lian hears the earth master speak sharply into the communication array—

'That wasn't me!'

Xie Lian's stomach sinks, his expression going strained as he looks around, trying to find the familiar green cloud of Shi Qingxuan's aura —but it's nowhere to be seen.

Nor is the dark shape of the Venerable of Empty Words.

'Lady Wind Master—what's going on? Where are you?'

When there's no immediate reply, Xie Lian directs his words at Ming Yi— "Why didn't you hold onto her when we came into the street?"

After all—two of her senses were sealed, and she isn't like Xie Lian— she wouldn't have been able to see the spiritual power of her abductor.

"I did!" Ming Yi retorts, seeming oddly agitated. "But there was a panic after you fired on the spirit, and people were being trampled."

Xie Lian pauses, sheepish—because it was a rational choice. After all —Shi Qingxuan's immortal body wouldn't have been harmed.

Ming Yi simply made the choice to save the mortals first—but in doing so, he lost Shi Qingxuan.

But that would have been only moments ago—surely, not even more than a minute's time.

"...She couldn't have made it far," Xie Lian mutters. "We should split up and look."

Just as he begins to say this—laughter echoes throughout the communication array, boisterous as ever.

But Xie Lian has known the Wind Master long enough to learn one thing: She laughs when she's nervous.

'Lady Wind Master?' He replies fretfully. *'Are you alright?'*

The reply he receives is…well…

'HAHAHAHA…WHY WOULDN'T I BE ALRIGHT? HAHAHA…I WAS ONLY TRYINGTOSCAREYOUGUYSIT'SFINE! MING-XIONG, HOWDAREYOUFUCKINGLETGO OFMYHANDIFIDIE I'M COMINGBACKTOHAUNTYOU AS A CALAMITY…HAHAHAHA!'

Instead of apologizing however, Ming Yi interrupts her—abandoning his usual tone of boredom. Instead…

He sounds genuinely concerned.

'Would you stop babbling nonsense and tell us what's going on?!' Xie Lian is quiet for a moment.

He has harbored mild suspicions about the friendship between Shi Qingxuan since the Mid Autumn Festival—and while he couldn't say whether or not the two are actually intimate…

It's obvious that Ming Yi cares for the Wind Master deeply.

In which case—the Crown Prince trusts himself more to remain levelheaded, so he interrupts.

'Have you said anything since it led you away? Does it know that it isn't Ming Yi?'

'…I don't think so.'

Xie Lian's tone becomes gentle—trying to soothe her.

'That's good. Stay calm, pretend you have no idea what's happening. Remember—it can only feed off of your fear if you react. Try spreading a spiritual barrier around your body—that should protect you if you trip and fall, and you'll sense any attacks coming.'

'…Okay,' Shi Qingxuan croaks, her voice thick with emotion, cracking slightly. *'Then what?'*

Hua Cheng's eyes flicker to the left, taking in the way Ming Yi's hands are balled into tight fists at his sides, his knuckles a stark shade of white.

He's a good actor—he always has been.

But this doesn't seem like part of the charade—or whatever plans Ming Yi would have had.

'Take a few deep breaths, nice and slow.' Xie Lian advises, his voice soft and gentle.

He's always been good at soothing people when they're frightened—and his presence has always been a comforting one.

(To everyone, of course, except himself.)

'Do you feel any better?'

'...A little,' Shi Qingxuan replies shakily. *'Thank you.'*

She sounds a little less frantic than she did before—so, Xie Lian decides to try his luck.

'Do you think you could move Rouye and see who is with you?'

Xie Lian is trying to make the order himself, of course—but the spiritual device isn't responding.

' *If I do, I'll probably die.'*

No frantic giggling follows this time.

Xie Lian pinches the bridge of his nose with a sigh.

It makes sense. The moment she opens her eyes and sees the creature—her terror would likely spike to a point where it could devour her entirely.

'After they took you from the temple of wind and water—what direction did you go in? How many steps have you taken?' Ming Yi inquires, and Xie Lian finds himself feeling even more hopeless.

If he can't command Rouye—she isn't close, not at all.

'...I don't know.'

'What do you mean, you don't know?!'

'Why would I keep track of that if I thought I was with you?! I just felt a flash of energy, and I thought you carried me out of the way!'

'Is it still carrying you now?' Xie Lian interrupts.

'No...no,' Shi Qingxuan's voice trembles. *'It set me down a little while ago.'*

And if it had picked her up and rushed off with her rather suddenly, the moment Xie Lian threw that bolt of energy...

The prince goes still, gripping Hua Cheng's hand even more tightly, not realizing that he was still holding onto it.

"...The travel array," Xie Lian mutters, turning toward Hua Cheng and Ming Yi. "It must have taken her through the travel array before the building was destroyed."

Meaning she could be anywhere by now, and they have no way of knowing how to find her.

'...I'm going to report this to the Heavens,' Xie Lian starts, preparing to ascend that instance, but Shi Qingxuan pleads in the communication array—

'You can't! My brother—his calamity is coming soon, and the third is supposed to be the worst of them all! Don't tell him!'

'If you don't stop being so fucking ridiculous, I'll put you through a calamity right now,' Ming Yi growls—but Shi Qingxuan, in spite of her obvious terror, remains absolutely firm.

'I said NO! Do you have any idea how much pressure he's under? How many people are watching him?!"

Shi Qingxuan is absolutely vehement, and it's almost admirable.

Xie Lian was always an only child, but even among siblings, the Shi brothers seem to share a deeper bond of loyalty than most.

'You think I'm stupid?! I KNOW this thing chose to attack me now on purpose!'

And while Shi Qingxuan might not be as strong as her brother—or as brave as someone like Xie Lian—the prince has come to recognize the level of devotion that the Wind Master has to those close to her, a rare thing.

'I don't care if it chews me up and spits me out, no one else is going to know about it until AFTER the trial, you hear me?! Even if it KILLS ME!'

Xie Lian is almost startled by the level of anger he senses from Ming Yi—so sudden, so intense, it seems to weigh down the very air.

'Fine. ' He replies coldly, *'If that's what you want.'*

This is getting them absolutely nowhere, but—

There is one way to deal with this that they haven't tried, and it seems to be the only thing left to do.

'...Alright—I have an idea to get you away, but I need your permission.'

Beside him, Hua Cheng stiffens—and Shi Qingxuan agrees immediately, not even asking what it is.

'You have my permission, your highness!'

Hua Cheng suddenly grips his hand firmly, his eyes locked on Xie Lian's face. "...The soul shifting spell?"

It's exactly what it sounds like—allowing the two people involved to switch souls. The cost of using it is enormous—and most aren't willing to allow their body to be inhabited by someone else anyway, but Xie Lian doesn't see another way.

"That's right."

"...Gege—"

'What are you gonna do when you have to face it? ' Shi Qingxuan frets, worried for him.

Xie Lian is rarely sure of anything, particularly with regards to himself—but now, he sounds entirely sure.

"It can't frighten me, so it's fine."

After all—he's faced a Venerable of Empty Words twice by now—and each time, he was the worst sort of enemy for creatures like that to face.

Because in all of these years—what has frightened him, other than his own nightmares?

Maybe when San Lang leapt into the Sinner's Pit, and Xie Lian hadn't known if he would be alright, but...

Ming Yi stares at the Crown Prince of Xianle, his expression conflicted—but he seems to move past that quickly.

"Do it."

Hua Cheng sends him a deathly glare.

“Your highness, please reconsider.”

Xie Lian shakes his head—knowing that there isn’t a better option available. Still— before he opens his mouth to activate the spell...

He stops himself.

“...Gege?”

There’s a long pause—a heavy one, with Xie Lian’s expression becoming torn.

Slowly, he reaches up and around his neck, lifting the chain sitting there, carefully gathering it up with the ring in his palm.

He’s only taken it off once, eight centuries ago.

And back then, it was Wu Ming’s ghost fire that he left to guard the ashes.

But Shi Qingxuan likely won’t be able to do much while she’s in his body— unaccustomed to the blindness or the shackles. So, the best thing to do...

Xie Lian curls his fingers around the ring tightly, biting his lip—and he turns to Hua Cheng.

“San Lang—could you please keep this safe for me until I get my body back?” The prince murmurs, holding his hand up.

Hua Cheng hesitates, but when he reaches out to take it—Xie Lian grips one of his vambraces tightly, anxiety etched across his face.

“It’s the most important thing I have,” he emphasizes—knowing that Hua Cheng would be careful with any of his possessions—

But this is different.

“...” Hua Cheng’s expression is impossible to read—countless emotions flickering through his eyes.

But his gaze softens.

“It’s safe with me, dianxia.” The ghost king reassures him quietly.

Ironically, it's the first time he's actually managed to touch his own ashes—much less hold them in the palm of his hand.

They feel heavier than he expected, sitting solidly on top of his skin.

Xie Lian nods—and as difficult as it is, he lets go of Hua Cheng's hand, leaning back.

His neck feels painfully bare without the chain hanging around there.

But this won't take long.

Hua Cheng frowns, disapproving. "Your highness, we should think of something else."

Xie Lian shakes his head, stubbornly resolved. "There isn't enough time." "Gege—"

'Lady Wind Master, are you ready?'

'Yes, your highness!'

In an instant, Xie Lian's body becomes feather light—almost like he might float away —and then, he comes crashing down to earth.

The first thing he notices is the softness of the grass beneath his feet. The sounds of the forest in the air—and just from the smell of the earth, the prince knows that he's much further north than he was before.

And back in the village of Fu Gu—his real body collapses.

Hua Cheng catches Xie Lian's form before it hits the ground, cradling it in his arms— and when the first noise he hears nearly makes the calamity become frantic.

A broken, pained moan.

"Gege?!"

In the early days of Xie Lian's banishment, he always wore bandages around his eyes —simply because he wasn't in the habit of always keeping them shut and couldn't afford to reveal his cursed shackle.

In the years since, however—he's forgeone such a measure.

His other shackles on his throat and ankle are covered with bandages

—but now, Xie Lian typically just keeps his eyes shut, or covers them with a hood pulled low over his head.

But now—the prince's eyes are wide open, pained, and terrified.

"I—your highness, I can't—!"

Xie Lian's voice echoes through the array, sympathetic, but soothing.

'It's alright, Lady Wind Master—take deep breaths.'

"But I—!" Shi Qingxuan reaches up to clutch at her throat, trembling violently in Hua Cheng's arms, and finally—he begins to understand what's happening.

"I can't breathe!" She whispers.

As a matter of fact—the moment she was dropped into the crown prince's body, that was the first thing she felt.

Aches in every part of her body—a blinding headache, overwhelming exhaustion— And like something was squeezing around her neck.

'Yes, you can,' Xie Lian assures her. *'Just inhale slowly through your nose, out through your mouth. It won't be for too long.'*

That's when Shi Qingxuan notices that the pain seems to be concentrated around her eyes, her throat, and her ankle.

Not only is the weight immense—but it feels like needles pickling through her skin, grinding down sharply until they hit the bone.

And that sensation is the most painful in her eyes, making her clutch at them while curled in on herself, shrinking in Hua Cheng's arms.

Ming Yi kneels down beside them, reaching for her shoulder—but the wrath of Hua Cheng's glare is so intense, his hand freezes in mid air.

After all—it might be Shi Qingxuan's soul in there at the moment, but it's still the Crown Prince of Xianle's body.

Shi Qingxuan isn't complaining, despite the fact that she's being cradled by a deadly calamity, the most feared creature in the Heavens.

If anything, she's shocked to discover that Crimson Rain Sought Flower's arms are surprisingly gentle—

And that he smells nice.

Faintly of smoke and iron—but also like the forest, just after the rain.

That thought almost makes her smile through the discomfort, and Ming Yi glares fitfully, frustrated by the fact that he can't get any closer.

"What are you smiling about at a time like this?"

"...You smell like your name," She mumbles under her breath—and Hua Cheng levels her with an utterly baffled look, until she speaks again into the array—

'Your highness, is this what it feels like for you all the time?' There's a beat of silence, and he finally answers:

'You get used to it.'

Hua Cheng's becomes stone-faced.

'Gege, can you see where you are?'

After another beat, he replies again.

'I'm about to.'

Then, there's nothing else—and the ghost king speaks into the array again, agitated.

'Your highness?'

Silence follows.

Xie Lian, similarly to Shi Qingxuan, is experiencing an array of new sensations— mainly the *lack* of pain, and even more so how light and limber his body feels.

...Is it truly that easy to walk?

Do breaths come so naturally to others?

It feels like walking on clouds.

It makes him remember how much he loved to run as a child, flitting from place to place, how light he felt.

He thought he had simply grown out of such things—but now, he finds himself filled with doubt.

And aside from that—there's a hand gripping his arm, pulling him along.

Xie Lian reaches up with his free hand, giving Rouye a gentle tap where it sits over his eyes—and while the spiritual device is startled, it recognizes a signal that Xie Lian has given many times before, slithering away.

The hand starts to jerk back, noticing the movement from Rouye—

But Xie Lian is faster, flipping his wrist around, dainty, perfectly manicured fingers catching the figure's wrist in a death grip.

His lips curve up into a faint smile. "Hello there."

It's nighttime, so it takes his eyes a couple of moments to adjust to the darkness, but —

He can see.

The shapes of the leaves on the trees around him. The slope on the mountain trail beneath their feet.

And he can see the dark color of the sleeve that he's holding.

Connected to someone tall, broad shouldered, his face turned away.

"You aren't Shi Qingxuan," the voice comments slowly.

"No," Xie Lian agrees, digging his fingers in tightly. "Should we introduce ourselves?"

"...Yes," the figure replies quietly. "I think we should."

But when it turns its head, Xie Lian's smile drops from his face, all of the color in his cheeks retreating.

"W..." He starts to take a step back, letting go of its sleeve, but it reverses their grip again, gripping Xie Lian's arm before he can flee.

"What's wrong, your highness?"

A white, smiling mask stares back at him, and Xie Lian feels his heart begin to pound in his chest.

Remembering that mask, among the last things he ever saw, devoured by a swirling fog of hate.

“Who are you?” The prince whispers, lips trembling.

“You know who I am,” it replies gently, in a voice that sounds so familiar—like a hunter imitating a bird’s call, enticing it to swoop back to its nest.

To protect its young, or a mate.

The Wind Master has a kind face, soft and delicate. Now, it twists into a snarl.

CRACK!

The creature is forced to retreat when a strike lands on its arm—so brutal, it’s broken on impact, bent at an impossible angle.

Xie Lian snaps the Wind Master’s fan shut, his eyes narrowed—and when he speaks, his voice—

“You are *not* Wu Ming.”

It’s *murderous.*

The white ceramic mask gleams in the moonlight, and Xie Lian watches as the surface begins to change in shape and texture—until it almost looks like a human face, covered in wet, white paint.

And it cracks open, revealing rows of needle-like teeth.

“You don’t recognize me?”

Its arm cracks and twists, slowly returning itself back to its original state.

“Why don’t you just go ahead and tell me who you are?” Xie Lian glares, building a spiritual barrier around Shi Qingxuan’s fan, sharp as a blade.

‘Your highness!’ She protests in their array. *‘What are you doing with my fan?! That’s a sacred spiritual device! It’s a GIFT FROM THE EMPEROR!’*

That’s something any martial god will do—turn an unrelated weapon into a sword. Old habits die hard.

'Gege, what's going on?!'

Xie Lian shuts the array out, and that jagged gaping scar of a grin widens.

"You will."

Before it can say more, Xie Lian loses patience, launching himself forward, striking out with the fan—

But this creature is quick, and it dodged the first blow, then the second.

But the third—the third blow hits, and with it, Xie Lian is able to slice off its right hand with sheer sharpened spiritual power alone, tackling it to the ground.

"Who are you?!" He snaps, one hand holding the blade to the creature's throat, while his other claws at that mask.

The material is almost wet under his fingers, like mud—but slowly, it begins to smear away as he scrapes his fingernails against the skin underneath, and slowly, a familiar face is revealed.

One not so different from his own, but time has rendered it nearly unfamiliar.

Still, Xie Lian flinches back, wrenching Shi Qingxuan's fan away from the monster's throat as he falls back on the ground, scrambling back.

The figure sits up slowly, white fragments of the mask dripping from its face, clattering to the forest floor.

"What's wrong, Xie Lian?"

The King of Xianle's face doesn't look the way it did when he died.

Not the old, broken man that he became, a preview of what his son would be worn into over the centuries.

Fractured, hopeless, and alone.

No.

This is Xie Lian's father from when he was just a child.

Not a streak of gray in sight. Young, strong, his smile gentle as he turns to look at Xie Lian—but it's not right.

Xie Lian's father had expressive eyes. He could never hide what he was feeling. This creature—

It's eyes are like dead pits in its face.

It repeats itself.

"What's wrong, Xie Lian?"

It lurches forward in sharp, quick movements—almost like a spider, never moving at a natural pace—

And it approaches Xie Lian on all fours, crawling like a beast, a deranged smile stretching across his face.

"Did you have a nightmare?"

It finds its severed hand on the way, reaching down to grab the abandoned piece of flash, pressing it against the stump of his wrist until the two knit back together, reattaching.

Xie Lian grits his teeth, kicking out with his foot when it gets too close.

The blow lands directly on its neck, caving it in—but that doesn't seem to stop the creature, it's hands still clawing forward in the dirt, his father's face smiling up at him.

"Don't be scared," It rasps, smiling wider and wider, eyes vacant and bulging. "Don't be scared, Xie Lian, don't be scared."

He kicks out again, this time snapping the creature's neck, making it fall limp, its head lolling around.

"Don't be scared!" It wheezes, its voice breaking up with laughter.

"DON'T BE—"

CRACK!

The next kick is so violent, it sends its head flying from its shoulders, rolling away into the grass—and as the creature scrambles over to pick it up, Xie Lian attempts to address Shi Qingxuan's form.

After all—Lady Wind Master's legs are rather short, and she doesn't have as much muscle as Xie Lian does in his male form. But Shi Qingxuan's male form is taller, and slightly more suited for battle.

Still, when he tries to perform the spell to switch genders—

Nothing happens.

'...Lady Wind Master, are you stopping me from changing your form?' He asks in the communication array, ignoring Hua Cheng's repeated calls of his name in his private one. 'I tried, but nothing's happening.'

'Oh?' Shi Qingxuan replies, sounding genuinely surprised. *'That's strange. Maybe it's a side effect of the soul switching spell?'*

Xie Lian hasn't used the spell before, so he wouldn't know.

'In any case, it's fine! I'm stronger in my female form, you know! I—!' Xie Lian cuts off the communication array again.

Well.

He clutches Shi Qingxuan's fan tighter, surveying the trees around him.

Her body might not be as suited to combat—but she isn't that much smaller—and Xie Lian can make up for the lack of muscle with spiritual power.

"Don't be scared..." That voice hisses again.

"Why would I be?" Xie Lian replies calmly. "What's there to be afraid of?"

There's a sour feeling in the air—almost as though he's offended the creature from wherever it's hiding in the underbrush, skulking like a rodent in the sewers below.

"Because you're so sure Crimson Rain Sought Flower will save you?" It sneers. "He doesn't even know where you are."

Xie Lian raises an eyebrow, surprised by the animosity towards Hua Cheng—who has the least to do with any of this.

"I don't need him to save me," he shrugs. "But if he was here, this would be going far worse for you."

After all—Xie Lian might have broken its arm and decapitated it, but

Hua Cheng…

If Hua Cheng had seen the way it had been crawling towards Xie Lian—the god is fairly sure that it would have been incinerated.

“Such faith in a ghost…” The voice echoes from different points in the trees, as though the creature is disappearing and reappearing at different locations in the forest. “Not the first time, hmm?”

The vague reference to Wu Ming makes him grit his teeth, his eyes flashing.

But…how does he even know about that?

And how does this creature know what Xie Lian’s father looked like?

“…Imagine having such faith in a man…when you don’t even know what he looks like…”

Xie Lian hears scuttling across the ground, almost like an insect.

“…Aren’t you curious?” The voice purrs, appearing behind his ear. Black painted fingernails appear on his shoulder, a large hand gripping him there as lips whisper next to his ear. “I could show you…”

The prince doesn’t jump—or even flinch.

Instead, he calmly turns his head—and when he sees the face before him, the rotting flesh, bone poking through, fangs and a slithering forked tongue, he smiles.

“San Lang doesn’t look like that, silly.”

“How would you know?” The creature looms over him. “That man is always changing his face.”

As it says this, its form flickers constantly before Xie Lian’s eyes, from one horror to the next.

“Because he showed me his true form already,” the crown prince replies. “I think I’ll take his word over yours.”

Of course—he hasn’t actually *seen* Hua Cheng’s face—but he’s felt it beneath his hands before. Enough to know that he isn’t deformed or mangled, not in the way that this creature is trying to present.

"You think you're so clever don't you, child?" The creature sneers. "You think I don't know how much power that spell requires?"

Xie Lian's smile slowly begins to fade.

"I just have to wait," It purrs, its fingers curling tighter and tighter around Xie Lian's shoulders, bruising them. "Then, it'll be just me and the wind master."

It's not wrong. All it has to do is dodge and stall. Even with how much energy Hua Cheng lent him—Xie Lian has no stores of his own, and no means of producing more.

He'll run out before the end of the hour, at best.

'Gege, ' Hua Cheng is still speaking into their private array. *'Gege, just use the Wind Master's fan to send up a whirlwind—I'll see it, and I'll come to you.'*

Xie Lian nods faintly—because that's a good idea. It means that the Wind Master's body won't be left alone with this creature, even when the spell runs out.

But when he lifts up the Wind Master's fan, preparing to do as he asks —

Arms wrap around his middle from behind, pulling him back against an unfamiliar chest, and lips whisper next to his ear,

"Are you calling him? That's good."

The prince ignores him, until—

"I'll hang him, too."

Xie Lian's hand goes still—and for the first time in so long, he experiences an unfamiliar feeling.

Hairs on the back of his neck standing up, his blood turning to ice.

'Gege,' Hua Cheng calls him again, and for the first time— *'Please, talk to me.'*

He doesn't know if he's ever heard Hua Cheng say 'Please' before, or anything of the sort. He's not the pleading type.

But it's that last part of the creature's sentence that slips under his defenses, and in those cracks—

There's fear.

I'll hang him, too. Too.

'Don't.'

Xie Lian's voice speaks up suddenly in the communication array, and Hua Cheng replies frantically—

'Don't what? Gege, I—!'

'Don't come!' Xie Lian replies sharply. *'Whatever you do, do NOT come!'*

'What's going on?!'

The prince cuts out the array again, his fan still aloft.

Behind him, the creature waits for a response. For the terror it's looking for, but—

When Xie Lian turns his head around, his eyes burn brightly in the dark, flashing green with rage.

"You're going to fucking *what* , now?" He asks coldly, his voice gaining an echoing quality.

Before it can respond—Xie Lian strikes out. Not with the fan, but with his bare hand.

Shi Qingxuan's hand might be small—but it's plenty big enough to grab the creature by the front of the throat, squeezing until the airway crunches under his fingertips.

"Say it again."

Xie Lian lifts him up, staring up at him coldly, watching that face flicker over and over again, changing into countless monstrous versions of one beast.

"Do you think you'll survive long enough for any of that?"

But there's something even more infuriating about it.

The creature is smiling.

Smiling down at him like Xie Lian has said the funniest thing in the world—it just can't laugh about it right now, not without its voice box intact.

And just as Xie Lian is about to snap its neck a second time—it turns into a cloud of smoke.

It swirls around in the air for a moment before flickering back towards the safety of the tree line, clearly meaning to make a break for it—

But Xie Lian has no such plans of allowing it to get away. "Rouye." His steps forward are slow, methodical.

The silk bandage is actually hesitant to return to him. After all, it recognizes that tone very well.

The same tone Xie Lian used in the Sinner's Pit, when he commanded the device to hang Ke Mo.

The same voice he used in the fallen kingdom of Xianle, ordering Rouye to kill. But this situation is different.

Because in both of those instances, Xie Lian was operating the device without any spiritual power.

And that's the thing about Rouye. The thing that no one else quite knows. Xie Lian brings Shi Qingxuan's hand up to his lips.

Normally, he wouldn't resort to using his own teeth—but the Wind Master is not a martial god, and doesn't have any blades on her person.

But his canines do the trick—breaking skin until blood streams past his fingertips— and Rouye is quick to wrap around his palm, drinking it up.

And when it does—it begins to glow brightly in the dark.

No one knows how Rouye was born. Nearly everyone assumes the bandage was a gift from Jun Wu—a means for Xie Lian to protect himself during his banishment.

But even Jun Wu doesn't understand what the device truly is.

A demon.

Born from the blood and suffering of a god. From the death of a king and queen.

And in those rare moments when Xie Lian can offer it spiritual energy…well.

It becomes a different weapon entirely.

“Hunt it.”

The bandage whips around like a snake with a rattling tail

And when it disappears into the tree line, Xie Lian kicks aside Shi Qingxuan’s shoes, finding the delicate material of the slippers to be a hindrance.

It can’t stay in a non-solid state for long. Xie Lian has gleaned that much from watching it.

And it won’t be able to escape Rouye. Not in a situation like this. Then, Xie Lian can bind it. Then, Xie Lian can piece it apart until he isn’t terrified of that word anymore.

Too.

I’ll hang him, too.

Why did it say that?

Hua Cheng is still calling out in the array.

Xie Lian can’t bring himself to listen.

He’s a ghost king. A calamity born from the Kilns of Mount Tonglu. Xie Lian knows that.

He knows that, and—

I’ll hang him, too .

Those words filled him with instant, irrational terror.

Followed by a rage beyond his control.

But it’s different this time.

This time, he has spiritual power.

This time, he can see.

This time, he has Rouye—

But when Xie Lian catches himself in that train of thought...

He stops chasing after it.

'This time. '

He keeps saying *'this time,* ' in his thoughts.

For there to be a *'this time,* ' that implies the existence of a *'last time,'* and now, Xie Lian realizes.

He's been in this position before. This exact situation.

Antagonized by the loss of a loved one. Chasing a ghost down a mountainside, enraged.

And back then, it was a trap.

The wind blows through his hair, gently making it sway around him as he looks up towards the sky, the harvest moon almost sinister as it bears down upon the land with a golden glow.

It isn't his first time chasing a ghost down a mountain path. Or even his second. Once, he found an enemy.

The second time, a friend.

In Xie Lian's experience, most things in his life tend to come in threes.

Too.

I'll hang him, too.

He presses one hand against the side of his head, goosebumps rising down the back of his spine, trailing through his limbs.

This thing could only be after one of two things:

Luring Xie Lian further and further away, wasting time until his spiritual power runs out, and taking Shi Qingxuan captive.

That, or it's true goal is something far more sinister: Xie Lian himself.

If the latter were the case, Xie Lian isn't sure why the Venerable of Empty Words would want him, but...

"Rouye," he takes a firm step back, holding the fan in an attack stance. "Return."

It brings very little comfort when the bandage returns from the trees nearly immediately.

Which means that the creature, wherever it is—is close. *'...San Lang.'*

'Dianxia.' Hua Cheng's voice isn't gentle or pleading anymore, but brimming with barely contained frustration. 'Where are you?'

'I don't know, but I need to ask you something,' the prince replies. *'What?'*

'Some Venerable of Empty Words are stronger than others, right? ' He keeps his eyes focused on the tree line, Rouye circling around him in a defensive position, forming a gleaming white ring.

'...Yes, like any other form of ghost,' Hua Cheng agrees. *'Which is why you should tell me where you are, now.'*

Xie Lian doesn't reply immediately, his mind moving faster and faster by the minute.

'Ren Song told me something.'

Hua Cheng seems startled to hear Xie's Lian bring the forest demon up now, of all times.

'What?'

'That if...he got someone inside his array...' Xie Lian glances around, turning his head to make sure he can keep an eye on every vantage point, almost becoming dizzy from how quickly he's checking.

'...He could access their memories...'

'What does that have to do with this?'

Because there's only two ways it could know what Wu Ming looked like. What Xie Lian's father looked like.

That it could have known the words 'I'll hang him, too,' would draw such a reaction from the god.

First, if he had access to Xie Lian's memories via some sort of spell. And second...

'San Lang,' Xie Lian's voice grows quiet as he turns his head once more. There's a shape in the darkness.

Only the lower half of a face can be seen.

A mouth, twisted into an overly wide smile—and the whites of its eyes can be seen flashing under the moonlight.

It would know those things if it was there when they happened.

'San Lang,' The prince repeats, but this time—his voice comes out as more of a croak. 'I think it knows.'

' *Knows what?! Gege, just—!'*

Creak…

Xie Lian's heart leaps into his throat—and it never stops smiling.

Creak...

"Don't you recognize me yet, your highness?" That mouth inquires, leaves rustling in the trees.

Creak...

With each repetition, that sound gets even louder—and Xie Lian's stomach plummets further and further down, until it feels like a stone in free fall.

He knows that sound.

"No..." He chokes, stumbling backward, Rouye shrinking closer to him, forming a tighter protective coil.

That smile in the darkness widens—and Xie Lian sees blood dripping from its jaws, black underneath the moonlight.

"You asked me to say it again..."

It whispers, drinking in the meal it's been waiting for.

Fear.

Xie Lian's fear, dripping from every part of his body as his limbs begin to tremble. "I'll hang him..."

Creak…

Something is lowered into the clearing, dangling from the end of a long rope.

And Xie Lian—

He knows those boots.

Even with blood dripping from the soles, pooling on the ground. He—

He made them.

"I'll hang him," the voice croons, watching with delight as green eyes flood with tears. "…Just like I hung Hong'er."

CREAK…

The body drops down.

Xie Lian whips his head to the side, unable to bring himself to look at it. He doesn't want to see—

Xie Lian doesn't want to see him. Not like that.

Instead, he looks back towards that face in the trees—and he sees it. The thing from all of the nightmares he never remembers.

The moonlight slowly expands over him, exposing long, jet black hair, a solitary streak of gray shooting through his right temple.

Long white sleeves flutter in the wind—that of a mourning robe. Now, Xie Lian doesn't see a face at all. It's—

A mask.

Half smiling, half crying.

Xie Lian stumbles to the side, barely catching himself by grabbing onto Rouye. He must have twisted his ankle slightly, but he doesn't feel it.

Everything feels so far removed from him now—even his own heartbeat feels like an echo, rather than something connected to him.

And there's someone screaming, and he just wishes they would stop, except that— Oh.

That’s just him.

He’s screaming.

And this time, when he launches himself towards the figure—he doesn’t stop.

He’s not even sure if it’s out of grief, anger, or fear anymore.

All Xie Lian knows is that he wants it to stop.

Like there’s this broken chord inside of him, ringing louder and louder and louder— and if he doesn’t do something now, he’ll break apart.

Like a wounded animal, lashing out in desperation.

But for the first time in Xie Lian’s life—his strike doesn’t seem to land at all.

Actually—it feels like he’s falling, as though the forest floor has opened up beneath him, leaving him plummeting into darkness, darkness, darkness, until—

When Xie Lian opens his eyes—he isn’t in a moonlit forest on the mountainside. Not anymore.

He’s in some sort of courtyard—this time in broad daylight—

And it isn’t cold anymore.

Actually, it doesn’t smell or feel like any other place he’s ever been, and— “Dianxia?”

Back in the city of Fu Gu, Hua Cheng, Ming Yi, and Shi Qingxuan are jolted to attention by one sound in their communication array.

One blood curdling, awful sound. A scream.

Both Ming Yi and Shi Qingxuan flinch, unfamiliar with such a noise—but Hua Cheng has heard it before

His first night as a dead man, when the love of his life finally found his body.

The worst sound in the world. The only thing that can make the ghost king afraid, and after so many years of building up his armor—

He feels naked, broken, and stripped bare.

Ming Yi notices the look upon his face, opening his mouth to ask, but —

Before he can, black painted nails grip him by the throat, punching him so deeply into the ground, a crater is left in the shape of his body.

Then, the ghost king rounds on Shi Qingxuan.

“Switch back, NOW!” He snarls, nails biting into his palms until they bleed. If the Wind Master wasn’t inside Xie Lian’s body right now, he probably would have physically threatened him to get the point across —but that doesn’t seem to be necessary.

“I-I’m trying!” She croaks. “He’s the one controlling the spell, and he won’t answer me!”

Hua Cheng pinches the bridge of his nose, trembling with anger.

“Before you switched, what kind of terrain was it?”

“Wh—?”

“If you waste my time, you won’t survive long enough for the Venerable to get you.”

It’s startling—because Hua Cheng has never been what Shi Qingxuan would call ‘friendly’ towards her, but—

Clearly, he’s capable of turning absolutely ruthless on a dime.

“I—It was hard to tell, I was blindfolded and I couldn’t hear, but—I could smell pine trees.”

He turns away from her, pressing his fingertips against his temple, speaking into an entirely different array.

‘Shuo.’

Normally, there isn’t always an immediate response between the two of them, not if the other is busy—

But when Hua Cheng uses this tone, the reply is instant. *‘What is it,* *Hua Chengzhu?'*

'His highness is in danger, ' Hua Cheng expresses quickly, his tone clipped and matter of fact. *'We're forty kilometers from Qinghe now, and he was taken through a travel array—to somewhere on a mountain with pine.'*

It might sound like a vague description—but to Autumn Twilight Shrouding Forests, it's enough.

There are limits to the range of travel arrays, particularly those that have only been used once—so he has to be within a certain radius.

'...Alright, ' the forest demon replies. *'I'm going.'*

'There's something dangerous with him—and he's in the Wind Master's body,' Hua Cheng warns. *'The soul switching spell?'*

'Yes.'

Normally, Shuo would ask more—but in a situation like this, he immediately sets himself to work, while Hua Cheng inhales deeply.

When he breathes out, he extends his senses, and along with it, his spiritual power.

The very same aura that he's been restraining recently, not wanting to overwhelm Xie Lian with the sight of it at all times.

The mortals can't see it—but it envelops the down of Fu Gu in a matter of seconds— and Shi Qingxuan, looking around through his cursed shackles, gasps with surprise.

Even still, it expands further and further out, hordes of silver butterflies slipping into the trees.

He'll find him.

Hua Cheng squeezes his eyes shut.

He'll find him.

And if he doesn't—the spell will run out, first.

Xie Lian looks around, disoriented—trying to discern if this is a dream, or a memory.

The details feel too sharp to be a construction of the subconscious, or some sort of illusion. He can see the individual leaves on the bushes—the intricacies of the carvings on the pillars.

So it's not a dream, no—

But it's far too unfamiliar to be a memory, either.

"Dianxia," the voice repeats, this time closer—and now, Xie Lian realizes— Whoever it is—they aren't calling to him.

Just as he realizes that, a child rushes past him, mischievous laughter darting through the air.

But just as the little boy passes through Xie Lian's view, he realizes—

There's something vaguely familiar about his features.

The shape of his nose—the shade of his eyes.

He's barely more than a toddler—all around cheeks and clumsy steps.

"Prince Bolin!" An exasperated servant cries, rounding the corner. "No running inside the place!"

Xie Lian received similar scoldings himself as a child, but— Prince Bolin?

"Oh," another voice interrupts, calling out from behind him. "He's just trying to fly away, isn't that right little love?"

When Xie Lian turns his head—there's a woman standing there, with dark hair and violet eyes, holding her arms wide open.

And in an instant, he recognizes the gentle adoration in her eyes. She's the boy's mother.

Prince Bolin beams, rushing into her arms.

"No!" He cries, but he giggles—as though she's exactly right.

"Liar," she smiles, blowing kisses against his cheek until he squeals with laughter, trying to squirm away. "Aren't you going to say yellow to your father?" The Queen looks up towards Xie Lian—and when she does, his face freezes.

“…Darling, what are you wearing?”

Xie Lian looks down at himself, but he’s not wearing anything odd—still just the dress that the Wind Master was wearing before. Maybe a little low cut, but—

She isn’t looking at him.

She’s looking through him.

And when Xie Lian turns around, he sees.

A figure dressed in elegant robes of red and gold—the sort of thing he would expect to see on a king, or an emperor. But on his face—

It’s a mask.

Half smiling, half crying.

A sight that has only ever filled the Crown Prince of Xianle with overwhelming terror.

But not now.

Now, as he watches the man wrench his head from side to side, fighting to tear the mask off of his face, his fingers clawing desperately—

“Darling?” His wife questions again, holding their son tighter in her arms.

—Xie Lian can’t help but feel pity, building in his gut.

“Papa?” The child questions, holding his mother’s dress a little tighter, and as Xie Lian watches the masked figure struggle, a voice pierces through the scene, loud, sharp—

“NO!”

And just as quickly, it all goes dark.

Xie Lian rolls over onto his hands and knees, disoriented—and when he looks up— He’s back where he started.

In the middle of the woods, on the slope of a mountainside.

Trembling, his lungs burning.

What—?

'XIE LIAN!'

Hua Cheng has never raised his voice to him before—or called him by his first name. But now, calling into Xie Lian's private array—he sounds beyond desperate.

'San Lang,' he replies shakily, *'I'm sorry, I—'*

'Let the Wind Master switch back with you!'

The prince hesitates, looking around him.

'…I don't think she can deal with this thing by herself,' he mutters—somewhat aware of the fact that Hua Cheng doesn't care about that—

But Xie Lian does.

And while Xie Lian might be frightened, or hurt—

That's all it can do to him, and in comparison to the possible consequences to Shi Qingxuan, it seems like a small price to pay.

Hua Cheng seems to know him well enough to understand that he won't leave her like this.

'Put some distance between yourself and it, then switch. She can send up a signal for us to find her when you do.'

Before, Xie Lian might have staunchly refused, but—

'I'll hang him, too…'

He swallows hard, his hands trembling against the dirt.

'…Just like I hung Hong'er.'

'…Okay,' he replies faintly, rising to his feet. He feels strange—and he can only blame that on being in a body he's unaccustomed to.

While Shi Qingxuan's body isn't weighed down with shackles—it also seems to tire faster than his own—and far more prone to nausea.

The easiest tact seems to be running to the top of the mountain—

where her signal could be seen the easiest, and where she would automatically have the high ground on any attacker before they managed to reach her again.

Once he breaks through the tree line, he calls out— *‘Lady Wind Master?’*

‘Oh, your highness!’ Shi Qingxuan replies immediately, audibly relieved. *‘We were so worried!’*

‘Do you think you can switch back? If you send a signal up, we’ll come to you immediately.’

‘Yes, yes!’ She agrees quickly.

After all—she might have been frightened before, but with the cursed shackles, it’s difficult to stay in Xie Lian’s body for that long. And if they wait any longer, Hua Cheng might just end up punching Ming Yi through the earth’s core at this point...

‘Okay—prepare yourself!’

Xie Lian is hit by that weightless feeling once more, floating up, up, up—only to crash back down with a heavy weight, slamming back to earth, with the familiar sounds of Fu Gu bustling around him.

He never thought a day would come when he would open his eyes and feel comforted to see darkness—but now, when he sees the sea of crimson—

Xie Lian makes a choked sound of relief.

“San Lang—!”

His words are broken off when he finds himself enveloped in a crushing embrace.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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?
I'LL DO WHATEVER AMUSES ME.

CREDIT: IMAGINARY

ANNOUNCEMENT!!!

The EXTREMELY talented ImaginaryCanvas has decided to take on the project of creating a comic adaptation of this story!! I'm so honored and grateful that they have taken the time to take on such a massive task, and I've been a fan of their work for a very long time, so this was extremely exciting news! While this has been in the works for a little while now, the first chapter is coming out very soon! Here is the cover art:

Artist: @ImaginaryCanvas
Author : @CATACLYSMICEVIE

The Original Post is here!

I'm sure plenty of you are already familiar with Imaginary, but if you want to keep up with WIPs from the comic or updates on when things will be coming out, please follow them and support them on twitter and patreon if you haven't already!

Chapter End Notes

a big thank you to Imaginary again for taking on this project! I'm so honored and excited!

xoxo, Evie

The Terrace of Cascading Wine

Chapter Summary

> ‘Lady Wind Master,’ He calls into the communication array, lifting his head from Hua Cheng’s chest. ‘Are you alright? Can you send us a signal?’ After a moment, Shi Qingxuan replies—
>
> ‘...I don’t think that will be necessary, your highness—and did something bite my hand while you were in my body?!’
>
> Xie Lian winces sheepishly before pushing past that, ‘What do you mean?’
>
> ‘I know where I am, I think...’ Shi Qingxuan’s voice is slightly faint, surprised. ‘Actually—this is the place where I ascended.’
>
> Xie Lian perks up, his eyes wide.
>
> ‘Really?’
>
> ‘Yes—it’s the mountain where my brother and I trained in cultivation—the Terrace of Cascading Wine.’

Hua Cheng’s arms crush the prince against his chest briefly, but fiercely—his cheek pressed against Xie Lian’s hair.

He doesn’t say it out loud—but the feeling behind it is loud and clear . *‘Don’t ever do that again.’*

Xie Lian squeezes his eyes shut, pressing his face into the front of Hua Cheng’s robes briefly, trying to get those words out of his head:

‘I’ll hang him, too.’

“...I’m sorry,” Xie Lian mutters. “I thought I could handle it, I’m—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Hua Cheng shakes his head. “You’re back now.”

Xie Lian takes a long, shaky breath—and he realizes his shoulders are still trembling.

“...Something strange happened,” he whispers, working to steady himself. “...I saw—” He pauses. “Where’s the Earth Master?”

“Who cares?” Hua Cheng’s reply is flat.

The earth master is currently dragging himself—one limb at a time—from a deep crater in the ground, coughing up dust as he goes—and Xie Lian doesn’t have time to ask more.

‘Lady Wind Master,’ He calls into the communication array, lifting his head from Hua Cheng’s chest. *‘Are you alright? Can you send us a signal?’* After a moment, Shi Qingxuan replies—

‘...I don’t think that will be necessary, your highness—and did something bite my hand while you were in my body?!’

Xie Lian winces sheepishly before pushing past that, *‘What do you mean?’*

‘I know where I am, I think...’ Shi Qingxuan’s voice is slightly faint, surprised. *‘Actually—this is the place where I ascended.’*

Xie Lian perks up, his eyes wide.

‘Really?’

‘Yes—it’s the mountain where my brother and I trained in cultivation—the Terrace of Cascading Wine.’

And Xie Lian is more than a little ashamed to admit—he’s relieved to hear it.

For a moment, in the pits of his terror—he really had believed that it was the White Clothed Calamity.

But luring Shi Qingxuan to a place personal to her? That means it has nothing to do with Xie Lian

Which leaves only one option left.

“San Lang,” Xie Lian goes to stand, and Hua Cheng lets him go—however reluctantly. “Is there a Venerable of Empty Words that would be powerful enough to access the memories of a heavenly official?”

The Ghost King hesitates.

Within the ghost realm, the supremes sit atop the heap. A very distant third to them in terms of power is Ren Song.

Venerables aren’t quite the same.

“There’s one,” Hua Cheng agrees. “That spirit was far older than me.” Xie Lian’s eyebrows raise.

“A Venerable could live that long?”

“...” Hua Cheng is quiet, seeming to choose every single word meticulously before he speaks. “Before the Kiln began producing Ghost Kings, there were many failed experiments performed by it’s forge master.”

It’s...forge master?

“The original Venerable of Empty Words was one of them—though it was so powerful, we call it the Reverend of Empty Words.”

Which makes Shi Qingxuan’s situation far more dangerous than Xie Lian thought— but there’s something else bothering him.

“...This forge master of the Kiln—was it Zhao Beitong?”

Hua Cheng and Ming Yi go completely still, both of them whipping around to look at the prince.

“...What?” The calamity questions flatly. “Where did you hear that name, dianxia?”

“...After the mission in Banyue, one of her weapons was recovered by General Pei,” Xie Lian explains. “Jun Wu told us that she was the first calamity, wife of Bai Wuxiang—and that she created the weapons that destroyed the last Heavenly Dynasty.”

Ming Yi almost opens his mouth to correct him—then seems to remember that the ‘earth master’ would have no way of knowing that.

Hua Cheng, however, replies easily.

“Most of that is true—but she was no Calamity.” He corrects him quietly. “She was a martial goddess.”

Xie Lian brightens, surprised—after all, he’s never heard of a martial goddess before —

But it also reveals a confusing crack within the story he’s been told. Why would a goddess destroy the heavens?

And if all of that is true—

Was she the woman Xie Lian saw in his vision?

Xie Lian supposes it's possible—if the Reverend of Empty Words was her creation— It might possess some of its creator's memories, and that was what he saw.

Finally, Ming Yi speaks up.

"The travel array isn't working. That thing must have cut off the connection points." Xie Lian frowns, his stomach tightening with building worry.

'...Lady Wind Master? Is there a place where you could hide out until we get there?'

'Sure—the tavern where I used to drink is still here, it's just empty now...'

'That's good,' the prince replies quickly. *'Seal yourself inside, and don't open the door for anyone other than us.'*

'Or Ren Song,' Hua Cheng interrupts. *'It's possible he might reach your location before we do.'*

'Either way,' Xie Lian concludes, *'Someone will be there soon. Just don't open the doors for anyone else.'*

'I can do that much, your highness,' He can practically hear Shi Qingxuan rolling her eyes. ' *I'm not a child. I don't need you to explain that I shouldn't open the door for strangers.'*

"But you'll tell them your name, your birthday, and everything else..." Ming Yi grumbles.

Since he's only said that out loud and not into the array, Xie Lian opts to ignore it, telling Shi Qingxuan—

'Good, we'll be there soon. Hold on and wait for us as best as you can, alright?'

Then, he turns to Ming Yi.

"How long will it take for us to reach him, you think?"

The earth master has already set off down the street, his face turned away from them. "On foot? An hour."

As they set off, Xie Lian looks to Hua Cheng. "Could I have—?"

Before he can even finish asking, Hong'er is being placed back in his palm—with the utmost care.

"…" Xie Lian closes his fingers around the ring tightly, holding it close to his chest for a moment.

Even in someone else's body, being free from his shackles for the first time in so long —the most alien part of all of it was the absence of the chain around his neck.

"Thank you, San Lang," he whispers, slipping the necklace back on, tucking the ring inside his robes.

Hua Cheng watches the gesture, his expression carefully controlled. "You said it was important to you."

So, of course he took good care of it.

Xie Lian smiles faintly.

He's aware that Hua Cheng has no way of knowing just how meaningful the gesture is —

But it means the world to Xie Lian.

"It's the last thing I have left of someone precious to me," he explains quietly. Hua Cheng doesn't reply—he just reaches for his hand, holding on tight.

The walk to the Terrace of Cascading Wine is quick, with little interruption from the task at hand. Ming Yi leads the way, his steps quick, posture sharp—and Hua Cheng and Xie Lian follow close behind, the former giving his god a brief history of their destination.

When Shi Wudu was sixteen, he came to study on this very mountain under a powerful master—and after his ascension, during Shi Qingxuan's time in the middle court, the Wind Master would often come to this place to continue his training.

And, the Wind Master being the sort of person that he was—each day of training was capped off with stopping by the local tavern before returning to the Heavenly Realm, drinking and laughing with friends to his heart's content.

Until one day, when a local man became so rowdy with a group of young women—the Water Master's deputy felt the need to intervene.

He bewitched his cup of wine—and when he spilled it all over the man's head, he was knocked out cold.

A year later, he would ascend from the very same place—coincidentally, while drinking.

Xie Lian can't help but find something about the tale rather odd. After all—ascension is a matter of fate and chance.

(Xie Lian himself ascended while sleeping.)

But Shi Qingxuan's path...

For most people who ascend, they take one of three directions: Martial prowess.

Scholarly might.

Acts of personal sacrifice.

For the Wind Master—while Xie LIan thinks she's a kind hearted and decent person— her path doesn't match any of those.

Outliers exist...and yet.

There's something about Shi Qingxuan's story—the whole of it—that doesn't seem to make sense. Colliding and incongruent factors that Xie Lian can sense, but not quite name.

And finally, when they grow close, and Xie Lian feels the familiar slope of the mountain path beneath his feet—a thought strikes him.

"...Shi Qingxuan hasn't asked us if we were getting close yet," he mutters, holding Hua Cheng's sleeve a little tighter.

For someone as anxious and impatient as the Wind Master at this moment—that's somewhat out of character.

Hua Cheng hums in acknowledgment, his eyes fixed on the path ahead.

"She might be too frightened to speak.'

That's not entirely out of the range of possibility...but still.

The closer they grow to their destination, the more Xie Lian feels a sinking pit in his stomach. Maybe lingering terror from his experiences in Shi Qingxuan's body—

But it feels like more than that.

"...Have you heard from Ren Song?" He questions softly. "Do you think he would have arrived before us?"

Hua Cheng falls silent, but Xie Lian can sense it, pouring off of him—Concern.

"It's been quiet."

That's the other thing that's been bothering him—

Hua Cheng is right.

It is quiet.

From the river at the foot of the mountain, to the stillness of the air.

There are no sounds of the forest.

No rustling of leaves or chattering of animals. Even the insects wandering beneath the grass seem to have fallen silent.

And then, when they begin to pass the tree line—it comes into view.

A familiar aura—sharp and green, with a burning core—and he's almost relieved by the sight.

Until Xie Lian notices something that makes his blood run cold.

Before, the aura from Ren Song's spiritual power couldn't be compared to Hua Cheng's—but it was still brighter than that of most other ghosts. But now...

It's noticeably dim.

Hua Cheng is greeted by an even more terrifying sight.

A small figure, against a crumbling stone wall marking the edge of the pavilion. Slumped over, his hair blowing limply in the breeze.

Ming Yi stiffens in turn beside him—so startled, his disguise briefly flickers—

But there's no comparison between that, and the darkness that passes over Hua Cheng's face.

Unlike the other two, Xie Lian isn't frozen in place with shock, instead rushing the rest of the way up the hill, kneeling by Shuo's side.

"San Lang—is he alright?!"

The calamity kneels down in front of him, placing his hands on Shuo's shoulders as he looks him over—and with every passing moment, his expression becomes more and more contorted with rage.

"Look at me," he mutters, giving Shuo's shoulders a harsh shake. "Now!"

"San Lang," Xie Lian interrupts, concerned—but before he can say more, the ghost's eyelids start to twitch, his movements weak, but present.

"H...Hua Chengzhu?" He rasps, his words slightly slurred—and when he opens his eyes, the pupils are blown, nearly blocking out his entire irises with darkness.

"I'm here as well," Xie Lian adds, feeling around for Shuo's hand, squeezing it gently. "What happened to you?"

The demon struggles to reply, wincing, blood dripping from the corner of his mouth— But when Hua Cheng finishes examining him, he—

He knows exactly what happened, and when he explains his voice is so cold, so sharp with anger—it actually startles Xie Lian to hear it.

"That thing—it fed off of him."

Xie Lian stops, looking over at the Ghost King with wide, unseeing eyes. "...His fear, you mean?"

Hua Cheng's expression is grim, his mouth pressed into a thin line. Eyeing the wounds in the side of Shuo's neck—

In the shape of a set of fangs.

"More directly than that, your highness."

For once—Hua Cheng doesn't have to explain, and Xie Lian—

He feels his stomach plunge with remorse.

Xie Lian doesn't have to ask how the creature did that—or why.

After all—he's done it before.

Centuries ago, standing in the Royal Palace of Yong'an for the first time, staring down the man that Xie Lian had wanted to blame for everything that had ever gone wrong in his life, even if the world is never so simple.

And in that moment, desperate for spiritual power—he had taken it from Wu Ming.

Not in the way he does now, relying on the generosity of those around him—Xie Lian simply took it.

He reached out and grabbed the ghost by the throat, digging his nails in until he felt power rushing through his veins once more.

Until Xie Lian felt strong again. Until he felt *safe* again.

It's one of the moments in his life he's always been deeply ashamed of —but never more so than now, listening to Shuo's shallow, unsteady breaths.

"...Will he be alright?" The prince whispers.

Hua Cheng doesn't reply immediately, pressing his fingertips to Shuo's temples, rapidly feeding some of his own power into the ghost's body to tide him over in the short run.

His reserves weren't completely depleted.

There's no sign of his form dissolving—and he wasn't reduced to a ghost fire.

But still—the damage wasn't insignificant. The 'Reverend' or whatever attacked him— it clearly meant to leave Ren Song entirely subdued, unable to complete his task.

"...He'll be alright," Hua Cheng concludes, allowing Xie Lian to let out a low sigh of relief, before adding— "But he needs to be taken to Ghost City for treatment."

His shoulders are tense, clearly torn as to what to do—but Xie Lian doesn't hesitate.

"Then you'll have to take him back," the prince concludes, his tone matter of fact.

Hua Cheng doesn’t argue that point—but there’s one sticking point for him:

“Come with me, then.”

The prince hesitates, turning his head back in the direction of the Terrace of Cascading Wine.

In any other circumstance, he would. Even if Xie Lian hadn’t grown fond of Shuo in the last few weeks—Hua Cheng is clearly upset about him being hurt, and the prince wouldn’t want him to have to take him back to Ghost City alone, but…

“…I have to find Shi Qingxuan and return her to the heavens first,” he murmurs, biting his lip. “As soon as I do, I’ll join you there to make sure he’s alright.”

“Your highness,” Hua Cheng mutters, seeming utterly torn, “you can’t expect me to leave you alone after that.”

“But I’m not alone,” Xie Lian points out with a wry smile, still squeezing Shuo’s hand tightly, pushing the boy’s hair behind his ear. “Ming Yi is here with me, we’ll stick together.”

Oh, if only he could see the look that Hua Cheng gives the ‘earth master’ in response. Within their communication array, it’s the same thing, over and over again.

It wasn’t me.

It wasn’t me.

It wasn’t me.

And why should Hua Cheng care, when the result is the same?

“…I’ll return as soon as he’s settled,” the ghost king mutters under his breath, while saying another within He Xuan’s communication array—

‘At this point, it doesn’t matter if it was you.’

‘I—’

‘You started this.’

So bent on revenge, that he can stomach the idea of being a pawn in a game someone else is clearly playing—too focused on his goal to even find out who is moving him across the board.

And now, lifting Shuo's form into his arms—

Ming Yi can't even look at the boy.

"...I'll look on the north side," the earth master starts, "you can take the south—"

"You'll look together," Hua Cheng cuts him off coldly, holding Shuo with one arm, lifting a set of dice from the pockets of his robes.

Normally, Xie Lian would be offended by the implication that he couldn't go looking by himself.

But given what just happened...

He can't really blame Hua Cheng for wanting Xie Lian to avoid being separated from the others again.

Once the ghost king disappears through his newly constructed portal —one that seems to be working now that the reverend has cornered it's prey—

Xie Lian and Ming Yi begin their search.

Initially, they have one goal: finding the tavern that Shi Qingxuan had agreed to hide within.

But when they do...

Ming Yi's face pales when he catches sight of the structure—and the door sitting wide open, swinging gently in the breeze.

Xie Lian has never heard him sound quite so desperate, until he calls — "Shi Qingxuan!"

He rushes towards the door, finding the inside of the building empty and abandoned —with no sign that Shi Qingxuan had ever been there to begin with.

And, of course—their calls into the communication array go unheard...or ignored.

"...I don't think it could have forced its way in here," Xie Lian mutters, pressing his hand along the frame of the door.

There's no damage to the lock or the wood—and no sign of forced entry.

Ming Yi falls silent for a moment, his palms pressed flat against the wall as he leans his forehead against it, breathing in through his nose, deep and slow, his shoulders stiff—but they refuse to tremble.

It—

It wasn't supposed to happen like this.

"Then why would she have answered the door?!" He growls, speaking to Xie Lian far more roughly than he had dared to in Hua Cheng's presence—but now he does not bother. "She was TERRIFIED, she wouldn't have answered to anyone else!"

"No," Xie Lian agrees, "I don't think it was a stranger."

The earth master rounds on him, infuriated, almost crying out those words again—

It wasn't me.

It wasn't me.

It wasn't me.

But the crown prince has no reason to suspect that it was—has no idea what is truly going on.

Hua Cheng and He Xuan—

They keep one another's secrets well, in spite of any disagreements they may have over the other's methods.

And oh, how Hua Cheng disagrees with him. How he judges him. It's always so easy to pass judgment on a life you haven't lived.

"...What makes you say that?" He questions slowly, his voice low, almost dragged down with emotions, turning flat and cold.

"She was still wearing earplugs—she wouldn't have been able to hear anyone calling at the door," Xie Lian explains, his expression grim. "But she was here."

Xie Lian can still smell her perfume, even if the remnants are faint.

“…Someone spoke into her private array, then?” Ming Yi mutters, leaning against the wall, pinning his hands against his temples. “Why does she share that password with anyone who fucking asks?!”

Xie Lian doesn’t comment on that—because even he agrees that, up until this incident began unfolding, the Wind Master was far too trusting.

“All we can do now is keep looking,” Xie Lian mutters, turning around. “She can’t be far.”

The Reverend of Empty Words had to subdue Shuo in the time before they arrived, and from what Xie Lian was able to gather after fighting it—

The creature is strong, frighteningly so. But it would not have been able to injure a powerful demon like Ren Song in a mere instant.

It hasn’t had time to go far.

Ming Yi seems to make the same conjecture, finally able to calm down enough to step away from the wall, hurrying back out the door.

“Stay close to me,” he mutters, reaching back to grab Xie Lian by the wrist. “I’m not dealing with Crimson Rain Sought Flower trying to skin me alive because you tripped over a rock.”

“San Lang wouldn’t do that,” the prince replies solemnly, more than aware of the fact that he’s lying through his teeth.

Ming Yi rolls his eyes—but he makes no comment.

The Terrace of Cascading Wine is more of a complex now than it used to be—more popular during the summer months, going unused during the latter weeks of fall and the season of winter.

There are multiple courtyards and buildings to check—and in each and every one of them, they find no sign of Shi Qingxuan.

The Earth Master grows silent, but Xie Lian can feel tension building up in the way that his hand grasps the prince’s wrist, laying heavy in the air.

“I think it would make the Wind Master happy, if she knew that you were worried,” Xie Lian comments quietly, almost hoping for Ming Yi to snap, retorting something about not being nothing of the sort—

But he says nothing.

"...Hold on," the prince mutters, digging his heels in and pulling them both to a stop. "I have an idea."

"If it's another stupid spell, I don't have spiritual power to spare like Hua Cheng—"

"No," Xie Lian assures him, shaking his head. He reaches down to his side— unsheathing fangxin. "This is different."

It just occurred to him, that's all.

Ming Yi stiffens as he watches the crown prince bring the sharp edge of the blade to the inside of his wrist.

"...What are you doing?"

"She still has Rouye," Xie Lian's expression doesn't change, nor does his breathing even halt as he slices into his own flesh, blood pouring down.

He stares down blankly, unable to see it running down his arm, dripping down and landing on the earth below

Xie Lian has lost many things over the course of his life, loved ones he thought he couldn't bear losing.

But the one thing that remains to him—as meaningless as it feels—still holds some value.

His line is ancient—and within his veins runs the blood of kings.

The same blood that birthed Rouye, forming its first baptism.

And if the demon is within reach, and Xie Lian's blood has been spilt — It will come.

Ming Yi is silent, watching Xie Lian's blood pool on the ground beneath his boots, staining the grass.

When he finally does speak, he sighs.

"...If you had to use blood, you should have used mine," he mutters.

Xie Lian shrugs, waiting calmly.

"It wouldn't work with yours."

And before the earth master can point out that they have no way of knowing if this *will* work—

There's a flash of white at the top of the hill before them, leading from the great tower looming over the pavilion.

Rouye.

Ming Yi starts dragging them forward before the demon even reaches them—and when it does, it wraps itself tightly around Xie Lian's wrist, slithering around excitedly as it drinks in the freshly spilt blood, hurrying to consume all that it can before the wound seals itself up.

Some might think of it as a slightly grim habit for one's own spiritual device to have, but Xie Lian has never minded. After all, it actually helps the blood clot faster, and—

After all, it deserves a good meal every once and a while. It works rather hard in the prince's service

When they reach the tower, Ming Yi is prepared to climb to the very top of it, but— That won't be necessary.

The moment Ming Yi sees her, the noise that rips out of his throat—

It's one that Xie Lian desperately wishes he wasn't familiar with.

He lets go of the prince's arm, and for a brief moment abandons any decorum, leaping the rest of the way up the hill in one step, falling to his knees by the Wind Master's side.

She's been left sprawled on the tower entrance, eyes closed, her normally sun kissed skin drained of any color.

And above her, scrawled into stone in what looks so much like blood, are the all too familiar words, the characters still dripping:

WRETCHED BEGINNING, WRETCHED END.

Xie Lian hurries after him, but—

This time, he does trip over something on the ground, not quite the same in shape as a rock, but easy enough for the toe of his boot to get caught up in.

He catches himself with one palm, Rouye holding him back with his other, and when he reaches down to see what tripped him...

He finds the Wind Master's fan, a powerful spiritual device...split in half, the character for 'Feng' cut straight in two.

Xie Lian holds onto it for a moment, his eyes wide with shock.

After all, he knew the creature was strong—that fact was clear from the very beginning. And he knew it was clever—clever enough to manipulate and terrorize.

But what short of a calamity would be powerful enough to snap one of Jun Wu's weapons in half? Who would dare?

In his distraction, he quite isn't sure if he understands the words that leave Ming Yi's mouth in a pained moan, but he could almost swear—

It sounds like 'Not again.'

"Wake up," the earth master pulls her into his arms, giving her a gentle shake. "Don't..." his voice cracks with pain, sinking down, down, down, only to rise again with terrified anger as he shakes her again, this time harder. "Don't be a fucking crybaby, WAKE UP!"

Xie Lian bites his lip, taking a long, deep breath, and accepting the truth of this situation.

This matter has grown beyond what they can handle.

He lifts his fingers up to his temple, entering the proper password before calling out—

'Ling Wen?'

There's a pause, but, as always, the civil goddess responds swiftly.

'Your highness?'

'I need to speak to the Water Master as soon as possible, ' Xie Lian explains, brushing himself off as he rises to his feet. *'He needs to descend.'*

'...He's with me now,' Ling Wen replies calmly, her tone marked with confusion. *'But he rarely descends to the Mortal Realm now, particularly*

with the days ahead being so difficult. But, I can certainly pass along a message to him.'

'Something has happened to the Wind Master,' Xie Lian's reply is swift and concise, wasting as little time as possible. *'I don't know if she's going to be alright, and he needs to come to the Terrace of Cascading Wine immediately.'*

Then, there is absolutely no response.

Ming Yi crushes Shi Qingxuan against his chest with one arm, and with his other, he quickly searches her body for any injury, finding none.

He hadn't—

For the briefest moment, their only witness being a blind man, he rests his forehead against hers, his eyelids squeezed shut.

It—

It wasn't supposed to happen like this.

Telling her the truth—even if that truth was horrible—

It was the only way he could think of to protect her from what's coming.

To show her what the Heavenly Court actually was, and more importantly...

What her brother actually is.

What the Water Master Shi Wudu has always been.

The sort of man who picks and chooses who lives and who dies upon his own convenience.

Who can live with the rape and murder of innocents, and use their graves as the foundation beneath his own success.

To show her that he's a—

BOOM!

BOOM!

BOOM!

The sky flashes with each clap of thunder, heavenly flight flashing down upon the mountain each time, but the first is the brightest. So intense, Xie Lian has to throw his arms over his eyes to shield them, his shackle stabbing painfully in protest.

And as soon as the dust settles, he hears a cry— “QINGXUAN!”

The Water Master moves so quickly, it’s impossible to discern individual steps, his robes streaming around him as he rushes to his sister, shoving Ming Yi aside.

The Earth Master steps back, his hands lifted up on either side of his head, but his eyes are narrowed, watching the Shi siblings with an expression so venomous, Xie Lian can almost feel it, even if he can’t see it.

Behind him, hurrying to his side are Pei Ming and Ling Wen—neither of whom have ever been close allies to the Wind Master, but seeing her brother in such a state has them both ashen and pale.

The Water Master leans down, pressing his ear against her chest—

And when he finds silence, he lets out something more than a cry or a scream.

It’s a howl.

The sort of scream that Xie Lian has only heard from grieving parents, holding their children in their arms.

The sort of sound that reaches inside of your chest and hollows you out.

Shi Wudu can’t breathe, not in the moments since he heard that his sister wasn’t. Can’t think. Can’t feel.

There’s only pain and terror, flashing between one and the other.

That horrible, building denial—telling himself that this can’t be right.

That he saw his sister at breakfast yesterday, and that she was fine. Her smiling, happy, self. Flicking strawberries at him with her chopsticks whenever he had the nerve to stop paying attention mid-conversation.

And the utter, merciless agony that can only come from silence.

Ling Wen stands at a distance, visibly at a loss for words, one hand clutched over her chest, her expression gaunt.

The only one who dares to step closer is Pei Ming, his own expression stricken as he kneels behind the Water Master, but where he tries to touch his shoulder—

Shi Wudu cringes away, trembling, whipping his head around in either direction to stare at Xie Lian and Ming Yi, his eyes bloodshot, brimming with tears.

“WHO DID THIS?!”

Xie Lian lowers his chin, and Ming Yi’s expression remains dark, closed off.

Shi Wudu looks up— and now, he finally sees the words written above the tower door —

In an instant, his face drains of all color, clutching his sister’s body closer as he scrambles away from the steps, running straight into Pei’s chest, his breaths quickening.

“...WHO THE FUCK WROTE THAT?!” He chokes, readying himself to wring the truth out of the other two if he has to—anything, just to avoid facing the truth of his sister’s limp form in his arms, but—

But then, there’s a rattling breath that arrests every other thought.

He freezes, turning his attention to Shi Qingxuan’s face—watching as her eyelids twitch, and finally—she begins to cough.

Xie Lian exhales a shaky breath, just as Shi Wudu lets out a trembling sob of relief.

“Qingxuan,” he croaks, rocking back and forth. “Can you hear me?!” He reaches down, pushing her hair from her face—and now that the Water Master can see that his sister is alive, he can actually allow himself to *feel* that overwhelming sorrow, tears slipping down his cheeks.

“...ge...?” Shi Qingxuan rasps, eyes still closed.

“I’m here,” Shi Wudu replies quickly, his voice breaking, “Gege’s right here...”

Her eyes begin to flutter, just as her brother looks up, readying himself to call for medical assistance before they can—

CRACK!

The sound of the slap is so sudden, so sharp—everyone goes silent.

The Water Master is frozen, a red mark growing on his cheek, his eyes wide, his tears still dripping from his chin.

Xie Lian struggles to grasp what's happened, until he hears Shi Qingxuan choke out—

"Don't fucking TOUCH me!"

She shoves at her brother's chest violently.

Shi Wudu still doesn't move—too shocked to react, but with every word that comes out of his sister's mouth—

"I don't EVER want to see you EVER AGAIN!"

That surprise rapidly turns to hurt, building and cresting in his eyes, and—

Pei shoves her hand away, his tone livid.

"What the FUCK has gotten into you?!" He snarls, eyes flashing. "Who the hell talks to their own blood like that?!"

Shi Wudu's head is still whipped to the side from the slap, his hair slipping over his shoulders to hide his expression.

"...Pei—don't," he mutters faintly.

"No," the general shakes his head, his voice trembling with anger, "I've looked past too much already—who do you think you ARE, speaking to your brother like that?! All while he's SHEDDING TEARS OF WORRY OVER YOUR UNGRATEFUL—!"

Regrets are like hailstones.

Forming so harmlessly, so many careless choices made out of emotions like fear, anger, or hurt.

And very rarely does one ever think a cold breeze or a cloud overhead will lead to a storm.

But once they form, they begin to fall. And it's the falling that gives them power.

Gravity pulls them further and faster, building up speed and force—to the point where a ball of ice no bigger than a man's hand could kill you.

Shi Qingxuan has been blessed in her life. Cherished and protected from the harshness of storms.

She never learned of the storms she could create on her own. The pain she could cause.

What it would be like to feel so sorry, that it turns into a recurring ache in your gut, flaring each time you remember what it felt like to be so *cruel* .

But the words that fall from her lips now will plunge down to the earth with such force, causing such pain—

That she will regret them for the rest of her life.

"I WISH HE WASN'T MY BROTHER!" She screams so loud, her voice cracks.

Shi Wudu still doesn't move.

His expression is hidden—and when she thrashes to get away from him, his arms are still locked around her.

"Let GO OF ME!" She screams, shoving at his chest again. "Don't YOU HEAR ME?! I —"

"Shi Qingxuan," Xie Lian starts, recognizing the terrified, hurt tone in her voice.

He felt like that once before himself—and the way he lashed out at his loved ones, the things he did that he couldn't take back—

They've haunted him ever since.

"—I HATE YOU!"

Xie Lian balks, absolutely stunned to hear the Wind Master speak that way.

But before he can react—the Water Master seems to snap out of whatever daze he was in, snatching his sister by the wrist, holding her in an iron grip.

“That’s enough.” He speaks calmly, his voice controlled through sheer force of will. “I don’t know what has gone on with you—but we’ll deal with this once you’ve received medical care.”

He stands with the Wind Master in his arms—even as she struggles, fighting to get away from him.

“PUT—PUT ME DOWN! MING-XIONG, YOUR HIGHNESS—HELP ME —!”

The moment Xie Lian takes a step forward, the Water Master’s eyes flash in his direction.

“Your highness,” he murmurs, his voice shockingly calm, given everything his sister just said— “Do not interfere.”

Shi Qingxuan tries her best to struggle—but whatever happened has left her body severely weakened.

She tries to cry out one more time, choking out the syllables,

“MING-XIONG—!”

But before she can say any more, her eyes roll back into her head, and she goes limp.

Ming Yi rushes forward, but before he gets even remotely close—

A sword flies through the air, stopping to hover before his throat, the sharpened tip glinting in the sun.

Shi Wudu hasn’t lifted a finger—and yet, the scabbard hanging by his side is empty. His fan still sits in his belt, untouched.

Clearly, he doesn’t seem to deem a possible battle with Ming Yi worthy of using such a device.

And the words he spares for the earth master are so frigid, even Xie Lian shivers, taking a step back.

“Know your place, Earth Master Ming Yi.” He holds Shi Qingxuan even closer, turning to return to the Heavens. “This is a family matter.”

Xie Lian doesn’t think he’s wrong—and as bizarrely as the Wind and Water Masters may be behaving at the moment, Shi Wudu is still her brother.

One who clearly loves her quite deeply, no less.

Who better to look after her now, than him?

Ming Yi is not quite so easily convinced.

“She doesn’t seem to want to be considered your family,” he glares, taking another step. “And she doesn’t want to go anywhere with you!”

The Water Master doesn’t turn back, and the sword doesn’t move—the tip of the blade digging into the base of Ming Yi’s throat from where he’s stepped forward, pricking him until blood begins to drip down.

“...Ming Yi, if you think your input is relevant, you have severely miscalculated your position.” The Water Master turns his head only slightly, enough so to meet Ming Yi’s gaze through the corner of his eye. “Stand down.”

The Earth Master glances around. Xie Lian has stepped aside, but seems to be listening to the situation rather intently, his brow furrowed.

Ling Wen stands at the furthest distance with her fingertips pressed to her temple— clearly in communication with other heavenly officials.

But the greatest and most obvious obstacle in this situation comes from General Pei, standing directly beside the water master, his hand noticeably resting upon the pommel of his sword where it rests at his side.

“...You certainly are confident when it’s three on one,” The Earth Master comments flatly, his rage barely hidden beneath a veneer of sarcasm. “So impressive—it’s easy to see why the emperor is so fond of you.”

And where their gazes clash, Shi Wudu’s eyes spark with anger.

“Assuming I need help to protect my family is a mistake you won’t survive making,” Shi Wudu warns him coldly. “And if you think I’m leaving my unconscious little sister with a man who has been openly interested in her, then maybe we should have the medics look at you as well.”

The Earth Master falls silent—but not out of shame, no.

Xie Lian can sense many emotions from the god—but none of them are shame.

But, to his surprise—

Ming Yi makes absolutely no denial of what the Water Master accuses him of.

"...Good luck with your calamity, Lord Water Master." He inflects his statement with a sarcastic bow, rising and turning on his heel to walk away.

"I'm sure that it will be a sight that none in the heavens will ever forget."

Xie Lian falls silent, listening as the other officials go their separate ways, finding something odd about Ming Yi's statement.

Not the sarcasm—he's come to expect that from Ming Yi.

No, what surprises him is that the earth master spoke so much at all.

Still—once he's gone, and the other three gods have ascended back to the Heavens once more—

Xie Lian's task here is finished, and as worried as he is about Shi Qingxuan—there's another, far more pressing matter to attend to now that her safety has been secured.

Slowly, carefully, he makes his way down the mountain—setting himself on the path towards Ghost City.

The Weight of Lies

Chapter Summary

> “...It’s Mount Tonglu,” he mutters, wiping a hand down his face.
>
> Xie Lian is quiet for a moment, trying to understand.
>
> “...What about Mount Tonglu?”
>
> “It’s opening,” Hua Cheng explains through clenched teeth. “Not now—but soon. And it...has an effect on calamities.”

It’s an awfully long way from here, and Xie Lian doesn’t have the spiritual power necessary to create a travel array—which means he’s left traveling on foot.

Normally, such a journey would take him around two days or so, but given how serious Shuo’s injuries were...

Xie Lian is reluctant to take so long in returning to them.

In which case—the most obvious option, of course, would be to call Hua Cheng in his private communication array in order to ask the Ghost King to come and fetch him.

And that—that would require saying the password. Not once. Not twice.

But *three* times.

And Xie Lian—he can’t bring himself to do that. But—

That isn’t his only option.

After a moment of fishing around in his pockets—Xie Lian lifts out a set of dice, remembering Hua Cheng’s words from not so long ago—

‘It doesn’t matter what you roll—I’ll always appear.’

It seems like a bit of a silly thing to do, after all—almost like a child waiting outside of a hall after martial arts practice, calling his mother to come and fetch him home.

But still, Xie Lian had felt horrible about not accompanying them back before—

And waiting two days to see if Shuo is alright seems like too much to bear.

But just as Xie Lian prepares himself to roll...

He hears something.

This distant, rhythmic sound, a repetitive *thud* , *thud* , *thud* , followed by... Chanting.

Gravelly voices, repeating the words in unison:

“YI YU XI, YI YU XI!”

“YI YU XI, YI YU XI!”

And in all honesty, if any other person had witnessed the sight that appears before him, they would have likely begun to scream and run for the hills.

But Xie Lian can’t ‘see’ any sight, and even if he could—he’s become a bit too accustomed to the presence of Ghosts to feel startled when he sees the small pockets of resentful energy descending towards him.

Six ghosts, each bearing a structure shrouded in shadow and mist until it grows closer—when anyone standing nearby would have been able to see it’s true form:

A step litter.

Extravagant, with golden bars and a crimson silk canopy fluttering slightly in the breeze.

Xie Lian, somewhat unaware of what’s going on, simply steps back from the road in order to allow the ghosts to pass—but they do no such thing.

Instead, they come to a halt directly in front of him.

Xie Lian is able to discern from the sound of their movements now that this must be some sort of litter—and he finds himself wondering if he’s come across some well off female ghost, off to meet some lover on a date, but...

One of the bearers turns its head towards him, the vertebrae in its neck cracking as it does so. Each of the ghosts are little more than bone, their skeletons gleaming gold under the demonic light from the step litter.

“Pardon, sir,” one of the skeletons says, its jaw bones creaking with each syllable. “We were sent by the Ghost King Hua Chengzhu to retrieve the Crown Prince of Xianle. Would that be you?”

Oh. *Oh* .

Xie Lian lifts his hand from fangxin, suddenly realizing that he had reached for the weapon in the first place.

“I—yes, that’s me,” he agrees faintly—and as soon as he confirms his identity, one of the golden skeletons scrambles forward to pull aside the canopy.

He offers one bony hand to help the prince up the steps.

“Right this way, sir—right this way!”

Xie Lian hesitates at first.

In his younger years, it was common for his parents to attempt to insist that he travel from place to place on the royal litter—but he often refused.

Back then, it was simply because he preferred to walk—and now, it almost seems inappropriate for someone like him to be carried around in such a grand litter. After all, who does he think he is?

“...There’s really no need,” he mumbles, but the skeleton bearer wiggles its hand insistently.

“Our lord’s orders I’m afraid, we insist!”

...But if Hua Cheng really did order those creatures to come all this way...

Xie Lian sighs, allowing himself to be assisted up the steps.

It really can’t be helped.

Once inside, he finds a chair that is really far too wide for just one person, though Xie Lian wouldn’t go so far as to call it a divan or sofa.

In any case—it’s more than comfortable enough for him as he takes a seat, pulling his legs up underneath him as he leans his head against the cushions.

And once the prince is elated and comfortable, the litter takes off once more—moving far faster than it did before.

As a matter of fact—Xie Lian would dare say that it could easily out pace a man on horseback. But somehow, the ride remains smooth—calm enough for him to relax, as his mind begins to wander.

There's something strange going on between the Masters of Wind and Water.

Not just Shi Qingxuan's words when she awoke in the Terrace of Cascading Wine— but they were completely out of character.

Even to Pei, whom she openly dislikes, Xie Lian has never heard the Wind Master be so harsh, so—

So openly cruel.

And for that reason alone, Xie Lian would believe that she had been bewitched by the Reverend when it attacked her. Such a move would make sense, given how turning Shi Qingxuan against her only family would add to her misery, but...

If that were the case, he would have expected Shi Wudu to seem more shocked.

He was hurt, clearly—but he didn't ask questions, or express the sort of confusion that Xie Lian would expect from a brother whose sister suddenly turned against him in a fury.

Instead, he simply silenced Shi Qingxuan and took her away—

Almost as though he didn't want to give her the chance to say anything more, implying...that he's siding something.

And Xie Lian...he might believe that.

Because while Shi Qingxuan has been acting strangely ever since she came to ask him for help—her fright was a clear explanation for that, and Xie Lian doesn't think that she's been dishonest with him at any point so far.

It's Shi Wudu who has been behaving oddly—and for quite some time now.

That might be a presumptuous conclusion to come to—after all, Xie Lian only met the Water Master rather recently, but…

His actions have contradicted everything Xie Lian had assumed about him before— from not only his reputation, but also his position.

The Water Tyrant. Known for being selfish, prideful, and distant from the Mortal Realm.

Who also just so happens to be Jun Wu's favorite.

A position that Xie Lian remembers being in all too well.

Which is why Shi Wudu's actions confuse him even more.

He remembers the conversations he used to have with the emperor—the emphasis that was always placed on courtesy and humility.

Qualities that the Water Master has never reflected, except—

Except for in the moments when he's directly opposed Jun Wu in public.

Taking up for Hua Cheng, someone he seemed to care very little for one way or the other. Stopping that play during the Mid Autumn Festival.

Those two instances stood out in stark contrast to everything else Shi Wudu has done in Xie Lian's presence—and in both moments, while his actions were kind—

The Water Master didn't speak compassionately, or express concern for those for whom he was interceding.

If anything—he seemed distressed in those moments, hiding any disturbance with a veneer of condescending arrogance.

Almost like he's…afraid of something.

Or someone.

Could that…have been the Reverend of Empty Words?

But that doesn't make any sense.

Even if Shi Wudu knew that the Reverend wasn't destroyed—it had left them in peace for four centuries. How could he have known that it would return?

And why would that make him behave so erratically in the Heavens, the place where he—and Shi Qingxuan—would be the safest?

That would mean that something within the Heavens was frightening him—or, at the very least, occupying his thoughts enough to impair his judgment.

But what could do that to a god as powerful as the Water Master? And if something is threatening him...

That's a problem.

Not only because of the Water Master's strength, and the threat it could pose to all of them, but—

Because Xie Lian doesn't actually believe that Shi Wudu is what he seems.

The selfish, arrogant person that everyone, even his peers seem to believe him to be.

There has to be someone else, underneath such a heavy shield of pride.

The older brother that Shi Qingxuan adores, always having such faith in. And after that display—

Xie Lian agrees with the assessment Ming Yi made during the Mid Autumn festival.

...He *does* believe that General Ming Guang and the Water Master are lovers. And not in the casual sense that people typically associate with Pei—

That protective outrage he showed on Shi Wudu's behalf on the turn of a dime... From the outside looking in, the truth becomes difficult to deny.

Pei Ming isn't simply the Water Master's friend—or even a casual partner.

He's in love with Shi Wudu.

And in Xie Lian's experience, such trust and loyalty from those who love you— It doesn't come from nothing.

Then, something clicks into place for him—so suddenly, it actually makes him sit up in his chair, reaching out to grip the hand of it.

The thing about this situation that has been crawling underneath the surface of his thoughts, tugging at his attention.

The reason he felt so certain in his evaluations about the Water Master. The—

The reason he nearly intervened, when Shi Qingxuan lashed out the way she did. Because—

Xie Lian reaches up, grasping the chain around his neck tightly. The Water Master…

…In eight centuries, he has only encountered two people who strongly reminded him of Hong'er.

The first being Hua Cheng, and the second…

Is Shi Wudu.

And that might seem like a bizarre comparison to make. A child born with nothing to the God of Wealth.

But it's true.

Every comparison Xie Lian has made between Hua Cheng and Hong'er has been drawn between the way the two looked after him—similarities in small mannerisms and habits.

At first glance, the Ghost King felt so familiar, that when they met… Xie Lian called out Hong-er's name.

It had been so long since he felt the agonizing disappointment of calling out for him, and receiving no answer.

And even if there have been other similarities that he's noticed since—there's no point in asking again.

That was one of the things he learned from the Reverend.

There's one thing he does fear, even how—and it's feeling that pain, that loss, all over again.

And of course—he's under no pretenses that there is any actual connection between Shi Wudu and Hong'er.

The two lived centuries apart—and even the possibility of reincarnation isn't likely.

Xie Lian knows that people say you can't recognize a soul's past life. That everything about them becomes erased when they pass from one journey into the next.

He knows.

But if he came across Hong-er's soul again, he would feel it.

Against all reason, against everything that he has ever been taught—Xie Lian believes that.

The connection he draws between the two stems from the way they treat those they care for.

With a level of loyalty that often seems almost absurd.

A love so fierce, that, in order to protect it—

It makes a man willing to become ruthless.

Xie Lian has no doubt that, had he lived long enough—Hong'er would have become immeasurably strong. Maybe even stronger than him.

All in the name of protecting Xie Lian.

Of keeping him safe.

And if someone had threatened that...

The prince has no doubt that Hong'er would have used any means at his disposal to protect him. And not only that, but—

Hong'er could behave pridefully himself.

Never with Xie Lian—he always treated the prince with the utmost level of humility and respect—but with others, certainly.

But that smugness—while it was sometimes the result of a playful nature, more often than not, it stemmed from one of two emotions:

Fear, or pain.

And while it's obvious that the Water Master is afraid of something, it leaves Xie Lian to wonder—

Whatever that thing may be—is it hurting him, too?

And if that's true, there aren't many people who could—

Before Xie Lian can complete that thought, the step litter comes to a halt.

He almost asks what the issue is—but when he opens his eyes and sees the ocean of crimson spiritual energy around him, that answer becomes self-evident.

The deja vu isn't lost on him—remembering the last time he was stopped by a ghost, riding in a litter like this...if not slightly less grandiose.

But this time, when a hand reaches between the curtains—Xie Lian reaches with his own to take it without complaint.

"Gege," the Ghost King sighs as he helps him down the steps, noticeably relieved. "You're here."

Xie Lian gives his hand a gentle squeeze, sticking close to Hua Cheng's side as he leads him through the streets of Ghost City.

"I promised I would come as soon as I could, San Lang," the prince assures him. "... How is Shuo?"

Just as he asks—he notices something else— The street is relatively quiet.

Unusual, for a place like Ghost City.

"...It's been a long time since a high level savage ghost was attacked like this," Hua Cheng admits softly, leading Xie Lian towards Paradise Manor. "It's left everyone on edge."

Particularly when it wasn't a ghost who had tangled with Heavenly Officials, like Xuan Ji.

Her decision to harass Pei was ill advised and clear cut—and allying herself with Qi Rong won her few friends in the ghost realm.

But Ren Song isn't in the same league as her—and even if he was—

He's under the direct protection of the most powerful ghost there is: Hua Cheng.

Which begs the question:

If Ren Song can be brought to such a state—how are any of them safe?

And what ghost could have done it?

When they step through the halls of Paradise Manor, it's devoid of any servants, the quiet only broken by…

Swearing.

"MotherFUCKER that HURTS!"

Xie Lian exhales sharply, so relieved to hear that the ghost is awake, even if it's only to curse at someone—and when he rushes into the bedroom, Shuo glances up, blinking blearily.

He's sitting up on the edge of the bed, struggling against Yin Yu, who has been working to stitch up the wounds on his neck.

A sweat has broken out across his forehead, and his cheeks are unusually flushed for a ghost—and Xie Lian can hear how hoarse his voice is when he croaks—

"…Dianxia?"

For a moment, the prince freezes, visibly startled—but he quickly recovers from it, hurrying to Shuo's side, reaching over to grasp his hand.

"I'm here," Xie Lian murmurs, reaching up to press the back of his hand against Shuo's forehead.

And when he feels the unusual heat there, he frowns—looking to Hua Cheng with concern.

The ghost king shrugs, arms crossed over his chest as he leans against the wall, watching them with a guarded expression.

"Whatever that thing was—it's death qi is toxic."

Xie Lian arches an eyebrow. He's aware of the fact that such things are a danger to mortals, but…

"I had no idea ghosts could be sickened by that sort of thing…"

"Not usually," Hua Cheng agrees, his eyes growing impossibly dark.

"But not all ghosts are the same."

A weaker ghost, for example, would not have been able to feed off of Shuo—much less leave him so much worse for wear. And Xie Lian seems to be rapidly coming to the same conclusion that Hua Cheng did, when he found him—

It allowed Shuo to live intentionally. Otherwise, he would be...

"Did it find your ashes?" Hua Cheng questions—and his voice sounds calm, but there's clearly tension underneath.

Xie Lian stiffens, startled—having had no idea that Shuo carried something as precious as his own ashes on his person at any point in time.

"...No," Shuo mumbles, reaching up to rub his fingers over the choker sitting around his throat.

The emerald there still gleams in the candlelight, unharmed—and the ashes hidden behind it remain untouched.

He's undressed from the waist up while Yin Yu finishes dressing the wound on the side of his throat—dangerously close to where the ashes sit.

"...Do you remember anything about the creature that attacked you?" Xie Lian questions gently, still squeezing his hand..

"Not really," Shuo mutters, shaking his head. "Everything's blurry, but...it was strong."

The way he says the last word—with so much trepidation— It startles Xie Lian.

Because...there are supposedly only two ghosts that are stronger than Shuo—and one of them would never hurt him

"...Was it Blackwater?" He questions quietly, not seeing the way Shuo and Hua Cheng look at one another—their expressions tense, but grim.

"No," Shuo shakes his head, his voice coming out a little steadier now. "We aren't enemies—and I would have recognized him."

Xie Lian nods, unsurprised. After all—the Reverend of Empty Words and Blackwater being one in the same...

Well, the implications of that stretch too far to consider. “Did you manage to get a clear look at his face?”

Xie Lian wouldn’t have been surprised if Shuo had said that he didn’t remember, or that he simply hadn’t recognized him, but—

“...He didn’t have one.”

The prince pauses, unsure of what to make of that.

“You mean...” he swallows hard, fighting the goosebumps rising on the back of his neck. “...He was wearing a mask?”

“No,” Shuo shakes his head slowly, his brow furrowed as he struggles to recall. “He just...had no face.”

Xie Lian grips his hand a little tighter as he listens.

“Where his eyes, nose, and mouth were supposed to be, there was just...nothing.” Shuo mutters, sniffing and rubbing his nose irritably. “I remember it running towards me on all four limbs...almost like a dog, but not really, more like...”

“...A spider?” Xie Lian prompts him quietly.

“Yeah,” Shuo mutters, a shiver wracking him. “Just like a spider.”

The prince can still remember it through his mind’s eye—that warped , smiling face, wearing the skin of his father as it crawled toward him like a beast, crooning those words over and over again;

Don’t be scared.

Did you have a nightmare?

Don’t...don’t be scared.

“I don’t know what happened after that,” Shuo concludes, glancing back up at Hua Cheng. “Next thing I knew, you were carrying me back to Ghost City.”

“...You need to rest,” the calamity mutters, pushing off of the wall as he walks over to Shuo’s bedside, pushing up his sleeve. “You might remember more when your strength comes back.”

He offers the ghost his wrist—which Shuo takes without hesitation.

Xie Lian may be a bit hypocritical for being startled by the sound of Shuo's fangs piercing Hua Cheng's skin—but the ghost king seems completely unbothered, watching as the boy drinks his blood.

"He doesn't have enough spiritual power to purge the death Qi on his own right now," he explains to Xie Lian as Shuo takes a few more hungry swallows. "This is the most efficient way to give him mine."

Xie Lian supposes he's engaged in the same behavior before with Rouye, even if he wasn't explicitly giving spiritual power in that sense.

Of course—he's also aware of Hua Cheng's other 'efficient' means of sharing power, but...

That method wouldn't be appropriate for being used on Shuo, given the nature of their relationship.

...But then again, if that's true...why is it appropriate when it's the two of them?

Xie Lian swallows hard, contemplating the implications behind that until Hua Cheng pulls his wrist back, his skin knitting back together instantly as he slides his sleeve back into place.

"...Come gege," he mutters, walking out of the room. "We have other matters to discuss."

The prince remains on the bed beside Shuo for a moment, his head tilted to the side.

It's very clear—to him at least—that Hua Cheng *is* worried about Shuo. After all—he can't imagine the Ghost King offering his own blood up for just anyone, and...still.

He seems reluctant to let that show.

"..." Xie Lian gives Shuo's hand one last squeeze, reaching up to pat his cheek gently. "I'm glad you're alright," he murmurs, "I was so worried when we found you like that."

The demon hangs his head, ashamed.

"...I won't fail again, your highness," he mutters—sounding bitterly disappointed in himself.

"..." Xie Lian pats his cheek one last time, rising to his feet—and then, he does something that truly surprises the ghost.

He leans forward, carefully wrapping one arm around him in a gentle embrace, a—

A hug.

He's hugging him.

Shuo is too stunned to reciprocate, stiff and awkward—but he makes no move to push Xie Lian away, and after a moment, he leans back on his own.

"...I don't care how many times you fail," Xie Lian mutters, shaking his head. "As long as you're still here—that's all that matters."

The Ghost falls silent, his eyes wide—and Xie Lian takes that moment to follow after Hua Cheng, knowing that he ought to let Shuo rest.

Maybe it wasn't his place to say such a thing—and more likely than not, he wasn't the person Shuo wanted reassurance from in that moment—

But Xie Lian's life would have been so different if just *one* person had told him that—and he knew that Shuo needed to hear it.

When he joins Hua Cheng in the hallway, he quietly relays what happened between Shi Qingxuan and his brother after the ghost king left—and to Xie Lian's surprise, he doesn't ask any questions, listening quietly, his hands clasped behind his back.

"...Are you alright, San Lang?"

The Ghost King looks to him, standing a little bit straighter.

"What do you mean, your highness?"

Xie Lian shrugs, clasping his hands behind his back. "You just...you've seemed like there's been something on your mind."

A tension that only seems to weigh him down more and more. And oh, if only he knew.

Hua Cheng almost bites back a smile, noticing that they're walking with the same posture, side by side.

"...It's nothing that his highness should concern himself with," the calamity mutters, shaking his head.

In the end, the reason is simple:

If Hua Cheng had it his way—he would have absolutely no secrets from the prince, but...

He hasn't been given any form of a choice.

Xie Lian falls silent—unaware of the nature of Hua Cheng's predicament, but the Ghost King can tell—he doesn't like having his worries brushed off.

But none of that prepares him for the next question to come out of the prince's mouth.

"Why did neither of you ever tell me?"

"Never tell you what?"

"That Shuo was born in Xianle."

Hua Cheng comes to a sudden halt in the middle of the hallway, his eyes widening.

"...For being as old as he is, I always thought his accent seemed a little modern," Xie Lian explains, fiddling with the hem of his sleeve. "But I never gave it more thought than that...until just now."

When Shuo called him 'dianxia.'

He's called him that before—plenty of times—it's not the word itself that was strange.

It was that, clearly because he was disoriented—Shuo slipped back into his real accent.

And THAT inflection on 'dianxia' is one that Xie Lian has heard plenty of times before.

From Mu Qing.

He still says it that way, even now.

Meaning that Shuo was most likely raised as a commoner and in Xianle.

"...You'll have to ask him," Hua Cheng mutters. "I don't know what his reasons for keeping it to himself were."

But now—Xie Lian notices something else.

Hua Cheng—

He sounds frustrated.

More so than Xie Lian has ever heard him—even when the prince was ignoring his calls into their private communications array while he was fighting the Reverend.

“...San L—?”

Before he can even finish saying his name—Xie Lian’s been backed into the wall.

Not forcefully—even now, Hua Cheng wouldn’t dare—but with his hands on the wall above Xie Lian’s head, the prince is given little room for escape.

“What if I was, as well?”

Xie Lian stares up at him, his shackle gleaming faintly in the dim lighting of the hallway—confused.

Hua Cheng’s gaze never leaves Xie Lian’s face—

And if the prince could see him in that moment—the tortured, frustrated look in his eye—

He would know.

“...I don’t understand—”

“What if I was from Xianle?”

Xie Lian falls silent, speechless from shock, confusion, and—

That horrible feeling—one that’s only ever hurt him. A spark that he’s tried to smother so many times—because it burns like nothing else:

Hope.

“...Are you?”

There’s a long, heavy pause—as though Hua Cheng is wrestling with something within himself, and finally, he spits out—

"...No," he mutters, taking a large step back, wiping at the corner of his mouth—and the back of his hand comes away red. "I was born in Xuli."

And oh, he could almost scream—

The one thing he's allowed to say about his mortal life that's actually true—and it's a detail that would be utterly meaningless to the prince.

And now, he can't even bear to look at Xie Lian, who—

Who has never looked quite so crestfallen.

"...Were you trying to tease me just now?" He mumbles, still shrunken back against the wall, even if Hua Cheng is no longer crowding him in. "Because it wasn't funny."

"No!" The ghost king is vehement about that much, shaking his head. "I wouldn't—"

"Then why would you say that?"

Hua Cheng wants to tell him.

He would give anything to tell him.

How frustrating it is, watching his god solve so many mysteries, big and small—but never the one standing right in front of him.

That the only thing he's carried on for these last eight centuries has been the chance to tell him.

But he can't.

Because of a curse that he's no closer to breaking now than he was as a ghost fire. And while he's always had those emotions, at the moment...they feel unbearable.

"...It's Mount Tonglu," he mutters, wiping a hand down his face.

Xie Lian is quiet for a moment, trying to understand.

"...What about Mount Tonglu?"

"It's opening," Hua Cheng explains through clenched teeth. "Not now—but soon. And it...has an effect on calamities."

That’s partially true.

It’s the reason that Hua Cheng is struggling to contain his frustration—but it’s not the cause of those emotions to begin with.

“...Is it painful?”

And even now—in the midst of wanting to rip his own hair out—

Hua Cheng’s gaze softens.

“No,” He assures Xie Lian quietly, shaking his head. “Dianxia shouldn’t worry himself with it.”

“...And when Mount Tonglu opens...”

“You won’t need to worry about that, your highness.”

Hua Cheng has no plans for Xie Lian being anywhere nearby when that time comes.

The last time Mount Tonglu opened, he was perfectly content to hide within dreams.

Until the Kiln’s call became too much for him to bear. And so, He Xuan was forged.

There’s no reason that he couldn’t hide away again.

(Unless, of course, fate does not give him a choice.)

Choices, at the end of the day, are ugly things. They seem so small, made in moments of carelessness or quiet desperation.

But they grow, and they grow, roots clawing into a man’s foundations until they crack.

Shi Wudu’s sister won’t look at him anymore.

Her food sits on a tray at the end of the bed, pushed aside—not a single bite taken. She’s facing away from him, her arms wrapped around her legs, holding them tight against her chest, hair flowing loosely down her back.

“…You can’t keep me here forever, you know.”

The Water Master stands in the doorway, stone faced.

“I don’t imagine that will be necessary,” he replies calmly, walking over to lift up the empty tray. Something he would normally leave to an attendant, but…

He hasn’t allowed anyone near Shi Qingxuan since they returned.

“Mu Qing said your powers would recover in a month or so,” he shrugs, balancing the tray against his hip. “By then, the situation will be handled.”

A laugh rips from her chest, disbelieving—and she holds herself just a little bit tighter.

“…You really think this is a situation that can just be ‘handled?’” She questions, her eyes swollen and red. “You think that’s what I want?”

Shi Wudu stops, facing away from her, his gaze settling upon the closed door. “We’ll discuss that later.”

His sister whips around, glaring at his back, her hands bunching in the sheets. Shi Wudu’s strength has always been a comfort for her. He’s always stood so tall—and because of that, she never had to worry about feeling weak.

But now—she’s been the one living with the guilt for only a day, and it already feels as though it’s begun to crush her. And if that’s true—

Then how does he live with it?

After four centuries of that crushing guilt, how does he live with himself?

“We’ll discuss what I want…after you’ve already made the decision for me,” Shi Qingxuan mutters, shaking her head. “That’s fair.”

“I don’t think you and I are in a position to discuss fairness, Shi Qingxuan.”

He places his hand on the door, and she grits her teeth, her shoulders trembling with frustration.

“That takes some nerve, when YOU’RE THE ONLY ONE WHO IS ALLOWED TO *LEAVE!”*

She reaches out in a frenzy, trying to find anything to throw in a fit of rage—and the glass paperweight that she does hurl at him never lands.

Her brother reaches up, catching it without so much as turning around to look.

“You haven’t exactly given me a choice,” he shrugs, setting the paperweight onto a side table.

“There is ALWAYS a choice!” Shi Qingxuan glares vehemently. “You just make them on your own—you NEVER tell me what’s going on! That—that *thing* had to tell me —!”

Her brother whips his head around, his expression dark.

“I don’t know *what* that thing told you,” Shi Wudu mutters, not shrinking or flinching away from her glare. “I just know that you instantly took it at its word instead of asking me for my own side of the story!”

“And WHY SHOULD I HAVE BELIEVED YOU?! YOU NEVER TELL ME *ANYTHING!”*

Shi Qingxuan wishes she could say that her anger was fearsome. That she was the sort who could calmly air her grievances without stammering over a single syllable, but she isn’t. She’s always been an angry crier. Crumbling into tears when her emotions get the best of her—and now is no different.

Her brother has always been the opposite. He’s even more calm when he’s angry— almost as though his blood freezes over as the words come out of his mouth.

“WHAT MAKES YOU THINK YOU DESERVE THE CHANCE TO EXPLAIN YOURSELF?!”

But not now.

Now, she watches his expression contort with so many different emotions.

Fear. Pain. Regret. Shame.

“BECAUSE I’M YOUR *BROTHER!”*

They’ve argued before. They grew up as brothers, after all—and for many of those years, Shi Wudu was a teenager, raising a child on his own.

But Shi Qingxuan’s brother has never been like this.

His mouth twisted with emotion, eyes shining, his hands balled up at his sides.

“Maybe—” He slams the tray of food down on the table, shoving it aside. “Maybe I’m *not* forgivable. Maybe you should disown me, or hate me—but if I’m this horrible, irredeemable monster,” he swallows thickly, pressing a hand against his chest, almost losing the will to go on, but—

He forces the words out, nonetheless. “Then let me confess it *myself!"*

“You—!” Shi Qingxuan sputters, her eyes widening. “You haven’t *denied* anything, and you think you’re entitled to that?!”

“Maybe not from the rest of the world,” her brother mutters darkly, shaking his head. “But from you, yes.”

For the simplest reason in the world.

“Do you think I would *ever* turn on you like that without giving you the chance to speak?!”

“Then just *tell me* if it’s true!” Shi Qingxuan chokes, wiping at her face angrily.

“If *what* is true?!”

There has always been an invisible line, drawn somewhere between the two of them. One that has been there for years, but only one of them was ever aware of its existence.

“He Xuan, the scholar from Fu Gu,” Shi Qingxuan croaks, staring him down, her eyes narrowed. “Did you switch his fate with mine?!”

And now—that line has been crossed.

“Is that why the Reverend of Empty Words left me alone all of these years?!”

Shi Qingxuan doesn't know what she expected. Maybe some small part of her was hoping that he would be angry. That he would vehemently deny the accusation. Perhaps he would even feel betrayed, because she trusted that monster over him.

But his reaction is none of those things.

The Water Master, he—

He looks *relieved* .

"I-Is it—?!"

"Yes," Shi Wudu's reply is faint, but it makes Shi Qingxuan's stomach plummet like a stone. "Yes, it's true."

She doesn't know if she expected him to deny it, or if that would have made her feel better, but...

Somehow, this is worse.

"...And you aren't..." Shi Qingxuan swallows thickly, bitterness on her tongue. "You aren't going to try to justify it?!"

"Do you think I could?" Shi Wudu asks quietly, watching his sister fall silent.

There might be an explanation for doing something so horrible to an innocent man— Shi Wudu has made those to himself countless times.

But there is no justification, or excuse.

"You..." Shi Qingxuan sobs, her face flushed with hurt and rage. "That's all you have to say?! You...you demand the chance to explain yourself, and then when I charge you with it, you don't deny it, and —!"

"I asked for the chance to confess," Shi Wudu interrupts her, his voice numb. "And now I have. There's nothing else to say."

He turns to leave, but—

"NOTHING ELSE TO SAY?!" Shi Qingxuan shakes her head, nails biting into her palms. "HOW CAN YOU SAY THAT?!"

The Water Master closes his eyes

“I had to make a choice,” he explains calmly, even if his chest aches. “Between being a good person, and watching you die.”

When he was too young to understand what the real consequences were. What they would mean.

Shi Qingxuan stares at the floor, the truth settling over her like a heavy blanket of guilt—

Until her brother continues.

“And that was a choice I had already made.”

The first time Shi Wudu made that choice, he was ten years old.

And the consequences of that felt just as sharp, just as real as what he did later. He made it again in the days that followed.

Again, when he was thirteen.

Again, when he was sixteen.

Then, he was seventeen—and that choice was being laid out before him again. Trading one life for another.

And he felt the shame, the fear of punishment and scorn—because stealing a man’s fate is a profane thing to do.

A monstrous thing to do.

Shi Wudu knew that.

But he had tried every other alternative—and it felt like just another step on a path that he had already been walking.

“...What are you talking about?” Shi Qingxuan whispers, her voice trembling. Her hurt, her anger, it’s still there—in an ever tightening knot with her guilt. But when she catches a glimpse of her brother’s eyes...

There’s an ache within them. A pain that runs to the bone, and she—

Shi Qingxuan has never looked closely enough to see it before.

Shi Wudu glances up towards the ceiling, exhaling slowly. There are certain things he could never tell Shi Qingxuan. Things that—if she knew them—she couldn’t live with. But a long, long time ago, when he was young—

One person told him the right thing.

The same man who told him that you couldn't run from your curses.

A young cultivator—one calling himself Bolin. Shi Wudu isn't even sure if that was his real name anymore, but—

'All you're doing by coddling him is making him better prey.'

Shi Wudu swallows hard, pressing his palm against his forehead.

'Your brother won't learn until you allow him to.'

He knows. He knows that, and still—some lessons are painful.

"Just *TELL ME!*" Shi Qingxuan cries, "What are you talking about?!"

Shi Wudu's hand trembles as he lowers it from his face, and he doesn't look away from the door.

"How did you think we got to keep the money?"

His sister freezes, her eyes wide with confusion—clearly having expected him to say anything but that.

"...What?"

"Shi Qingxuan..." He sighs, wrapping one arm around his middle. "You're four centuries old. I wasn't even a teenager when our parents were murdered. You really think everyone just stepped aside and allowed a child to run the clan and the shipping business?"

Shi Qingxuan doesn't move, her mouth forming into an 'o,' eyes wide.

"You..." She swallows thickly, shaking her head. "You were the heir. Our uncle made sure—!"

"No," Shi Wudu corrects her. "I was the heir, but when that much money is at stake—people don't care."

Everyone feels pity for a sob story. Two young brothers, rendered orphans by robbers—it's an awful tale.

But when the funerals were held and the tears were dried, there were two defenseless, isolated children left behind—holding the largest fortune in Qinghe.

And Shi Wudu might have been incredibly young, but he was old enough to understand what people would do for gold.

Who they would kill for gold.

And in a world where they had lost everything else—that was the only resource he had to protect Shi Qingxuan:

Wealth.

"I had to make choices, to hold onto that money." Shi Wudu mutters, shaking his head. "I had to make choices, to keep your identity a secret."

It didn't take long for the side branches of the Shi family to begin pointing fingers regarding their sudden changes in fortune.

It took even less time for them to come to the unanimous conclusion as to when their troubles began:

When Shi Qingxuan was born, and the Reverend of Empty Words made its claim upon his life.

And yes, it was horrible business, they had said. So pitiful.

But if the child was doomed to die miserable and penniless...

...Why should the entire clan have to suffer the same fate?

'If the boy cannot be saved, why not just end it quickly?'

Shi Wudu's jaw clenches, remembering the conversations that happened before his very eyes.

Between wealthy, entitled old men, who craved that which was not theirs to begin with.

'If we just let the creature take him—there's no need to draw this out to reach the same conclusion.'

"I made choices," Shi Wudu repeats quietly. "And I doubt recounting any of them would find me favor in your eyes, or forgiveness. I don't need any of that."

Shi Qingxuan stares, and in her shock, the tears begin to slow.

“…You don’t think you need my forgiveness?” She whispers, her voice hoarse.

She has cried so much in the last day, it’s left her throat raw.

Her brother turns his gaze towards the floor, his expression unreadable.

“Even if you don’t forgive me—even if you hate me—you’re alive,” his explanation is muted, each word coming out evenly.

“And these last four centuries—you’ve been happy.”

“…Do I look happy now?!” Shi Qingxuan whispers, her brow pinched. “And even if I was—those years—being a god—all of it—it was a lie!”

“Shi Qingxuan…” Shi Wudu rubs his temples, tired. “Do you think any of this is real?” He points out the window, to the glimmering streets of the Heavenly Capital below, gods and goddesses strolling past, going about their business. “Do you think half of the people down there *deserve* to be here? Honestly.”

His sister doesn’t reply, and he paces.

“If this was a place that was built for people who *deserved* to be happy, then you would be here,” he mutters, half to her, half to himself.

And *he* wouldn’t be.

“But—it isn’t, it’s—”

“What?!” She snaps, “I don’t understand what you’re saying!”

She sits up on the edge of the bed—still angry, still hurt—but more confused than anything else. And watching her brother pace like this, watching his words become almost nonsensical—

It’s frightening.

“Ascension isn’t about who deserves it!” Shi Qingxuan struggles to stand, bracing herself against the side of the bed, one hand against her chest. “It doesn’t *matter* if I deserved to be happy, or if I was unlucky—that’s horrible, you think I don’t hate it?! But that was MY *FATE!* And—and you *stole* someone’s future!”

The Water Master doesn’t flinch away from the accusation. Doesn’t deny it.

“And I *PAID!”* His hand slams against the wall, so hard—it actually cracks the marble. “I’ve paid *EVERY SINGLE DAY* SINCE I DID IT!”

The moment the words come out of this mouth, he falls silent.

He doesn’t say another word, and he won’t look at her.

Shi Qingxuan hangs her head, biting her lip so hard, she tastes iron.

“...How?”

She doesn’t see the way his shoulders shrink.

“How did you pay, gege?”

He looks down at his wrist, feeling numb.

Disconnected from himself.

Remembering when a cursed shackle sat there, dragging him down. When he couldn’t see.

When he could only feel what was being done to him.

‘You know how to get out.’

“...Was it being worshiped all these years? Was that your penance?” Shi Qingxuan mutters, her voice shaking. “Having the entire world admire you?! Was the wealth such a horrible price to pay?!”

“Shi Qingxuan—”

“Was it the fact that no one is ever good enough for you?! Is that why you always pushed me so hard?! Because I was *never* good enough?!”

“I never thought—”

“YOU CAN’T SAY THAT!” She shakes her head, her hair whipping around her. “You know what the WORST part of all of this is?! MAYBE I could have ascended on my own. MAYBE I could have earned this—BUT YOU NEVER GAVE ME THE CHANCE!”

It’s the first time she’s seen her brother flinch.

“Was I supposed to wait and hope you ascended before that thing killed you?!”

“YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO *BELIEVE* IN ME!” Shi Qingxuan sobs, “That’s ALL I ever wanted, don’t you understand?! But the only thing you’ve *ever* believed in is YOURSELF!”

“That’s not true, Qingxuan.”

“Oh, forgive me,” She sneers, “You only believe in yourself—and fucking PEI, of *ALL* people!”

He stiffens, his expression hidden. “Don’t bring him into this.”

“Was THAT the price you had to pay?! Falling in love with a man who doesn’t give a *SHIT* ABOUT YOU?!”

The last time they spoke about his relationship with Pei—the Water Master adamantly denied having such feelings for him.

“You don’t know what you’re *TALKING ABOUT!”*

He makes no such denials now, his hands clenched into trembling fists at his sides.

She doesn’t know.

She couldn’t know.

Ever since the moment he sold someone else’s future away to save hers, he also gave up his own.

Because if he hadn’t...He would have told Pei.

Even if it meant that his lover might have left—Shi Wudu would have told him.

Told him that every single moment of happiness he’s had as a god was a moment spent by Pei’s side.

Told him that he’s terrified of the moment that he’ll leave. Told him that he—

He would have told Pei that he needed *help* , if he hadn’t already known that he didn’t deserve it.

Shi Wudu would have told Pei that he was in love with him, but— He thinks that, on some level, the general must already know.

He doesn't think it's possible to love someone so deeply, so entirely, without them knowing.

But Pei is patient, and he's never pushed him.

"...Pei is—"

'The only person who has ever put me first.'

Shi Wudu bites his lip, breathing in deeply through his nose.

"He's a good person, Shi Qingxuan. And when I'm gone—you'll be grateful for him."

She's so caught up on the last part, she doesn't notice her brother said 'when.'

Not 'if.'

"Grateful?!" She laughs, but there's no mirth in it. "What was the price, then?! How did you pay?"

Still, her brother doesn't answer her.

Shi Qingxuan grips the bedpost, her legs trembling with the effort it takes to stand up.

"You won't tell me?" She glares, her eyes stinging. "Whatever it was, can you look me in the eye and say you didn't *deserve it?!* That it wasn't a fair punishment for what you've done?!"

When her brother replies—his voice has gotten so quiet, she can barely hear him.

"No."

He knows, he—

Shi Wudu squeezes his eyes tightly shut.

"...When I pass my calamity, I'll find the Reverend, and I'll kill it." He explains slowly. "After that—if you want me to turn myself in, I will. If you want me to go into exile—I will. If..."

Shi Wudu takes a deep breath.

"If you want me to never show my face in front of you again, then that's what I'll do, just let me—"

"That isn't what I want."

Shi Qingxuan shakes her head, gritting her teeth.

"You were always supposed to ascend, gege."

That was his destiny. He—

Shi Qingxuan's brother has always been a genius. Someone who was meant to rise above everyone else. But she—

She was supposed to die a lonely, miserable death many centuries ago.

Wretched beginning, wretched end.

And all she's done up until now is survive off of the kindness—and cruelty—of others.

Maybe all she was ever meant to do was serve as motivation for him.

Some tragic part of some young hero's backstory. A chapter of grief meant to make him stronger.

Shi Qingxuan has always been well aware of the fact that she was never the central character in her own story.

As such, her only goal was ever to have a good time, and stay out of the way. But now—she knows.

That happiness—those years she wasted being silly and carefree—

All of that belonged to someone else.

And now, her place within that story feels superfluous. It feels...wrong.

"...When this is over, I'm renouncing my godhood." She says the words with such stubborn, ringing finality—they feel as though they might as well be written in stone. "That's the right thing to do."

Finally, her knees give out from exhaustion—but before she can hit the floor...

Her brother catches her, kneeling on the ground with Shi Qingxuan in his arms, his head hung low.

That's when she feels something wet land on her arm. For a moment, she's too stunned to move.

But when she does—she reaches up to press her hand against Shi Wudu's cheek, and —

"...Gege..."

"...You shouldn't be out of bed," his voice sounds just as calm as it was before, and now, Shi Qingxuan realizes—

Realizes that her brother has been crying all this time.

"Gege—"

He lifts her up, setting her back down on the edge of the mattress, and Shi Qingxuan expects him to make another attempt to leave—to to tell her that she's being ridiculous, that he wouldn't let her, but—

The Water Master falls to his knees.

"Please."

Finally, Shi Wudu raises his chin, and Shi Qingxuan sees.

Sees how tired her brother looks.

How his own face has grown so pale, his eyes bloodshot and swollen.

His cheeks soaked with tears.

"Please," he repeats, reaching to grab both of her hands with his own. "I've never asked you for anything Qingxuan—but *please* , don't make me watch you die," he chokes the words out, squeezing tightly.

His hands are trembling.

He's a proud man. One who doesn't ask for things. Who doesn't beg or plead.

Even when she said she hated him, he didn't beg for forgiveness.

When she said she wished he wasn't her brother, he didn't plead with her to take it back.

But now, when she threatens her own future—the Water Master falls to his knees and asks for mercy.

"I'll do anything," his face contorts as a sob rips out of him, his shoulders trembling. "I'll tell everyone what I did, I'll take as many shackles as the Prince of Xianle, I'll—" He drops his face against her knee, his body wracked with broken, silent weeping.

"...Anything but your own godhood?" Shi Qingxuan questions, torn between the ache of everything she's just learned, and—

The utter inability to watch her brother cry.

And the words he utters in reply don't make sense to her then.

But later, they will.

And when they do—they'll break her again.

"...He won't let me go," Shi Wudu whispers, his voice breaking.

Maybe with a shackle, or with blackmail—

But he'll never let Shi Wudu walk away with no strings attached.

'You know how to get out.'

There's only one way out.

Just one.

"...Who are you talking about?" Shi Qingxuan whispers, placing a hand against the side of his head. "Gege, I don't understand—"

"Forget it," Shi Wudu sobs, his hands tightening around hers until they ache, but she doesn't complain. "It doesn't matter, just—just don't make me!"

Her older brother always felt like an adult, even when he wasn't.

She can barely remember anything of their mother, but one of the few memories she's held onto is a day they went to the sea.

She kept on trying to swim too far into the surf, and her brother would pull her back. Their mother would try to reassure him—

'Sweetheart, we're watching your sister—why don't you go play? It'll be fine.'

Their older cousins were swimming not so far away, which honestly would have been more fun for a boy that age than looking after a toddler, but…

Her brother always insisted on looking after her himself.

When he was a teenager, he was immersed in paperwork and ledgers—and even once those were cast aside, he was training every single day, working towards his ascension.

He's never seemed like a child—not until now. Crying those words—

'Don't make me.'

'Don't make me.'

'Don't make me.'

Because he can bear anything, live with anything—but not watching her die.

And listening to him weep, no matter how angry she is, he—

He's still her brother.

"…Even after all of the things I've said to you," she mutters, staring down at him, "After how many times I've dragged you down…the only thing you're scared of is losing me?"

Shi Wudu doesn't reply at first, struggling to catch his breath, but—

"…It doesn't matter what you do," he mutters, lifting his head. His voice is just as raw as hers now, but the words come out clearly. "What you say to me, how you feel about me," he looks into her eyes—and there isn't an ounce of insincerity in his gaze.

"I will always be your brother."

Now, her hands are the ones trembling in his grip, and her gaze is unsure.

"And I—" his voice trembles, but he presses on. "I know you won't ever agree with what I've done, and that you won't forgive me."

But Shi Wudu doesn't need her forgiveness, and he's never asked for it.

Those who suffered for his actions are long gone now—and he has no way of making amends to them.

Some mistakes can't be taken back, no matter how badly you want to, and— Shi Wudu doesn't want to.

He might be sorry, but if he had to make that choice again today, he would. He hasn't learned. He hasn't changed.

He doesn't deserve to be forgiven.

He doesn't deserve to have what he wants.

But Shi Qingxuan—

She never did any of those things. She never knew.

"...But someday, I hope you learn what it's like to love someone unconditionally," Shi Wudu concludes. "Because it's been the joy of my life."

That was another sacrifice he made when he was young.

He didn't know every price he would pay for switching fates, but...he knew one.

When Hua Bolin came to their home, asking about their family history—that was when Shi Wudu learned the reason behind his sister's fate.

That she was being targeted as payment for a wrong his ancestors committed centuries before.

And it seemed so infuriatingly unfair.

That his sister, who had never hurt anyone, who had been born into this world as an innocent—should pay for the sins of an evil old man from centuries before.

Casting that curse aside to someone else felt equally arbitrary, even if he knew it was wrong...

...Life wasn't fucking fair. That's what he told himself.

But he also knew that, because of what he had done to He Xuan—if he had any descendants, he would be passing on a blood debt.

That they, in turn, might be cursed.

And so, from a young age, he knew his sister was the closest thing he would ever have to a child of his own.

In many ways, he's the closest thing she's ever had to a parent— raising her since she was barely four years old.

He wasn't perfect. He knows that.

But he's never loved anyone or anything in this world quite as much as her, and he's always known that was the only thing about him that was even marginally redeemable.

Shi Qingxuan is quiet, one hand on his head, the other squeezing his.

"...We'll talk about what to do after your calamity," she mutters, adding— "And we'll do it together."

He doesn't get to make those decisions without her.

Not anymore.

"...Alright," her brother agrees, his breaths slowly evening out.

"And when we do—someone is going to have to pay for this, gege."

"...I know."

Oh, he knows that better than anyone.

After a pause, she asks—

"You aren't going to let me out of here until it's over, are you?" His silence is answer enough. "Wudu—"

"It's for your own safety."

He straightens up, preparing to leave again—and when he does, Shi Qingxuan reaches out, grabbing his sleeve.

"Can you just tell me one thing?" He's hesitant, but she clings onto him stubbornly. "Please, gege."

"...What is it?"

And the one question his sister asks—

"Who told you how to switch fates?"

—it's the one question he can't answer.

"You couldn't have been more than a teenager when you did it," Shi Qingxuan mutters, her brow furrowed. "So...who told you?"

She doesn't think even his cultivation master would have known. Even among the heavens—a spell like that isn't commonly known.

"...It doesn't matter," her brother's voice is distant, quiet.

"But—"

"I'll be back later," he turns to the door. "There's something I need to take care of."

"How could it not...!"

Before she can finish asking her question, the door slams behind him—and she's left alone.

"...Matter."

She sinks back against the bed, her eyes staring at the ceiling, thoughts going in countless directions.

But something is bothering her more than anything else.

'It doesn't matter.'

'He won't let me go.'

'Forget it.'

Each time her brother—whom Shi Qingxuan knows better than just about anyone— said those words, he used a tone that she has never heard from him before.

One of helplessness.

The Wind Master sits up, staring at the door.

Whoever helped him switch fates—and the person that he's afraid of—

They're one in the same.

But...who on earth is there that could frighten her brother? And if he isn't going to tell her that himself...

Shi Qingxuan grits her teeth, determined.

“…I have to get out of here.”

All Ships Will Sink

Chapter Summary

> The farmer's wife glances from the teenage girls, then back to him. "Say…" Her smile turns a little sly. "Shouldn't your parents be pushing for a marriage for you by now? You're getting to that age."
>
> Several of the girls watching hurry a little faster to lift up their packs, giggling sheepishly, and Xie Lian finds a small knot in his hair.
>
> It must have gotten in there while he was sweeping out back this morning, after he brushed it.
>
> He turns around, combing his fingers through the tangle just as Hua Cheng replies—
>
> "Oh—I'm already spoken for."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Back in the mortal realm, Xie Lian is left with a mystery of his own to solve.

It's been three days since Shi Qingxuan was swept off to the Heavens by his older brother—and despite the prince's repeated attempts to reach out to him, he hasn't heard a word.

Xie Lian isn't particularly disturbed by that—not yet, anyway. Given everything that happened in Fu Gu and the Terrace of Cascading Wine…Shi Qingxuan might still be receiving treatment.

No, that isn't what he finds mysterious or odd.

You see, after spending two days in Ghost City, Xie Lian had to return to Puqi Shrine. Not only because he had left his duties unfinished in his hurry to help Shi Qingxuan— but also, because, well…

Hua Cheng did send servants to help with the shrine in his absence, but… It's one thing, to have them doing chores and looking after the children.

It’s another thing altogether to have them dealing with Lang Qianqiu and Qi Rong, so—Xie Lian had to go back.

And to his surprise—Ren Song asked to tag along.

He expected that much from Hua Cheng, who had expressed wanting to spend some time in Puqi Shrine before the business with the Reverend of Empty Words—but not him.

For the most part, he lounges on the hill next to the Shrine, watching Guzi play, helping with the cooking.

Even more shocking was Lang Qianqiu’s reaction to the entire thing.

Initially, he grumbled about Shuo’s return—but when he saw the forest demon was injured, his tune…suddenly changed.

Not drastically—he still grumbles in response to Shuo’s verbal abuse, but…

He also starts doing more around the shrine than JUST making sure Qi Rong doesn’t escape. Little odds and ends that he seems a little lost with, a prince who has never actually had to do chores before, but—

Shuo supervises.

Which he’s doing right now, actually. Laying back on the grass, lazily tossing a ball back and forth with Guzi—heckling the prince of Yong’an as he chops wood.

“Put your back into it!” He drawls, his ankles crossed. “Me or Hua Chengzhu would’ve had it done an hour ago!”

“As if Crimson Rain has been out here chopping wood,” Lang Qianqiu grumbles, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

“Oh, I’m sure he’s very familiar with the prince’s woo—” Shuo starts the joke without thinking, then stops before he can finish.

“…What?” Lang Qianqiu stares, trying to put that one together. “I don’t get it.” Shuo rolls over, pressing his face into the grass.

“Forget it.”

“Why do you sound like that?”

He groans, and his voice is muffled when he replies—

“Nothing, I’ve just never been more disgusted with my own sense of humor than I am right now.”

Lang Qianqiu waits, expecting some sort of explanation—but when one never comes, he hacks at another slice of wood, this time putting more force into it.

Too much force—because this time, he shatters the entire log into splinters.

“Now look at what you did!”

“I DON’T KNOW WHAT YOU WANT FROM ME!”

From inside the shrine, Xie Lian tunes out the shouting, standing in front of his donation box.

There were some donations sent by the time he arrived that clearly came from Mr. Mo as thanks for him dealing with the fetal spirit—that isn’t shocking.

What is shocking, however, is the rest of it.

At least two dozen gold bars, stuffing the box to the brim.

And having not found any indication like a note or a calling card to tell him where they came from—

Xie Lian sets off from the shrine, walking down to the fields below. “San Lang?”

The ghost king straightens, brushing the dust from his hands. “Gege?”

Normally, helping in the fields is something Xie Lian would help the farmers with— given that they make donations to the shrine in exchange—but when Hua Cheng is here, he insists on doing it in his stead.

To ‘pass the time,’ as he says.

“Did you leave gold bars in the shrine?”

The calamity tilts his head to the side.

He’s wearing his younger skin right now—that of a nineteen year old, his hair in a loose braid that Xie Lian tied for him that morning.

“No, it wasn’t me.”

His outer robe is tied around his waist while he works, and it certainly isn’t indecent —and yet, it does draw some attention, with some young ladies lingering on their way back from the river, pretending to reorganize their packs while they watch him work.

Of course, Xie Lian couldn’t notice that—and he doesn’t see the way his undershirt is unbuttoned at the top, revealing the sharp edge of his collarbone and the toned lines of his chest, or how his sleeves are rolled up to the elbow, but, well—

The others certainly do.

“Why?” He cocks his hip out slightly, leaning his chin on top of the shovel he was using to dig a new irrigation trench, raising an eyebrow. “Do you need some gold, gege? You can have—”

“No!” Xie Lian corrects him, waving his hands in front of himself nervously.

“I just don’t know where it came from—I don’t really think I’ve done anything to deserve it.”

“...” Hua Cheng thinks it over. “Do you think it could have been the Water Master?”

Xie Lian pauses, rubbing his chin. “...Shi Wudu? Why would he give me that much gold?”

It doesn’t make any sense—there’s enough in there to be worth at LEAST a million merits.

“You said it seemed like he was hiding something when he took Shi Qingxuan back to the Heavens,” Hua Cheng points out. “Maybe he wants you to keep quiet about what happened the other night.”

Xie Lian falls silent with a frown, and while he thinks that over, one of the farmers stops, noticing the young ladies dallying on the side of the road, follows their gaze to the youth in the field—and he waves enthusiastically.

“Well, if it ain’t Xiao Hua! You know, we met your old man the other day!” Hua Cheng smiles, offering a polite wave in return. “Did you really?"

"Yeah—he mentioned your mother was feeling under the weather. Is she doing better?"

The reminder of that incident makes Xie Lian's ears heat up with embarrassment almost immediately—but Hua Cheng seems completely unbothered.

"Oh, yes—she's always had a strong constitution."

The farmer's wife glances from the teenage girls, then back to him. "Say…" Her smile turns a little sly. "Shouldn't your parents be pushing for a marriage for you by now? You're getting to that age."

Several of the girls watching hurry a little faster to lift up their packs, giggling sheepishly, and Xie Lian finds a small knot in his hair.

It must have gotten in there while he was sweeping out back this morning, after he brushed it.

He turns around, combing his fingers through the tangle just as Hua Cheng replies—

"Oh—I'm already spoken for."

Xie Lian's fingers go still just as the giggling stops.

"Spoken for—you're already married?!" The farmer sputters, hands on his hips.

Hua Cheng watches Xie Lian from the corner of his eye. "That's right."

"Well, I'll be damned! She must be a gorgeous young lady to snag a young man like you! Accomplished, too!"

The young man hums in agreement, still leaning his chin on his shovel, watching Xie Lian's back.

"The most beautiful person I've ever met, certainly."

Xie Lian fidgets with the knot, even more focused than he was before.

"Not to mention intelligent, kind, and hardworking."

The farmer whistles, approving that Xiao Hua would speak of his young wife with such glowing praise. "You sound smitten!"

Hua Cheng's smile turns lopsided, his eyes sparkling in the afternoon sun.

"I fell in love at first sight when I was a child. They were older than me, and it took me years to win them over—but it was worth it."

He speaks with such sincerity, all the farmer and his wife can do is stare with surprise, the latter saying—

"She sounds like a lucky girl."

They're already walking away, but under his breath, Hua Cheng replies— "I've always been the lucky one."

Xie Lian starts when the ghost walks over to stand beside him—and by then, not only has he gotten the knot out, but he's absentmindedly braided half of his hair.

"That was quite a story," Xie Lian comments, making his way back up the hill, working on undoing his ministrations. It's easy enough, though it does leave one side of his hair wavy.

"Story?"

"Well," Xie Lian doesn't look up, fiddling around. "San Lang isn't married."

"Mmm..." Hua Cheng nods, watching his antics with an odd expression, "You're right, gege," he reaches over, tucking some of Xie Lian's hair behind his ear. "I lied about that part."

The prince has no idea why he's smiling about something like that.

"So insincere..."

But the next words out of Hua Cheng's mouth make the smile drop from his face.

"But the rest of it was true."

Xie Lian looks over at him, startled.

"...What?"

"There is someone special to me," Hua Cheng explains, watching him intently. "I just haven't won them over yet."

"…" Xie Lian stops walking for a moment, his fingers going still in his hair.

"…Dianxia?"

For a moment, he's quiet, with his head tilted down—and before Hua Cheng can decide what to make of that reaction—

Then, Xie Lian starts walking rather quickly, returning to the shrine.

"I don't want…" he mutters under his breath, trailing off.

"…Don't want what?"

"All this gold," Xie Lian concludes, lifting up the donation box with a huff. "I don't care why the Water Master gave it to me—it's too much. Besides—I've been meaning to check on Shi Qingxuan."

Hua Cheng frowns, watching him head out the door.

"Your highness…" the disapproving tone makes Xie Lian stop in the doorway, glancing back at him.

"It would be ill advised to involve yourself in this situation any further."

Xie Lian doesn't ask him what he means—it's obvious there's more to this than what meets the eye, but still.

"…I'm just going to make sure he's alright, and give the gold back." Xie Lian explains. "That's all!"

Hua Cheng watches him go with a frown—but he doesn't stop him.

Xie Lian's journey to the Heavens is rather uneventful. While he may have been involved in a few noteworthy incidents recently, he's still considered a pariah by most of the Heavenly Court, so no one stops to ask him questions as he marches towards his destination:

The Palace of Ling Wen.

She doesn't work up from her work immediately, surrounded by stacks of scrolls, her assistants running about, bewitched memorandums flitting around in the air.

Actually, she doesn't notice him until one of the memos nearly smacks Xie Lian in the face.

"Your highness—?"

Thud!

The Prince sets down the crate he's been carrying—and when he does, she sees the heaps of gold bars gleaming inside.

Now, normally, Xie Lian has always had a calm, graceful countenance. That which would be expected from a man of his station.

And he isn't harsh or even remotely inappropriate now, but— He's scowling.

...Ling Wen doesn't think she's ever seen the Crown Prince of Xianle scowl before. Or that she's even heard of such a thing.

"I would return these to the Water Master personally, but I doubt I warrant an audience with him at this time," he explains quietly. "But I have not earned this gold, and I will not accept it. Give him my thanks."

"I..." Ling Wen stares at him, stunned, her jaw hanging open. "...your highness, I don't believe Shi Wudu sent these to you."

Xie Lian pauses, the wind rather effectively knocked out of his sails. "...Pardon?"

Ling Wen glances over the box, counting the bars within.

"Believe it or not, he's actually rather good at reading the room."

She glances back up at Xie Lian, who has gone from scowling and self righteous to sheepish in a matter of seconds. "And he doesn't like wasting his efforts. He wouldn't send a gift that was likely to be returned."

Or a bribe, for that matter.

"...Oh." He mumbles, his voice suddenly rather small. "I see."

Ling Wen stares at him, trying to decide what to make of his slightly scattered expression. "Are there any other officials who might owe you some sort of debt?"

None that Xie Lian can think of, certainly.

"...Just split it and give it to Feng Xin and Mu Qing, then," Xie Lian mutters, glancing away. “They’ve both had their deputies helping me extensively recently—and I never paid them back properly for the damage caused by my ascension…”

“…Alright,” Ling Wen agrees slowly.

She wants to ask more, but before she can Xie Lian…he leans his elbow against her desk in what could only be the poorest attempt at looking casual she has ever witnessed.

“So…how have you been?”

The Civil Goddess stares at him.

“…What?”

“I mean…how have you been doing?” Xie Lian questions, twiddling his thumbs. “It seems pretty busy.”

Ling Wen can’t take her eyes off of him, her expression openly bewildered.

“…It’s always busy.”

“Right,” the prince lets out an awkward laugh. “Right…”

(Ling Wen hasn’t seen him quite so out of sorts.)

“…And how have you been, your highness?”

“Good,” Xie Lian replies a little too quickly, turning his face away. “Very good.”

“…Are you sure?” Ling Wen questions, unsure if she actually wants to know, but feeling obligated by friendship to ask. “You seem rather…”

“What?” Xie Lian turns to look at her rather suddenly, his expression tense. “I seem rather what?”

Ling Wen is frozen, her eyes wide, beginning to err more on the side of wishing that she had never asked at all.

“…Bothered,” She concludes calmly.

“Oh. Well.” Xie Lian picks at his fingernails, finding that his cuticles have become slightly overgrown. Which isn’t surprising, given that he hasn’t exercised proper nail care in quite some time.

(He gave up around a century into his second banishment.)

But you see, being accident (and somehow conflict) prone as he is, he loses fingers, even entire hands somewhat frequently, and when they grow back, the nail beds tend to stay perfect for at least a few months.

Mu Qing would probably say something about him being a ‘freakish lizard,’ if Xie Lian mentioned that to him.

Xie Lian digs his thumbnail into the cuticle on his ring finger, pushing it back.

He doesn’t know why he’s thinking about what Mu Qing would say right now, anyway.

Xie Lian wouldn’t tell him, people tend to act disturbed when he mentions that sort of thing.

It’s not exactly pleasant small talk.

Ling Wen for her part can’t stop staring at the way one side of Xie Lian’s hair is perfectly combed and straight, and the other has a slight wave.

“...Your highness?” She prompts him, hoping that he’ll either get on with what he’s saying, or flee the conversation.

Before she even finishes her last syllable, Xie Lian replies—

“I misinterpreted the situation.”

“You—?”

“I’ve misinterpreted a lot, lately.” Xie Lian continues, picking at his cuticles a little more fervently. “It’s just confusing, you know?”

Ling Wen is open mouthed, two of her deputies stopping to stare.

“Sometimes, you really think you know what a person means, and then you’re just...” He trails off, staring into the middle distance. “Silly.”

“...”

Ling Wen sets down her pen.

“Your highness?”

"Yes?"

"Your nails are bleeding."

"Ah." That would explain why his hand is wet, then. "So they are."

"...Do you need me to—?"

"I should be going."

Xie Lian pushes away from the desk, only to get smacked in the face by a passing memo.

"..."

"..."

"..."

Ling Wen and her deputies watch in unsure silence as the prince stands still, his shoulders hunched.

"...I didn't break something just now, did I?"

Ling Wen looks down at the memorandum, one paper wing crushed as it wiggles forward miserably on the floor, and one of her deputies rushes down to pick it up.

"...No," She answers quickly, her words coming out in an awkward rush. "No harm done. But your highness—"

The front doors of her palace swing shut, and she and her two deputies are left sitting there in shocked silence, papers flitting past all around them.

"...Lady Ling Wen," one of them speaks up, staring after him. "...What just happened?"

It takes a long time for her to answer.

"One of two things," she mutters, reaching up to massage her fingers over her temples. "The first possibility is that he thought the Water Master sent him a courting gift, and was embarrassed to have misinterpreted the situation."

One of the deputies was in the middle of taking a sip of tea, which they promptly spit out, spraying it across the floor as they hunch over, hacking. Ling Wen reaches over to slap her back, helping to clear her airway.

“Or, it’s something to do with Crimson Rain Sought Flower.” More than likely the latter.

Xie Lian finds himself on the doorstep of the Palace of Wind and Water a few minutes later, and to his surprise—

“I’m sorry your highness,” the deputy god who answers the door bows his head. “The Wind Master isn’t accepting visitors right now.”

“...Is she still unwell?”

“No,” the deputy shakes his head. “She’s much better—but the Water Master has said that she wouldn’t like any visitors.”

Xie Lian frowns, exchanging a few more niceties before the door is shut in his face.

If Shi Qingxuan really was better, she would want visitors. Actually—she’d probably be out and visiting people herself.

“...”

Xie Lian turns on his heel—and instead of walking back down the avenue, he takes a sharp turn at the edge of the palace wall, disappearing down an alley.

Now, normally, he would say that he’s very good at respecting boundaries. Infinitely better than he is at enforcing his own.

But in this case, when a friend is in a precarious position, well...

It’s better to be safe, than sorry.

Leaping over the wall is easy work, his footsteps silent on the ceramic tiles of the roof as he makes his way over the palace, peering down below. Not at the roof itself, which he obviously can’t see—

But Shi Qingxuan’s aura, burning dimly below.

Thankfully, in the Heavens there aren’t any mortals without spiritual power for him to worry about—so when the small, flickering green form below is the only one he sees—Xie Lian knows Shi Qingxuan is alone.

And when he drops down, swinging in through the window, she gasps.

“Your highness!” Shi Qingxuan sits up, her hair slightly askew. “You came!”

When she hurries over, taking Xie Lian by the arm—and while she’s much better than she was before, the crown prince still notices how sluggish her movements seem now, compared to her normal gait.

“I wanted to make sure you were alright,” Xie Lian explains, placing his hands upon his friend’s shoulders. “Are you feeling any better? They said you weren’t accepting visitors, but—”

“That’s all gege,” Shi Qingxuan mutters, her expression dark with frustration. “He’s been planning to lock me up in here until his calamity is over, and heaven knows how long that will be!”

“Given how serious your attack was, I don’t blame him for being worried...” Xie Lian admits, even if he does think the Water Master goes too far in his protectiveness.

And speaking of which—are they even on good terms right now? Given what Shi Qingxuan said to him the last time he saw her, that seems almost impossible...

But before Xie Lian can ask, he notices something, his eyes narrowing. “...Lady Wind Master, there’s someone under your bed!”

Shi Qingxuan lets out a little scream, clinging to Xie Lian’s side, just as a voice hisses —

“Would you be quiet?!”

“...Ming-Xiong?!” She whispers loudly, dropping down to her knees as the Earth Master crawls out from underneath the bed. “...You came to rescue me?”

“Shut up.”

His tone is flat, and cold—but the minute he’s sitting up, he reaches for her face, taking it between his hands.

“Did he hurt you?”

Shi Qingxuan stares up at him for a moment, her expression taut with confusion. “...You mean my brother?” She questions.

Ming Yi's jaw is locked.

"Who else?"

And what else could he be expected to think? The last time they saw her, it was after Shi Wudu had knocked her out and dragged her off to the Heavens, all but threatening Ming Yi's life when he attempted to interfere.

"...No," Shi Qingxuan mutters. "He wouldn't."

Ming Yi doesn't seem to believe that, but the Wind Master is too distracted to focus on reassuring him. Instead, she glances around, listening to make sure there aren't any guards nearby or listening in—and once she's sure of that—

She leans forward, giving Ming Yi a quick, rushed kiss—taking advantage of the fact that the only other person in the room can't see it.

"Thank you for coming for me, Ming-Xiong," She whispers.

The earth master is quiet, reaching up to tuck a stray curl behind her ear.

"You thought I wouldn't?"

Her fingers tighten in the front of his robes for a moment, her cheek pressed against his as she replies—

"I thought my best friend might."

He turns his face into her hair, and for the briefest moment—he smiles.

"...Who's that?"

Instead of replying with her usual antics—whining about how cruel and unfair Ming- Xiong is to her—

Shi Qingxuan just wraps her arms around his neck,hugging him fiercely. "I'll explain everything," She whispers. "But we have to get out of here first."

Xie Lian glances around them, taking in the positions of the guards around the palace. It was easy enough, sneaking in—but sneaking out, particularly when Shi Qingxuan is still not completely back to normal?

“I’ve already made a path,” Ming Yi shrugs, pointing towards the bed.

Xie Lian perks up, making his way over as the earth master pushes the furniture aside. “Really? How did you manage that?”

“Oh!” Shi Qingxuan beams with pride. “Ming-Xiong actually got out his spiritual device!”

“...He did?” Xie Lian tilts his head, expecting a sword, or a...

“It’s a shovel!” Shi Qingxuan explains, “It can dig through just about anything!”

Xie Lian doesn’t react at first, because, well—

His first instinct is to laugh, which isn’t particularly nice, especially given how useful Ming Yi’s tool is in this situation.

“That’s...perfect!”

And honestly—he can’t say that it isn’t impressive, having a spiritual tool that can tunnel underneath the Heavens itself.

They drop down into the tunnel with Ming Yi at the front, Shi Qingxuan in the middle, and Xie Lian bringing up the rear.

“...Can’t we use a light or something? It’s so dark down here,” Shi Qingxuan whines, holding onto Ming Yi’s shoulders as he tunnels forward, chipping ahead with his shovel, foot by foot.

“The light would draw too much attention.”

“How would it draw attention underground?!”

“Someone particularly sensitive might sense that someone is underground using magic, even if it’s for something that small,” Xie Lian explains. “Better to avoid drawing attention until we find a safe place to resurface.”

“And to be quiet,” Ming Yi adds, somewhat testy.

Shi Qingxuan takes the hint, growing silent for a time as they burrow forward, the tunnel sealing itself behind them as they move forward in the earth.

The only issue is that, despite the fact that it’s laid out like a city—the Heavens is a truly massive place.

It takes them a few minutes to get out from underneath the Palace of Wind and Water, and even then, they have to navigate through the Martial Avenue, which stretches on, and on, and on.

And eventually, Shi Qingxuan's patience wears thin.

"...Can you tell where we are?" She whispers, glancing back in Xie Lian's direction, squinting in the dark. "I don't think I can walk much further."

Xie Lian tilts his head, listening closely to the sounds above. "...We're still beneath the Martial Avenue," he explains.

"There are people above us, and—" He stops before he can finish that thought, feeling the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

Even without his sight, his battle instincts are as sharp as ever—enough for him to make a split second decision.

Shi Qingxuan gasps, making a muffled grunt when Xie Lian claps a hand over her mouth, yanking her back against his chest, forcing her not to make a sound—and within an instant, his reasons become clear as a sword plunges down from above.

And he was right to cover her mouth—because the scream of shock she would have let out is silenced against his palm.

She's quiet, her chest heaving nostrils flaring as the three of them remain still, waiting.

"...Looks like I missed them—but they're close!"

It looks like Shi Qingxuan's escape has already been noticed—and they don't have any more time to waste.

They remain silent and still until the sounds of their pursuers above fade away—and once they do, Ming Yi starts digging even faster than before.

Xie Lian ends up carrying Shi Qingxuan in his arms—both to save her energy, and to keep them moving faster whispering to Ming Yi—

"How long would it take you to draw a travel array?"

"...Thirty seconds," the Earth Master mutters. "But I can't draw one until we resurface."

“We’re underneath someone’s palace now,” Xie Lian listens closely, “And it’s quiet. This is probably the best chance we’re going to get.”

“With those assholes that close behind us?!”

“Yes,” the prince agrees, “I’ll have to buy you time—make the destination my shrine.”

“Won’t that be predictable?” Shi Qingxuan whispers urgently as Ming Yi begins tunneling up towards the surface. “They’ll just follow us there!”

“They’ll hesitate,” Xie Lian mutters, moving her so that he’s carrying the Wind master on his back as he climbs up.

“How do you know that they will?!”

Ming Yi looks like he might prefer taking on their pursuers.

“Because Crimson Rain is there.”

Xie Lian doesn’t have to say it for him to know.

The prince does feel somewhat guilty about that.

He had assured Hua Cheng that he wasn’t going to get himself involved with this mess any further, and now...

Well, it’s too late to consider other options.

And when they exit the tunnel, stumbling to the surface...it’s quiet.

Shi Qingxuan tightens her arms around Xie Lian’s neck still hanging from his back as Ming Yi kneels down on the floor, drawing the array.

“...I’ve never been in this palace before,” She comments, glancing around—finding the space completely unfamiliar.

“...Or maybe not this particular room,” she amends.

“Hmm?”

“Well—it’s someone’s bedroom.”

And the moment she says that—Xie Lian opens his eyes to look around —

Finding a distinctly bright, golden aura in the far corner of the room, presumably where the bed is.

"...Oh dear."

"What?!"

Just as Shi Qingxuan asks, candles around the room flicker to life, illuminating everyone within.

Ming Yi looks up in the middle of drawing the array, and his face falls.

"Oh god, did it have to be HIS palace?!"

"Who?!" Xie Lian questions, completely unaware.

The god sits up, curly hair sticking up in every direction as he rubs at his eyes, and Shi Qingxuan pauses, eyeing his bare torso and chest.

"You know, I guess it shouldn't be surprising, he is a martial god, but..."

A vein pops in Ming Yi's forehead.

"You're SERIOUSLY DOING THIS RIGHT NOW?!"

After the stress of the last week, Shi Qingxuan is desperate for even just a moment of comedy.

"Don't be jealous, yours are bigger! Especially in your female fo—!"

"SHUT UP!"

"Where are we?!" Xie Lian interjects, "People are—!"

The door to the bedroom bursts open, and when it does, the daylight from outside comes streaming in.

"QI YING!" Pei barks, storming through the door. "Hurry—the Wind Master is being abducted!"

Shi Qingxuan cries out with indignation.

"ABDUCTED?! I'm ESCAPING!"

"You're not a PRISONER, your brother is trying to—!"

"Lock me in my room and not let me leave?!" Shi Qingxuan glares.

“What does that sound like to you?!”

“...Well, it’s for your own good!”

Isn’t Qi Ying the Warden of the West, also known as Quan Yizhen?

Wasn’t he the one Xie Lian sat next to during the mid autumn festival?

“...” Xie Lian turns to look in the Martial God’s direction, bowing apologetically.

(Which looks somewhat ridiculous, since he still has Shi Qingxuan on his back.)

“Sorry for waking you, General!”

Quan Yizhen looks back at him, his eyes wide, slightly dazed from being woken up in such a manner.

Pei takes a step forward, only to stop when Xie Lian places a hand on the hilt of his sword.

“...Your highness, this isn’t a matter you want to involve yourself with.”

Shi Qingxuan shrinks slightly, but Xie Lian simply hitches her up a little higher on her back with one hand, the other still on his sword.

“Lady Wind Master has helped me more than once, I won’t abandon her now.”

“You have no IDEA what you’re getting into!”

“You’re the one who doesn’t know what you’re getting into!” Shi Qingxuan glares. “You don’t even know what’s GOING ON!”

“I know that this is the LAST thing your brother needs—!”

“And who gives a fuck?!” Ming Yi glares. “What about what she needs?!”

Xie Lian takes one step back, closer to the array—and Pei quickly seems to decide that the time for negotiation has passed.

“Enough—Qi Ying, help me secure the Wind Master!”

There’s a long pause as the Warden of the West looks from Xie Lian, to

Pei, back to Xie Lian.

Ming Yi finishes scribbling down the array in that time—and when he does, he reaches out to grab Xie Lian by the elbow, yanking him back into the formation.

Pei lunges forward, drawing his sword—

BOOM!

Xie Lian immediately draws fangxin, but... The blow doesn't land on him.

Xie Lian isn't sure what happened, even as the array flares and activates around them, listening as Pei Ming cries out indignantly—

"QI YING?! WHY ARE YOU ATTACKING ME?!"

And in an instant—they're gone.

Shi Qingxuan clings to him tightly, glancing around.

"Oh, thank god, we made it back—and you're—" Something in her tone changes as Xie Lian sets her down. "...you're right, Crimson Rain is here."

Ming Yi sends her a venomous look, and Xie Lian is baffled. "Didn't I already say that he was?"

"You certainly implied, but..."

"Gege," Hua Cheng comments from where he's sitting up on the counter, watching the group of newcomers with his knees spread. "I didn't realize you were returning with guests."

Directly contradicting what Xie Lian told him before.

"Ah, well..."

Xie Lian rubs the back of his neck, backing away from the other two, more in Hua Cheng's direction. "Things got a little bit out of hand, it wasn't part of the plan—"

Then, he accidentally backs up so far, he ends up bumping into the counter, between the calamity's spread knees.

Which would be embarrassing enough if he hadn't stumbled in the process, and when he throws up a hand to stop himself, well—

It lands on Hua Cheng's chest.

The Ghost King's skin, to be more specific.

To say it most accurately, Xie Lian's hand is on Hua Cheng's bare chest. He yanks it back almost immediately, going red all the way to his ears.

"Oh—I, I didn't—!" He stammers, realizing *exactly* what Shi Qingxuan must have been thinking. "He—He wasn't like this when I left—"

And now, realizing exactly what she was *staring* at, he throws his arms out in front of Hua Cheng, who obviously wasn't expecting company.

"NOBODY LOOK!"

From behind him the ghost king raises an eyebrow, setting his flask down on the counter.

Liquor, probably.

From the smell of it, and, well—

Xie Lian has tasted it on his lips before, the mere memory of it making him grow even more red than he already is.

"What are you doing sitting around in a shrine shirtless, anyway?" Ming Yi grumbles, etching a new travel array on the door.

"I spent the day working in the fields, and I was taking a rest," Hua Cheng shrugs, drumming his fingertips against the edge of the counter. "Is there a problem, Ming Yi?"

The earth master doesn't say a word, focusing on his task as Hua Cheng reaches for his outer robe.

Once he pulls it about his shoulders and goes about the task of buttoning it up, Xie Lian seems to relax. "What should our next step be?"

"We can't stay here," Ming Yi scribbles down the array even faster. "Most gods would avoid a fight with Crimson Rain—but not Ming Guang."

Xie Lian jumps when Hua Cheng slips down from the counter behind him, his hip brushing against the prince's skin as he walks past.

"Have you fought him before, San Lang?"

Hua Cheng crosses the room, watching Ming Yi's progress from over his shoulder.

"We've never met."

He shrugs, watching the final symbols being etched into place.

Shi Qingxuan moves closer as well, prepared to leap through the array as soon as it's ready.

"Even you wouldn't challenge him?"

A soft laugh falls from the ghost king's lips.

"More like he's never been foolish enough to offend me."

Ming Yi steps back, the array glowing brightly as he performs the final hand signals to activate it.

"But," Hua Cheng adds as the door is opened, "I'll keep a low profile this time around."

Not because he wouldn't relish in the fight—Xie Lian has spent enough time around Hua Cheng to know there's little he enjoys more —

But because he doesn't want to cause Xie Lian any trouble.

Shi Qingxuan is the first through, with Ming Yi behind her, and Hua Cheng and Xie Lian following closely behind—and when the portal shuts behind them, the first thing Xie Lian notices is the change in temperature.

It's warmer—slightly more humid, with lower elevation.

When he listens closer, he can hear cicadas beating in the distance—what's left of them anyway, given that most have already returned to hibernation.

"Oh, Ming-Xiong, this is perfect," Shi Qingxuan sighs with relief, stretching her arms over her head. "Pei won't come here unless he's desperate—that gives us time," she mutters, running her fingers through her hair as she paces the room, frantic.

“...San Lang?” Xie Lian leans towards him, speaking quietly. “Where are we?” Hua Cheng leans down to reply right next to his ear—

“The Palace of the Rain Master, your highness—but it would seem that she isn’t here at the moment.”

Ah—right. No one ever explained the details to him, but someone did mention that Pei is rather wary of her, refusing to enter her territory if he can avoid it.

Ming Yi watches Shi Qingxuan as she walks back and forth across the room, her normally well groomed hair slightly tangled, falling in front of her face.

She’s still pale compared to her normal complexion, with dark circles beneath bloodshot eyes.

“What happened back there?”

The earth master crosses his arms over her chest—looking as though he might want to go to her side, but choosing to keep his distance.

“Why wouldn’t your brother let you leave your palace? What’s going on between the two of you?”

“...”

Shi Qingxuan stops, pressing her face into her hands.

“...He’s being blackmailed.” She finally replies, hesitant to say anything more—

And upon hearing her describe it like that—Ming Yi’s face goes blank.

“Who?” He asks flatly, his knuckles white where he grips his elbows.

“My brother,” Shi Qingxuan doesn’t look up, holding her face even tighter as she stares at the floor.

“And what has your brother done that would warrant being blackmailed?” Ming Yi presses, his eyes locked on hers.

Shi Qingxuan won’t meet his gaze.

Hua Cheng suddenly feels compelled to turn away, not seeming to want to watch Ming Yi’s expression any longer. Instead he chooses to occupy himself with one of the cats lounging in a nearby patch of sun.

And after a long moment of silence, Xie Lian asks his own question.

“...Lady Wind Master, the day you ascended,” he asks quietly, his tone gentle as he watches her shoulders hunch. “...It was the last day of autumn, wasn’t it?”

Shi Qingxuan shrinks, her voice trembling slightly. “...Yes,” she whispers.

Hua Cheng doesn’t say a word, scratching a kitten beneath its chin. Its fur is white as snow, marked with dark patches around its eyes and throat.

Xie Lian sighs, rubbing the back of his neck. “...I think I know what happened,” he murmurs.

When Shi Qingxuan doesn’t speak up on her own, he continues.

“The Scholar He Xuan—I would be willing to bet he was born on the same day as you, likely in the same city,” Xie Lian squeezes his eyes shut. “That’s the only way it could have worked.”

Hua Cheng glances over at him, surprised.

“...Are you referring to swapping fates, your highness? How do you know about that?”

Xie Lian can hear Shi Qingxuan’s heart thumping anxiously, and his own aches with sympathy.

“My Guoshi taught me when I was young,” he explains. “Before he disappeared...he was fearful that I might attempt to switch my own fate to escape the situation.”

Hua Cheng stiffens, his jaw clenching with anger. “Dianxia never would have done such a thing.” Xie Lian offers a tired smile.

“Careful, San Lang.” For a moment, his expression becomes distant. “Have that much faith in me. and I’ll end up surprising you.”

Mei Nianqing was an excellent teacher. Xie Lian came to appreciate that time more and more during his own time as a teacher.

But the man had his own scars.

Xie Lian had simply been too young to see them and recognize them for what they were.

He would dote upon the crown prince, often treating Xie Lian like his own son. But there were other moments.

Times when he would regard Xie Lian with an air of fear and dread.

Not because he believed Xie Lian would do something terrible—but simply because he knew that the prince could.

And given what Xie Lian would do later—maybe he wasn't wrong.

Hua Cheng's reply goes silent, unheard.

'But you could never disappoint me.'

"You say that as though your Guoshi didn't want you to resort to such a thing," Ming Yi mutters, still watching Shi Qingxuan.

"He didn't—he forbade me from even considering it."

"...Then why tell you about it to begin with?"

"He didn't tell me the exact spell," Xie Lian explains. "He just wanted me to understand that I should never use it—in case I ever heard of it from someone else."

"...And what did he tell you?" Shi Qingxuan asks quietly.

If Xie Lian had known of all of the forces at play—he would have told the entire truth. That switching fates is not a skill taught by cultivation masters.

It's old magic. Dark magic.

Cursed.

And the spell is never taught by someone with good intentions.

Mei Nianqing told Xie Lian the story when he was a young, over confident god.

All he had been thinking of at the time had been an attempt on his life, during which he had been saved by a young soldier, guarding him in a cave until the danger had passed.

But even in that state...

Mei Nianqing's cautionary tale frightened him.

Switching fates is so uncommon, it belongs more to legend than it does to history. The number of times the spell has been cast in any records—that of the heavens, of mortals, or ghosts, is less than one could count on both hands.

And each instance has always begun in the same way.

When someone of truly magnificent destiny is faced with an impossible situation. Some sort of obstacle that cannot be overcome.

A man desperate to save his lover.

A mother, wishing to protect her children.

...Even a prince, struggling to hold onto his kingdom.

And at their lowest moment of fear and desperation, a figure has always appeared, offering to save them from failure, to give them their heart's desire—

To change their fate.

For someone in such a desperate situation, it's an impossible choice. So difficult to resist.

And they never realize that the person offering is not their friend. That what they offer isn't salvation...

It's a trap.

The cruelest kind.

Because of the things they don't tell the spell caster.

First: that you cannot switch fates between two individuals unless their destinies are already deeply intertwined.

Always causing pain to those you meant to save.

And second...

Any suffering caused by the spell will eventually come back to you. And it won't stop.

Not until the debt incurred has been paid.

And when such debts cannot be forgiven, well...

It only ever ends one way.

But Xie Lian can't tell Shi Qingxuan that without frightening her more.

"...He told me that practicing dark magic always comes at a steep price—to everyone around me." Xie Lian explains. "Lady Wind Master—how did you learn what your brother had done?"

Shi Qingxuan somehow grows even paler remembering, turning away and wrapping her arms around herself

"...The Reverend told me," she mutters. "Or, well...it showed me."

"...Showed you." Ming Yi repeats flatly.

Shi Qingxuan doesn't explain any further—but Xie Lian can already guess what happened.

"It showed her a memory, it did the same thing with me."

Hua Cheng looks over at him sharply.

"...It did?"

"Yes," Xie Lian frowns, his brow pinching with concentration. "Though I'm not sure if the memory was from the Reverend's perspective, or someone else's..."

And it begs another question:

Was the memory it showed Shi Qingxuan the Reverend's? And if so, how was it present when Shi Wudu switched their fates?

And if not...how did it get a hold of Shi Wudu's memory?

Then, the pieces fall into place.

Hua Cheng has never watched someone get so close to the truth, despite all odds.

"...It's not the Reverend," Xie Lian mutters.

Shi Qingxuan turns around to look at him sharply. "What?"

"The creature hunting you—it isn't the Reverend of Empty Words."

He shakes his head, feeling somewhat breathless as the facts come together. “Did you notice anything odd about the story during the Bloody Fire Social?”

Shi Qingxuan falls silent, thinking hard, and Hua Cheng—who always answers his questions, rhetorical or not—remains silent.

The one who answers him, in the end, is the most soft spoken of the four: Ming Yi.

“...The way he died,” the earth master replies slowly. “It was wrong.”

“What?” Shi Qingxuan looks between the two of them. “How was it wrong?!”

“All of the other victims of the Reverend of Empty Words died by suicide,” Xie Lian paces, not so differently from Shi Qingxuan’s movements a few minutes before. “But not He Xuan, he...”

“...Drowned,” Ming Yi concludes quietly.

“The Reverend never devoured him—and there’s no other instance of a victim escaping its wrath. Anyone that strong, who endured such a horrific life...” Xie Lian stops pacing, his stomach sinking. “Would form into an extremely powerful ghost.”

One bent on only one thing: Revenge.

And as for how He Xuan could have access to Xie Lian’s memories, tormenting him the way that he did—Xie Lian has other theories about that, but—

BOOM!

A sudden, thunderous crash outside steals his attention.

“OI!”

In the fields beneath the palace, the farmers scatter at the sight of Heavenly light and thunder opening up above the landscape—

All except for one of them.

A bull, jet black with long, ivory horns.

It rears back on its hind legs, and in doing so its shape begins to change.

Where there was once a towering beast now stands a man—one with long, thick black hair, a square jaw, and a gold ring through his nose.

"...Well, well!" He barks, his chest rumbling with laughter. "If it ain't little ol' Pei Ming!"

The martial god steps forward, unamused.

"I'm not here for a fight," Pei sighs, eyes gleaming in the sun. "I'll be in and out of your hair quickly."

"Do you think I let outsiders waltz about my mistress's lands freely?" The Rain Master's deputy crosses his arm, muscles in his arms and chest flexing.

Pei places one hand on the hilt of his sword, "Do you think I would have come here if I wasn't prepared to cut you down?" He questions coldly.

His normal smiling, happy go lucky demeanor is gone—replaced with something colder, sharply focused.

Yushi Huang's deputy raises both eyebrows, shocked.

"Well, you've suddenly got quite a lot of nerve—!" He starts, rolling back his sleeves as though he's looking for a fight, but—

Pei simply walks right past him, his expression dark. "I don't have time for this."

There are few people in this world he actively avoids—Yushi Huang being one of them.

But some things are more important than guilt, or regrets.

The moment he shoves the door to the temple open, the Wind Master is already indignant.

"How did you find us so quickly?!"

Pei glances around the room, taking in possible enemies.

Ming Yi, he isn't worried about.

Xie Lian is problematic, but with the cursed shackles, he can be dealt with. And the fourth...

Just looks like a young farm hand, sprawled on a bench with a cat in his lap.

“…Tracking spell,” he mutters, which only serves to make Shi Qingxuan even more indignant.

“How dare—!”

“YES!” Pei glares, rounding on her with such frustration, it actually makes her flinch. “I fucking DARE!”

“General—”

“And if you would pull your head out of your ass for even A SECOND, you’d realize why!”

Shi Qingxuan laughs with disbelief, and even without her spiritual powers or her fan, she’s practically rearing and ready to fight.

“That is RICH, coming from YOU!”

“I’m not wasting my time with this,” Pei growls, stalking forward. “We’re leaving.”

“I’m not going ANYWHERE with you!”

“When you’re incapable of protecting yourself AND your stupidity impacts others, YOU DON’T GET A SAY!”

“STUPIDITY?!” Shi Qingxuan tries to lunge for him, only to be stopped by Ming Yi’s arm around her waist. “YOU DON’T EVEN KNOW—!”

“You know what I DO know?” Pei’s eye twitches, and this—

This isn’t like him. Not at all.

Even if Shi Qingxuan doesn’t care to admit it…

Something must be wrong, for Pei to be acting so spooked.

“These two,” He jabs his thumb in the direction of Xie Lian and Ming Yi, “CANNOT keep you safe from that thing, but they’ll get hurt trying. Is that what you want?!”

Finally, Shi Qingxuan falters.

Clearly, she hadn't considered that possibility, but…

…Xie Lian *did* get hurt last time, trying to protect her.

"Ming Guang," the prince steps forward, both of his hands raised. "There's no need to be so rash, we can discuss the situation calmly."

Pei looks at him, his expression slightly wary—but determined. "Your highness, normally I would agree—but there isn't any time. I hope we aren't forced to delay any further because you've forced me to fight you."

"You won't be fighting him."

Pei Ming turns his gaze to the youth in the corner—

One with a surprisingly deep voice for a teenager.

He hasn't moved, his legs stretched out lazily, scratching the cat in his lap behind the ears.

But his gaze is sharper than any blade.

Xie Lian sighs, remembering what Hua Cheng had said about not making a scene, but instead of addressing that veiled threat, Pei seems to change tact.

"…The more time you waste, the more you put your brother's life in danger," he turns to Shi Qingxuan, who grows still.

"…What?" She questions slowly, and the next words out of Pei's mouth bring silence to the entire room.

"His calamity began as soon as you left the city," he takes a step towards her, and Ming Yi's arm tightens around her waist. "And it's not going well."

"…It did—?"

"And I'm not there to help him, even though he needs me," Pei continues, his knuckles white where he grips his sword at his side. "Because he was actually *sick* with worry, not knowing where you were. So, are you coming willingly, or am I dragging you?"

Shi Qingxuan falls silent, and for the first time in a few minutes—Hua Cheng actually forces himself to look at Ming Yi.

Watching her face, everything about him radiating calm, but— Hua Cheng knows better.

He's tense. Wound up so tight, he could easily shatter.

And he warned him. But...

Shi Qingxuan pushes his arm down from her waist, stepping towards Pei Ming—only for him to catch her by the wrist.

"...You're actually going to help him?" He questions, staring at the back of her hair, his expression guarded.

"After everything you just told us?"

Shi Qingxuan doesn't look at him, her head bowed low—clearly torn about what the right thing to do is, given the situation, but...

"...Of course she is," Pei grabs her other wrist, pulling her along. "He's her brother!"

"He's—"

"He's right." Shi Qingxuan mutters, biting her lip—and this time, she pulls her wrist out of Ming Yi's grip. "I'm going to have to figure out what to do after his trial is over, but for now...He's my brother."

No one in the room sees.

No one else is watching.

But Hua Cheng is.

Closely enough to see the flash of pain in He Xuan's eyes. Brief, but deep.

'Families are complicated.'

Hua Cheng warned him of that, and still.

Two things blind a man to reason:

Love, and grief.

He Xuan has both in abundance.

He brings up the back of the line as they follow Pei Ming and Shi

Qingxuan to the array the martial god used to travel to Yushi Huang's territory from the Eastern Sea.

'You can't blame her when she doesn't know that it's you.'

He makes the attempt at reasoning with him, but receives no reply.

'It's obvious that you don't want to hurt her. Why—'

'It shouldn't matter who I am. Who my fiancé was. Who my sister was.'

Hua Cheng falls silent, having no means of arguing with such a statement.

'If you're saying she wouldn't be able to stomach what he did as easily if she could put a face to the person who died for her—that's not good enough.'

Maybe it isn't. Not to the person who suffered.

But it's also very—

'That's something I respect about the Crown Prince of Xianle.'

It's unfair, of course—bringing Xie Lian's convictions to such a debate is the equivalent of bringing a broad sword to battle when your enemy wields a toothpick.

And given the fact that the two of them shared so many memories in the Kiln—He Xuan knows far more about Hua Cheng's past with the prince than most.

'Remember that day, when the night touring green lantern pulled you behind his carriage in a sack?'

Hua Cheng's mouth presses into a grim line.

'Xie Lian didn't know you. You were just an orphan with nothing to your name.' He watches his God's back a few meters ahead, hair gently bowing in the breeze. *'What would have happened if he had been more like Shi Qingxuan?'*

Hong'er would have died.

Maybe he would have become a ghost fire, maybe not, but most likely —

There would have been no Wu Ming. No Hua Cheng.

Nothing.

Still, it's not a perfect comparison, not even close.

Xie Lian held no love for his cousin—only disgust.

And Hong'er had been very much alive—someone Xie Lian could step in and rescue.

Not a dead man from four centuries ago—one whom Shi Qingxuan now believes has been terrorizing her.

And while He Xuan wasn't responsible for *everything* that happened in Fu Gu... He isn't entirely innocent, either.

'You wouldn't be interfering if the prince didn't care for her,' He Xuan adds, his shoulders squaring stubbornly. *'If you want to protect him—keep him out of this.'*

'You think I haven't been trying?'

What is Hua Cheng supposed to do, when Shi Qingxuan runs to Xie Lian for help at every turn?

Even now, he plans on trying to convince Xie Lian to stay behind. Hell, he's even willing to use Shuo's injury to guilt trip him into returning to the shrine, but—

'Pei! ' Ling Wen's voice cries out in the general communication array—and for once, she sounds urgent. *'Have you located the Wind Master?'*

'I have her, we're returning now, ' Pei replies, and within the communication array...

If the horrified whispers are anything to go by—the Water Master's battle isn't going smoothly.

'You have to hurry,' Ling Wen speaks in a rush now, *'A group of fishing vessels weren't warned, and they've gotten swept up in the mess—at least forty mortals are at risk!'*

Xie Lian stiffens, and Hua Cheng closes his eyes, breathing out slowly through his nose, speaking into the prince's private array—

'Your highness—we should stay back.'

He makes the suggestion, knowing full well that, when lives are at stake, he'll—

'I'm sorry, San Lang.' Xie Lian frowns, his posture turning stubborn as he hurries ahead, closing in on Pei's array. *'I know I told you I would stay out of this—but there's more at stake than you know.'*

Hua Cheng could say the same to him, but...

There's no time to discuss it.

Pei Ming leaps through his array with Shi Qingxuan in tow, Ming Yi following directly after them—and then, Xie Lian, with Hua Cheng close behind.

With one step, Xie Lian is in the fields, and with the next— He stands on the rocking bow of a ship.

But the men around them are no ordinary soldiers. All of them are deputies within the Palace of Wind and Water, powerful cultivators in their own right—each one milling over the decks, manning the helms, adjusting the sails.

"Ge!" Shi Qingxuan cries, looking around. "Where is he?!"

Xie Lian blinks, struggling to see, because—

He's now having the dawning realization that, similar to Hua Cheng, Shi Wudu was restraining his own spiritual power this entire time.

But not now.

The air around them is charged with power, vividly blue, crackling in the storm— filling Xie Lian's entire range of vision.

"OVER THERE!" Pei holds one hand up against his forehead, shielding it from the violent winds, pointing ahead. "IN THE CENTER OF THE STORM!"

One of the higher ranking deputies rushes over, standing at salute:

"General Ming Guang!" He cries, "The Water Master is holding his ground—but the storm keeps pulling us further out—how should we handle the civilians?!"

Pei presses a hand against his temple, thinking.

First, he speaks into his private array with the Water Master—uttering the only words that could matter to him at this moment:

'Your sister is here.'

There's an ominous crash of thunder in response, then a rush of the water as something shoots towards the boat—springing forth upon reaching the bow, boots landing heavily on the wooden planks.

The Water Master doesn't spare anything else even a passing glance.

"SHI QINGXUAN!"

Normally, he's dressed in fine silks and jewels, hair flowing down his back—

But the Water Master dresses very differently for battle, it would seem.

Instead, he wears deep, midnight blue robes that fit much closer to his body, more suited for combat, with black trousers and heavy leather boots underneath.

It's more comparable to something a ship captain would wear—not a god of wealth and opulence.

And his hair, rather than hanging down his back, is pulled up into a high ponytail, clasped with a gold hair pin that doesn't match anything else he's wearing, but, well—

(It was a gift.)

The Water Master pulls his sister into a fierce hug—so tight, her ribs ache with protest.

"Where were you?!" He mutters, pulling back, placing both hands on either side of her head, looking her over for injuries. "Are you hurt?"

Xie Lian can't help but notice how similar his reaction to seeing Shi Qingxuan was to Ming Yi's, but then again…

Both men care for the Wind Master deeply, that much is clear—even if their forms of care are very different.

"I'm fine," Shi Qingxuan mutters, reaching up to press her fingertips to a cut on Shi Wudu's cheek with a frown. "I didn't mean to—"

"It doesn't matter."

The Water Master pulls her in for another hug, pressing a kiss to the side of her head as he squeezes his eyes shut, taking deep breaths.

And now, with the knowledge of where his sister is—and that she's alright—he seems to regain his focus.

Shi Qingxuan isn't startled by the gesture—her brother has always hugged her, and when she was small it was never unusual for him to kiss her on the forehead or the hair when putting her to bed at night, but...

To be affectionate in front of others— That's never happened before.

"Whatever happens next, you stick with Pei or Ming Yi, understand?" He mutters, stepping back. "I need you to promise me. I can't—" He lowers his voice. "I can't do this if you don't."

"...Okay," the Wind Master agrees, eyeing his expression warily. "But I —"

Before she can say anything more, Shi Wudu turns around, looking to Pei as he unsheathes his fan from his belt. "I need you to protect the ship."

The General grits his teeth, displeased with the arrangement—but there's nothing else to be done.

He can't fight the Calamity on Shi Wudu's behalf—that isn't how such things work. And as for the fishermen, well—

The sea is too unruly right now to be safe for anyone *other* than Shi Wudu at the moment, so they won't be able to assist them until the cyclone is dealt with.

And as the mist starts to clear, it's more obvious that it isn't a storm at all—rather it's more like seven raging pillars of water, swirling with the force of a maelstrom.

Shi Wudu places one foot on the bow, glancing back to one of his men.

"If any blasts get past me, make sure she takes it on the head—and keep your heading due West. We cannot go any further East, understand?"

"Aye, sir!"

Xie Lian is slightly puzzled by the second order.

What lies to the east that the water master is trying to avoid?

Satisfied, he steps over—but this time, instead of running across the water's surface, he snaps his fan open, giving it a powerful wave.

The instant that he does, something springs from the water, landing beneath his feet as it rushes him back into battle.

And after a moment of staring—Hua Cheng realizes that he's seeing a dragon. Conjured from the sea water, with the Water Master riding its back.

"...I'll admit it," the ghost king hums, leaning against the railing beside Xie Lian. "The water tyrant lives up to the reputation."

Pei snaps his eyes away from the battle, finally seeming to notice Hua Cheng's presence with an air of irritation.

He's never been fond of that nickname.

"...Your highness, who is the kid?"

Xie Lian perks up, moving to stand in front of Hua Cheng.

"He's just someone from my palace," the prince shrugs, his hands clasped behind him innocently. "He won't cause any trouble."

Pei glances from Xie Lian, to the youth looking over his shoulder, his gaze suspicious.

"Your highness..."

"Hmm?"

"With all due respect, you don't have that many acquaintances, and nobody works in your palace."

Xie Lian pauses, feeling somewhat sheepish, because—

Well, both of those things are true.

"...Regardless of who he is—he's just here to help me," The prince lifts his chin. "And as I've said–he won't cause any trouble."

“He’s right,” Hua Cheng yawns, leaning his elbows back on the deck railing. “Just pretend I’m not even here.”

Easier said than done.

While they’ve been talking, Shi Wudu has been clashing with the water pillars in the distance, his dragon curling around them in a tight coil, squeezing like a constrictor until they come crashing back down.

“...Well, as you can see, this is almost over with,” Pei mutters. “So, there’s no need.“

Xie Lian can’t argue with him there—and he almost asks Hua Cheng to wait for him back in the shrine, since he’s sure this will be over in a matter of minutes, but...

Within his private array, Hua Cheng speaks up . *‘Gege, it’s important you stay beside me this time.’*

...This time?

What does he mean?

Once the Water Pillars come crashing back down to earth, Shi Wudu lifts his fan, gathering the force of the currents below.

Once they’re in his grip, he directs them towards the merchant ships in the distance, pushing them further and further out, until finally—they’re out of range.

Shi Qingxuan lets out a shuddering sigh, dropping down to her knees with relief as her brother returns to the ship.

“Oh, thank the heavens,” she mutters, pressing a hand against her forehead. “I really thought you were—”

She falls silent when she sees the look on her brother’s face.

“It’s not over,” he rounds on one of his men, fists clenched. “Didn’t I tell you to keep west?!”

“We did, sir!”

Just then—Xie Lian feels the ship shudder and groan. “What’s happening?!”

The Water Master glances around the sides of the ship, sweat beading at his temples —already exhausted from the first round of the fight.

“Gege?!” Shi Qingxuan grasps the railing, startled “What’s happening?!”

Shi Wudu doesn’t answer at first, breathing raggedly as he moves his fan, attempting to use the currents to push the boat to the west, with the others, but…

Nothing happens.

Pei frowns, his brow knitting with confusion.

“…Shui—?”

“The communication array isn’t working,” Shi Wudu mutters, rubbing the side of his head. “We…we have to…”

He winces, pinching the bridge of his nose—and Pei’s expression turns focused.

“…Shi Qingxuan—go with Ming Yi and use the travel array to summon reinforcements.”

For once, the Wind Master doesn’t argue with him—rushing below decks. And Xie Lian can’t help but notice…Hua Cheng has become rather silent.

“…San Lang,” he reaches out, hoping to grab his sleeve—but the calamity grabs his hand instead, holding on tightly. “What’s going on?”

“…” He watches as Ming Yi’s back disappears below decks before turning his attention to the prince, his tone somewhat clipped.

“The far eastern sea is Blackwater’s territory.”

“Black Water Sinking Ships?” Pei mutters, startled. “Of all of the terrible luck…”

Just then, Shi Qingxuan returns from below decks, even paler than she was before.

“The travel array isn’t working!”

“Well, isn’t that just common sense?” Hua Cheng rolls his eyes. “If the communication array is down, why would the travel array still be working?"

Pei sends him an irritated look. "You—"

The ship rattles again, even more violently this time—making even Shi Wudu lose his balance. Pei Ming catches him, his hands on the Water Master's shoulders.

"Fine, if you know so much—then what's going on here?!"

Hua Cheng seems perfectly relaxed—but his grip on Xie Lian's hand is tight.

"Any ship within Blackwater's territory will sink," he shrugs, and though no one else can see, when he drags his thumb over the back of Xie Lian's knuckles, the prince's ears grow a little warm.

"There's only one thing that can float out here."

"What?" Shi Wudu rubs his forehead, opening his eyes. "What kind of wood? There might be something in the cargo hood that can—"

"Coffin wood," Hua Cheng replies calmly.

"..."

"We don't have any of that on board, do we?"

While Shi Qingxuan's intentions by asking are innocuous, her brother can't help but be exasperated.

"Why would a GOD have coffin wood on his ship?! We CAN'T DIE!"

"Not with that attitude," Ming Yi mutters under his breath.

Hua Cheng reaches into his pocket—he's been wearing the disguise of a poor fisherman, up until now, one that's quickly broken when he lifts out a golden flask, raising it to his lips.

(Subtlety be damned, he needs a drink.)

"...Then we'll just have to abandon ship."

Despite the fact that this is a Heavenly vessel that no doubt is worth a royal treasury's worth of gold—the Water Master seems perfectly comfortable with leaving it behind. "We'll have to retreat by air, instead."

As he says this, the gods around them begin mounting their heavenly swords, rising away from the ship decks—with the exception of Pei, who stands upon Shi Wudu's blade beside him, and Shi Qingxuan, standing on, well...

Mi Ying's shovel.

The handle, to be more precise.

Xie Lian can't even focus on the hilarity of the situation, not when he's gripping fangxin, thinking.

Maybe, if Hua Cheng was lending him spiritual power, fangxin could carry him to safety. But both of them? The blade is fairly old, he doubts...

But before he can say a word, Hua Cheng wraps an arm firmly around the prince's waist, speaking next to his ear,

"Flying out won't work—you'll have to hold onto me, your highness."

"...It won't?"

Hua Cheng eyes the dark waters below.

"...Things happen when you try to fly in Black Water's territory. Do you trust me?"

Xie Lian stares blankly ahead, feeling somewhat unsettled, for once, that he can't see what might be coming.

"...Yes, but—oh!"

Without another word, he's swept off his feet.

"San Lang?!" He mutters, grasping at the front of the ghost king's shirt—a very similar position to when he plunged down into the Sinner's Pit in the Crescent Moon Kingdom.

"The ship is going down," Hua Cheng explains, stepping up onto the bow. "We don't want to be on board when it does."

Suddenly, Xie Lian understands Hua Cheng's sudden sense of urgency, remembering something the Ghost King told him weeks ago, just after Xie Lian found out who he was.

Nine times out of ten, Hua Cheng is stronger than Blackwater.

But there is one, glaring exception to that rule:

Every Ghost King is Supreme within their own territory, and this…

This means that the situation they've now found themselves in is just about as dangerous as it gets.

Without another word, Hua Cheng leaps overboard, taking Xie Lian with him as he plunges into the water below.

Xie Lian gasps from the cold, throwing his arms around Hua Cheng's neck. "We'll start sinking in a minute," the ghost king speaks next to his ear. "But—!"

CRASH!

CRACK!

If Xie Lian could see the creatures bursting from the water, even he would have felt a hint of fright.

Enormous fish skeletons, closer in size to a small whale, leap from the depths—eyes burning red as they attack the heavenly officials floating above.

"Just hold onto me," Hua Cheng repeats, squeezing his eyes shut, concentrating. "Don't let go, and you'll be safe."

Xie Lian isn't worried for himself—not exactly.

He knows that Hua Cheng's arms are the safest place to be in this scenario. But the people above…

"The Water Master will have to protect them as best as he can," Hua Cheng seems to guess what he's thinking, grasping Xie Lian firmly by the jaw. "Take a deep breath, now."

Xie Lian doesn't even think before obeying, sucking in a deep breath of air— "Hold it!"

Just as he gives that last order, Xie Lian feels the water beginning to suck them down, dragging them into the depths below.

He keeps his mouth tightly shut, holding onto his breath as he clings around Hua Cheng's neck as tightly as he can.

'It's alright.'

That's the last thing he hears, along with the roar of the water in his ears. Hua Cheng speaking into his private array—

'Just hold on.'

Then, with the building pressure of the sea around them, Xie Lian fades into unconsciousness.

Plunging further and further into swirling darkness, drifting between dream and reality.

'Just hold on.'

'Just hold on.'

And, as usual, Xie Lian doesn't remember his dreams.

Not even when he sits up with a ragged gasp, clutching the chain around his neck.

"DON'T!"

He glances around, his breathing ragged as he clutches his chest—

And, as usual, he's in darkness.

From the gritty texture beneath his hands and feet, it's fairly obvious that he's somehow made it to a beach, and...

Panic builds in his throat.

He's alone.

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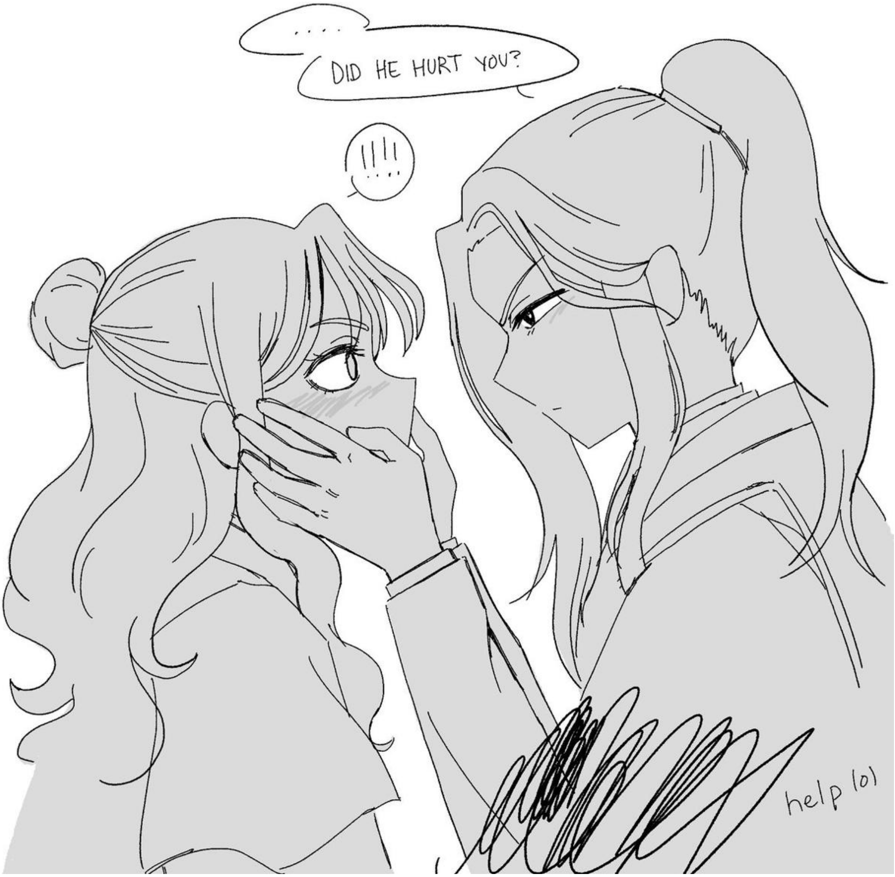
CREDIT: PANICKING ARTIST


. . . .
DID HE HURT YOU?
!!!!
. . . .
help lol

CREDIT: ASH

[image]

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Chapter End Notes

thanks to Banana Scouts, Ash, and Panicking Artist for their beautiful work, and allowing me to share it!

xoxo, Evie

The State of You

Chapter Summary

> The prince swallows hard, sitting up a little straighter.
>
> Normally, his embarrassment over doing such a thing would make him hesitate, but —
>
> He's desperate.
>
> "...I'm so, so sorry in advance..."
>
> Without any further preamble, he leans down, using his thumb to push Hua Cheng's chin down, just as the Ghost King did for him before, opening his mouth as he seals their lips together.

Chapter Notes

> content warnings for this chapter: there is a mildly nsfw scene that could be considered dubious consent. (No one intentionally violates anyone, it's difficult circumstances.) Secondly, there is brief reference to sexual assault.

"San Lang?!"

He's quiet, listening closely for a response, but...

There's just the gentle rush of the waves, and the breeze in the trees. No one answers.

Xie Lian swallows hard, pushing his hair out of his face.

"SAN LANG!"

Old wounds flare easily.

Xie Lian rolls over onto his hands and knees, feeling around blindly, fighting back the panic that has seized his heart in an iron grip.

He has to be nearby.

He—

Xie Lian hands his head, his lips trembling.

“...He wouldn’t leave me,” he whispers, his voice rasping from the salt water he must have inhaled while passed out.

And just as his hand starts to reach out again, fumbling in the dark—
He feels a boot.

Xie Lian yanks his hand back at first with a choked whimper.

‘Not again.’

That’s the only thought in his mind.

‘Please, not again.’

Xie Lian is many things, but he’s never been a coward.

But right now, all he wants to do is run away, to not—

To never live through something like that again.

But...he can’t.

“...” He reaches out again, this time his hand landing higher up, feeling a man’s leg, his clothes, much like Xie Lian’s, soaked with sea water. “San Lang?”

He was wearing a skin before, but one Xie Lian had felt before—so when his palms press against his cheeks—

It’s him.

A broken sound tears from his throat as he grips the ghost king by the shoulders, giving him a shake.

“Can you hear me?!”

How much water could he have inhaled? Xie Lian has drowned plenty of times before, trying to fish in all four seas. Once, he even drifted for an entire month before being pulled up in a fisherman’s net.

But Hua Cheng probably hasn’t dealt with that before.

Xie Lian feels around frantically, trying to decide what he should do.

This is one of those moments where his immortality comes back to haunt him— having a body that heals from any wound or illness has left his understanding of medical practices woefully inaccurate.

But...when Xie Lian was in the lake before, chasing the fetal spirit...San Lang...

The prince swallows hard, sitting up a little straighter.

Normally, his embarrassment over doing such a thing would make him hesitate, but —

He’s desperate.

“...I’m so, so sorry in advance...”

Without any further preamble, he leans down, using his thumb to push Hua Cheng’s chin down, just as the Ghost King did for him before, opening his mouth as he seals their lips together.

In any other situation, he would be absolutely mortified to do such a thing, but now...

Now, he’s focused on the task at hand, holding Hua Cheng’s face between his hands as he blows hair down his throat, feeling his chest rise and fall with each breath that Xie Lian gives him.

What...what is he going to do, if he doesn’t wake up?

Xie Lian has no idea how to treat a ghost for an injury, he doesn’t have any spiritual power—he can’t even get Hua Cheng out of here and take him to someone in Ghost City for help. He’s really so—

Xie Lian is startled from his thoughts when he feels a hand land on his shoulder.

Of course—he can’t see that Hua Cheng’s eyes have been wide open for the last seven seconds, too shocked to speak—but the hand gripping his arm is enough to tell the prince—

He’s awake.

Xie Lian leans back sharply, sighing a shaky breath of relief.

“San Lang!”

Hua Cheng sits up with him, a couple of ragged coughs wrenching from his chest.

"A-Apologies, gege..." He mutters, sounding half winded, half dazed. "Stretching the defense array was more complicated than expected."

"...Array?" Xie Lian replies faintly.

"If you don't have enough spiritual power to shield your body, the currents here pulverize flesh and bone," Hua Cheng explains, decisively looking away from him.

So, he obviously had to shield Xie Lian.

"And in the Wind Master's current state..."

The prince's eyes widen.

"...You protected Shi Qingxuan?" He questions faintly.

Hua Cheng has always made a point of being decisively unhelpful to other Heavenly Officials. Outwardly cold, even to the point of hostility.

"She got blown to the other side of the island with Ming Guang, but she's fine—"

Before Hua Cheng can say another word, Xie Lian does something slightly out of character.

He lunges forward, flinging his arms around the Ghost King's neck, hugging him tightly, his face pressed into his chest, not seeming to mind that his robes are soaked and covered in sand.

At first, Hua Cheng is too stunned to respond, and Xie Lian chokes out;

"I-I thought..." He swallows thickly, his chest aching, and his eyes stinging. "I thought you were..."

"...Dead?"

Xie Lian doesn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Actually, he wishes he could cry.

There's an ache in his chest, one that gets heavier and heavier with every passing year—and if he could shed a tear, maybe it would be a little lighter.

But nothing seems to break through anymore, no matter how deeply it hurts.

"...I know it sounds ridiculous..."

Because he already *is* dead, Xie Lian shouldn't have anything to worry about, and yet...

He's seen a ghost dispersed before his eyes before—until all he had left was a black saber and white flower.

"I don't..." Xie Lian swallows thickly, leaning back.

"I don't know what came over me, I'm sorry--"

Before he can completely pull away, arms wrap around him, pulling him back in.

"San Lang—?"

"Don't apologize," the ghost king mutters, one arm tight around his back, his hand stroking the back of his head.

"I'm sorry for frightening you, gege."

Xie Lian bites his lip, resting his cheek against Hua Cheng's chest for a moment, allowing his panicked breaths to slow.

"It wasn't your fault," he whispers.

Honestly, he's daunted that Hua Cheng would expend so much energy that he'd actually end up knocked out, even if it was only for a short period of time, but...

He seems fine now.

Still.

Hua Cheng being a ghost was never something that bothered Xie Lian...

Until now.

Because at this moment, the only thing that might make him feel secure would be hearing his heartbeat.

"...San Lang?" He mumbles, the unsteadiness in his voice prompting Hua Cheng to hold him tighter.

"Yes?"

"Could I...ask you for a strange favor?"

The ghost king hums, leaning his chin on top of Xie Lian's head for a moment. "Anything."

Xie Lian closes his eyes, fighting the urge to--

"...Could you summon one of your butterflies?"

He doesn't seem bothered--just surprised as he complies.

Clink!

Xie Lian turns his head when he feels the creature land lightly on his shoulder, one of its wings gently bumping against his cheek.

"...Can I ask why?" Hua Cheng murmurs, watching the look on the prince's face curiously.

Xie Lian doesn't reply.

He just stares at the silver light emanating from it's wings.

Because he can't see him. He can't hear his heartbeat, or the pace of his breath.

He tilts his head to the side, allowing those wings to brush against his cheek once more.

But when he hears the sound of silver bells, or sees the ethereal glow of wraith butterflies--

Xie Lian knows he's alright.

He's here.

(San Lang is here.)

When it becomes clear that the prince isn't going to answer, Hua Cheng takes a different tact.

He reaches forward, taking the side of Xie Lian's face in his hand, guiding his god to look back toward him.

"If it makes gege feel better, I'll let him in on a secret," he murmurs, stroking his thumb over Xie Lian's cheek.

The god stares up at him blindly, waiting.

In these brief moments when they're alone, when no one can see the look in his eyes, Hua Cheng tries to take the chance to take him in.

To etch every line of that face even deeper into his memory, watching him with open adoration.

"No matter what happens to me--I won't leave this world," he murmurs, watching Xie Lian's parted lips, his chest aching with longing.

"...Even if your soul dispersed?" The prince whispers, feeling slightly doubtful.

"Even then," Hua Cheng assures him gently. "I would always come back."

That takes Xie Lian back to when Hua Cheng leapt into the Sinner's Pit, those words he gave to Xie Lian before disappearing below.

'Don't worry, gege.'

'I'll always come back.'

"...How?"

Hearing that from anyone else, Xie Lian might have felt patronized. He isn't a child. He understands death and loss better than most.

Except for a ghost, maybe.

(No one mourns like a ghost.)

But Hua Cheng sounds...sincere.

"Because," he shrugs. "I still have something precious to me in this world."

Xie Lian pauses, leaning back to tilt his head to the side, his eyes narrowing. Why...does that sound so familiar?

Hua Cheng stares down at him, not saying a word, watching the wheels move in his head.

And they do.

They spin faster and faster, reaching top speeds—

...And they go speeding in the wrong direction.

"Right," Xie Lian swallows hard. "That...right."

The person he fell for when he was a child.

The beautiful, intelligent, generous stranger that he loves.

That's when it also starts to dawn on him:

Xie Lian just gave him mouth to mouth, then proceeded to mope about, thinking about how he wished Hua Cheng would breathe, because...

...Ghosts don't need air.

"...Uh..."

"...Dianxia? Is something wrong?"

"...I'm so sorry," he mumbles, stumbling back out of Hua Cheng's arms, scrambling to his feet.

"Gege—?"

"I—I WAS JUST—!"

Hua Cheng leaps to his feet to hurry after him, worried by the panicked tone in Xie Lian's voice.

"What?!"

"...I THOUGHT YOU NEEDED AIR!"

Your highness, just calm down—"

That's not even remotely possible for Xie Lian, who feels almost delirious with guilt and embarrassment, charging blindly through the woods.

"I'M SO SORRY!"

"YOUR HIGHNESS, YOU CAN'T RUN OFF HERE!"

Like *hell* he can't!

What was he thinking?!

He can't even imagine how bad that looks—particularly after Hua Cheng had JUST told him that he was in love with someone, and not so long ago, Xie Lian had practically batting his eyelashes and insisting 'mouth to mouth didn't count as a kiss' so Hua Cheng would—would—

There's also another fairly obvious drawback to charging through a forest you've never been in before while blind and emotionally distressed, therefore not paying attention to your surroundings...

THUNK!

Xie Lian slams face first into the tree, so hard, his arms are still sticking straight out, and he goes flying backwards.

CRACK!

BOOM!

And the tree, a sizable specimen, comes crashing down.

That would all be bad enough, but no.

It doesn't stop there.

Before he can hit the ground, he lands back in Hua Cheng's arms—but this time he has a bruised forehead and a bloody nose.

"...I'm so—"

"I know you were just trying to help me," Hua Cheng assures him, a deep frown settling across his face.

He says that, but he sounds unhappy.

Before Xie Lian can question that, because Hua Cheng does seem bothered by something, he—

He feels the Ghost King's lips press against his forehead, and his heart leaps all the way into his throat.

"San L—!"

Then, his lips are on the bridge of his nose, and Xie Lian lets out something that sounds somewhere between a yelp and a death rattle.

"There," Hua Cheng mutters, placing both hands on Xie Lian's shoulders as he spins him around, walking him back towards the beach.

When Xie Lian reaches up to touch his nose, he can feel that it's no longer bleeding— honestly, it was probably broken before, so—

So obviously, that's what Hua Cheng was doing.

"...Thank you, San Lang," he mumbles, still feeling somewhat mortified.

The calamity doesn't immediately respond, guiding Xie Lian to sit down on a fallen palm log on the beach.

"You can thank me by staying still," he mutters, straightening up. "This place isn't safe."

Xie Lian falls silent, listening as Hua Cheng walks away, hands in his lap.

Rarely does Hua Cheng ever try to tell him what to do—so, if he's doing it now—

He must be really worried.

In any case, the butterfly stays with him, sitting in Xie Lian's lap, crawling over his hand when he offers it, wings beating gently.

Xie Lian watches it, taking quiet comfort in its gentle glow.

After a minute or so, Hua Cheng returns, his wet outer robes stripped off, the tree Xie Lian knocked down with, well—

(His skull.)

—propped up on one shoulder.

He drops it down onto the sand with a low *thud!*

He extends one arm out, palm flat, and Xie Lian can see the brief glow of spiritual power as he activates a magical array.

"...You can use that here?" He perks up, hopeful. "Can you communicate with the outside? We could go get reinforcements—"

"Sorry, gege," Hua Cheng shakes his head. "It's not that kind of array." He reaches his hand inside, pulling out an ax. "It's storage."

"...Oh," Xie Lian mumbles, feeling slightly crestfallen. "That makes sense."

At first, he thinks Hua Cheng might plan on using the tree for firewood—but that turns out to be necessary.

Crack!

With a simple snap of his fingers, a campfire sparks to life, warming him without any visible source.

"Hold out your hands for me."

The prince obeys without question, and Hua Cheng hands him a fish skewered on a stick, roasted to perfection—(likely by magic.)

"Oh," Xie Lian blinks, "You should eat first, I really don't need—"

"Only one of us needs food to survive," Hua Cheng speaks over him.

As he says this, he drops a handful of berries into Xie Lian's other waiting palm.

"...I don't need to eat to survive—" Xie Lian starts, prepared to go onto the same train of thought as he did with Lang Qiangqiu and Shuo a few weeks before in the shrine, but—

"Can you stay in proper fighting condition without eating a certain amount?" Xie Lian stops, his mouth hanging open—because he's got him there.

Hua Cheng straightens up, turning back to the tree, stripping it of limbs and bark, cutting into usable planks.

"But I—"

"—haven't eaten in two days." Hua Cheng mutters, making Xie Lian feel slightly chagrined. "In a place like this, you'll need your strength. Make sure to eat it all."

And instead of arguing anymore, Xie Lian relents, picking pieces of fish from the bone, chewing thoughtfully.

"...What are you doing?" He wonders quietly, listening to the sound of sawing and hammering.

“We have…” He thinks it over, glancing up to evaluate the position of the stars in the sky. “A three hour window to get out of here, give or take. And there’s only one way out.”

Xie Lian chews on another bite before popping a berry into his mouth. “…Where’s here, exactly?”

“Black Water Island,” Hua Cheng lays out the newly hewn planks. “Blackwater rules the eastern sea—but this is his actual lair.”

“…And why is the window two hours?”

Hua Cheng kneels down, measuring out the proportions he needs.

“I take it you’re aware of the fact that the Water Master is also worshipped as a moon goddess?” Xie Lian nods, and he continues, “It’s a full moon tonight.”

A harvest moon, actually.

It hangs over the sky like a golden locket, making it easy to see clearly.

“Even in Blackwater’s Lair, he’ll be able to defend himself and the others until sunrise,” Hua Cheng explains.

The reminder of Shi Wudu makes Xie Lian frown, his chewing slowing down.

“…I need to speak to the Water Master before we make an escape,” Xie Lian mutters, his expression grim. “There’s something he doesn’t know.”

Hua Cheng pauses in his work, turning to look over his shoulder, watching Xie Lian’s expression closely.

“…What do you mean?”

The firelight highlights the planes and shadows of his face in stark contrast—and now, his shackles have an almost eerie glow to them.

“I didn’t say before, because I didn’t want to frighten Shi Qingxuan,” Xie Lian pops another berry into his mouth.

“But there’s more to the fate switching spell than the Water Master knows.”

Because whomever taught him such a thing—Xie Lian doubts it was a well meaning teacher, warning him of the cost.

Hua Cheng's hands go still.

"...Meaning?"

"The suffering of the victims of a fate switching spell always rebounds on its caster," Xie Lian explains, chills running down his spine as he contemplates what that would mean for the Water Master. "And if Scholar He's story is completely accurate, then..."

Xie Lian can't say he isn't horrified by the Water Master's actions—or that he doesn't believe that Shi Wudu is deserving of punishment for what he's done, but—

No one deserves...

Hua Cheng listens to him explain, the bitter taste of repulsion building on his tongue.

"...It's very likely that the Water Master is going to be raped."

Or, that's already happened.

After all—He Xuan's fiancé and sister were victims of the fate switch as well.

Just saying the words makes Xie Lian feel a little sick, but he forces himself to continue.

"He'll be forced to watch unimaginable suffering, and then..." Xie Lian swallows hard. "He'll drown."

It seems ludicrous, imagining a scenario where the Water Master could drown.

But still, if the story is to be believed...

(And Xie Lian *does* believe it.)

...That's Shi Wudu's fate.

Hua Cheng is quiet for a moment, thinking.

"Would telling him spare him, you think?"

“...I don’t actually know,” Xie Lian admits. “I don’t think it can be stopped.”

“Then maybe it’s best if he doesn’t know,” Hua Cheng murmurs, going back to his task.

“If it were me, I’d rather not live in fear of something I can’t prevent.”

Xie Lian doesn’t know which he’d rather have. Either option seems horrible, but...

“In any case, if we get out of here, the emperor can send a horde of reinforcement. Shi Wudu is his favorite, right?”

“Right...” Xie Lian agrees—but even still. If Blackwater is stronger than even Hua Cheng here, he isn’t sure if there are enough reinforcements in the world to make a difference. “...And what are you building, exactly?”

“I already told dianxia,” Hua Cheng shrugs.

“There’s only one thing that floats in Blackwater’s territory.”

A coffin.

“...But that’s just a regular tree you’re using,” Xie LIan tilts his head. “How is that going to—?”

“We happen to have a dead man on hand,” Hua Cheng points out.

“Once I lay down in it, it’s a coffin.”

Xie Lian can’t argue with that logic—even if he’s slightly daunted by the prospect.

“...It can’t be worse than the last time I was in a coffin,” he offers, trying to make light of the situation, but—

Hua Cheng isn’t laughing.

“If there was another way, I wouldn’t force dianxia to relive that.” He mutters, seeming torn, and Xie Lian shakes his head.

“It won’t be like reliving it at all, really.” He assured him. “You’ll be with me.” Back then, it was the silence that was the most difficult to bear.

Hua Cheng doesn't seem completely comforted by that fact, but he doesn't argue. And as he works, Xie Lian finishes his food in silence, his mind drifting in other directions.

"...San Lang?"

His reply is immediate;

"Yes?

"How come you haven't won that person over yet?"

That beautiful, intelligent, perfect...

"...Well, dianxia already knows," Hua Cheng shrugs, his eyes far away. "I met him when I was very young. I don't know if he ever saw me as more than a child."

"...Even now?" Xie Lian raises an eyebrow. "But you're close to my age."

"Yes," Hua Cheng agrees with a faint smile. "But he hasn't seen me in a long time. And..." he sighs, sitting back.

"He really saw me at my worst," he mutters, turning his head to look into the fire.

"...Your worst?" Xie Lian questions, struggling to imagine.

There's no mirth to Hua Cheng's smile anymore, his eyes burning with self loathing.

"I...was so weak back then," he mutters, disgust burning in every syllable. "I was worse than useless."

Hearing Hua Cheng speak that way about himself...

It hurts more than Xie Lian expected.

"...Then I envy them."

His response makes Hua Cheng stop to look up at him, nearly stopping his work completely.

"...You do?"

"If a person told me they loved me..." Xie Lian sighs. "I don't think I would have believed them unless they saw me at my worst."

Even Hong'er didn't see how low he could truly stoop—but even still. He wouldn't have left, even if Xie Lian had tried to push him away. He knows that.

"...That's really how you feel?" Hua Cheng questions quietly.

Xie Lian reaches up, grasping the chain around his neck. "...You know, I don't know if there's ever been a person who was loved as much as I was, back when I was strong," Xie Lian explains quietly. "But I grew up with that. I was raised to expect it. I felt...entitled to it."

He had never known anything less than utter adoration.

"But..." Xie Lian smiles faintly, shaking his head. "I don't think there was anyone who ever made me feel quite as loved as the boy who stayed beside me when I was at my weakest."

Even if Hua Cheng needed to breathe, he would have stopped by now.

"And he wasn't wealthy," Xie Lian adds, twisting the ring between his fingers. "Or powerful, or anything like that. Actually—knowing him, he would probably say the same thing as you: that he felt useless. But..."

Xie Lian sets aside the stick, having finished his fish.

Now, he holds Hong'er with both hands, leaning closer to the fire for warmth.

"He meant the world to me."

When Hua Cheng speaks again—his voice is oddly quiet.

"...It really didn't matter to you?"

"What didn't?"

"That he was weak."

"He was never weak," Xie Lian corrects him softly. "But yes."

To this day—Hong'er was the strongest person he had ever met.

"I guess...the best way to phrase it would be..." Xie Lian sighs, spinning the ring a little faster.

"...The one basking in infinite glory is you. The one that's fallen from Grace is also you."

The ring comes to a halt between his fingers, flashing in the moonlight.

"What matters is you—not the state of you." He concludes quietly. "I..." He struggles for a moment, trying to phrase his words carefully. "I really admire San Lang, so I'm jealous of anyone who got to see you at your best, and your worst. They're a really lucky person."

It's then that he seems to remember to feel self conscious, rubbing the back of his neck.

"...But I suppose all of that must sound pretty silly."

"It doesn't," Hua Cheng replies quickly, shaking his head. Something about him sounds distinctly...unsettled, though not in a bad way.

"But...I'm the lucky one," he reaches down, tracing a fingertip through the sand, staring into the fire. "Just having any place in his heart, even if it isn't the same kind of attachment as the kind I have for him...that's more than enough for me."

"...Really?"

Hua Cheng's finger digs deeper into the sand, grains digging roughly underneath his fingernail, but still, he claws deeper, speaking evenly, even when his eyes sting with emotions that won't break through.

"Even if I was nothing more than a happy memory, I'd be grateful."

He's done nothing to convince Xie Lian that his beloved isn't the lucky one.

Xie Lian knows what it's like to be loved so selflessly, and it's a greater blessing than anything the Heavens have to offer.

"...But I have something to ask you, gege." He looks up.

"What is it?"

"After you came to Ghost City for the first time, when I was taking you away from the Heavens..."

(A generous way of phrasing a situation that was half rescue, half abduction.) "He said you had a husband."

Xie Lian stiffens, his complexion immediately turning splotchy and red.

“Oh, I…” He swallows hard, and Hua Cheng—

He just goes and makes it worse.

“And it’s not the first time I heard of dianxia having a husband, so I wasn’t sure if that was your method of letting him down gently.”

“I—you heard what?” Xie Lian croaks, fighting the urge to turn around and bury his entire head in the sand.

Hua Cheng reaches down, twisting the bead braided into the end of his hair. “I didn’t realize it at the time, but I put it together later.”

(He isn’t above telling a white lie, here and there.)

“I encountered a cultivation master during my travels by the name of Jiang Chi,” he explains. “He told me that his teacher had been the love of his life, but refused to marry him—all because he was mourning a husband.”

“…He said I was the love of his life?” The prince mutters, feeling slightly mortified.

“He did,” Hua Cheng eyes his face closely. “So, it made me wonder.”

“Wonder what?”

“Have you ever been married?”

“…” Xie Lian pulls his knees up, shaking his head.

“No,” he whispers. “No, there was just…someone I wanted to be with, when I was younger,” Xie Lian explains carefully, reaching down to fiddle with the ends of his hair. “And we never got the chance to…And he was gone before I realized…”

“…That you were in love with him?” Hua Cheng questions.

His tone is calm—detached—but his expression is anything but.

And when Xie Lian nods, he looks as though he’s been kicked in the gut.

“Did anyone else know?”

"I told Mu Qing," he twists his finger, winding a lock of hair around it. "...But I ended up regretting that," he admits

Instead of expanding on that, however, his expression darkens.

"...And I think Bai Wuxiang knew," he mutters, wrapping his arms around his knees.

"What makes you say that?" Hua Cheng asks him quietly.

"Because...he used him to hurt me," Xie Lian whispers.

And now, they're both remembering two very separate things.

Xie Lian is thinking back on how he was forced to relive that day, over and over again.

How Bai Wuxiang wore Hong'er's face more than once.

Even in the temple, when they were...

But Hua Cheng—

All he can think about is one of his worst memories.

Being a ghost fire, unable to speak, unable to step in.

Watching the love of his life in tears, being kissed on the banks of a river by Bai Wuxiang...

...Wearing the face of his former bodyguard. Feng Xin.

"...And I guess I just kept on saying that afterwards, because if he had asked me to marry him...I would have said yes," Xie Lian admits, knowing how silly it must sound. "And I—for some reason, I do get proposals often."

"For some reason," Hua Cheng repeats faintly.

"Yes, and I just...for so long after that, I never felt that way about anyone else."

Talking about it is difficult—and Xie Lian has never been comfortable enough to confide in someone like this, but—

Just admitting it, getting it off of his chest—it feels like a relief.

“Eventually, I started to feel like I never would…and it was comforting, imagining a scenario where…”

“Where you were together,” Hua Cheng finishes for him, oddly quiet.

Xie Lian nods, letting his hair slip from his finger.

“…And do you still feel like you never will?”

There’s a long, long beat of silence. One where Xie Lian keeps his face turned away from him, constantly fiddling with the chain around his neck.

When it becomes clear the prince isn’t going to answer—Hua Cheng drops the subject, rising to his feet.

“We should get moving.”

“Oh?” Xie Lian looks up, letting the ring slip back underneath his robes. “Is it ready?”

“It’s the best I could do on short notice,” Hua Cheng nods, lifting the coffin with one hand, using the other to help Xie Lian walk to the shore. “It’ll have to work.”

He says that, but Xie Lian has absolutely no doubt that it’s most likely meticulously crafted.

Hua Cheng is remarkably skilled at anything he tries, really. Cooking, fighting, carpentry—it makes one wonder where and why he learned…

“Here,” Hua Cheng steps inside first, laying down on his back as he guides Xie Lian to step in and join him. “It’ll be a tight fit, but…”

At first, Xie Lian isn’t particularly concerned by that. After all, they’ve shared a bed plenty of times, how bad could it—?

Then, when he starts kneeling down—

He realizes there isn’t enough room for them to lie side by side, even if both of them are on their sides. The only way for him to get in is to, well…

Lay on top of Hua Cheng. Which he struggles to do.

At first, he tries to place his knees on either side of Hua Cheng’s hips

—but the coffin is too narrow, and the size of his thighs doesn't allow for it.

The only thing he can really do is place one knee between Hua Cheng's leg, essentially...straddling his thigh.

He carefully lowers himself, wishing there was a way he could brace his arms that would keep his weight off of him—but there really isn't.

Hua Cheng eyes him carefully—seeming to completely misinterpret the reason for Xie Lian's nerves.

"You're sure it won't be too much for you?" He asks quietly.

Referring to, of course, Xie Lian's prior experience with being in a coffin.

Xie Lian shakes his head quickly, clearing his throat.

Normally, he might have been, but in this situation, he's so distracted...

"No," Xie Lian mutters, "Like I said, it's not the same if you're with me, just..."

Hua Cheng waits, giving him all of the time he needs to formulate his response—

"...Could you lend me some spiritual power?" He asks, biting his lip.

"If something happens and we go into the water again, I don't want you end up hurt trying to—"

He falls silent when Hua Cheng leans up on his elbows, pressing their foreheads together, a gentle warmth passing between them.

"It's no trouble, and I won't get hurt," Hua Cheng assures him gently, even as Xie Lian fights the urge to pull away, his heart stuttering. "But I don't want gege to worry."

"...Thank you," Xie Lian whispers hoarsely as he leans back down.

Once they're both settled in, the coffin lid swings shut with a heavy creak—and with a flick of Hua Cheng's wrist, the heavy wooden box is pushed into the water.

And for all of the currents and waves around them—Hua Cheng was right, it's perfectly buoyant.

Actually—despite being inside an enclosed space, Xie Lian finds himself, for the most part, rather comfortable.

He's not laying on the hard wooden surface of the bottom of the coffin, after all—and with Hua Cheng's arms cradling the small of his back, he feels very secure.

It's just…

"…San Lang?" He mumbles, his voice slightly muffled by Hua Cheng's robes.

"Hmm?" The ghost king hums, his chest rumbling slightly under Xie Lian's cheek.

(This does nothing to help this odd, squirming feeling in the pit of the prince's stomach.)

"Wouldn't this be easier if we switched?" He mumbles, feeling slightly self conscious.

"What do you mean?"

"With you on top, and me on the bottom."

Hua Cheng raises an eyebrow, staring at the coffin lid overhead.

"Does top or bottom really make that much of a difference?"

"I-Um—Well—" Xie Lian clears his throat again, "I'm a martial god, I know…I'm pretty heavy, and the body you're wearing right now is only eighteen or nineteen, correct? That can't be—"

Then, their predicament—well, Xie Lian's predicament—gets even worse.

Because Xie Lian has always been aware of the fact that Hua Cheng was taller—and… more muscular—than his teenage form, but—

Feeling his body grow and shift against him, making the coffin even more cramped than it was—

"San Lang!" He cries, his voice cracking slightly.

"Don't just go and make yourself bigger all of the sudden!" He wishes he sounded more scolding, but—

Really, it sounds more like he's whining, especially when Hua Cheng's forearms—now substantially more muscular—tighten around his back.

"Still worried about being too heavy?"

After a moment of Xie Lian struggling to respond, a sly, teasing smile curves the ghost king's lips.

"Or is this about what you told me the other day in Puqi village?"

It takes Xie Lian a moment to understand what he means, and when he does—

'How did you imagine it?'

Xie Lian's eyes go wide open, and he chokes on his own breath.

'O-On top of me...'

"SAN LANG!" He cries, trying to cover his face with his hands—but that's hard to do in this position, so—

He just buries his head in Hua Cheng's chest, mortified. "Don't tease me right now!"

Hua Cheng only laughs quietly in response, his palm flattening against the small of Xie Lian's back, rubbing slow circles with his thumb.

"Sorry, sorry, forgive this impudent one..." He smiles.

Xie Lian frowns, not lifting his head from the ghost king's chest.

He doesn't sound sorry, and Xie Lian isn't sure if he's feeling all that forgiving.

But he does take advantage of the moment of silence to try and readjust, pressing his leg up slightly as he tries to lift himself up—

Only for one of Hua Cheng's hands to flash down from his back, grabbing his hip in an iron grip, forcing a choked sound of surprise from Xie Lian's throat.

"Don't move," the ghost king growls, making Xie Lian jump. "Wh—?"

"Something's noticed us."

Before Xie Lian can ask what, something smacks into the side of the coffin—sending it spinning around until he can't tell which way is up or down, Hua Cheng holding him tightly until they settle, and—

This time, it leaves Hua Cheng pressing down on top of him.

Which is an entirely different sensation than what he was feeling before.

All he could think about back then was trying to make himself as small and unobtrusive as possible--worried about whether or not Hua Cheng was comfortable, if he was too heavy, and now...

Hua Cheng *is* heavy on top of him, but not in an uncomfortable way. He can still breathe easily, he isn't in any pain, but...

But Hua Cheng's thigh, built with seemingly nothing but firm muscle, is pressed firmly between Xie Lian's legs.

Pressed *there* .

"..."

Xie Lian's face is still smushed against Hua Cheng's chest, but his eyes are wide open, silently panicking.

The ghost king, however, seems to be too focused on the threat from the outside to notice Xie Lian's distress.

"You had better hold onto me, your highness." He mutters, his eye narrowing as he extends a protective barrier around the coffin, silently cursing black water with every thought he has to spear, launching a number of swears into their private array, knowing that He Xuan isn't listening.

It's been 'stay out of this' and 'don't get in my way' this whole fucking time, and the *moment* Hua Cheng actually *does* manage to get his god to leave the situation willingly, they get dragged back by He Xuan's demented fucking *pets* .

'I'm going to kill you.'

He glares at the surface of the coffin as they're rattled again, bracing his arms over Xie Lian's head to avoid hurting him, even if their bodies are still slammed together to some extent.

'Your first death is going to look like a vacation when I'm done with your

worthless—!'

SLAM!

The prince lets out a ratting gasp, his arms clutching at Hua Cheng's shoulders when the coffin is hit with another barrage, and Hua Cheng's focus on declaring his vengeance is momentarily broken.

"Are you alright, dianxia?!"

"I-I'm fine!"

Xie Lian whispers, his voice low, because he's worried if he speaks any louder, it might break. "Just--what do we do if the coffin breaks?"

"...Just hold onto me," Hua Cheng repeats, "I won't let you sink."

"I...I know..."

Assured that Xie Lian isn't in pain, Hua Cheng goes back to splitting his attention between defending the coffin, and threatening He Xuan.

'You're not going to have to worry about fucking your arch nemesis's little sister anymore, because I'm going to castrate you.'

SLAM!

'I'm going to make you walk around with your balls hanging around your neck like a nice little accessory so you can explain to anyone who asks what a DUMB ASS MOTHERFUCKER YOU ARE—!"

SLAM!

"Ah!"

"Are you hurt?!"

"N-No!"

'I'm going to find a way to resurrect you from the dead, eviscerate you, feed you your own entrails, watch you die, then BRING YOU BACK TO START ALL OVER AGAIN—!'

And then, on top of everything else—Xie Lian won't stop squirming.

"Don't move!" He doesn't mean to snap, but...

...Xie Lian can't do this.

He can't do this.

What's...

He flattens his legs, wishing desperately that he could close his knees, but that's not possible in this scenario.

What's wrong with him?!

He's NEVER had this issue before, except, well—

The first time that Hua Cheng helped him heal his injuries to his arm, after escaping the Heavens.

Is it just because—he's attracted to him?

And why, in eight centuries, is the first person he's been actively attracted to the one he ends up in this sort of situation with?!

It's not as though Xie Lian has never had those feelings before, or that he's never been...visibly aroused, but...

Never in front of another person, and always when he was a teenager. Even the last time he was...excited, around Hua Cheng—they were interrupted before it got to...

This point.

Where Xie Lian is pressing as far back against the coffin floor as he can, his heart pounding.

And there's this...pulsing feeling, like a second heartbeat, but...

...Down there.

And this coiling heat in his stomach that's getting worse and worse every time something slams into the coffin.

It leaves him feeling somewhat frantic.

Because each time he makes a noise, or cries out—Hua Cheng checks in on him to make sure he's alright. And the next time that happens, he's—

He's going to notice.

There's no way he won't.

And in that case, Xie Lian is going to have to die.

Probably by repeatedly smashing his head into the side of the coffin. Or by simply swimming down to the bottom of the ocean and starting a new life. He'd be a pretty decent crustacean, given the chance.

And this—

It's going to look so, so bad.

Maybe he could have gotten away with calling it an embarrassing natural reaction before, but—

Can he get away with that after giving him unnecessary mouth to mouth, asking him about sexual positions, and telling Hua Cheng he was JEALOUS of his beloved?!

He can't, he—he can't!

SLAM!

And this time, when the coffin gets slammed into from above, forcing Hua Cheng to crush down on top of him, Xie Lian—

He panics.

This time, Hua Cheng doesn't ask if Xie Lian is alright, or if it the god is hurt— This time, he—

"..."

It's silent in the coffin.

Xie Lian is silent, heart galloping at breakneck speeds, and Hua Cheng--

When he speaks, his voice is low, muted, almost—

Almost small, as he croaks out one word, sounding unusually lacking in composure.

"Why?"

"...Um...I thought..."

Xie Lian bites her lip.

She doesn't blush often. Actually, until recently, she went centuries without getting even a little bit hot under the ears.

"...Changing into a smaller form might make it less...cramped," She lies, her words rushed with embarrassment.

Around Hua Cheng, however—she's blushed more in a matter of months than she probably has in her entire life.

But nothing quite compares to the heat in her face right now.

"..."

"S...San Lang?" She questions, feeling guilty for springing this on him, but...

What else was she supposed to do?! At that point, it was a life, death, or starting a new life as a deep sea crab sort of decision!

At least now, regardless of what she's feeling, it's not...Visible.

"...That was very considerate," Hua Cheng's voice is oddly stiff.

"Jiejie really does think of everything."

There's something about hearing him say 'jiejie' that makes Xie Lian's heart pound even faster.

Of course, there's one drawback that she notices at first, because while most of her got smaller...one part of her didn't.

Her chest, which is pressed tightly against Hua Cheng's.

Hua Cheng finally looks down at her face, his eye hungrily scanning a new iteration of goddess, committing the sight to memory. And just like her male form—

She's gut wrenchingly beautiful.

But looking down was a critical error.

Because while his only intention was to take in Xie Lian's face, he—

Once again, Xie Lian changed nothing about the shape or fit of her robes when she switched forms. Meaning the front...doesn't cover...in a decent manner...

"San L—?" Xie Lian starts, finding him oddly quiet, but—

Then, out of nowhere, the ghost king's thigh–which had already been settled between hers—presses up suddenly and *firmly* , pushing her higher up against the coffin wall, and—

(Away from Hua Cheng's now 'visible' problem.)

"H-Hah—!" She sucks in a shuddering breath, discovering, much to her misery—

Just because she isn't a man, the...tension...in her gut hasn't disappeared. Now, that throbbing is even more concentrated, and it—

"What are you—!"

SLAM!

This jolt makes his knee—not by his own intention, he would never do such a thing intentionally—drag up and against her, and all the while–

Hua Cheng's hand curls into a fist, braced over her head, and he barely manages to hiss through clenched teeth—

"Stay still!"

He seems extremely focused, probably on getting them to safety, Xie Lian can feel his spiritual power pulsing around her, and—

She's an awful person.

Trembling—all over, but particularly her thighs—unable to control her breathing with gasping or making mortifying sounds, so she—

She just makes the decision to stop breathing all together, which only makes the shivering more noticeable.

"...Jiejie?"

'Don't.'

"W...What?"

'Please don't call me that right now.'

"Be honest..." Hua Cheng mutters, his teeth clenched, eye squeezed shut—

Feeling like the most selfish man to ever exist, all while Xie Lian is silently panicking–

"...Is it getting to you?"

"...What?" She croaks.

"I-I don't know what you're—!"

"I know you said you'd be alright because I was with you," Hua Cheng mutters, sounding so guilty, and—

Oh.

"But if this is too stressful for you..."

Oh.

Xie Lian's hands tighten around his shoulders.

She's an awful, awful person.

Her hands tighten around Hua Cheng's shoulders, trembling.

"...Yes," She whispers, lying through her teeth–but her voice is so unsteady, it's completely believable. "I'm—I'm scared," she whimpers, "I—"

SLAM!

"I'm really, really scared!"

She buries her face in his chest, taking deep, unsteady gasps, terrified to exhale, because she doesn't know what sounds are going to come out of her mouth next, and–

And telling Hua Cheng that was a mistake.

It was the worst mistake she ever could have made.

Because now, Hua Cheng's other hand comes down to cup the back of her head, stroking her hair, guiding Xie Lian to press her face into his shoulder.

(Mistaking one type of unsteady breathing for frightened hyperventilation.)

And when he speaks again, his voice is right next to her ear—so low, gentle, and soothing.

"It's alright," he whispers. "I'm right here, I won't leave you.”

Oh—

SLAM!

The next press of his thigh makes her stomach twist in—

An undeniably wonderful way.

"You're safe."

A shudder runs through her, and Hua Cheng hushes beside her ear, his hand sliding down and underneath her, rubbing against her back.

"Relax for me."

There's something deep and authoritative about his tone, and Xie Lian feels herself drowning in guilt, because—

He's just trying to help, because Xie Lian told him that she was afraid. She—

Xie Lian lets out a pitchy little sigh, forcing her muscles to unclench, and when they do—that includes the muscles in her thighs.

Which leaves her weight fully settled against Hua Cheng's leg.

A few more tiny, muffled noises escape her as Hua Cheng hushes her, gently reminding her to breathe.

She's the worst person alive.

Lower than scum, honestly.

Her fingers claw into the back of his robes, clinging so tightly and—

SLAM!

This time, the attack on the coffin is unrelenting, and without either of them moving intentionally—

It leaves Xie Lian's hips being moved up and down against his thigh, over and over again in an inconsistent, maddening rhythm.

Her stomach keeps coiling and tensing, like it's building up to something that she needs, that she might explode if she doesn't get, even if she has no idea what it is—then, the coffin shifts angles, or the attacks change, and it fades, only to buildup again—

She's horrible. She—

She deserves another thousand years of banishment just for this. Or maybe another cursed shackle. But—

She presses her face deeper into Hua Cheng's shoulder, her toes curling inside her boots.

Xie Lian would be lying if she said she wanted it to stop. And for once, in her long, mostly miserable life, Xie Lian—

She does something extremely selfish. Objectively awful, considering the fact that Hua Cheng genuinely doesn't seem to understand what's actually going on—

She...

...Does exactly what he told her to do.

Relaxes.

Her shoulders limp but trembling as any sound she makes is muffled by the thundering crashing outside, the rest of it caught in Hua Cheng's shoulder.

Her eyes are open now, but half lidded, going hazy as her breaths start to hitch.

And she's learning something else now. Something she never needed to know about women, because she never planned on being with one —

(Never planned on being one, either.)

But the longer this goes on, the easier it gets for her robes to slide against her with his thigh.

And with that—

It feels even better, even if there's something mortifying about slick fabric dragging over such a sensitive place, over and over again.

Part of her briefly panics, wondering if he can feel it, but—

Her robes were already wet before they got in the coffin. She—

It feels like she's getting closer to that feeling again, even if she's not sure what it is or what it means, it's—it's good, it's so, so good, and she doesn't want it to stop, even if there's an ache for something...more.

Almost like a need to fill a void.

A sense of emptiness that she's never felt before, and doesn't understand now. Is this something that women just...feel? It's—

SLAM!

Her eyes roll back into her head, her stomach tensing.

But that's okay, if it--if it feels like this, it's more than okay, as long as it doesn't—

"Jiejie," Hua Cheng speaks up suddenly and her mind scrambles, trying to form a coherent thought, "Hold on!"

Wait, no, no, she's—!

CRASH!

Then, it's absolutely freezing.

Xie Lian doesn't have the frame of mind to remember to hold her breath, inhaling sea water immediately on her first gasp, and just as she begins to choke, she feels Hua Cheng's arms tighten around her.

He—He wasn't kidding about the currents before—they're strong!

It feels like being sucked down a drain, even as Hua Cheng's arms remain locked tightly around her middle--and this time, she's able to use the spiritual power he lent her to extend a protective barrier around both of them, and eventually, they crash back onto the shore.

Xie Lian fumbles, reaching up to make sure that Hua Cheng is still conscious—and when she feels that he's up and moving—

She rolls onto her hands and knees, hacking up sea water into the sand as Hua Cheng pats her back.

"Well," General Pei's voice makes them both stiffen. "If it isn't Crimson Rain Sought Flower..."

Ah, so Hua Cheng did switch back to his original form…

"...And the Crown Princess of Xianle."

ANNOUNCEMENT:

The first chapter of the comic adaptation was released today by Imaginary Canvas! You can access the entire thing through twitter! Imaginary did an amazing job, thanks so much to them for the hard work!!

READ HERE

A Good Man

Chapter Summary

> Pei looks at the surface of the water, the hairs on the back of his neck sticking straight up.
>
> “That,” he points, his tone conclusive, “is a trap.”
>
> Even if he doesn’t know what’s going on—he can see that much.
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> “...It is,” Shi Wudu agrees, his eyes unmoving. “But it’s pretty straight forward.”
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>
> From behind them, Ming Yi leans against a tree, his eyes flashing gold in the dark, his arms crossed.
>
> And a slow, satisfied smirk spreads across his lips.

Chapter Notes

> this chapter is long, but it's a VERY important one, and a doozy! good luck!
>
> content warnings: violence

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Her face, even as she's pale and shivering, flushes red.

From beside him, Shi Wudu doesn't seem particularly amused, snapping his fan shut.

"We don't have time for this," he mutters, his mouth pulled into a tight frown. "I didn't pull you back here after that coffin shattered just to stand around and gawk at her."

"...You were the one who pulled us back in?" Xie Lian straightens up, squeezing the water out of her hair. "I thought you couldn't control the currents here?"

"Full moon," Shi Wudu mutters, "I pulled water in from the west."

"He's a genius, if you don't recall."

Xie Lian does–but still, to manage such a thing in Blackwater's lair is still impressive.

"Thank you," She murmurs, trying to rub some warmth back in her arms, and—

She nearly jumps out of her skin when she hears Hua Cheng let out a snarl, yanking her behind him.

"What are you looking at?" He hisses, glaring in the direction of...

Ming Yi, who simply crosses his arms over his chest, raising an eyebrow.

"Isn't that a little hypocritical?"

After the show he made of staring at Shi Qingxuan's bare chest in ghost city, it's what he gets.

Never mind the fact that Xie Lian is soaked from head to toe, and wearing ill fitting white robes.

Ming Yi wasn't the only one looking—he was simply being less subtle than Pei Ming. "..."

Hua Cheng extends his arm out, opening the array he used to retrieve the ax before, when he needed to construct the coffin—this time, pulling out a black outer robe, holding it out behind him so Xie Lian can cover herself in something warm and dry.

"Here, your highness."

"...Thank you, San Lang," Xie Lian murmurs—wishing she hadn't been seen by the others in such a state, but it can't be helped.

In any case, it only takes her a moment to use the spell to change back, wrapping the new outer robe around himself as he clears his throat.

“We were just...it was cramped in the coffin, so I...”

Pei Ming raises an eyebrow. “Didn’t you build it for the two of you to escape? Why not make it bigger?”

Xie Lian scratches the back of his head, his nerves slightly frayed after that encounter.

“I…well…”

Shi Wudu’s eye twitches. “We don’t have time for this!” He snaps. “We still can’t find Shi Qingxuan, and sunrise isn’t far now!”

“What?” Xie Lian stops, concerned. “I thought she was with Pei!”

“She was,” the general agrees. “Then Ming Yi and Shi Wudu caught up with us, and…”

“She disappeared,” Shi Wudu concludes, clutching the golden locket around his neck, his tone frantic. “You can see spiritual energy, can’t you?”

The question is directed towards Xie Lian, who glances up, surprised. “I can, but…”

“Can you use it to track her?!”

Xie Lian scans the area, narrowing his eyes with concentration.

“It would have been easier before,” he mutters, “she lost so much spiritual power in that attack…” And as he looks around, he tries to speak up. “Lord Water Master?”

“What?”

“There’s something you should know,” Xie Lian looks back toward him. “Could we speak privately—?”

“I don’t have time for that right now!” Shi Wudu shakes his head, “I can wait until after we get out of here!”

Pei looks back and forth between the two, concerned.

“Shui-Xiong, if the crown prince thinks it’s important, maybe you should—”

“Does it have anything to do with where my sister is?” Shi Wudu cuts him off pointedly, and Xie Lian sighs.

“…No,” he admits.

“Then it doesn’t matter,” his hands clench into fists. “Can you tell where she is, or not? I can’t waste any more time.”

From her spiritual energy? No. But there’s another way.

A slightly more embarrassing way, but Xie Lian doesn't have the time or care to worry about that right now.

He takes a deep sniff, then turns his head.

"...This way," he mumbles, reaching for Hua Cheng's hand, slightly wary of taking down another tree.

Seeming to sense what he wants, Hua Cheng takes him by the arm without a word, leading him through the forest briskly.

"...You can smell her?" Pei questions, vaguely impressed.

"She wears expensive perfume," Xie Lian explains, having Hua Cheng continue due north through the forest, leading them deeper towards the center of the island. "And when you lose one of your senses...the rest become much stronger."

"Still," Pei tilts his head. "You're like a proper little tracking hound, your highness."

Hua Cheng sends a dark look back over his shoulder.

From the rear of the group, someone is watching them both with a keen eye.

Ming Yi's gaze drifts back and forth between Ming Guang and Crimson Rain Sought Flower.

From the shape of their jawlines, the similar build to their shoulders.

He always thought there was something vaguely familiar about Pei Ming, but now, seeing him and Hua Cheng standing in such close proximity...

It's strange.

But he doesn't care enough to think on it further.

His gaze narrows in on the back of the Water Master's head, his nose wrinkling slightly as, when no one is watching, he allows the true venom within his glare to peek through.

The group is moving quickly, but spread out—making sure there's no chance to miss something.

Shi Wudu glances down at his hand as they hurry through the forest.

His fingers—

They won’t stop shaking.

“...She’s alright,” Pei murmurs from his side, watching the look on his face with a small, worried frown. “You know that.”

The golden locket hanging around his neck is reason enough to know. It’s still, unmoving.

She isn’t hurt, then.

The Water Master blows out a slow, shaky breath.

“...Pei.”

Even now, in his frantic worry to find her, he stops walking.

The Martial god stops beside him immediately, not knowing what to expect, but—

Shi Wudu’s hand reaches out, snatching the collar of his robes, pulling Pei Ming down until they’re eye level.

“You remember what you promised me?”

It isn’t difficult to guess what he means.

Shi Wudu hasn’t demanded Pei promise him very many things:

And only one of them was ever so important.

“...Yes,” he raises an eyebrow. “But once we get back to the Heavens, we can straighten out the matter with your sister, she won’t be in any danger—”

“Promise me again.”

“...” Now, Pei frowns, feeling reluctant. “What’s going on with you?”

He’s been with countless beauties over the years. Princesses, concubines, generals, actresses—

And none of them have ever had eyes that compare to the Water Master.

Now, though—they’re darker than they have ever been.

“Promise me,” he repeats, his fingers tightening in the front of Pei’s robes.

“...I promise,” Pei mutters, his brow furrowed as he stares down at him. “You know I never break my word.”

Shi Wudu doesn’t reply, his jaw clenched

The others are far enough ahead, and Ming Yi is far enough behind that he dares to reach down, cupping the Water Master’s cheek. He half expects to be pushed away, but—

He isn’t.

“...You know it won’t ever come to that,” Pei points out, his thumb brushing over his jaw.

The words he offers are meant to bring comfort to Shi Wudu. To make him feel safe.

“...If someone wanted to get to you, they would have to kill me first,” he leans down, pressing their foreheads together. “You aren’t going anywhere.”

But they don’t. They strike terror.

After a brief pause, Shi Wudu tilts his head up—pressing a chaste, exceedingly brief kiss against Pei’s lips before pulling back.

An unusual gesture from him, given how easily someone else could see.

He’s never done something like that.

Not until now.

But, in contrast to the sudden show of affection—his voice is like ice.

“Understand—if the time comes where you can only protect one of us, and you choose me over her...” Those eyes snap up to his, burning like an aurora in the darkness. “I will *never* forgive you, Pei.”

Before the general can respond, Shi Wudu pulls his face out of his grip, hurrying after the Crown Prince of Xianle and Crimson Rain.

He knows.

On some instinctive level.

Ever since Xie Lian sent that message from the Terrace of Cascading Wine, he knew.

If that thing wanted his sister dead, she would have died there. If it wanted her to die here, she would be dead already.

His nails bite into his palms as he walks faster, pieces of jet black hair falling loose from his ponytail, framing his face.

This isn't about his sister.

Shi Wudu was raised around sailors and fishermen. He knows the game.

Shi Qingxuan isn't the target.

She's bait.

And the more desperately he tries to get to her, the deeper he's being reeled in.

A fish on a hook.

Shi Wudu knows.

And still…

He walks even faster.

Finally, when they reach the center of the island—the tree line breaks, revealing a large clearing, filled only by a lake.

One with black waters, the surface smooth as glass—in spite of the breeze. Xie Lian comes to a halt on the shore, his stomach sinking.

"…The trail stops here," he calls over his shoulder, just as Shi Wudu appears on the beach beside them, eyeing the waters warily.

"And you don't see any sign of her spiritual power?" Xie Lian peers down into the darkness, and…

All he sees is resentment.

So dark, so vivid, it makes him wince.

"...No, I don't see it anywhere."

Shi Wudu can't take his eyes off of that water, the muscles in his jaw working.

Pei comes to a halt beside him, sending his friend a sharp look.

"You aren't thinking about it."

"..."

Pei looks at the surface of the water, the hairs on the back of his neck sticking straight up.

" *That,"* he points, his tone conclusive, "is a trap."

Even if he doesn't know what's going on—he can see that much.

"...It is," Shi Wudu agrees, his eyes unmoving. "But it's pretty straight forward."

After all, who would go for something so obvious?

From behind them, Ming Yi leans against a tree, his eyes flashing gold in the dark, his arms crossed.

And a slow, satisfied smirk spreads across his lips.

Suddenly, the locket against Shi Wudu's chest begins to vibrate violently, and the Water Master goes rigid, watching the water with a faint sense of dread.

It's not a trap, if the point isn't to trick you.

It's not a trap, if you don't have a choice but to jump in.

Pei doesn't see it coming—doesn't have a chance to stop him before he lunges, leaping into the water.

It doesn't splash, there are no ripples on the surface.

He just slips beneath without a sound.

"...WUDU!"

Xie Lian's words from before reverberate through his mind.

'In the end, he'll...'

The Prince looks down into that darkness, his blood going cold.

...Drown.

Xie Lian's next step is an impulse—and maybe an unfair one.

Even Hua Cheng doesn't have time to react before he plunges in after the Water Master, disappearing into the dark.

It's like ice, sucking him down, down, down, like he's plunging through a free fall instead of through the water, but—

Xie Lian isn't afraid.

It was a calculated gamble.

Based on one very important factor:

Hua Cheng has repeatedly made it clear that, while they aren't friends...they do have a working relationship.

And, nine times out of ten, he's more powerful than Blackwater.

So, even though Blackwater might be more powerful in his own lair...

He won't lay a hand on Xie Lian.

Because if he did, he would make an enemy of Hua Cheng.

Who, knowing him, has already leapt after Xie Lian.

It's a risk, but...

Finally, after what feels like forever, he breaks through the water's surface, landing on...

A cold, stone floor.

He hunches over, struggling to catch his breath, his body aching, because that water—

Something about it felt as though it was sapping the life out of him.

"...SHI QINGXUAN!" Shi Wudu rasps, pushing wet bangs out of his eyes.

"GEGE!"

The Shi siblings rush towards one another.

Shi Wudu grabs her by the face, looking her over, desperate to find where she's hurt, but when he finds no injuries, he...

He notices that her locket isn't hanging around her neck. "...How did you get down here? Where's your necklace?"

"I-I don't know!" She cries. "One minute I was beside you and Ming-Xiong, and the next thing I knew, something grabbed me, and—my locket..." She looks to the other side of the room briefly before cringing, burying her face in her brother's chest.

Slowly, Shi Wudu follows her stare, finding...

Cages.

His arms tighten around his sister protectively, pulling her behind him.

The creatures inside barely even look human.

Gaunt, thin—covered in dirt and grime, some of them moaning and whimpering—but most of them are silent, staring off into space.

But one of them, seated towards the very front, babbling nonsensically, is set apart from the others.

With a golden locket gleaming around his neck.

"...I'll get you another one," Shi Wudu mutters, shaking his head. Just as he says that, the other three come crashing down.

Hua Cheng lands on his feet while the other two land in a heap, immediately rushing to Xie Lian's side, placing both hands on his shoulders.

"Your highness," his voice is hardened with anger. "You can't do that here, it's—"

"Not safe," Xie Lian replies quietly, "I know."

He looks towards Shi Qingxuan and her brother, worry settling in the pit of his stomach.

"Do you know what this place is, San Lang?"

“...Blackwater Manor,” Hua Cheng answers after a moment.

So, this is where the other Ghost King lives.

Xie Lian rises to his feet, thinking.

As he does, Shi Qingxuan looks around the room, hugging her brother tighter when she notices what...looks like some sort of shrine.

“...What is that?” She mutters, pointing to the pile of bones set up on an altar—clearly having been used for some form of worship.

“Blackwater...he wouldn’t just have his remains sitting out, would he?”

“No,” Hua Cheng shakes his head. “I’ve seen his ashes before—those aren’t it.”

And even if they weren’t—Blackwater isn’t a god. He would get no use from having his ashes worshiped.

So why...?

Shi Wudu doesn’t seem eager to focus on that, instead looking up towards the black, smooth surface of the ceiling, his lips curving into a grim frown.

“...I don’t think we can leave the way we came,” he mutters.

No, Xie Lian agrees with him there.

That would make it too easy for the prisoners being kept here to escape. No, Blackwater would have another way of exiting.

“...There’s no way he sails through the entire eastern sea every time he wants to leave this place,” Xie Lian mutters under his breath, rubbing his chin.

It would be too time consuming—and it would be a liability, in the case of an emergency.

But if he was going to have a means of escape—it would be here, in his private residence.

One that the mortal men he’s keeping here wouldn’t be able to use: A travel array.

Just as Xie Lian thinks of that, Ming Yi seems to come to the same conclusion, finding a dip in the floor beneath their feet.

With a snap of his fingers, a small blue light appears in his palm, illuminating the floor below—revealing the carvings etched into ancient stone.

"..." Shi Wudu glances at him, down to the floor, seeming to put together what needs to be done in his head.

He can't judge by the stars anymore—but he knows they don't have much more time before the sun rises.

Maybe only minutes.

"If you can set it to the correct location, I can spare enough power to run it," he mutters, watching as Ming Yi examines the array more closely.

"...It's a unique array," the earth master frowns, tracing the carvings.

"What do you mean?"

"It only gives you a one way trip."

Xie Lian supposes that makes sense—after all, if the door worked both ways, it would make it possible for people to sneak into Black Water's home unannounced, so...

Hua Cheng steps over, grabbing him firmly by the arm. "Set it to Puqi Shrine first."

Xie Lian glances up.

"But—"

"That's a good idea," Shi Qingxuan mutters, pressing a hand to her forehead. "I've already dragged you into so many problems as it is...and the rest of us are going to the same place anyway, so we can all leave after you do."

It...makes sense. But Xie Lian...

Shi Wudu rolls up his sleeves, watching the look on the Crown Prince of Xianle's face, and...

Something about it makes his skin prickle unpleasantly—even though he can't place why.

"...Your highness."

Xie Lian turns to the Water Master—as much as he can in Hua Cheng's grip.

"Yes?"

"What was it that you wanted to tell me, before?"

Of course—now that his sister is safe, he's willing to listen. And...

Xie Lian frowns, shaking his head.

"...It's something we should discuss in private," he mutters. "I'll come visit you soon, and we'll talk."

Before the Water Master can ask anything more—

"It's ready," Ming Yi murmurs, looking up from his place on the far end of the array.

"..." Shi Wudu looks away, placing his hand on the outermost symbol. Under his power, it glows vividly blue, illuminating the entire room.

"San Lang, you can go first—" Xie Lian starts, only for Hua Cheng to drag him forward, his tone insistent.

"We're going together."

"But—"

"No." Hua Cheng suddenly turns firm, and suddenly—sapphire eyes are watching him very closely. "We're doing as I say this time, dianxia."

Hua Cheng doesn't look back at any of them, even as Xie Lian attempts to drag his feet, and in the blink of an eye—they're through in a flash of blue light, disappearing in an instant.

And what comes next— It all happens so fast.

The Water Master has one hand on the array, his eyes flickering around everyone else in the room.

His sister, beside him.

Ming Yi, who should be watching the portal to make sure it's closing before he sets their next destination, but…

He isn't.

And Pei Ming, watching him.

Shi Wudu straightens, watching the shrinking portal in front of them.

"…Hey," he mutters, his voice suddenly quiet—enough so to draw the general's attention.

And the look on the Water Master's face—

It's odd.

Wide eyed, pale. To be expected, after the week he's had, but…

"Do you remember what you told me, the night of the mid-autumn festival?"

Pei frowns, glancing over at the other two—startled that Shi Wudu would be bringing something like that up here.

"…I remember."

He was hanging his head before—but now, the Water Master looks up at him.

And the minute Pei Ming takes in his expression—he knows.

Something is wrong.

Horribly, horribly wrong.

"…"

Shi Wudu smiles, and those eyes, the eyes that have been drowning him for centuries in the most perfect way—

Now—

They're filled with tears that refuse to fall.

He's too proud to let them slip free.

Even now.

A pride that is so achingly familiar, it fills Pei Ming with this horrible sense of dread.

The Water Master reaches out for him, placing his palm over Pei's heart.

"...You would have been perfect," he admits, looking up at him with that tear laden smile.

Shi Qingxuan looks back and forth between the two of them, not understanding why Pei's eyes have grown as wide as they could possibly be, remembering—

'I would make a good husband.'

Two tears slip free, despite his best efforts—making shining tracks on his cheeks—and now, with his last words—they break.

"And I am so sorry."

It's the first time he's ever heard the Shi Wudu apologize to him—or anyone, for that matter—

But it's not an apology.

Not really.

Pei realizes that one moment too late.

It's—

The hand on his heart gives him a harsh shove, one infused with spiritual power, blasting him back—straight through the portal, just before it closes.

It's a goodbye.

Silence falls in the chamber as the Water Tyrant sinks to his knees, squeezing his eyes shut.

"...Gege?" Shi Qingxuan frowns, confused—reaching out to place a hand on his shoulder.

Her brother doesn't reply, hanging his head.

He can feel it.

The anger filling the room.

"...You had so many chances to separate Pei from the rest of us." Shi Wudu mutters, staring at the darkness where the portal once stood, his voice calm now.

Resigned.

"But you didn't."

"Gege, who are you talking to—?"

The next words out of his mouth make her fall silent, growing pale.

"You had plenty of chances to kill Shi Qingxuan, but you didn't."

He takes a shuddering breath, and when he opens his eyes, he's resigned.

"Pei would have protected me. Keeping him around was an obstacle. Unless..." He turns, looking towards the only other person in the room. "Your plan was to force me to watch him die."

Dark eyes flash in confirmation, and Shi Wudu smiles—not giving a single inch.

"...Fuck you."

"Who are you talking to?!" Shi Qingxuan frowns, tugging at her brother's sleeve.

It's just them, and Ming Yi. Who would he be cursing like that? Who would want to kill Pei in front of him—?

And why does he look like that?! She's never— "Let me send her back."

Shi Wudu looks down at the travel array, his expression exceedingly calm, despite the words he's been saying.

He's had so many chances to kill Shi Qingxuan. But he didn't.

There's no way he wants her to see this.

"..."

Ming Yi doesn't go through the pretenses this time.

Crack!

He doesn't pretend to fiddle around with the array.

This time, with a simple snap of his fingers—it sparks to life, with the destination being set to the Heavenly Capital.

Shi Qingxuan whips her head around to look at him, her eyes widening with confusion.

Ming Yi...doesn't look like himself.

His eyes are black, filled with—

So much resentment, it makes her flinch.

"M-Ming-xiong?"

But he won't look at her.

No, his gaze is locked on her brother with dark intent.

"Go."

"Wh—?"

The portal opens.

"Listen to him, Shi Qingxuan."

"What..." The Wind Master stumbles to her feet, shaking her head as she backs away from the both of them. "What's going on here? Gege?"

"Go," her brother repeats, staring at the portal. "Pei will look after you, whatever comes next."

"What are you talking about?!"

She rounds on Ming Yi, reaching out to grab his sleeve. "Ming-xiong—what are you two—?"

Slowly, he turns his head to look at her—and she flinches away, stumbling back, her face growing pale.

His eyes burn unnaturally in the dim light of the cavern—and his form—

It's changing.

Growing taller, broader—his skin growing waxen and colorless.

Ears sharp, pointed—his eyebrows more severe.

Older, and—

"...That isn't Earth Master Ming Yi," her brother mutters, and Shi Qingxuan— It feels as though she's begun to enter free fall.

"He never was."

"No..." Shi Qingxuan chokes, her eyes welling up with tears as she shakes her head. "You're—you're wrong!"

Still, Ming Yi won't look at her.

Only her brother.

"MING-XIONG WOULDN'T, HE—!"

"Leave." Amber eyes watch her coldly. "And I won't hurt you."

"H-hurt me?!" Now, those tears begin to fall, slipping down her cheeks. "WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?!"

Shi Wudu grits his teeth, grabbing her by the wrist, clearly meaning to drag her. "FOR ONCE IN YOUR LIFE, WILL YOU JUST DO AS YOU'RE TOLD?!"

"NO!" She sobs, twisting out of his grip. "I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON, BUT I'M NOT LEAVING YOU!"

She twists around to look at Ming Yi, trembling.

"MING-XIONG, WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO DO?!"

"...Ha..."

Both of the Shi siblings fall silent, watching as the figure before them presses a hand over his face.

"Hahaha..."

His shoulders begin to shake as his body is wracked with bouts of laughter without mirth.

"HAHAHAHAHA!"

He wraps one arm around his middle, hunching over.

“Look what a good job you did, Water Master Xiong,” he sneers, “You must be so pleased with yourself!”

Shi Wudu doesn’t look up, reaching for his sister’s arm again, but—

But she won’t let him.

“Gege—”

“Four whole centuries.” ‘Ming Yi’ speaks over her, his footsteps echoing against the walls as he circles them, like a cat stalking its prey. “The Reverend of Empty Words...My family...Mount Tonglu...”

The mention of the Kiln makes Shi Qingxuan go still, her face growing as white as a sheet.

“W-Wh—?”

“...All of that, and I’m still cursed. You—HAHAHAHAHA!” He cackles, his face falling into his hands. “YOU’RE EVEN BETTER AT SWITCHING FATES THAN I THOUGHT!”

Switching...

Shi Qingxuan feels all of the breath leave her chest, watching Ming Yi with wide eyes.

...Fates.

Shi Wudu finally looks at him, then at his sister, shaking his head.

“...The rest of it was me,” he mutters. “But this—”

The pain in his sister’s eyes is so endless, he can barely stand to look.

“You did this to yourself.”

“Ming—” She starts, choking on her tears, then stops, her lips trembling as she looks up at him.

This—

This isn’t Ming Yi.

It never was.

Staring down at her now, that all begins to feel horribly clear.

The man before her is no god.

But every inch of him radiates with power, and those eyes, the same eyes that felt so familiar before—

The hatred in them feels alien.

Before her is no friend.

Maybe in another life, he could have been.

Maybe in another life, he was destined to be more. But not this one.

This life has always been cruel, one way or another. Before her now is her enemy, her lover—

Her greatest sorrow.

Black Water Sinking Ships.

The demon He Xuan.

Hundreds of miles away, in Puqi shrine, another storm is brewing.

“SEND ME BACK!”

“General,” Xie Lian’s voice is even, but tense. “Let him go.”

Pei’s eyes are wild, one fist cocked back as he grips Hua Cheng by the collar, and— He’s beyond listening.

“You think I don’t know those two are in league with one another?!” He snarls, shaking the ghost king as he speaks. “YOU KNOW HOW TO GET BACK THERE, DON’T YOU?!”

Hua Cheng, in contrast to what Xie Lian might have expected—is being rather understanding—

Allowing Pei to scream.

“WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?!”

“Pei—”

“YOU WANT ME TO SPY FOR YOU? FINE. YOU WANT THE EMPEROR’S HEAD?! *FINE!”* His pleas become more and more desperate—to the point where Xie Lian can barely stand to listen.

“TELL ME WHAT YOU WANT, AND I'LL DO IT—JUST SEND ME BACK!”

“Pei!” Xie Lian finally loses patience, listening to Hua Cheng getting manhandled in such a way—reaching over to wrench his hands off of him. “The Travel array only works one way! There’s nothing San Lang can do!”

“YOU THINK THAT THING WAS TELLING THE *TRUTH?!*” Pei presses both hands against the side of his head, trembling.

‘You would have been perfect.’

He wouldn’t have said that.

Pei knows him inside and out—and Shi Wudu— He never, ever would have said that.

Not unless...

“...Normally, the array does work in both directions,” Hua Cheng admits. “But he must have sealed one end of it for his plan. I couldn’t bring you back there if I wanted to.”

He glances up at the sky, watching the sun rising in the distance.

“...His plan?”

Pei’s eyes narrow.

“...You fucking *knew?"* He asks slowly, taking another step toward him. “This entire time? You watched him walk into that trap and you just LET IT HAPPEN?!”

“You knew it was a trap.” Hua Cheng points out. “So did he, clearly. And neither of you are my problem.”

A shocked laugh escapes Pei’s throat—but there’s absolutely no amusement in it.

"I suppose I should have expected a calamity to be heartless," he mutters. "The prince's high opinion of you made me think you might actually have some COMPASSION!"

It's the first time Xie Lian has actually noticed someone's words actually get to Hua Cheng—he can feel the way that he stiffens, even if he can't see the change in his expression.

"...He's not heartless," Xie Lian places a hand on Pei Ming's chest, forcing him to take a step back. "You have every reason to be upset, but San Lang didn't do this to Shi Wudu or Shi Qingxuan," he steps firmly between the two men, and when Hua Cheng tries to pull the prince behind him—

Xie Lian pushes his hand away, intent on not allowing a brawl to break out.

"And he's also the only one who knows enough about Blackwater to be helpful, so insulting him and calling him a monster does nothing to help. We don't even know what's going on right now, anyway."

Pei forces himself to take slow, steadying breaths.

"...You mentioned his plan," the general mutters between clenched teeth. "What is it? What is he going to do?"

Hua Cheng stares at him, his eyes distant.

Normally, he delivers information with a smug sense of knowingness, proud of knowing more than most.

Not this time.

"He's going to kill the Water Master. That has always been his central goal."

The way he says it gives Xie Lian pause.

Not that he's going to 'try' to kill Shi Wudu, or that he 'wants' to—

But that he will.

Pei sniffs, clearing his throat.

Xie Lian recognizes what he's doing. As Martial Gods, they share a somewhat common history. Both were in wars at a young age. Both learned their own ways of coping. Xie Lian, however, has never viewed himself as a soldier. A swordsman, yes. A warrior, yes.

But there's a difference between the two.

Xie Lian finds joy in fighting—for the skill of it. What he does, he's always viewed as an art form—a way of expressing himself.

But being a soldier is a profession. One where you must learn to place weaknesses aside. Where your emotions, no matter how unsettling they are, must be suppressed in order to focus on the task at hand.

Xie Lian struggled with that, when he was young.

His first battle occurred when he was only twenty years old, after all.

He had never seen someone die before. He had seen dead bodies. His grandfather, when he passed—but he'd never watched the light fade from someone's eyes in an instant. Not until a soldier standing just two feet away from him was struck in the chest with an arrow. Xie Lian has seen so much death since then, it rarely phases him. But he always remembers that moment.

The soldier had only been a child himself—sixteen years old at most. With a small scar under his cheekbone, laughing with Xie Lian over a joke, one minute.

Dead the next.

His blood landed on the prince's cheeks.

The terror Xie Lian felt in that moment, the sadness, the loss of innocence—

He hadn't been prepared to deal with that. He was so disoriented in the ambush that followed, he was barely able to defend himself.

He wept that night.

Scrubbed his face until it felt raw, wishing it would feel as though the blood had washed away. Threw up any food he dared to eat.

And he just…couldn't stop crying.

Because that soldier was one of his believers. Because he had green eyes, and he spoke about his mother's letters from home. In the five minutes he spent marching beside Xie Lian's horse, he became a person in the prince's mind.

He became real.

And then, he was gone.

Xie Lian wept because it was unfair. He wept because he was afraid. He wept because he felt weak. He wept, because he didn't want to fight anymore. He didn't want to kill green eyed soldiers from Yong'an. Their mothers probably wrote them letters, too.

And for the first six months of the war, Xie Lian cried himself to sleep every night. He barely ate. Barely slept.

But eventually, it stopped—and the pain, fear, guilt, and anger—

He felt it, but he no longer reacted to it. Because that's what it means, to be a soldier.

But Xie Lian thinks, in the years after the war—he began to change. When someone was kind to him, and made him feel safe.

When Xie Lian didn't have to fight anymore.

He started feeling things again.

The good things—and the bad.

He was so, so happy when he was with Hong'er—even if he was too self pitying to realize it at the time.

He laughed, and smiled so often. Slept peacefully. Looked forward to finding him again when he woke up.

But there were also moments when he was so hurt, so angry. Never with Hong'er, but Xie Lian lashed out at him, too. Begged him to leave. Told him to stop wasting his life.

Of course, the prince regrets those moments.

But after Hong'er died...Xie Lian was in another war, all over again.

But he was the only target.

And even when he wanted to—even when he begged to—Bai Wuxiang didn't accept his surrender.

At some point since then, Xie Lian stopped fighting. But he can't recall if he ever started feeling again—not in the way that he used to. He hasn't felt secure enough for that.

But Pei, in all of his centuries of life, has never stopped being a soldier.

It's who he is. It's all he's ever been. It's all Pei has ever been allowed to be.

So now, even under extreme duress—a situation where, if the tables were turned, even Xie Lian wouldn't be calm...

Pei's expression turns to stone.

"Crimson Rain." He turns back to Hua Cheng—his tone less frantic now. "Can you get in contact with Blackwater now?"

"...He isn't answering," the calamity shrugs, his arms crossed. "I don't expect he will until it's done."

When he's done, meaning...

When the Water Master has been killed.

"...Fine." Pei turns around. "I'm not wasting my time here."

"Where are you going, then?" Xie Lian frowns. "We don't have a plan—"

"I know how to get to Blackwater's Lair now." Pei explains flatly. "I'll go to the Heavenly Court, get as many reinforcements as I can, and blast Blackwater's gates open."

Hua Cheng remains silent, at first. But those words—

'The prince's high opinion of you made me think you might actually have some COMPASSION!'

"...That won't work." Hua Cheng speaks up reluctantly. "Even if you could make it in time—"

And he won't, that much is certain.

"—the Emperor won't send anyone to help him. Not when they hear the truth."

Pei freezes, and Xie Lian winces.

“…What do you mean?”

So, he really didn’t know.

And Xie Lian knows Pei, so devoted to Shi Wudu, probably wouldn’t accept the truth from Hua Cheng, so…

“…By Heavenly law, He Xuan has a claim to Shi Wudu’s life,” Xie Lian explains quietly. “The Emperor won’t have a right to interfere.”

“How could Blackwater possibly have a claim over his life?”

Hua Cheng falls silent, and Xie Lian realizes now, just considering his own perspective—

He probably knows more about the story of the Shi siblings and He Xuan—the actual story—than most.

“…San Lang can tell you what has happened,” Xie Lian mutters, “But before that, I think I know how to figure out what’s going on right now.”

Hua Cheng turns his gaze to Xie Lian, his expression immediately turning wary. “Your highness—it won’t help—”

“Let him try.”

Xie Lian sends Hua Cheng an apologetic look, but Crimson Rain has examined that face in countless ways, and he knows what it looks like when the prince has made up his mind. How stubborn the set of his jaw becomes.

“The Wind Master is my friend. I’m going to try to help her.”

The air about Hua Cheng is deeply disapproving as he watches Xie Lian form the proper hand seals, knowing exactly what he’s going to do.

The moment the spell takes effect, his body crumples—and when it does, Hua Cheng is right there to catch him. He sinks to the ground with the prince in his arms, allowing Xie Lian’s head to rest against his shoulder.

Pei takes advantage of the brief moment of quiet to look at crimson rain—to *actually* see him—and there’s something about it.

“…Is that your true form?” Hua Cheng doesn’t answer, his arms tightening around the god—and Pei Ming takes that for an affirmative. “I always thought the stories about you missing an eye were a rumor,” he mutters, trying to distract himself from the waiting. “How’d it happen?”

Hua Cheng rests his chin on top of Xie Lian’s head—and for a moment, Pei assumes that his answer is once again going to be silence, but—

“Doing something stupid,” He shrugs, is eye flashing up—looking the general over, just as the other is doing with him. “What about yours?”

Pei reaches up to touch his cheek, startled by the question.

He’s always had one scar—running from his cheekbone, all the way up to his temple, framing his left eye and slashing through his brow.

Given his past as a war hero, however—it’s rare that anyone asks how he got it.

“...Doing something stupid,” he admits, and somehow, he manages to crack the smallest joke, even if it’s impossible to find any mirth in it, “more specifically, Xuan Ji.”

And Hua Cheng, to his surprise...almost smiles. Though not quite.

Not when he knows what’s awaiting his god.

Drip!

Drip!

Drip!

There’s a small stream somewhere, running through the underground chambers of Blackwater Manor, breaking the silence with the faint rush and drip of water.

“What do you think is going to happen, if you stay?” He Xuan questions coldly. “Do you think I’ll spare him out of affection for you?”

Shi Qingxuan lifts her head, eyes swollen, face streaked with tears.

“Affection?!” She chokes, staring up at him with disbelief. “You think I believe any of that now?!”

“Shi Qingxuan,” her brother won’t look up. “He’s sparing your life. Just—”

“Someone who had ‘affection’ for me wouldn’t have USED ME!” She cries, trembling from head to toe with fright, but—

The ache, the fracturing feeling in her heart—it hurts too much for her to be overwhelmed by the fear.

“Someone who cared about me wouldn’t have LIED TO ME!”

For the briefest moment, there’s a flash of pain in his eyes—quickly overtaken by a smile.

Then, he laughs. Not the crazed, over emotional laughter from before — This time, he genuinely seems to think something is funny.

“...Oh, my dear,” he smiles, his face dropping into his hand, “the people who love you have always lied to you.” He points one clawed finger towards her brother, “What do you think he spent the last four centuries doing?”

Shi Wudu doesn’t reply.

“But that’s the thing, isn’t it?”

It’s been so long, wearing Ming Yi’s mask. Lifting it from his face, allowing himself to fill out the edges of his own identity once again—it feels like stretching out one’s legs after countless hours sitting down. It feels good.

Satisfying.

“Before I tried to tell you the truth, I thought it was all him,” he shakes his head, slowly walking in a circle around the two, his steps echoing off of the walls. “I thought that he was protective. Controlling. That you were childish and naive, but innocent in all of this...”

“She *is* innocent.” Shi Wudu mutters. “She had no idea, she never did anyth—”

CRACK!

The slap is so violent, even a god so powerful as the Water Master hits the floor, hard—and Shi Qingxuan rushes to his side.

“I wasn’t done speaking.” He Xuan glares.

He stares at them, his head tilted to the side, pupils blown.

Shi Wudu, too proud to even acknowledge the cuts on his cheek from He Xuan’s claws—and Shi Qingxuan, trying to staunch the blood with her sleeve.

“...But I understand it now,” He Xuan continues. “You liked the lies he told you.”

Shi Qingxuan pauses, eyes widening, her sleeve hovering over her brother’s skin.

“Because those lies gave you the life you wanted. Drinking and parties. Wealth and amusement. And who were you to question that?”

Shi Wudu can’t bear the look in his sister’s eyes.

Learning far too late in life, the burden of self awareness.

“She didn’t do anything to you,” he mutters, pulling her behind him.

“Correct,” He Xuan agrees flatly. “That was you.”

And he lived with it so easily, for so long.

“You threw me down. But I want to know,” he stops in front of them, meeting Shi Qingxuan’s gaze. “On that climb to the Heavens, did you ever look down to see what you were stepping on to get there?”

Her lips tremble.

“She didn’t know.” Shi Wudu repeats, shifting in front of her, breaking the line of sight between them.

“Yes.” He Xuan agrees.

“Then you know I’M the only one to blame!”

“Before I knew her, yes. But that’s the thing about your sister,” He Xuan kneels down in front of them. “You look at her, and you see the same, terrified child you signed my death warrant to save,” he muses, staring into Shi Wudu’s eyes. “But I see who she actually is.”

"She's—"

"She's brilliant." He Xuan cuts him off flatly. "Observant. Curious. Passionate. Loyal."

So many compliments, given sincerely—but now, all Shi Qingxuan can do is hang her head with shame.

"I doubt that it never occurred to her that the Reverend's disappearance was odd." He Xuan watches her, finding the way she shrinks to be a quiet form of agreement. "The scroll of research you had Ling Wen put together was a farce. She could have easily figured that out. And while we're playing the honesty game, let's point out—"

He looks back to Shi Qingxuan.

"You have never cared that much about cultivation at *all."*

She makes no arguments there—in all honesty, as He Xuan requests, learning cultivation was something she did purely as a means of survival.

But she's never tried particularly hard.

"...Did you just assume that you were naturally gifted?"

"Leave her be—!"

"I knew."

That admission makes both of them fall silent—Shi Wudu with shock, and He Xuan...

He just listens, his eyes dark and unfeeling.

"I knew...my brother had done something, because I was more powerful than I should have been," She admits. "But Ming—" She stops herself, the mere reminder of that name being a lie sending more tears flooding down her face. "He—he gave me so many treasures and magical devices, I thought..."

"Did you ever ask?"

No.

And they both know why.

Because she had been afraid of the answer.

“And Shi Qingxuan, I was willing to forgive all of that.” He Xuan admits, watching her face. “I almost changed my mind so many times.”

“...It’s not too late,” she croaks, looking up at him, makeup smeared around her eyes, hair in her face. “I can forgive you, too! Just don’t—!”

“It is.” He looks away from her sharply.

“You haven’t done anything you can’t back,” Shi Qingxuan whispers, reaching out for him with trembling fingers, struggling when her brother holds her back. “I know you’re in pain, but—!”

“It’s too late, Shi Qingxuan.”

“It’s not! It’s—!”

“I GAVE YOU SO MANY CHANCES!” She flinches away, and now, her tears aren’t only for herself.

They’re for the agony in He Xuan’s voice.

“I was so, *so* sure, that when you knew the truth—you wouldn’t stand by it.”

“I didn’t,” Shi Qingxuan sobs, shaking her head vehemently. “I *DIDN’T!”*

“DON’T TELL ME THAT!” He Xuan turns away from her, his hands trembling. “You KNEW what you were doing, waiting until after his calamity! DON’T TELL ME YOU DIDN’T!”

In truth, Shi Wudu would have been nearly impossible to punish after that.

Some gods are simply too powerful to be held accountable. After passing his third calamity, Shi Wudu would have been one of them.

“...You don’t want her here for this either,” the Water Master speaks up finally, rubbing Shi Qingxuan’s back as she weeps in his arms. “She understands now. That’s what you wanted, right?”

“She can leave if she wants to,” He Xuan places his hands against the wall, black claws gleaming against smooth marble. “I never closed the portal.”

“...Qingxuan—”

“NO!” She half sobs, half screams. “I’M NOT LEAVING YOU!” Her arms cling around her brother’s neck, and—

Shi Wudu has to look away, his own eyes stinging.

“Go.”

“No,” her face is soaked with tears, her breaths coming faster and faster, until the room spins. “Please—please, I—I know what he d-did isn’t—I know you c-can’t forgive him!”

After all of those things she said, back in the Palace of Wind and Water—

Some small part of the Water Master had shattered.

Believing that she could never love him the same, knowing what he had done, but...

“BUT *HE’S MY FAMILY!”*

...Families are complicated.

“PLEASE!”

He Xuan’s back is turned—and he won’t look at her.

“TAKE ME, INSTEAD!” She pleads, “TAKE ME AWAY, LOCK ME UP SO I CAN NEVER SEE HIM AGAIN! THAT WOULD HURT HIM SO MUCH MORE!”

Shi Wudu pales, yanking her back. “Absolutely not!”

“OR KILL ME, INSTEAD!”

He Xuan presses a hand against the side of his head. “Enough.”

“I’LL GIVE UP MY GODHOOD,” She promises, hyperventilating. “I’LL DO ANYTHING YOU WANT—!”

“THERE IS NOTHING YOU CAN DO!” He Xuan snarls turning around, marching over, and yanking them apart. “DON’T YOU SEE THAT?!”

Shi Wudu coughs, straining to speak as he's hauled away from his sister by his throat, his feet dragging across the floor. "This isn't her…!"

"I'm going to introduce a new tradition to your family," Black Water snarls. "Letting people make and live with THEIR OWN CHOICES."

If she wants to stay, she can stay.

If she wants to watch, she can watch.

He Xuan drags the Water Master by the throat, too angry, hurt, and beside himself with grief to think about the fact that he isn't struggling.

Not even a little.

Instead, he forces him before the altar.

On his knees, yanking his head up by the hair—

Forcing him to look at the ashes and bone before him.

Lives.

Futures he destroyed.

Birthdays that were never celebrated. Vows that were never made. Children that were never born.

"Say you're sorry," He Xuan commands him coldly.

Shi Wudu looks up at him for a moment, his chest rising and falling quickly. He's pale. Trembling now, though he wasn't before He Xuan grabbed hold of him.

A coward, trembling before his death.

But there's something about his reaction that He Xuan can't stand.

Shi Wudu might seem afraid, on some level—but not of him.

His eyes are almost looking through him. Like he's thinking of someone else. Like he doesn't even *see* him.

He Xuan's fingers tighten, his eyes burning with rage.

"APOLOGIZE!"

"I'm sorry," Shi Wudu breathes.

He Xuan peers into his gaze, trying to find something in there.

The coldness. The cruelty.

Looking for the monster.

Even when Hua Cheng was making vague overtures about letting this go—he echoed the same sentiments.

People are the choices that they make.

And what could Shi Wudu's choices make him, if not a monster?

How could someone who caused so much suffering look like that?

Where does he get the right, after everything he's done, to look so fragile?

Shi Qingxuan is weeping uncontrollably, begging, but she's incoherent—

'Lady Wind Master.'

She jumps violently on the floor, but before she can speak—

'Don't react to what I'm saying now.'

She obeys, covering her mouth with one hand, curling up into a ball on her side, her breaths hitching.

'He's—dianxia, I can't stop him! He's going to kill—!'

'I don't think he's in control of himself right now, Shi Qingxuan.'

Her tears slow, her breaths stuttering as she listens closer.

'You...you don't?'

'San Lang explained it to me—but Mount Tonglu is opening soon.' The prince explains quickly. *'It has an effect on Ghost Kings.'*

She almost asks what that has to do with anything, before realizing faintly—

Right.

Her Ming-Xio—

He Xuan.

He Xuan is a ghost king.

'...I think he means it,' Shi Qingxuan watches the two of them, shuddering with grief and fear.

'*He does,'* Xie Lian agrees. *'But he'll regret this if you don't stop him.'*

'I can't!' She whimpers out loud, covering her mouth with both hands. ' *I can't stop him!'*

'You can try. Shi Qingxuan, you have to try.'

'I already did! He wouldn't listen!'

'He will, just keep pushing him.'

(The thought process being, of course, that it can't make things worse.)

'Why would he listen to me?!'

The words that echo in her mind make her pause, the tears slowing on her cheeks.

'Because he cares for you, Shi Qingxuan. I've seen it.'

The tears return in full force.

'He doesn't,' she sobs, her chest aching, as though something inside of her is dying. *'HE HATES ME!'*

'He does, even if he doesn't want to remember it right now,' Xie Lian's voice is persistent, trying to talk her through it.

He doesn't.

He doesn't.

How could he?

'You have to try and remind him,' Xie Lian speaks firmly, trying to keep her focused. *'That's the only thing you can do.'*

From the other side of the chamber, He Xuan has come to a similar, if not perpendicular conclusion.

That he needs to show her. To show himself.

Exactly who her brother is. What he is.

“...You want me to spare him?” He glances in Shi Qingxuan’s direction, watching how she sits up, her eyes wide and dazed, nodding through her tears. “Alright, Water Master Xiong—I’ll give you a chance.” He Xuan lets go of his hair.

Shi Wudu falls forward onto his hands and knees, watching as Blackwater crosses the room—momentarily frightened that he’ll go to his sister, but—

He Xuan walks past her.

To the cages.

“I’m sure you remember that little spell of yours,” he murmurs, opening the door.

Every single mortal inside is one already marked for death.

Murders. War criminals. Rapists.

He drags one out by the hair, the madman practically giggling as He Xuan drags him across the floor.

“Why don’t you show off for your little sister?” Shi Wudu grows still.

He Xuan deposits the murderer beside Shi Qingxuan—the very same one that was wearing her locket before.

This time, he kneels behind them both, pushing them close together as he lifts the locket from the man’s neck—placing it back around Shi Qingxuan’s.

“Switch them.”

Shi Qingxuan trembles, cringing away from the man beside her—and further into Ming—He Xuan’s arms as a result.

And oh, how ashamed she is, that they still feel like home.

“Come on,” He Xuan prompts him, staring the Water Master down.

“Do it, and I’ll let you both go.”

Shi Wudu looks from him, to Shi Qingxuan.

Who smiles, mouthing the words—

‘It’s okay.’

And finally, in that moment, He Xuan sees something ruinous in Shi Wudu’s eyes. A pain that lingers deep in the soul.

‘It’s okay, gege.’

“...” The Water Master rises to his feet.

Slowly, as He Xuan backs away, he crosses the room, walking back over to his sister’s side.

And when he kneels before her, He Xuan watches. He waits.

Ready to step in and kill him the moment he begins the spell, because the point isn’t for Shi Wudu to succeed. The point is to show Shi Qingxuan what his cruelty looks like. To bring that thing out, like a poison, so He Xuan can finally kill it. So he can finally slay the monster that swallowed his life whole.

“...” Shi Wudu hangs his head low, his hair hiding his face.

He takes three breaths, long and slow. And when he looks up—

Shi Qingxuan’s brother smiles at her. It isn’t a happy smile.

It’s exhausted. Worn. Defeated.

But it’s—

It’s also at peace.

He takes her face between his hands, and for a moment, he leans their foreheads together

They can’t use travel or communication arrays here, but—

They can talk like this, however briefly.

And within Shi Qingxuan’s body—

Xie Lian hears it too.

‘Thank you.’

‘Ge—’

Shi Qingxuan was never a burden.

She made him strong.

Stronger than anyone else.

Having someone to protect. Someone who needed him.

It made him brave.

He wouldn’t have made it, if he hadn’t had someone else who needed him.

‘I failed you in so many ways, but…’ Shi Wudu inhales again, his shoulders trembling. *‘You have to be brave now, Qingxuan.’*

‘Gege, listen—!’

His final words make her fall silent, too shocked to speak.

‘I love you, meimei.’

In all of Shi Qingxuan’s years of using her female form—he’s never called her that before.

Not once.

And while it often bothered her, she knew why.

Because Shi Wudu always remembered the fact that Shi Qingxuan was forced to disguise herself as a girl, when they were children.

Associating that with a lack of choice.

With the childhood that was stolen from her.

He never embraced Shi Qingxuan’s love of her female form. And this small act of acknowledgement—it feels like a final gift. The only thing he can give her, before—

Shi Wudu rises, letting her go.

“Don’t—” She starts, only to be drowned out by—

"HA!"

The Water Master throws his head back—

And he laughs.

"HAHAHAHAHA!"

He turns his head, looking at He Xuan over his shoulder. Smirking.

A wide, sneering smile spreading across his face. Showing him *exactly* what he wanted to see.

"You think you're so clever, don't you?" He muses, shoving Shi Qingxuan back. "Gods, you're still so *pathetic."*

He Xuan stares, his expression cold, non-reactive.

At first.

Shi Wudu presses a hand against his chest, laughing again. "The Crown Prince of Xianle already knows what I did. My airhead of a sister told plenty of people. Why do you think I locked her up? Never occurred to you?"

He Xuan's eyes flicker to Shi Qingxuan, who seems too shocked to respond.

"You think I care about making it back when people know what I did? That I'd rather be sent into exile by the emperor like Xianle?" Shi Wudu throws his head back, laughing again, full volume. "No, no...I've had four centuries of a life you couldn't even imagine," the water god smiles, clasping his hands behind his back as he walks closer to Shi Qingxuan. "I mean, maybe you can...you did spend a few decades eating my scraps, didn't you? Like a stray dog that no one wanted."

Shi Qingxuan's jaw drops, because this isn't him. This isn't her brother, he's—

"Gege," she speaks up, "Stop it!"

"And it makes sense now, that my sister is attached to you," Shi Wudu tilts his head back, pacing around He Xuan now.

Almost as though he's no longer the prey. "

She's always had an overdeveloped sense of pity for broken, worthless things. She used to bring back sick puppies when we were little. Birds with broken wings. She must have eaten your self pitying act right up," He sneers.

"...Self pitying?"

"Listen, listen, he's not—!"

"Yeah, because you what? My sister was cursed. I can't help but notice she's still here, after having lived this fabulous, *happy* life that you resent her so much for."

"BECAUSE YOU—!"

"Because I *did something* about it." Shi Wudu sneers. "Because I wasn't weak, like *you.*"

He Xuan's eyes flare, and Shi Qingxuan—

Maybe his mind was already made up to kill Shi Wudu before, but he was—

'Mount Tonglu is opening soon.'

In spite of Xie Lian's warning, He Xuan seemed rational.

Hurt. Enraged. But rational.

But Shi Qingxuan knows her brother doesn't mean a word.

She saw the remorse, when he admitted to what he did before.

He made no excuses then. Seemed ready, almost relieved to accept punishment. And now—

"You've had so many years to kill me, but you waited." Shi Wudu looks around them, rolling his eyes. "You waited until you could lure me here, because you're not strong enough to kill me otherwise. And now that I am here, you're...playing mind games still? I thought Ghost Kings were supposed to be formidable."

He stops directly behind him, speaking just next to He Xuan's ear.

"Is that why you're always in Crimson Rain's shadow? Last time I checked..."

"..." He Xuan's hands ball into tight fists, his knuckles white.

"He took down thirty three gods single handedly." Shi Wudu sighs, rubbing the side of his neck. "And you can't even kill one?"

"GEGE, STOP IT! MI—HE—HE DOESN'T MEAN IT!"

But it's too late. He Xuan already tried to tell her, but—

"Maybe if you didn't hesitate so often, you would still have a little sister too."

BOOM!

It's far, far too late.

Shi Wudu's back hits the ground, hard—so hard, the marble splinters underneath his back—with Blackwater's knee crushing down on top of his chest, pinning him down, fangs bared, snarling in his face.

"AT LEAST SHE DIDN'T HAVE TO *WATCH!"*

And for a moment, in spite of all appearances— Both of them are getting exactly what they wanted. One, a swift end.

The other—the monster they always wanted to find. Satisfying both the desire to kill, and to be killed. Clawed fingers grip his hair, and begin to pull.

"WAIT!" Shi Qingxuan panics, scrambling to her knees, trying to get to them before it's too late. "HE'S TRICKING YOU, HE'S—YOU DON'T WANT TO DO THIS!"

He Xuan's eyes are blown, watching the Water Master's neck strain, bones cracking. "I do," he breathes. "I really, *really* do."

"You don't—THIS ISN'T WHAT YOU NEED!" Shi Qingxuan shakes her head, desperate.

"WHAT MAKES YOU THINK YOU KNOW WHAT I NEED?!"

The next words that come out of her mouth are the only in existence that ever could have made him pause.

"...Because you—YOU'RE A GOOD MAN, MI—HE XUAN!"

Silence falls across the room, and He Xuan—

His hands go still.

Shi Wudu doesn't make a sound, his breaths ragged, eyes closed, waiting. But He Xuan doesn't see him, right now.

He sees another face.

Kind eyes, and a warm smile.

Freckles like constellations across her nose.

He sees those eyes welled with tears, whimpering from the pain. And begging him.

Begging the man she loved, with her last breaths—

'Y…You're a good man, H…He Sheng. '

…Begging him not to become cruel.

That day, when his heart died.

He stares down at that face.

The face that has haunted every angry, pained thought for so many years.

The monster.

Her killer.

And he—

Drip!

Shi Wudu starts, his eyes fluttering limply, when something wet lands on his cheek.

"…No."

He looks back at her now—actually looks at her, and—

Two red lines make their way down his cheeks, dripping from his chin.

Ghost kings don't cry, after all. They lose that ability.

They only bleed.

"He Sheng was a good man," Black Water whispers, his form flickering. "He was a big brother. A friend. A son. He did what he thought was right. And he tried—"

His voice breaks, crimson tears falling from his chin.

"He tried so hard to do the right thing."

And it never worked.

No matter what he did. Everything. Everyone.

They were taken away.

And he never—he never knew what he was doing wrong.

Never knew what he had done to deserve what was happening to the people around him.

Never knew how to make it stop.

"..." Shi Qingxuan's tears might be human—

But they carry just as much sorrow.

"He's still in there." She clutches her chest, her breaths hitching. "I *know* he's still in there."

The man who held her so gently.

Who would find ways to make her laugh that seemed unintentional, because he was always so determined to keep a straight face.

Who insisted that he didn't care—but he never left her alone in the morning after they spent the night together.

He never let Shi Qingxuan cry without finding a way to distract her from it.

The man who made her feel capable. Strong. Like she could do things on her own. The man who kissed her under the fireworks just weeks before, telling her not to think about next year. Because she was eighth, this year.

Shi Qingxuan was *enough*, this year.

"...You don't know that."

“I do,” She whispers, her lips trembling. “I fell in love with him.”

He Xuan stares at her, his expression frozen, and for just a moment, her stomach leaps with hope, until—

Until she watches all of the feeling in his eyes slowly fade away. Because sometimes, after so much pain—

You learn not to feel things, even when you should.

“No.” He Xuan repeats, his voice hollow. “You didn’t.”

He slowly turns his head back down, looking at that face. He was a good man, once.

He loved so deeply, and he tried so hard.

All for nothing.

He’s done too much since then.

‘D...Don’t...’

He’s gone too far.

‘Don’t let them...make you f-forget that, He Xuan...’

Since that day, when he felt his heart die, piece by piece.

‘You’re...a good man.’

Good men Rest In Peace.

And oh, the things He Xuan has done, all while telling himself that he no longer had a heart.

“...He would have loved you,” He Xuan admits, only now, while denying the existence of his own soul.

Only now, while he breaks the last thing he loves. Watching the terror and pain in her eyes, as he explains—

“But your brother murdered him.”

And finally—his true form appears.

Bloodshot eyes, ruptured blood vessels in the cheeks and throat, spidery dark veins stretched over pale, waxen skin.

The corpse of He Sheng. A good man, who drowned.

And maybe, if he does what he couldn't do before—

If he slays his monster—maybe then, he'll find some peace.

Or maybe, it won't. Either way...his little sister's killer doesn't get to breathe anymore.

He's taken too many things already.

He Xuan won't allow him another breath.

Not a single one.

He starts to pull again, this time far more viciously, and Shi Qingxuan—she only has one idea left, and she knows it isn't very good.

It's not something that you can take back.

Admittedly manipulative. But—

It feels fair.

It felt fair, at the time.

"...I can hurt him more than you can."

He Xuan pauses, just as Shi Wudu goes still, and Shi Qingxuan—

She throws her head back, and she screams. With all of the force in her body. With all of the bravery that she possesses—

"I DISCARD IT!"

Shi Wudu stares, his eyes slowly growing wider and wider, all while He Xuan is frozen.

Now, the Water Master begins to struggle.

"MOVE!" He shoves at He Xuan's chest with a shocking amount of strength, suddenly displaying—

He never had any intention of fighting back to begin with. "STOP HER!"

"What—?"

“YOU HEAR ME, YOUR MAJESTY?!”

Now, for the first time in a long time— He Xuan feels something.

Something he felt a hint of, before, on the Terrace of Cascading Wine. Even though back then, he covered it up with layers of anger and denial:

Terror.

“...No,” he rasps, his fingers, which have dreamed of nothing but crushing the throat beneath his hands, going limp.

Shi Wudu, however, is anything but frozen—shoving Black Water off of him while the demon is too shocked to respond, rushing to her.

“I DON’T WANT IT ANYMORE!” Shi Qingxuan screams, “IT WAS NEVER MINE, SO TAKE IT BACK!”

“STOP—!”

He hopes, against all reason, that he won’t hear.

The only person who can grant her what she’s asking for. The person Shi Qingxuan is screaming out to, now.

He prays silently, abandoning all pride, pleading.

Pleading that he’s done enough. That he’s kept enough secrets.

That having his body and soul hollowed out and stripped bare is enough for the emperor to grant him one mercy:

Allowing him to die like this.

Letting it end.

Not forcing him to watch his sister—

BOOM!

Golden light fills the room in a crash, blinding all three of them.

And when it fades...

Shi Qingxuan is limp on the floor, breathing heavily.

“...No...” Shi Wudu mutters, grasping her shoulders, looking her over.

“No, no, no...” He presses his fingertips to her temple, trying to give her spiritual power, but—

The Water Master screams.

“NO!” He looks up at the ceiling, tears pouring down his cheeks, rage in every inch of his face, practically howling with a mixture of grief and fury. “I DID EVERYTHING YOU EVER ASKED OF ME!” Shi Qingxuan blinks blearily, her ears ringing. “GIVE IT BACK!”

It’s useless.

There’s no cursed shackle on her body.

This isn’t exile.

He couldn’t take it back, even if he was feeling merciful.

He Xuan stops, staring at her—how dull her complexion suddenly looks, how—

How the room suddenly feels colder.

“...What is this?” He asks flatly.

Shi Wudu whips his head around to send him a venomous glare, holding Shi Qingxuan against his chest.

“What the fuck do you think it is?!” He snarls. “ISN’T THIS WHAT YOU WANTED?!”

“She’s...” He Xuan glares, recoiling from both of them. “You think I’m going to fall for that?!”

“Fall for WHAT, you STUBBORN ASSHOLE?!” Shi Wudu shakes his sister for emphasis. “WE BOTH FUCKING *SAW IT!”*

“She’s not mortal.” He Xuan stalks forward, even as Shi Wudu scrambles back, holding her protectively. “For the most OBVIOUS fucking REASON!”

“You—!”

“IF SHE WAS MORTAL, HOW WOULD SHE STILL BE IN THAT BODY?!” His anger is spurred on by terror, fumbling for a logical explanation that tells him the worst isn’t true.

That her time has suddenly become so limited. Shi Wudu falters, suddenly unsure.

“It’s a spell,” He Xuan points at Shi Qingxuan furiously. “If she had no more spiritual power, then it would run out!”

And in that case—Shi Qingxuan would have reverted to her male form immediately upon Jun Wu taking her divinity.

But her shape has remained unchanged.

“...I don’t...” Shi Wudu stares down at her, struggling to line up what He Xuan’s saying—which is an indisputable fact—with what he just saw.

Another indisputable fact. Until—

Until his sister scrambles out of his arms, rolling over onto her hands and knees, and —

Gagging.

He Xuan stops, his arms hanging limply at his sides, just— Just staring at her, his eyes growing wider and wider.

“I don’t...” Shi Qingxuan rasps, holding one hand against her stomach as she dry heaves, “I haven’t been able to change back since the festival...I don’t...know why!”

“...You...” Shi Wudu stares down at her, his lips parted and trembling. “...You can’t change back...”

It’s dawning on all of them now, in different ways.

Both of Shi Qingxuan’s hands rest over her stomach as she sits up, dumbfounded. But—how—?

He Xuan stumbles backwards, pressing a hand against his forehead.

And it’s so, so unfair.

Because he—

He couldn’t have known, but—

Now, finally, a memory comes to him.

But not really.

A glimpse forward.

One he saw in the Kiln, centuries ago.

That’s the cruelest thing about looking forward.

Seeing things shuffled and out of context. Not knowing what’s real, and what isn’t. What was part of his future, or Hua Cheng’s. Or if it was a dream.

But—

‘Papa?’

There was a little boy.

Dressed in fine silk robes.

With dark hair, and…

Green eyes, just like the leaves on the trees, twinkling up at him brightly.

‘Bet you can’t catch me this time!’

That memory, sealed away for so many years—is now unlocked.

His—

He Xuan’s face drops into his hands.

His son.

He saw his son.

And the choice that’s left before him—leaves him with only two options.

Each horrifically unfair.

To him, and to her.

His fingers tighten around his temples, trembling.

“…Dammit…god…fucking…”

BANG!

His fist slams into the wall, making the room shake.

Shi Wudu can’t look away from his sister.

It takes a moment to crest over the dawning realization that someone you never stopped viewing as a child could conceive one of their own.

It—

It isn’t unheard of for goddesses to conceive. It—

It happens.

And there aren’t many examples of officials who were born male, like Shi Qingxuan, who often spend their time in female form. It just—

Shi Wudu had assumed that her body, being the result of magical transformation, wouldn’t be able to bear a child.

And even if she could...

...When Shi Wudu asked her if she was sexually active, his sister had told him no. Even when he specifically asked about Ming Yi—

She denied it.

And it had never occurred to him, until this very moment, that she would lie to him.

And that—

That changes everything.

“...You...”

Ming Yi sleeping with his sister was something he wouldn’t have approved of, even if he wouldn’t have forced her to put a stop to it.

But He Xuan.

He Xuan, sleeping with his sister.

While lying about who he was.

About his intentions.

"…I'LL FUCKING *KILL* YOU!"

"Gege—!"

The blow actually lands on He Xuan, who is simply too shell shocked to respond—a bunch so violent, it actually manages to spin his head around, snapping his neck.

Shi Qingxuan screams, shrinking against the wall, until she remembers, well— He's already dead.

And essentially invincible in this place—which Shi Wudu is perfectly aware of—

But that doesn't stop him from punching, kicking, and clawing at the calamity until they wrestle down onto the floor.

"GE, PLEASE, WE JUST—!"

She just *barely* managed to save his life, and now—

Finally, after taking around twelve consecutive hits to the face—

He Xuan makes his decision.

Shi Wudu stops in the middle of cocking his elbow back, choking—

A hand wrapped around his throat once more.

"Mi—He Xuan—!"

He looks over at her—and this time—

He actually sees her

And later, she'll be so, so confused.

Because now, in this moment—

It doesn't look like he hates her.

It—

It looks like he's *sorry* .

Crack!

With his free hand, he snaps his fingers—

And two portals open.

“...Where...” Shi Qingxuan starts, then, with a flick of his wrist, she begins to slide away, even as she claws at the floor, trying to stop herself from going through one portal, as she—

As she watches He Xuan drag her brother through the other. Realizing—

He never said a word about sparing her brother’s life.

He—

He’s still going to—

“DON’T!” She screams, flailing as she falls into darkness, “MIN—HE XUAN, DON’T!”

Chapter End Notes

> ...it's a boy!
>
> xoxo, Evie

Levels of Intent

Chapter Summary

Pei Ming sits Shi Qingxuan up, grabbing her by the shoulders. “What happened?!”

The Wi—

The young woman doesn’t respond.

Her face falls into her hands—and—

She begins to weep.

Not gently, or beautifully.

But straight from the pit of her stomach. Gut wrenching, heaving sobs.

Chapter Notes

content warnings; this chapter has brief references to abortion as well as rape, read with caution!

The next thing she knows, she is lying against soft grass.

Birds chirping overhead. A river in the distance.

A few feet away, Xie Lian sits up in Hua Cheng’s arms with a ragged gasp, bracing one hand against his leg as he coughs, and a few feet away...

Pei Ming sits Shi Qingxuan up, grabbing her by the shoulders. “What happened?!”

The Wi—

The young woman doesn’t respond.

Her face falls into her hands—and—

She begins to weep.

Not gently, or beautifully.

But straight from the pit of her stomach. Gut wrenching, heaving sobs.

“...He Xuan took the Water Master through a separate portal,” Xie Lian speaks up. “It’s impossible to say where, but...”

Xie Lian waves his hand in an awkward little gesture, pointing to Shi Qingxuan. “I officially appoint you as my deputy.”

Shi Qingxuan seems reluctant, crossing her arms—and Pei stares at Xie Lian like he’s lost his mind.

“Did you just call the Wind Master your deputy?”

“...I’m not the Wind Master anymore!” Shi Qingxuan spits out between bouts of heaving sobs, and when Pei Ming and Hua Cheng look to Xie Lian, he...

He sighs.

“She renounced her godhood in order to satisfy Blackwater’s revenge, but...”

It wasn’t enough.

“If that’s the case, then why are you...?” Pei questions, looking over her form, and then—

It dawns on him and Hua Cheng simultaneously, with Pei seeming nothing more than shocked, and Hua Cheng, he—

He is visibly horrified.

But no one is looking at him.

“I’ll take her to the Heavens—Mu Qing will have to take a look at her as soon as possible.”

And judging by the situation, well—

Pei will be hunting down wherever Black Water has taken the water master.

So—there’s no time to waste.

Xie Lian stands up, reaching over to squeeze Hua Cheng's shoulder. He...

For an instant, part of him wishes that the Ghost King could come with him, even if he knows that Hua Cheng wouldn't be welcome in the capital.

He sighs.

"I'll come find you in Ghost City once we know what's going on."

Pei doesn't say a word, kneeling down and lifting Shi Qingxuan up into his arms. Despite centuries at one another's throats, she doesn't protest.

"As will I."

They told Pei that they would explain, after all.

Though Xie Lian expects that not even Hua Cheng has an explanation for everything that just transpired.

Still.

"I'll be waiting," Hua Cheng mutters, crossing his arms—seeming to loathe the idea of Xie Lian going to the heavens alone just as much as the prince does.

"Be careful, gege."

The first thing he does, upon entering the Heavenly City, is summon Mu Qing from the communication array.

His private one, not the general matrix.

That venue is flooded with panicked officials, worrying about the Wind and Water Masters.

Given the seriousness of the situation, within a matter of minutes...

They're standing within the Emperor's private palace, with Shi Qingxuan laying back in bed as Mu Qing examines her.

The others stand off to the side—and the discussion—

It's tense.

"Where could he be that we wouldn't know?!" Pei has done well up until now, keeping his composure--but the longer he goes without answers or even a lead, he becomes more and more frayed.

"I've asked every scout I have," Ling Wen mutters. "And they've all reported back." Even she, normally stoic, is visibly upset.

"And you?!" Pei whips his head around to look at Jun Wu, who has been sitting in a chair by Shi Qingxuan's bedside, rather quiet. "You MUST know where he is!"

The emperor has his legs crossed, his mouth leaning against his fist.

"I can't see him anywhere," he mutters, his eyes narrow, tension written across the set of his mouth.

"Since when?" Pei Ming stares, shaking his head. "Since when has there been something YOU couldn't see?!"

"Pei," Ling Wen places a hand on his arm—silently warning him.

"...I can't see within Blackwater Manor, not unless someone within calls out to me." Jun Wu points out—and they know he isn't there. "Nor can I see within certain sections of Ghost City."

In an instant, everyone in the room looks at Xie Lian, who frowns. "He isn't there," he firmly denies it. "San Lang would have told me."

"Yes," Pei mutters, laughing helplessly. "Because he's been extremely forthcoming, hasn't he?"

"Pei..." Feng Xin places a hand on Xie Lian's shoulder. "Don't lash out at him over Crimson Rain's actions."

Xie Lian shrugs his friend's hand off, frowning at both of them.

"San Lang didn't help Blackwater, not even once." He shakes his head. "The only reason he was there was to make sure no harm came to me."

"But he knew what was going to happen, and he didn't say..." Pei looks up at Xie Lian, seeming genuinely lost. "Can you actually defend that?"

The prince falls silent, and before he can answer, Mu Qing stands up, slipping off his gloves.

"...It's true," he mutters, offering news that, in any other occasion, would be joyous.

In this case, however, it brings only tense silence in the room—everyone watching Shi Qingxuan, who is staring out the window, her expression blank and dazed.

"…" Pei wipes a hand down his face, turning away from Xie Lian as he walks over to her, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Look, I know this is not a conversation she's going to want to have with everyone else here," He mutters. "Nan Yang—I—"

He grits his teeth, closing his eyes.

Knowing full well that, if Jun Wu can't see where Shi Wudu is, then no one can.

And in that case, the best thing he can do is stay here, waiting for one of the scouts to report back, sending as many people possible to search —

But Shi Wudu…

'If it comes down to it, and you choose me over her—I won't forgive you.'

…Would want someone with Shi Qingxuan.

"Gather as many martial gods as you can, and have them sweep their sectors. I know a few minor water deities I can set on the search. Ling Wen—send word out to them. Odds are he wouldn't have ventured into the Northern or Western oceans, but it's worth looking."

He glances back in Xie Lian's direction.

"Is there any chance Crimson Rain would be willing to look in the Ghost Realm if the request came from you?"

"…I don't know," the prince answers honestly. "But he wouldn't lie to me either way, so it can't hurt to ask."

Pei nods, and Xie Lian can't help not notice that—while he's doing exactly what should be done to organize their search efforts—

Jun Wu has taken a noticeable back seat to that discussion.

Wasn't Shi Wudu the closest to him?

Is he really so worried that he can't give orders?

Pei leans closer to Shi Qingxuan, who shrinks away slightly.

And she can't be blamed—their interactions for the last few centuries have been characterized by shouting matches and constant bickering, but now…

Pei Ming speaks to her calmly. Gently. “Who do you want to stay?”

“…His highness…” She mumbles, pulling the sheets up to her chest, sitting up. “And Xuan Zhen.”

The rest of them have assignments to carry out as it is—and as such, they make their exits.

Leaving Pei Ming, Mu Qing, Xie Lian, and the emperor behind.

“…I’ll be going too,” Jun Wu finally mutters, rising to his feet. “I have my own avenues to look into for finding him, but…there are two things you should know.”

This, he directs at Shi Qingxuan.

“If your brother is found alive, he will be exiled.”

Pei suddenly goes rigid.

“What?” He asks flatly. “On what charge?”

“…” Jun Wu eyes him for a moment, and Xie Lian feels compelled to speak.

“It’s been an emotional day for all of us, your majesty.”

“…Indeed. I’ll allow Shi Qingxuan and Xianle to explain the situation to you then.” Jun Wu looks Shi Qingxuan over, his gaze…complex, but…

Remorseful.

“Had I known your condition, I would not have granted your request.”

Shi Qingxuan bows her head, biting her lip. “If I had known—I wouldn’t have asked,” she whispers.

“And while I have great sympathy for your situation…Xianle, I understand you appointed Shi Qingxuan as your deputy.”

Xie Lian lifts his head, raising an eyebrow. “I did, your majesty.”

“I’m afraid that violates Heavenly Law.”

“Since when?” Pei frowns. “How is it a violation?”

“When a god or goddess discards their immortality, it’s because they’ve gone into retirement in most cases.”

Which, in itself, is a rare choice. Most gods fade into obscurity rather than bowing out willingly.

The Rain Master is an odd exception to that trend. She has offered to train a replacement and retire no less than six times in the last millennia—and each time that she’s tried, her worshippers have stubbornly refused to stop praying to her. After the sixth time, the emperor said stripping her immortality was a waste of effort.

When Shi Qingxuan asked her why she seemed so determined not to live among the other heavenly officials, Yushi Huang simply said: She did not enjoy politics, and she had no skill as a leader. She would be much happier at home, on her farm, until her years ran out.

Which Shi Qingxuan found strange at the time, as a young god herself.

There didn’t seem to be anything political about it. There’s no choice in whether or not a person ascends. Even the emperor is only in charge because he has the most worshippers.

And yet now, years later…She can’t help but wonder if the Rain Master was right all along.

“…But, it’s also true that when a Heavenly Official renounces their godhood, any crimes they committed during or after their ascension can no longer be punished by the Heavens.”

Pei grits his teeth—and he can’t even argue with that point. He’s been in the Heavenly Court long enough to remember instances where officials were pressured into retiring, rather than endure the scandal of being banished.

‘Let’s not be another Xianle,’ is a common phrase.

“It takes you out of my jurisdiction—and in cases where the crime is also a violation of mortal law, the worldly authorities will deal with you there.” Jun Wu sighs, leaning one hand against his dresser. “But there used to be a loophole in that system.”

Jun Wu taps his finger over a small scratch in the wood. Unnoticed by anyone who isn’t looking for it.

It came from a sharp corner on one of the Water Master's earrings, dragging as the emperor held his head down.

...And here he had thought that he wouldn't have any mementos.

"There used to be a trend long ago, in the former dynasty, where corrupt officials would retire or discard their godhood, have their friends appoint them back to the middle court, and essentially live the same lives as they did before. Even if they didn't ascend again."

Xie Lian can hear the obvious problem with such a thing—but Pei still can't seem to buy into that line of thinking.

"What crime has she committed? She clearly gave up her divinity under duress. It shouldn't even count!"

Xie Lian reaches over to pat Shi Qingxuan's hand.

She doesn't respond, simply turning her palm over to squeeze her fingers around his —and Xie Lian knows—

She isn't going to say it. Probably can't bring herself to, given what may or may not be happening to her brother at this very moment.

"...San Lang and Shi Qingxuan can probably explain the circumstances more accurately later," Xie Lian sighs, closing his eyes. "But during their mortal lives—Shi Wudu swapped the fates of He Xuan and Shi Qingxuan."

"...What?"

His reaction isn't quite what Xie Lian expected.

He doesn't immediately deny that Shi Wudu would have done such a thing—nor does he sound particularly horrified.

Only shocked, and confused.

"...The Reverend told me," Shi Qingxuan mutters, pulling her legs up against her chest. "Or...I suppose that was actually He Xuan."

It was him from the very beginning.

Trying to tell her.

To give her 'chances.'

“...And when I confronted gege, he told me it was true.” Pei falls silent, thinking it over.

And once again—he doesn’t react.

“...Then if he were here, he’d tell you—it’s his crime, not hers.”

Jun Wu crosses his arms, and Xie Lian sighs, knowing exactly what it comes down to. “...Not necessarily,” he mutters. Sympathetic for Shi Qingxuan—but crimes aren’t always committed intentionally—or even knowingly.

“How can she be punished for something she had no part in?”

Pei Ming is an honorable man. A soldier by trade.

But as someone who was raised to rule—Xie Lian’s understanding of laws, both earthly and divine, is more nuanced.

“She’s not as directly responsible as Shi Wudu, she didn’t commit the act herself, but...” He sighs.

Jun Wu watches him, vaguely approving.

“You haven’t forgotten your training, Xianle.” He murmurs, turning his attention back to General Pei. “There are different levels of guilt.”

Attached to different levels of intent.

Purposefully.

Knowingly.

Recklessly.

And negligently.

Purposefully wouldn’t even describe what Shi Wudu had done.

After all, he wasn’t the one who actively committed the crimes against He Xuan’s family.

He simply knew that, by switching his fate with Shi Qingxuan’s, a tragedy was reasonably certain to occur.

To make the comparison more simple:

What Shi Wudu did was selfish, and the repercussions were severe—but he's no Bai Wuxiang, that much is certain.

"It's not about what she knew," Xie Lian turns his head away, feeling distinctly uncomfortable with the situation. "It's about what she should have known."

She didn't purposefully hurt He Xuan. She didn't knowingly commit an act that she knew was reasonably certain to hurt He Xuan.

She wasn't even reckless.

That would imply that she deliberately engaged in behavior knowing that it could cause someone harm.

But Shi Qingxuan, whom Xie Lian would still say is an innocent in this situation—

Was negligent.

Even she admitted it, in Blackwater Manor.

That she knew something was off early on, sensing that her sudden rise was amiss.

And she made no effort to uncover the truth, fearing what the answer would be.

Maybe if she had pursued it from the beginning, she would have uncovered the truth.

And if she had, their fates could have been switched back—likely before He Xuan's family was murdered.

Her benefit, her decision to live in ignorance—directly resulted in his pain.

It's not comparable to what her brother has done, it's the lowest level of guilt, but—

She's still guilty, even if it's a far lesser crime.

"...I should have done something," Shi Qingxuan admits quietly. Not having the same technical knowledge as Xie Lian, but—

Knowing, in her heart, that she was wrong.

"You didn't know." Pei shakes his head. "If you're guilty of a crime, then we all are." He glances over at Jun Wu, and—

That's the irritating thing about Pei Ming.

His gaze is unwavering, and he always looks the emperor in the eye.

"If every single god who looked the other way from sin was banished, the Heavens would stand empty and leaderless."

"..." Jun Wu cracks a lopsided smile, but he—

He seems to find no joy in the situation.

"And people say you're not a poet, Ming Guang. You deserve more credit." He looks back at Shi Qingxuan, who struggles to meet his gaze.

"But there are realities to situations that we must accept. In this case —the Water Master's crimes have been made public. I have sympathy for Shi Qingxuan, but I can't give her no consequences at all."

At a certain point, it ceases being about justice—

And it becomes political.

"If Shi Qingxuan had not discarded her godhood, I simply would have banished her for a short term. But now that she has, if I allow her back into the middle court, with her connections..."

She would suffer very little punishment at all—and that would erode what little credibility the Heavens has when it comes to enforcing their code to begin with.

"So, you're telling me she's going to be a scapegoat?" Pei questions with a glare. "You can't make any exceptions?"

"Let's not pretend that you aren't capable of swallowing injustice when it benefits you, Ming Guang." Jun Wu points out calmly. "And yes, there will be exceptions made for the former Wind Master."

Xie Lian doesn't dare to feel hopeful, listening as he explains:

"While she will not be granted spiritual powers or a place within the middle court, she may maintain a residence within the Heavenly Capital and travel between realms as she pleases."

And Xie Lian cannot deny—that is a generous exception. Mortals are forbidden from entering the Heavens, Ghosts as well—

(Though that doesn't stop particularly determined calamities from sneaking in through the back.)

Xie Lian has actually never heard of such an exception. "And her child, when born, will have the same privilege."

Which makes sense, Xie Lian supposes. After four centuries of being a god, Shi Qingxuan has no family or friends in the Mortal Realm to return to. It...

It genuinely does seem like a kindness.

But one thing does strike him as odd: Mu Qing's silence is becoming deafening.

He's one of the most opinionated people Xie Lian knows, never shy about sharing his thoughts—and he hasn't said a word during this entire debate.

Until now.

"Is your decision final, your majesty?" He looks into Jun Wu's eyes, wary—and now Xie Lian starts to realize.

Mu Qing knows something that they don't.

"It is." Jun Wu glances around the room one final time, offering Shi Qingxuan one last piece of hope: "And Lady Shi Qingxuan will be allowed to partake in cultivation. Perhaps, with luck, she'll ascend on her own merits."

He says that—but Xie Lian doesn't think the emperor believes it. More like he's offering empty words of comfort.

"But, if you find my ruling unsatisfactory..." the emperor shrugs. "Your child's father is a ghost—which means you fall within their jurisdiction as well."

He glances around the room—the very bed that Shi Qingxuan is laying upon, thinking.

Taking quiet intrigue in how many things have happened here that they don't know about.

The satisfaction that brings. The sense of control.

“I don’t know what they can offer you, but you’re welcome to try your chances with them. In any case, I wish you the best of luck. Now,” he walks towards the door. “I should be looking for your brother.”

The door shuts behind him, and Shi Qingxuan—she shrinks.

“…What does he mean by that?” She mutters, confused.

How would that even work, asking the Ghost Realm for help?

“…He means San Lang,” Xie Lian murmurs—surprised to find that, after such little time…

He now knows more about the Ghost Realm than most Heavenly Officials.

While Hua Cheng and Blackwater are technically of equal rank—the latter is notoriously uninvolved.

(Which now, knowing that he was posing as a Heavenly Official, makes sense.) The de facto decision maker within the ghost realm, as a result, is Hua Cheng.

“…But how could he help me?” Shi Qingxuan mutters with a frown.

“Protection, I’m assuming…”

After all, Xie Lian doesn’t believe that He Xuan intends to return to harm Shi Qingxuan, but that’s more of a hunch—whereas Hua Cheng’s protection provides a guarantee of safety.

“…And would he protect me?” She questions, unsure.

“Yes.” Xie Lian agrees immediately.

Maybe not if Shi Qingxuan was any other official, but after everything they just went through…

Hua Cheng wouldn’t refuse.

“Then that’s just as much good as letting her stay in the Heavens.” Pei crosses his arms. “She would be even safer here. But that—that isn’t what we need to worry about right now.”

Which surprises Xie Lian—because it feels like the most pressing matter at hand, but—the general turns to Shi Qingxuan, looking her in the eye.

“You have options. You don’t have to make a decision today, but whatever you do decide—you won’t be alone.”

Operating under the assumption, of course, that her brother will remain by her side when he returns.

When.

Pei Ming refuses to consider the possibility of ‘if.’

“...Options?” Shi Qingxuan questions, uncertain.

“You obviously weren’t trying to have a child,” Pei explains—and it’s a little awkward for both of them, switching from their normally antagonistic dynamic—

But he puts that aside with shocking ease.

“And even if you were, the identity of the father—and what he’s done—complicates things. No one would blame you if you didn’t want...”

...If she didn’t want to continue the pregnancy.

“...Considering everything, Min—” She hangs her head, biting her lip. “He Xuan hasn’t actually...”

And Xie Lian—

He can’t help but feel pity.

Because even now, after everything— *‘I know he’s still in there.’*

Shi Qingxuan still seems to have some amount of faith in him. That Blackwater, at his core, is a good man.

Pei isn’t receptive to that point of view—given Shi Qingxuan’s situation, her brother’s disappearance, and the fact that he lied, but—

“...I’m so sorry.”

Everyone pauses when those words are blurted out in a rush—

From no one other than Mu Qing.

Shi Qingxuan looks up, startled to be hearing that from him—but she offers a strained smile.

“I-It’s okay, really! It’s...my fault for being so—”

She stops when Pei’s hand lands on her shoulder, squeezing firmly—and when she looks up, he stares right into her eyes.

“This,” he looks down at her stomach, “is not your fault. You were lied to. He’ll pay for that.”

Shi Qingxuan frowns. “I don’t want—”

“Mu Qing,” Xie Lian speaks up, talking over them both. “What were you talking about?”

He knows him.

Knows him a little too well, honestly.

While he might have felt sorry for Shi Qingxuan being lied to and saddled with an unplanned pregnancy—he wouldn’t have spoken like that.

He must know something.

“...” Mu Qing looks at the ceiling, tracing gilded tiles with his eyes as he takes a deep breath.

He hasn’t had to do this, not to someone he knows.

The benefit of being a physician to a court of immortals.

“...I’m sorry,” he repeats carefully, not looking down. “But you don’t have options.”

Xie Lian and Pei both stiffen, and Shi Qingxuan stares, confused.

“What?”

She reaches down, placing a hand over her stomach without even thinking—a newfound instinct, but one that feels as simple as breathing.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“...If your body was still immortal, we could terminate the pregnancy at your request. But...”

Pei stares, the muscles in his jaw working. “But what? You’re saying that won’t work?”

“...Look, it’s a unique situation,” Mu Qing mutters, crossing his arms. “But there’s good reason to think that attempting that might kill her.”

Xie Lian stiffens—immediately reaching for Shi Qingxuan’s hand, squeezing it tightly. “...Kill her?”

“If the father was a god, or a mortal man, it would be different. But in this case...”

The father is a ghost.

Not only a ghost—but a powerful calamity.

“...Even if we terminated the fetus—and she’s early along, it wouldn’t be complicated—the cursed energy it’s carrying would immediately cause it to become a fetal spirit, like...”

Like Cuocuo.

And with a father that powerful—

It would devour Shi Qingxuan from the inside.

“...I didn’t want to get rid of it anyway,” Shi Qingxuan mutters, holding onto Xie Lian’s hand tightly, holding herself around the middle with her other arm.

She’s already lost so much—

The idea of having a family. Even a small, admittedly twisted one...

Is comforting.

Still—

Mu Qing’s expression hasn’t gotten any less grim—and Pei Ming can hardly stand it, rising to his feet.

“If you have more to tell us, then just spit it out Xuan Zhen.”

He blows out a breath, finally dropping his eyes down from the ceiling—and he forces it out quickly.

"No mortal woman has ever survived carrying a ghost's child to term."

Shi Qingxuan feels all of the breath leave her—and now, it feels as though she's hearing every other word that's being said. Listening through a fog.

"...So you're telling us she's dead either way?!"

"If she was still a goddess, her body could survive terminating the pregnancy—or she could use her spiritual power to purify the cursed energy within her body and carry the child to term, but..."

"Then just let her use mine!" Pei cries out, frustrated. "I've got more than enough to spare!"

"It doesn't matter how much spiritual power you give her if she can't control it and direct it towards the child," Mu Qing pinches the bridge of his nose, and Shi Qingxuan—

She's never been more vividly aware of the consequences to her own choices.

"Shi Qingxuan has been a goddess for four centuries," Xie Lian frowns, holding onto her hand resolutely. "Surely, she can..."

Then, he notices that his friend has begun to tremble.

"...I always had spiritual devices, your highness." She whispers—and Xie Lian remembers what he heard He Xuan tell her, back in Blackwater Manor, when Xie Lian was attempting to help her—

That Shi Qingxuan had never cared too much about developing her cultivation.

"I never...learned how..."

Now, it begins to dawn on him.

"Even a high level mortal cultivator would struggle with purging that kind of resentment from inside their own body. And in the time it would take for her to learn..."

The child would grow to term, and...

Kill her.

Ascending again, one way or the other, might be easier.

Even if both seem equally impossible.

Still—

Xie Lian's eyes narrow with determination, and he holds her hand firmly. "Then I'll teach you cultivation myself."

The prince is more than happy to admit that, in most occasions, he's useless.

But he's managed to ascend three times. One of his students founded a cultivation sect. Another is Martial God of the East. He was able to teach Xiong Li enough to ascend in a single year.

That has to count for something.

"...Thank you, your highness," Shi Qingxuan mumbles, her voice thick with emotion— fear, and sadness. "I'll do my best, but..."

To some extent, cultivation is a matter of hard work and dedication. But it's also about natural talent.

And she just learned—

None of the talent she thought she had was her own.

And her brother, who knew her better than anyone...

He was so sure that she couldn't ascend or survive on her own, that he was willing to commit such a horrible crime to save her.

"...And you don't just have me," Xie Lian points out, reaching up to stroke her hair, pushing her bangs away from her face. "San Lang knows so many things, he can teach you too—and you know, from all the traveling I've done, I know quite a few cultivation masters in the mortal—"

"Thank you, your highness." Shi Qingxuan repeats herself, her voice still trembling. "I know you'll do your best—and you don't have to feel obligated to help me. You've already done so much..."

"It's nothing less than what you would do for me, if the tables were turned."

"..." Shi Qingxuan leans against him, crumbling when Xie Lian wraps an arm around her, pressing her face into his shoulder. "...Xuan Zhen?"

"Yes?" Mu Qing responds wearily.

"The baby…my baby…" She mumbles, her voice quivering. "…Even if I can't…will it be alright?"

"…Yes, most likely." Mu Qing nods.

In a normal situation, the results would be a bit more mixed. Most mortal women who conceive children with ghosts—while already a small group—the ghosts involved are usually less powerful, and…

Shi Qingxuan *was* a goddess when she conceived

In all likelihood, she's probably carrying the most durable unborn child currently in existence.

Normally, when a mortal woman is consumed by the fetus—the child left behind turns into a ghost fire.

But as the child of a goddess and a ghost king… It has far better chances.

By the end of the day, she's resettled into Pei Ming's palace—unable to stand the sight of her own, knowing that her brother isn't there.

Xie Lian stays for the first day, then the second—waiting with everyone else for word of the Water Master, as well as his abductor.

But nothing comes.

No sightings. No contact.

Nothing.

Xie Lian comforts the Wind Master as best as he can—and while they try to start with some basic lessons—

She's so worried for her brother, it doesn't seem to be of any use. Then, on the third day—Xie Lian stops in her room just after lunch.

"…I can wait longer, if you'd like—but since we haven't heard anything more…I think I should go and ask San Lang about what he might know."

At the very least—even if all he does is admit that he doesn't know about what's going on—showing that he's not assisting Blackwater could help take some of the blame that other heavenly officials have been so eager to lay at his feet.

“That makes sense,” Shi Qingxuan agrees.

She’s sitting beside the window now, wearing a loose white dress, with an oversized blue robe thrown across her shoulders.

Her brother’s.

She hasn’t stopped watching the golden gates, twisting her locket around and round her fingers.

“…Mu Qing will see to your lessons while I’m gone,” Xie Lian reaches over, giving her shoulder one last squeeze. “We’ll discuss logistics after…”

“Thank you, your highness.” Shi Qingxuan reaches up, patting his hand with her own. “Really.”

Xie Lian offers her a small smile—having already assured her countless times that it’s nothing, and he knows she would do the same, but…when he makes it to the door, she calls over.

“Your highness?”

“Yes?”

Xie Lian stops, his hand on the door handle.

“…If I don’t make it, I don’t want everyone arguing over…”

Over her child.

The mere mention of that makes him wince.

“It's too early to be worrying about that.”

“I know, but…” She bites her lip. “I trust you to know what’s right.”

At least someone does—because he certainly doesn’t.

“And I think it would help me relax if I knew…whatever happens to me, someone will be putting them first, you know?”

Oddly enough—yes.

Xie Lian thinks he might understand.

"...I promise," Xie Lian murmurs, "Regardless of what happens—I'll make sure they're well looked after."

But he desperately hopes it won't come to that.

Even if Shi Qingxuan is somewhat ill prepared to be a parent...It's clear—

How deeply she cares for the child already.

"Thank you, your highness."

He leaves not long after—and Shi Qingxuan is left alone, staring out the window, her locket settled against her palm.

"Where are you?" She whispers, staring at the horizon.

Three days.

The longest she's ever gone without seeing her brother is nine.

And in the time since they became friends, this is the longest she's ever gone without seeing...

...He Xuan.

The three longest, loneliest days that she can remember.

Punctuated by the waiting, and wondering.

Then, as she watches the sun begin to set, she feels it.

One moment, it was perfectly quiet and still, and the next...

The golden locket she's been twisting round, and round, and round—

It begins vibrating violently against her palm.

So much so, she nearly drops it from surprise, and then—

Shi Qingxuan feels her blood turn to ice.

There's only one thing in the world that would make it do that.

If the owner of its other half was—

Was in pain.

"...Pei," she mutters, the word barely coming out from her fear, her voice half hoarse. She pushes back, her chair screeching against the floor.

She spent countless years hating the man. Resenting him.

Rolling her eyes each and every time her brother said the words—

'When I'm gone, you'll be grateful for him.'

And now, here she is—stumbling through the halls of his palace, screaming for him to hurry.

"PEI—!"

Then, just as quickly as it began—

The vibrations stop.

The locket goes still against her palm.

Cold, and unmoving.

"...SOMETHING'S—!"

BOOM!

For a moment, all of the Heavens grows still, enveloped in a flash of golden light, the streets rocked by the force of the crash.

Shi Qingxuan barely manages to catch herself against the doorframe, and outside— she can hear confused cries.

"Just what was that?!"

"Are we under attack?!"

"The crown prince of Xianle didn't ascend again, did he?!"

"He wasn't banished a third time, you fool!"

"Was it the—?"

Then, someone cries out over the rest, words that bring such relief, her knees almost buckle;

"...IT'S THE WATER MASTER!"

The Myth Behind All Monsters

Chapter Summary

> The portal closes behind them, and that hand that's been dragging him in a Vice grip finally lets him go—sending him tumbling down against a hard, stone floor.
>
> Actually, when Shi Wudu manages to open his eyes, looking down— It's marble.
>
> Smooth not from the work of craftsmen—but through millennia of natural weathering.
>
> And when he forces himself up onto his hands and knees, coughing—
>
> He finds himself in a place unlike anywhere else that he's ever been.
>
> A cavern with a ceiling that stretches so high, it's impossible to see the end of it. "...Where are we?" He rasps, coughing as he struggles to his feet.
>
> Blackwater doesn't reply.

Chapter Notes

> CONTENT WARNING: this chapter features discussions of consent, graphic violence, death, and severe childhood trauma. Continue with caution!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THREE DAYS AGO

If Shi Wudu's neck hurt any more, he'd think his head was about to go flying from his shoulders.

The clawed grip around his throat is like iron, dragging him forward, step by step, even as the Water Master kicks his feet and struggles—

THUD!

The portal closes behind them, and that hand that's been dragging him in a Vice grip finally lets him go—sending him tumbling down against a hard, stone floor.

Actually, when Shi Wudu manages to open his eyes, looking down—It's marble.

Smooth not from the work of craftsmen—but through millennia of natural weathering.

And when he forces himself up onto his hands and knees, coughing—

He finds himself in a place unlike anywhere else that he's ever been.

A cavern with a ceiling that stretches so high, it's impossible to see the end of it. "…Where are we?" He rasps, coughing as he struggles to his feet.

Blackwater doesn't reply immediately.

He's facing away from him, hands clasped behind him—shoulders thrown back.

"…Where I was born."

Of course, for a moment—Shi Wudu is confused.

He knows exactly where He Xuan was born, exactly when. The details of his birth were the tools and method of his crime.

But—

Ghost King's have their own place of origin.

In death, they are reborn.

"…" Shi Wudu glances down at his palm, watching as a bright orb of blue energy forms before disappearing.

His powers aren't suppressed here, then.

They're no longer in Blackwater's territory.

"…Why bring me here?" He questions,glancing around, silently looking for an exit.

Still, he won't answer.

Shi Wudu closes his eyes.

Before—he had been utterly prepared to die. On some level—he had even been longing for it.

To get it over with.

But that was before

Before he knew his sister's fate.

And now—

"...This was a mistake, you know."

He Xuan's lips curve into a tired smile.

"Maybe."

But it's the only thing that he could think of.

"You should have killed me before. I—I gave you SO MANY CHANCES!"

He's still bedraggled from the fight with his Heavenly Calamity. His hair rumpled, clothes torn.

"I don't need 'chances' to take your life." He Xuan's voice goes from exhausted to hardened, claws flashing at his sides."It's mine to take. Mine to spare."

Shi Wudu's eyes narrow as he paces around the edge of the Kiln, flashing as he reaches into his belt.

"I don't want your mercy, Blackwater," he hisses. "It means NOTHING to me!"

He Xuan turns his head slowly, looking at him over his shoulder, black hair flowing loosely down his back.

The whites of his eyes have gone completely dark, with burning, golden irises in the center.

"...Oh, Shui-Xiong," his smile is lopsided, half cracked—marked with the kind of suffering that leaves a mind warped as he utters the Water Master's pet name with such sarcastic affection. "Who said anything about showing you mercy?"

"…"

Shi Wudu stops, hand in his belt.

Then, he smiles.

Relieved.

"Then you should have killed me before."

Blood still drips from the two cuts on his cheekbones, creating two paths down to his chin.

His fan is pulled from his belt, a white flash in his speed.

BOOM!

And now—

It's begun.

One might assume that, in a cave far removed from any source of water—a Water God and a Demon of the Black Water might be forced to fight on a smaller scale.

Not so.

And a battle between a god of the highest caliber and one of the Four Great Calamities, well—

It's a rare sight.

And it rapidly becomes clear to He Xuan…just how much the Water Master was holding back before.

Even during the battle with his Heavenly Calamity, before he pulled them off course. Every blow is landed with such ferocity—even blocking causes damage.

"YOU STILL THINK YOU'RE JUST A VICTIM, DON'T YOU?!"

Each time they clash, the very ground beneath them seems to rattle.

BOOM!

"AND YOU STILL THINK YOU'RE NOT THE VILLAIN?!" He Xuan snarls, catching his fan with one hand, using the other to slash with a wave of dark energy.

Shi Wudu drops down, sliding underneath as the wave shoots past, so powerful, it scorches the opposite wall of the Kiln, leaving a deep scar.

“IF BEING MISTREATED WAS ALL IT TOOK TO JUSTIFY CRUELTY, THEN I’VE *ALWAYS* BEEN A VICTIM!”

BOOM!

“BUT THAT’S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN YOU AND ME!” Shi Wudu’s next blow lands on his arm, actually managing to break Blackwater’s stance. “I NEVER MADE EXCUSES FOR WHAT I DID TO YOU!”

He Xuan briefly sinks to his knees, eyes flashing up at him, narrowed with hate.

“…And I DON’T NEED TO MAKE ANY EXCUSES TO YOU!” He lashes out on his own this time, sweeping the Water Master’s feet out from under him.

He wasn’t much of a fighter, once.

Life made him learn.

He reaches down for Shi Wudu’s throat once more, but—

CRASH!

The Water Master’s boot lands in his gut, sending him flying into the opposite wall with a *slam* .

“Not to ME!” He rolls to his feet, “FOR WHAT YOU DID TO SHI QINGXUAN!”

“You have no idea—”

“Do you HONESTLY THINK SHE WOULD HAVE GONE TO BED WITH YOU, IF SHE HAD KNOWN?!”

For the first time, there’s a crack in He Xuan’s resolve. The smallest flicker of remorse.

“I’ve always been the villain in your story,” Shi Wudu admits raggedly, the two of them pacing around the edges of the kiln, watching for the other’s next attack.

“...How does it feel to be the monster in hers?”

Those words actually seem to lash into him, making him flinch, pressing his hand back against the Kiln wall.

“...I brought you here because of her,” He Xuan spits out, claws digging into marble. “I STOPPED back there—for HER!”

“DON’T PRETEND YOU CARE!”

That’s all men like him do.

They look at you for the things that you have. For what you can do for them. Then they claw into you, like a vulture on a carcass. Pulling out everything of value.

And when there’s nothing left of you, they complain of hunger. He’s had enough.

He has nothing left.

He’s hollowed out, nothing but scars and regrets.

But—

Not Shi Qingxuan.

Never Shi Qingxuan.

“IF YOU CARED, YOU WOULD HAVE JUST KILLED ME, AND LEFT HER OUT OF IT!”

This time, when they charge in for the next attack—

Shi Wudu’s eyes burn, glowing an unnatural shade of blue, gleaming with heavenly light.

And this time, He Xuan is frozen.

Not by his own choice.

Frozen in the air, his arm raised for another blow.

Faint sounds filter through the air as Shi Wudu stands beneath him, one hand raised, curled into a fist.

It takes He Xuan a moment to realize what they are—wondering if other ghosts in the area sensed the fighting, but—that's not it.

They're prayers.

Thousands.

Begging for salvation. A child. Wealth.

Revenge.

And with them comes strength—strength that the Water Master is instantly converting into Spiritual Power.

"You and Shi Qingxuan have something in common," the Water Master tilts his head, hair slipping from his ponytail. "You've spent so much time infiltrating the Heavens—you haven't concentrated on developing your abilities beyond that, have you?"

In sheer scales of power, he's comparable to Crimson Rain Sought Flower.

But his finesse—his control—is lacking.

Clearly, he gets by on the fact that he has raw talent.

Shi Wudu has the same natural gifts—but that's the difference between them.

He's done nothing, over the last four centuries, but carefully refine and consolidate his strength.

To the point where he can hold one of the Four Great Calamities to heel. Gripping him by only controlling the water within He Xuan's blood.

He struggles, his feet twitching as he rams against the edges of the Water Master's magic, trying to writhe out of his grip.

Shi Wudu stands beneath him, his fist tightening, eyes burning brighter and brighter as he clamps down.

"...I don't think you were wrong, in the beginning," he admits, breathing heavily.

He Xuan's hands strain, veins popping as he fights it.

"But you...became just like me."

And there is no one that Shi Wudu holds more resentment for, more disgust, than himself.

He Xuan did the same thing to Ming Yi, the true earth master, that Shi Wudu did to him.

Continuing a cycle that neither of them chose to be a part of, one that will never stop turning.

Not until someone decides to end it.

That won't be him.

Shi Wudu doesn't have the right to make moral platitudes to anyone. And he—

He knows that men like him can never change.

That some things can't be forgiven.

But he's never tried to escape it.

"...This is the place where monsters are born, right?" Shi Wudu's hand tightens, and the blood vessels in He Xuan's chest cracking.

"Maybe this is where they should die, too."

Blackwater exhales harshly, muttering something unintelligible—at first. "...I'm not a monster."

He Xuan spits the words out, looking down at him, his own eyes beginning to take on a fierce glow.

'What's left of you, after?'

He takes ragged breaths, flailing—until he catches grip.

'What's left of you, He Sheng?'

CLACK!

CLACK!

There's no such thing as monsters.

Hua Cheng tried to tell him that, once.

Even if he was too angry to listen.

Only humans who make monstrous choices.

Shi Wudu doesn't have time to react before he feels something snare around his wrist, looking down to find...

A chain.

Black, heavy—like the kind used to weigh down a ship's anchor, springing from the floor of the Kiln.

And it drags him down, yanking the Water Master to his knees.

He Xuan lands on the floor coughing, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

When he rises to his feet, stalking forward, the Water Master's fan is knocked aside as he struggles to break free, tugging until his bones crack—

But to no avail.

At the last moment, he even tries to lash out with a dagger hidden in his boot, but is quickly disarmed.

CLACK!

CLACK!

Another chain shoots up, wrapping around his other wrist—dragging both down to the floor, crossed behind his back.

He Xuan stands over him, and—

He doesn't look like a man on the brink of victory.

He doesn't look like someone taking justice.

He Xuan does not look like a man at peace.

"...You don't deserve my forgiveness." He mutters, staring down at him.

His hands tremble at his sides, and his eyes—

They're agonized.

"I shouldn't have to forgive you."

Shi Wudu doesn't cower, looking him in the eye.

Waiting.

"...I never asked for forgiveness."

He Xuan looks up at the ceiling of the Kiln, the corners of his mouth tight as he stops the tears in his eyes from falling.

"But I have to."

Because He Xuan quickly made his own analysis of the situation, back in Blackwater Manor.

There's a reason of course, that a wealthy, practical man like Shi Wudu never continued his bloodline—or insisted that Shi Qingxuan do it in his stead.

Instead, he allowed an ancient, wealthy family to end with him. Because for what he had done, his bloodline would be cursed.

The same thing happened to Shi Qingxuan.

Her ancestor committed a horrible crime, one that left the resentment of the ghosts Fai and Xiang to fester for centuries. And when they moved on...

That curse was what brought the Reverend of Empty Words to the Shi Family's door. Curses are like fires.

If allowed to grow out of control—the damage from a mere spark can destroy an entire forest.

An entire family.

But they can only burn if you continue to feed them.

"If I can't forgive you..." He trails off, his gaze tormented.

Then his own son will be cursed.

It then, that the magnitude of what he's done seems to dawn on the Water Master, his eyes widening.

It's easy to live with the guilt, when you tell yourself that the only one responsible is you.

That the only one who would bear any punishment, is you.

But—

You can't run from your curses.

Someone told him that long ago, when he was too young and frightened to listen.

Blood drips down He Xuan's cheeks, leaning on the floor of the Kiln—and his voice breaks.

"I don't know if I can."

Because he hates him. Hates him.

He's survived these last four hundred years, on nothing but hating him.

Because it's cruel.

Because it's unfair.

Because if there were any justice, he would get the chance to bring his family peace. To bring himself peace.

"But this is the only way I know how to try."

Because you can't hate someone you know.

You can't reduce someone to a monster if you understand them.

"...Kill me, then," Shi Wudu mutters, shrinking away as He Xuan steps forward, shaking his head. "IF THAT'S WHAT IT TAKES TO FORGIVE ME, JUST KILL ME!"

He thrashes when He Xuan's palm lands on his forehead, trying to get away—but to no avail.

"What are you doing?!"

He rears back his fist, glaring at the floor of the Kiln.

He can't control it—even Hua Cheng couldn't.

But he doesn't want to see into the future—not this time.

"You don't get to keep Jun Wu's secrets anymore, Lord Water Master."

Shi Wudu's eyes grow to the size of dinner plates as he struggles, his fearless resignation quickly morphing into blind panic.

"You don't get to have any secrets, anymore."

"No—wait—STOP!"

BOOM!

Shi Wudu thrashes, white as a sheet as he watches He Xuan's fist slam into the Kiln floor.

"JUST KILL ME!" He screams, his wrist broken and bleeding from his effort to escape.

BOOM!

"DO WHATEVER YOU WANT WITH ME, JUST DON'T—!"

BOOM!

In one final moment of desperation, the Water Master's pride crumbles, leaving behind only naked fear, blind animal instinct and desperation.

And with his last chance to scream—

He cries out for Pei.

Just his name. There isn't time for anything else to be said.

Help me.

Save me.

It hurts.

(It hurts, it—)

'I'm so, so scared.'

Not—not again. It—

(It really, really hurts.)

The floor beneath them cracks—then shatters, plunging them into darkness. One that He Xuan cannot control—but they aren't going forward.

They're going back.

THUD!

He Xuan hits the ground hard—this time, familiar enough to make sure he doesn't land on his head.

And when he sits up...

There's no white floor beneath him.

No endless walls or vacant ceilings.

No Kiln.

No Shi Wudu.

Just...

A house.

Expensive, from the looks of it. With polished floors and thick, expensive rugs.

But not hollow, or sterile, the way that the Palaces of the Heavens can often feel.

There's a set of child's boots on the stairs. An elderly dog, sleeping in the corner.

The smell of baking bread.

There's the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs—and when He Xuan turns to look—there's a man.

Middle aged, with dark hair, green eyes, just the very beginnings of gray in his temples. Dressed in fine clothes—though not particularly ostentatious.

"..." He turns, a piercing gaze focused on He Xuan so suddenly, it startles him —even if he knows he's only watching this memory from the outside.

Then—the stranger smiles, and a seemingly stern expression softens. “Is that a little bird I hear?”

At first, there’s no response—then muffled, distant giggling.

A child’s laughter.

The man strolls through the room, hands tucked into his pockets lazily.

“Did you sneak in from my wife’s garden?”

His tone is knowing, gently teasing—and he receives more laughter in reply.

“No!”

The precocious, petulant reply makes the father smile—making his way over to the source of the giggling—a wardrobe, tucked against the far wall of the living room.

He Xuan can’t help but smile, too.

“Then who have I been hearing flapping about the rafters all morning?”

He muses, grasping the handle of the wardrobe. “Avoiding his lessons…”

“Wasn’t me!” The voice inside protests. “I was sleeping!”

“Is that so?”

The door opens, and He Xuan leans around to see, finding himself…

Surprised.

Having expected to see a child dressed like a girl, with chestnut hair and green eyes, but…

Instead, there’s a little boy.

One with feathery dark hair, sticking up in every which direction, yawning. With the bluest eyes he’s ever seen.

"Wudu," his father sighs, scolding. "You're getting too old for this."

The boy pouts, shrinking further back behind his mother's furs, even as his father reaches in to lift him out, hitching the five year old on his hip.

"I didn't mean to fall asleep!" He whines.

"Then why were you in the wardrobe?"

"Well..." His son blinks innocently. "I was hiding from Hao Laoshi."

"Mmm." Mr. Shi sighs, disapproving. "People are going to start thinking we spoil you."

The little boy just smiles, hugging his father around the neck. Perfectly aware that he is, in fact, spoiled.

"I had a good dream, though!" He exclaims, swinging his feet lightly as his father carries him back through the living room.

"Did you?"

"Mmmhm!"

"What kind?"

"I was an explorer!"

His father raises an eyebrow, giving him an affectionate squeeze. "Exploring what?"

"Uh..." He scrunches his nose up, thinking. "...I don't remember," he admits. "But I was far away!"

"Well, that's very exciting," Mr. Shi murmurs indulgently, carrying him up the steps. "But we need to get you dressed and ready to leave."

"...What?" The little boy frowns.

"But Laoshi already left—there's no more lessons today! Papa, don't make me—!"

"Only because you slept through them all." His father points out.

"Whatever it is, I don't wanna go!" He whines.

"And what should I tell everyone to explain you not being there?"

Shi Wudu thinks it over, his face screwing up with concentration.

"...Tell them I threw up," he replies firmly, his expression rather sage.

"..."

Mr. Shi throws his head back, barking out a loud, full bellied laugh.

"What?!"

"You say that every time, Wudu."

"Well, I might!" He declares, throwing his head back, very indignant. "I ate SO much in my dream, I'm about to burst! I'm gonna throw up Dad, really! Don't make me go!"

Mr. Shi reaches the landing of the stairs, moving into what looks like...a childhood bedroom.

Stuffed animals on the bed. Some of them, pristine, untouched—but a bear that looks like it's seen far better days—

(Most likely his favorite.)

"How would you throw up from eating in a dream?"

"Well, I dunno, I'm not a DOCTOR!" The boy mumbles petulantly. "But I had SO many oranges, and they were HUGE!" He babbles as his father helps him undress, pulling new robes out of a cabinet. "Like...as big as my head!"

"Then how did you eat them?"

He throws his hands up as his father pulls his robes over his head.

"I opened my mouth real wide, like a snake!" His head pops through the top of the robes, and when it does, he opens his mouth as wide as he can in demonstration, showing off two missing baby teeth on his lower jaw. "Like this!"

He snaps them back together. "I see..."

Mr. Shi grabs a comb, working on the mess of his hair. "And why are you so determined to stay home and sleep all day, when I haven't even told you what we're doing?"

“Well...I wasn’t gonna sleep anymore, I was gonna go play with Hu Ning!”

(One of the children next door.)

“...But where are we going?” Shi Wudu looks up curiously, continuously dodging his father’s efforts to make him presentable—but to no avail.

“To the temple.”

“...UGH!” He groans, flopping back on his bed.

His father pauses, slightly scandalized by the sacrilegious outburst.

“WUDU!”

“It’s BORING!” He whines, kicking his feet. “Why do I have to go?!”

“Because we’re going as a family,” His father reaches over, pulling him up and back out of bed.

“My prayers suck anyways!”

“Then maybe you should work on that!”

“Can’t I just write a nice note?”

“You!” His father wipes a hand down his face, pulling his son down the hallway. “You don’t even know how to WRITE!”

“I can have you write it down for me!”

“You’re going.”

“DAD!” He drags his heels as he’s dragged towards the exit. “It’s so UNFAIR, I don’t wanna—!”

“Look,” Mr. Shi sighs, stopping in the entryway, turning to kneel before his son, placing his hands on his shoulders. “Do you know *why* we’re going to the temple today?”

Shi Wudu blinks, shaking his head. His father sighs.

They were going to wait to tell him together—but if he has to listen to this whining the entire way there...

“Your mother is going to have a baby. Do you know what that means?”

His son’s eyes widen sharply, his jaw dropping open.

“You’re going to be a big brother.” His father takes him by the chin, looking at him seriously. “It’s a big responsibility. You have to take it seriously. It’s time to be a big kid now, understand?”

Slowly, his son nods—no longer making any complaints.

“We’re going to go and pray for their health, alright?”

“...Okay,” he agrees, allowing himself to be pulled along by his father’s hand.

He Xuan follows behind them, watching.

As they meet Mrs. Shi, lighting incense and leaving donations in the temple of the Heavenly Emperor.

Watches as the memories shift and change.

Showing a happy, content family.

A beautiful wife, a devoted husband, and a gifted son.

He sees Shi Wudu being showered with praise and bright predictions for his future.

Intelligent, a natural athlete, with an easy sort of confidence

The sort of child with a naturally strong fate.

Someone destined for greater things—and both of his parents clearly seemed to know it, constantly pushing him to work hard in his studies.

To make the most of his blessings.

And it seemed as though, watching through their eyes—there was no doubt that he would.

He Xuan recognizes the day of his own birth easily enough. The longest day of the year, in the middle of summer.

A warm, beautiful day, the sun sparkling over the western sea.

Light streams in through the window as the Shi family sits in bed together. Mr. and Mrs. Shi whispering quiet words of affection, while their eldest child, with the assistance of his mother, cradles the new baby in his lap.

“...He so small,” the boy whispers. “Is that normal? Is he gonna be okay?”

“Oh, yes...” His mother smiles, holding them both, stroking Shi Wudu’s hair. “He’s smaller than you were, but he’ll grow in no time, don’t you worry...”

“And in the meantime, he’ll have you there to look after him,” Mr. Shi murmurs. “That’s important, Wudu.”

He’s stern, but even at that age—Shi Wudu understands—it’s not really about him.

“Speaking of...” His mother speaks up quietly, reaching over to grasp her husband by the elbow. “Why don’t we invite Shi Jian to his birthday feast?”

Mr. Shi stiffens, and his wife rubs his arm, soothing him.

“Sweetheart, it’s been ten years...he’s never even met Wudu. Don’t you think it’s time you make peace with him?”

They’re talking about Shi Wudu’s uncle, of course.

His father was the eldest of three sons.

Shi Weiyuan, Shi Jian, and Shi Mingyu.

The youngest of the three died ten years ago, and Mr. Shi hasn’t spoken to his remaining brother since.

“Look at him, my love...” Shi Wudu’s mother tugs his arm, guiding her husband to look down at Shi Qingxuan.

Curly brown hair, big green eyes, grasping his brother’s finger in his tiny fist, gurgling soundlessly.

“Do you want him to grow in a family with such a grudge?”

“...”

Mr. Shi reaches down, pushing his fingers through Shi Qingxuan’s hair, looking at both of his sons.

And in his eyes—there is such pride, such love for his children.

“...Fine,” he relents, leaning over to kiss the top of Shi Wudu’s head, squeezing them both closer in his arms. “As long as he understands his place.”

He Xuan remains silent, skulking in the edges of memories, and he watches. Watches, with surprise, as the cultivator comes to spare the Shi family his warning—

To not make a show out of Shi Qingxuan’s birth. To hold no feasts, and keep him in the shadows.

And...

It’s a face that he’s seen before—though not with his own eyes.

But rather through Hua Cheng’s, in his memories of Xianle.

A white haired cultivator, just as young as he was then, with piercing blue eyes.

The former Guoshi for the Royal House of Xie—

Mei Nianqing.

...But didn’t he die in the Xianle Civil War? He wasn’t a god.

How is he here, in Qinghe, four centuries later?

He steps forward, wondering—but before he can, the memory shifts again, this time... to the feast.

“Shi Wuuuuduuuuu...”

The boy turns away, dabbing his mouth primly with a napkin. “Go away.”

“Ah!” His friend huffs, wiggling the back of his chair with her hands. “You’re just gonna ignore me? You’re so BORING now that you’re a big brother!”

“Birthday feasts are important!” The little boy grumbles “I’m not going to mess it up just because you wanna eat dirt or something.”

“Aiyah!” She clutches her chest with offense. “When did I say anything about eating dirt?! That was ONE TIME, and you MADE ME!”

“Yeah, well. Don’t bet on being able to hold your breath longer than me.” He shrugs, popping a mouthful of pickled plum into his mouth. “That was dumb.”

“I didn’t think you were gonna HOLD ME TO IT—and I wanted to meet your uncle! Don’t you?”

Shi Wudu doesn’t look up, pushing his food around his plate. “Nope.”

“But isn’t he a famous cultivator?!”

“He’s not famous,” Shi Wudu rolls his eyes. “My dad says people only know his name because ladies think he’s handsome.”

“Yeah, well, your dad’s a grouch!”

That seems to rile him.

“He is not!”

“Is too, everyone thinks so!”

“That’s not why he doesn’t wanna meet him.” One of the older children, the son of a side branch of the Shi family, leans back in his chair with a smirk. “He’s scared.”

Shi Wudu gawks, his fingers tightening around his chopsticks. “I am not!”

“Why’d he be scared?”

“Oh...cause his uncle wants to kill him.”

“Hey!” The older boy’s sister turns to glare at him, smacking him upside the head. “Watch your mouth, don’t spread tall tales!”

“Am not!” Her brother cries, rubbing his head. “Everyone knows he killed Shi Mingyu.”

“No, he didn’t!” His sister whispers loudly, “Shut up!”

Shi Wudu looks down at his plate, suddenly green in the cheeks.

“He killed your other uncle…” The older boy smirks, leaning in, “Then he’s gonna kill you and your parents, all to get the Shi family fortune. Scary, right?”

“I’m not scared,” Shi Wudu repeats sharply.

The older boy’s sister seems to get exasperated, grabbing her brother by the ear, giving it a harsh yank.

“OUCH!”

“What are you trying to scare him for?! He’s a little kid!”

“I’m NOT little!”

“Besides, everyone knows Shi Mingyu was killed by Li Xiaotong, stupid.”

The mention of that name makes the heir to the Shi family turn even more green, and his older cousin smirks.

“…Oh, you’re scared of him then, huh? Think he’s gonna sneak out of jail and cut your th—?”

Smack!

“Ow!”

“What is WRONG with you?!”

From beside Shi Wudu, his friend rocks on her heels, still wiggling the back of his chair.

“Sooooo…do you wanna meet him, or not?” He mumbles something under his breath. “What?”

“I’m gonna throw up.”

“You ALWAYS say that!” She whines, but—

Shi Wudu quickly slips out of his seat, hurrying down between the tables in the feasting hall, making a beeline for the washrooms, when he—

“AHHHHHHHH!”

A blood curdling shriek pierces the room, making every single head turn.

“What?!”

“What’s going on—?”

A young woman stands at the front of the feasting hall, pointing to the wall with trembling fingers.

And there, written in something dripping and red—

Is the character for death.

“Everyone, stay calm—”

Then, another voice bellows out and over the crowd, booming:

“WRETCHED BEGINNING, WRETCHED END!”

More panicked cries follow as people begin to look around, scrambling in the confusion.

“What was that?!”

“Was it a ghost?!”

“...I see it! THERE’S A BLACK SHADOW!”

Then, utter chaos breaks loose.

People fleeing the hall to get away, shouting and pushing.

And in that mass, Shi Wudu is stumbling, getting knocked about as he wriggles through a crowd of screaming adults, just—

Just trying to get back to the head table, where his parents and Shi Qingxuan are. “Mom!”

He raises his voice, crying out with pain when someone steps on his foot, falling to the ground.

“MOM!”

And for such a small child in a stampede like that—it only would have taken an instant for him to be trampled—

Until he’s lifted up into someone’s arms.

Carried through the stream of party goers fleeing, one hand placed protectively behind his head as they break free.

The boy tries to look up, to see what's going on— But it's too loud, and there's—

There's so much screaming, he—

He buries his face into his rescuer's shoulder, trembling.

Finally they break free, and he hears a deep, unfamiliar voice call out —

"GE! I have him here!"

"Oh," His mother chokes out, rushing forward to take her eldest child into her arms, her voice thick with tears.

"My love, I'm so sorry, are you alright?" She leans down to look at him, her eyes frantic. "Are you hurt anywhere?"

His foot won't stop stinging, but not so bad now that he doesn't have weight on it.

Still, he bursts into silent tears, frightened.

"Oh, darling...It's alright..."She hugs him close, allowing the boy to cry into her neck. "I'm here, I've got you..."

She looks over his head, bouncing him in her arms, giving the man who brought him over a grateful note.

"Thank you, Shi Jian."

Shi—?

Shi Wudu sniffles, twisting his head slightly to peek.

There's a man standing behind his father—slightly shorter, but with a similar face; his features are just somewhat sharper.

Jet black hair, pulled away from his face—and piercing blue eyes, just like his own. "Do you know what that thing was?"

"..." Mr. Shi sighs, pressing a hand against his temple. "A cultivator mentioned something the other day, but..."

“Gege...”

“How were we to believe something so bizarre?” Shi Weiyuan glares. “Who would give up a child’s entire future on the word of a stranger?!”

Shi Wudu looks over his mother’s shoulder—to Shi Qingxuan, sleeping peacefully in his crib.

In spite of all of the panic, he’s fallen right back to sleep. Unaware of the fear permeating the air around him.

‘Good,’ he thinks to himself, hugging his mother even tighter. He doesn’t want Shi Qingxuan to feel scared, it’s...

His eyes drift to the red symbol on the wall, still dripping down towards the floor— realizing that it must be blood.

...It’s the worst feeling in the world.

“...Mom?” He whispers, ears still slipping from his eyes, sniffling. “What was that?”

His mother doesn’t answer, holding him tighter against her, her own eyes fixed on the same point.

In the days that follow, they summon the cultivator back to Shi Manor. They go through their options. His parents beg, plead for there to be another way, but...

It isn’t possible to simply manufacture a better outcome out of thin air. To create an alternative where none exists.

But he does make one thing clear to them, before he takes his leave: That Shi Qingxuan is too young to understand that he is a target. Too young to feel fear.

He isn’t the one that the Venerable of Empty Words is feeding off of. It’s them.

And that kind of strain, over the years—

“Look at me!”

Shi Weiyuan shakes his son by the shoulders, trying to get the eight year old to look him in the eye.

“LOOK AT ME!”

…It does something to a family.

“I know what you’re feeling,” His father mutters, keeping his gaze pointedly focused on Shi Wudu’s face. “And I know it’s not fair, but you CANNOT react. Do you understand me?”

The boy stares at the ground, his shoulders trembling. They were walking down the beach, as a family.

It was supposed to be a normal, relaxing afternoon—with the children wandering ahead, Shi Wudu standing at the edge of the water with his “sister,” ‘Mingxia,’ as ‘she’ collected shells.

That was when it whispered in his ear.

That he was going to watch Shi Qingxuan drown.

Watch his face turn blue, until blood came out of his eyes.

That he was going to break his little brother’s ribs, trying to push the water out of his lungs.

And being so small, only eight years old—

He screamed.

He cried.

He snatched his sister, barely two years old, and ran back to their mother.

She’s already gone ahead with Mingxia now, carrying her back to the house.

Leaving Shi Wudu alone with his father on the beach, half frightened out of his skin, staring at the ground, numb.

“…I’m sorry,” he whispers, “It said—”

“It doesn’t matter what it said,” Mr. Shi kneels down in front of him, his expression stern. “You can’t show it your fear.”

Or else—he’ll become a meal for it, too.

He’ll make it stronger.

And then, Shi Qingxuan will be in more danger.

"...How do I do that?"

"You push it down," his father murmurs. "With any other emotion that you have to— but you don't show fear."

It's a slow process.

Watching a child being conditioned into something cold.

Someone who feels anger, instead of fright.

And He Xuan—

He was the eldest brother, too.

But he never thought he *could* have been shielded from the Venerable of Empty Words.

Not until he watched how desperately this family tried to shield Shi Qingxuan. And for years—they succeeded.

But at a steep price.

Because over time, desperate to find its prey—

The Venerable became more and more aggressive, desperate to make someone in the Shi family crack. To reveal where the soul it had laid claim to was hidden.

And the eldest child was the easiest target.

It was easy to assume, all those years later, that they had simply been forced to watch Shi Qingxuan suffer—but now...

Just as He Xuan's entire family crumbled under the curse of the Reverend...the entire Shi family suffered.

And still, he—

On the morning of Shi Qingxuan's fourth birthday, he opens his eyes, seeing a not so unfamiliar sight.

It's been getting more aggressive lately.

There's a man-like figure, crouched in the corner of his ceiling—just like a spider, watching him with angry, beady little eyes.

The ten year old stares up from his bed calmly, his expression flat. Unfeeling.

He sits up, pushing his hair out of his eyes, then begins the process of stretching his arms over his head with a yawn.

"I'm going to kill your mother," it rasps. Shi Wudu slips out of bed.

That threat is new.

He strolls over to his dresser, examining which robes he might like to wear that day, then checks the calendar on his desk, ensuring that he doesn't have to prepare for any more exams before going to the party.

"I'm going to kill your father!"

He Xuan watches as the child combs his hair slowly, methodically, never moving his eyes from the mirror.

With each threat, it becomes louder, more hostile—frustrated with being ignored. "I'M GOING TO KILL YOUR BROTHER—!"

The slipper is thrown with sharp accuracy, landing in the corner the creature was previously in—making it disappear in a puff of smoke.

Shi Wudu rolls his eyes, shrugging his robes over his shoulders.

"I don't have a little brother," he responds coldly. "Pathetic."

He goes about his day, just like any other.

The threats, the fear, never knowing when some horrible monster might appear around the corner—

Shi Wudu has learned to live with that, by now.

He doesn't react anymore, having learned—none of it is *real* .

But this time, for the first time—

One of the Reverend's threats came true.

On what was a normal, happy day. Just like any other.

They couldn't outwardly celebrate Shi Qingxuan's birthday—the only acknowledgement is his favorite dinner being served that evening.

They sit by the fire, after the meal is done—with Shi Wudu's father explaining some of the business ledgers to him while his mother plays with his brother on the floor, helping him use golden foils to build a palace as high as he can.

And Shi Wudu can't help but wince each and every time his brother knocks them down, giggling with delight.

How inevitable it looks.

But still—

It was a happy evening.

A quiet evening, being kissed goodnight and sent to bed.

Fully expecting that he would wake up; and it would be just like any other day. But he doesn't.

He wakes up with a gentle shake to his shoulder—his mother staring down at him, pale and frightened.

"...M—?"

"Shhh..." She presses a finger to his lips. "We have to be quiet."

He's ushered out of bed, and at some point, when they're slipping down the hallway, she whispers—

"People have broken into the house."

For just a fraction of a moment, his eyes grow wide.

"What about the guards?" He whispers.

When she doesn't respond, he knows the truth.

That if she's come to get him out of bed—something has already happened to the guards.

The danger—

It's not fake, this time.

Not a game.

It’s very, very real.

Shi Qingxuan yawns when they come to fetch him, rubbing his hands over his eyes.

“Mama?”

“Shhh…” She presses a kiss to his forehead, lifting him out of bed. “We’re gonna play a game, okay?”

That’s what she tells him, when they hide him under a loose set of floorboards in his bedroom.

That it’s hide and seek.

But he absolutely cannot under any circumstances make a sound.

“Mama…” The four year old whines, looking back and forth between them unsurely, “I don’t like this game…”

“It’s okay, shhh, shhh, it’s okay…” Their mother whispers, pale, her lips trembling. “Your brother isn’t scared, see? He—He loves this one.”

He looks to Shi Wudu, unsure, and—

His brother smiles, his expression completely calm.

“It’s a surprise,” he whispers, “for the special day.”

And it was a cruel thing to do, making Shi Qingxuan think this was a game for his birthday, but—

He kept quiet.

His mother pulls him back into the hallway, holding his hand so tight, it hurts— seeming terrified of every step that she takes down the stairs, certain the floorboards will creak.

“Where’s Dad—?”

“Shhh…”

But this time, when she hushes him—

He sees the tears in her eyes.

When they reach the foot of the staircase she kneels down, pressing her forehead against his, her lips trembling.

“I love you,” she whispers, running her fingers through his hair.

“Wh—?”

“And I’m so sorry,” She squeezes his hands, two tears slipping down her cheeks. “But you have to be brave now.”

“Wh—?”

“I’m going to go and find your father,” she keeps looking back and forth when she speaks, making sure no one is coming. “And I need you to go out the front door, and run as fast as you can to the Taos house to get help.”

“...I don’t...” Shi Wudu glances toward the hall leading out front. “Mom, I don’t think I can—”

“We don’t have time to argue,” she shakes her head, grabbing him by the chin, forcing him to look her in the eye. “You have to. Think—think about your sister.”

He’s scared.

“That always helps me be brave.”

He’s so, *so* scared.

His mother kisses his forehead.

“...You have been the joy of my life,” she whispers, giving him one last squeeze.

“M—!”

“Now, go.”

She gives him a push.

They split in the hallway, each going their separate ways.

He’s scared.

He wants to go back to bed now.

He wants to wake up in the morning, and complain about going to lessons. He wants his father to yell at him for being out of bed.

He wants—

Shi Wudu stops in the entryway, not making a sound.

There are men in the courtyard.

Strangers.

Wearing masks over their faces, swords hanging at their sides.

"..." He takes a step back, shrinking into the darkness, and he—

He hears a scream.

His mother, screaming.

He can't go back, not to where she is. Can't risk going upstairs.

Can't risk going outside.

And so—

He scrambles into the family room—the same place where, only hours ago, they had been laughing and playing games.

Where they had been happy.

No loose floorboards to hide beneath.

No secret cupboards or passages, just—

Just the wardrobe.

The same wardrobe he used to hide in when he was small, hiding from his tutors—a lifetime ago.

Now, he slips back inside—pulling the door shut with a *click* .

He scrambles in until his back hits the wall, one or two heavy fur coats slipping from the hangers in his hurry, landing on top of his legs.

The door won't stay completely shut—there's something caught in the latch. Leaving just one sliver of the room outside visible.

And through that dark, narrow view of the world outside—

He watches what remained of a childhood dissolve.

BANG!

A heavy boot kicks the door to the family room in—and it takes everything in the child not to scream.

To clap a hand over his mouth, trembling, but silent.

Did they find me? Is it gonna get me? Is this—?

Is this real?

And he watches with that slow, cruel revelation, as his parents are dragged inside.

His mother thrashing and screaming—his father limp.

The revelation that, in spite of every lie you are ever told:

That parents, no matter how much they might love you, cannot keep you safe.

Shi Weiyuan is left by the fireplace, limp on his back, his breaths coming in ragged, fading gasps.

A path of blood forms on the floor, where he was dragged.

“Please!” His wife sobs, reaching for him. “Please, you can take whatever you want, just—just let me take him to a doctor, PLEASE—!”

CRACK!

The slap is so violent, she’s sent flying into the wall, her head smacking against the corner of the mantle.

Up until now, watching, He Xuan has felt some level of detachment.

But—

“We weren’t finished talking,” one of the men replies, his voice cold—detached. The lady of the house is dragged up by the back of her head, gripped by the hair. Her eyes are half out of focus, blood staining her hair.

“Where are they?”

Shi Wudu’s eyes remain locked on his father, watching his breaths come slower and slower, his eyes widening as his hands—

His hands stop struggling.

“T-the safe is in his office, I—I don’t know if I remember the—!”

CRACK!

“Where are the children?”

She stares up at them, her mouth bruised and slack, tears slipping down her cheeks.

“…They aren’t here,” she whispers.

CRACK!

“You think we won’t find them, you bitch?!”

“THEY AREN’T!”

CRACK!

Shi Wudu has to cover his mouth with one hand, his nose with the other—pressure building in his head from the lack of air—

All so he won’t make a sound, watching as his mother is beaten.

Viciously. Bones breaking, blood splattering across the floor.

“WHERE ARE THEY?!”

This time, when she’s dragged up again by the hair—her face is streaked with blood, one eye blackened, and still—

He watches as his mother spits in the robber’s face, blood splattering across the front of his mask.

And she smiles.

Not like any other smile he has ever seen.

It’s grief stricken. Ferocious.

Not an expression of happiness—something more like a wounded animal baring its teeth.

"We sent them running to the neighbors as...as soon as we saw something was wrong..." She chokes, managing a wet laugh. "I...I really didn't think they were going to make it. D-Did you not catch them?" He watches as his mother laughs loudly, scornfully.

"Then...you're all already dead, aren't you?"

CRACK!

It doesn't matter how sadistically she's beaten—her answer remains the same. And her son, he—

Watching this, he can't help but feel some sick sense of deja vu.

As though this is something he has seen, a dozen—maybe a hundred times before. And maybe he has.

Happening all around him, all the time.

A world where the weak suffer—but the cruel survive.

At some point she's dropped to the floor, her cheek slumped against the wood while the robbers stand over her, arguing.

And at some point, by some odd turn of chance—her eye slides across the room—meeting his through that small crack in the wardrobe door.

He isn't sure at first if she can see him, but—

'It's okay.'

She mouths the words with blood stained lips, her eyes fixed.

'It's okay.'

Shi Wudu can't hear the robbers anymore—or even his own mother's pained gasps. Only his own heartbeat, blood rushing in his ears.

There's a plea in her eyes. A final request that goes unspoken, but her son understands every word.

Not to get caught. To survive. To find his brother—

To protect him.

'I love you.'

He watches then, as her eyes slide out of focus, and her breathing slows.

He learns, so early, what it feels like to watch the life fade out of someone's eyes. To witness their soul slipping away.

She becomes still, eyes still open—staring blankly ahead. And finally, the robbers seem to notice.

"...Oh, fucking hell—LOOK WHAT YOU DID!"

"Me?! What did I do?!"

"You're the one who made the bitch HIT HER HEAD!" The larger robber glares, grabbing his companion by the front of his robes. "AND you killed the husband first! When would a mother give up the children before the father?! Fucking DUMBASS!"

"Why do we even want the kids anyway?! Let's just take the money and go, didn't you hear her say? People might already be on the way here..."

He Xuan has been there, watching through the same crack. Hiding beneath the same robes.

And when he turns his head—

The little boy is staring at him.

Both hands over his face, eyes wide as they can possibly be, and unlike before, with the father—

Shi Wudu can actually see him.

Because this is his memory—one that they're simply reliving.

And those eyes say one thing:

Get out.

This is mine.

No one else gets to see it.

Get out.

But even if He Xuan thought he had a right to privacy—

That isn't how this works.

"I heard the son is a pretty little thing, looks a lot like the mother...and the girl, well —"

He Xuan's stomach twists with nausea.

"You can always get money out of a girl—especially the younger ones."

Somehow, that actually seems to cross a line for the third robber, scratching the back of his head with discomfort.

"Can't we just kill them instead? That's all we're supposed to do, right?"

"But the mother said—!"

"If they actually went to get help, why has no one showed up yet?"

Then, they begin to look.

One of them starts to walk towards the wardrobe, but—

"If one of them was in here, do you think they could have kept quiet through all of that?"

It's a fair point.

"Come on—we can't waste any more time than we already have. Check the rest of the house."

They leave—and He Xuan watches the child's face.

The silent, horrific calculations he's making.

How likely it is that Shi Qingxuan can keep quiet.

They probably can't find him otherwise—not without checking every floorboard in the house.

But he might get scared that it's taken so long for someone to come and find him.

And he actually does have some idea of what the robbers want him for.

He had protective parents—and he was an exceptionally beautiful child.

His mother never gave him explicit details. Simply told him that—because of the way he looked—adults might want to hurt him. Who he should trust, who he shouldn't.

What was appropriate, and what wasn't.

And as those men search the house—He Xuan watches him think about it.

Watches him wait, and listen—his dead mother's eyes staring at him blankly all the while.

If it sounds like they're where Shi Qingxuan is, he'll scream. He'll scream, make them chase him.

Whatever happens, happens—but they won't get Shi Qingxuan. Still—they never do.

And eventually, as the night stretches on, and the candles burn low, they seem to run out of time.

Leaving the house in silence. It feels like it lasts so long.

He counts in his head as high and as long as he can, rocking slightly, but not making a single sound.

And after what feels like hours, he opens the closet door with a creak. The first thing he does is slip on the blood, landing hard on his back. He doesn't cry out.

He rolls onto his hands and knees, tired.

Numb.

"...Mom," he mumbles, glancing at the burning embers in the fireplace. "It's cold."

It's summer. He has no idea why he can't stop shivering.

All over, his shoulders trembling, teeth chattering.

No one answers him.

Shock is a difficult thing to shake, for someone so young.

It's so cold, and he's so tired.

His mother's arms are slightly stiff, when he tries to move her. She's too heavy.

He tries, but he keeps slipping on the blood, and she's—

She's too heavy.

For a moment, he just lays down beside her, trying to pull her arms around him, but—

It doesn't feel the same as being held.

Still, for just a moment, he thinks about staying here. Laying down, and falling asleep.

It's cold, and he's so tired.

But he can’t.

Reluctantly, even as every part of him silently begs to stay behind, to lay between his parents and never wake back up—

Shi Wudu pushes himself to his feet.

His steps are slow, unsteady as he makes his way up the stairs.

There’s a bloody trail on the floor—but he pays it no mind.

That was from his father.

His hands couldn’t stop shaking before, but they’re steady now, prying the floorboards back up, finding—

No wonder he was so quiet.

Shi Qingxuan fell back asleep.

Good.

That—

That’s good.

“Gege?” He yawns, rubbing his eyes as he’s lifted into his brother’s arms.

“Shhhh…” his brother shushes him, holding him close as he carries him from the room.

“Are…are we done playing now?”

Shi Wudu stops in the hallway.

Shi Qingxuan can’t see, his head resting on his brother’s shoulder.

But He Xuan can see the tears in Shi Wudu’s eyes.

“…Yeah,” he mumbles, hugging tighter as he carries him down the steps. “You won, Qingxuan.”

“Gege…you’re hugging too tight…”

“Sorry,” he whispers.

When they get to the bottom of the stairs, Shi Qingxuan is confused as his brother places his hand over his eyes.

“Gege?”

“Shhhh…” his brother hushed him again.

He doesn’t slip on the blood, this time.

It’s dry by now.

“It’s okay.”

“But…”

The bodies lie cold on the floor as he walks past, shapes fading in the dark as they walk into the courtyard.

“There’s just scary stuff outside.”

That makes Shi Qingxuan shrink, hugging him tighter.

“Bad stuff?”

“It doesn’t matter,” his brother responds woodenly.

The gravel in the walkway digs into his bare feet. He’s cold. His head hurts. His arms feel so heavy. He—

He doesn’t care.

His mother said thinking about them—protecting them—made her brave.

“Nothing is gonna hurt you while I’m here, Qingxuan.”

And nothing ever did.

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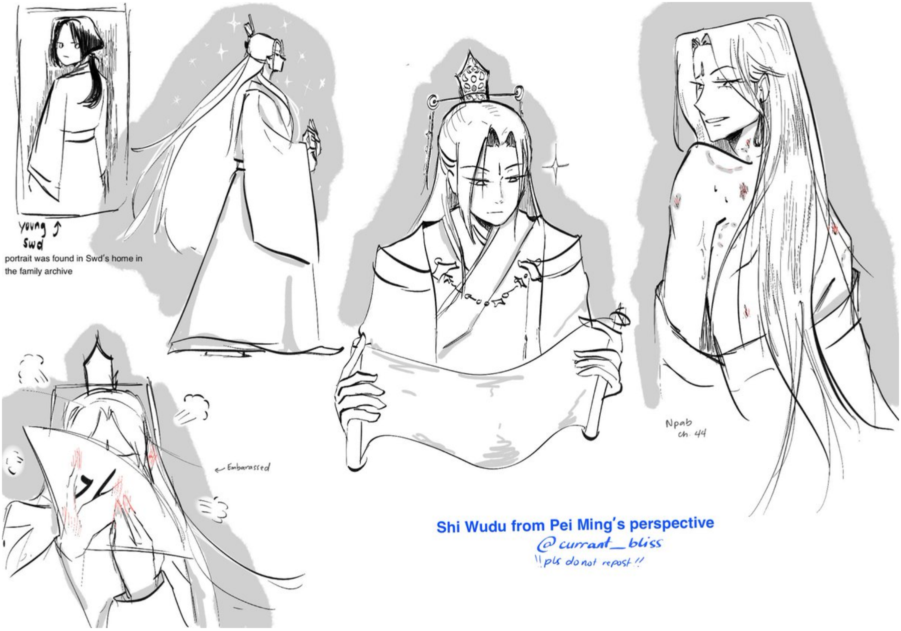
young Swd
portrait was found in Swd's home in the family archive
Embarassed
Npab ch. 44
Shi Wudu from Pei Ming’s perspective
@currant_bliss
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CREDIT: JUNKY

Chapter End Notes

big thank you to junky for their beautiful artwork, and allowing me to share it!

xoxo, Evie

The Things We Live With

Chapter Summary

> He Xuan watched as Shi Wudu changed from a happy, silly child, into a cold one. One who was trained to hide his fear. To mask it with other emotions.
>
> Then, after the death of his parents, he became hollow and stiff—like someone focused only on getting from one moment to the next.
>
> In his teenage years, he evolves into someone else.

Chapter Notes

> content warning: this chapter depicts violence, and grooming

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The murders shocked the otherwise quiet, wealthy city of Qinghe.

And overnight, created the wealthiest orphan in the country.

The side branches of the Shi family take them in as the authorities scratch their heads.

The motive was obviously robbery, but…The safe was untouched.

Puzzling.

But Shi Wudu knows why.

It puzzles the adults around—watching a boy of such an age, having witnessed such a horror, behave as he does.

Focused on his studies, fussing after his little sister like a mother hen. Not weeping, or cowering in terror.

One day, while strong arming Shi Qingxuan into eating his vegetables, he hears one of the adults at the table mention the name—

'Shi Jian.'

Just the mention of that one is enough to make him stiffen.

“…What about my uncle?”

“…We’ve sent word to him in Lanling,” the lady of the house, a distant cousin, explains. “He’ll be here within the week.”

“Why?”

It’s off putting, for a boy not even eleven to speak to adults in such a manner.

Never rude, but always as though he sees them as peers.

“We already held the funeral. There’s no need for him now.”

“…I’m sure he would have come if we had gotten word to him in time, but—”

“I don’t care that he wasn’t there,” Shi Wudu clarifies coldly. “Why do we need him here?”

“Well…he’s the head of the clan, now.” She smiles at him gently, knowing he’s too young for his parents to have explained what would happen in such a situation—and who could have predicted this, anyway? “And you two need a permanent guardian—”

“He isn’t the head of the Clan, and we don’t need a guardian.”

The lord of the house glances over at him, curious.

“Then who is? And who exactly do you expect to look after you two?”

It’s almost unnerving, how sharply the boy stares him in the eye.

“I am, and I will.”

And of course—no one took him seriously.

Not then, anyway.

“HEY!”

A few hours later, the older cousin scrambles back to the edge of his bedroom, holding his hands out in front of him.

“What are you DOING you FREAK—!”

He’s cut off when a boot presses down on his throat.

Shi Wudu might be younger, smaller—

But somehow, also terrifying.

"That's right." The younger child agrees, and watching him with a dull, unfeeling gaze. "I'm a freak. Who knows what I might do." He digs his foot in, and his cousin pales, wheezing. "So, you better give me what I want."

"W-what?!"

He leans in, his eyes like ice.

His cousin has always been a bully. The type who enjoyed inspiring fear in others, particularly when he was insecure.

But he was also the only one who ever called Shi Wudu's uncle a murderer. "You're going to tell me everything you know about Li Xiaotong."

Shortly after, he finds himself in the last place a child should be. The city jail.

The guards were reluctant to let him in at first—even when he made a show of sniffling, telling some lie about wanting to visit his father.

(Not a particularly good lie, given the quality of his robes, or the sapphire earrings he was wearing.)

But regardless of how strange it was for a child to make such a request—gold is gold, and his was as good as anyone else's.

It was a miserable story. One of three brothers.

The Shi Clan is an old family. A wealthy family. Known as shipmasters and merchants.

But never cultivators—and his grandfather had set his mind upon changing that.

He had three sons, after all. His eldest, Shi Weiyuan, could take over the family business.

His youngest two sons, however, Shi Jian and Shi Mingyu, were sent to Langling to study under a cultivation master.

The hope being that, when they completed their training, one of them would return to Qinghe, beginning a cultivation sect in the Shi name.

Both brothers excelled.

But neither of them were able to surpass their Shixiong, a young cultivator native to the city of Langling—of low birth, but said to be a genius.

Li Xiaotong.

The city jail of Qinghe is deep underground. Damp, and cold—with only the rats scurrying across the floor for company.

Most of the men groan and beg as he walks past.

For food. For him to bring the lantern a little closer. Some, even just for company.

But the furthest cell—

It's quiet as a grave.

And maybe, if Shi Wudu had been an average child, he would have been afraid.

But he's learned already, so many times over—

There are far worse things that you can find waiting in the dark.

Clink!

The lantern is set on the floor, kicking up a small puff of dust—and when the prisoner within looks up...

There's a boy staring back at him.

Young, couldn't even be a teenager yet—but with eyes that feel familiar.

The color of them, yes—a piercing shade of blue—

But more so the expression.

Gaunt. Hardened. Not so different from the prisoners in the cells around him.

Not so different from his own.

He grasps the bars, staring down at him.

“Are you Li Xiaotong?”

The prisoner looks him up and down, one knee pulled up against his chest.

He’s pale—thin, as is expected, from a man who has spent the last fifteen years in a cage, deep underground.

But he was handsome, once.

With fine, dark eyes, and even darker hair. Features that are both sharp, and delicate. Before, he was called the Black Jade of Langling—revered for both his beauty, and his strength.

Now, that face is marred with a long, deep scar.

Stretching from chin to temple, his right eye rendered pale and useless. His other stares ahead blankly, uncaring.

“Who is asking?”

The boy grasps the bars a little more tightly.

“My name is Shi Wudu. You knew my uncles.”

Li Xiaotong’s eyes flash briefly with recognition.

Looking him over again, the resemblance is even more obvious than it was before.

“...Weiyuan’s boy,” he muses, lips curling up into a crooked, bitter smile. “Best be going home then. Wouldn’t want daddy to hear about the company you’ve been keeping, hmm?”

He doesn’t rise to the bait, like another child might. Angrily disputing that he was something that he isn’t—an adult.

Instead, he responds coldly:

“My father is dead.”

Li Xiaotong falls quiet, his smile still in place—

And he offers no condolences.

"...And why have you come to see little old me?" He muses, resting his chin against his knee.

"Because I believe you."

The cultivator falls silent, his gaze becoming sharp. "You didn't gain anything from my uncle's murder." In reality—he lost everything.

His future as head of a cultivation sect. His freedom.

And Shi Wudu suspects, from the rumors of how close Li Xiaotong and Shi Mingyu were, something even more dear to him.

"If you had ambushed him, you wouldn't have ended up with that."

Of course—he means the scar.

Not something you gain from murdering a man in his sleep.

But the one who stood to gain the most—

That was Shi Jian.

Who went from the third ranking disciple in his sect to the most senior.

And from one of three heirs to the Shi family, to one of two.

"...And why does it matter if you believe me?" Li Xiaotong questions, his eyes narrowed and distrusting.

So far removed from human kindness by now, he doesn't even trust the words of a child.

"Because, that means I'm willing to get you out of here."

The Shi family is powerful—the most powerful in the city, by far. Maybe in the country.

Since the ascension of General Pei, the Kingdom of Xuli has always been powerful, certainly. The most stable and long lasting state in recent history.

But when the General broke his sword, refusing to take political power after the betrayal of his king—

The people never again respected the government—or the king—the way they once did.

Now, wealthy families pull the strings of power. None more so than his own.

Even at his age, getting a prisoner released isn't a heavy task.

"And why would you be willing to do that?"

Because they want the same thing.

Because when Shi Wudu's mother was lying dead on the floor, those men were frantic to find and kill him, as well as Shi Qingxuan.

Robbers don't need to do that. Maybe if they were after financial gain, like the one who wanted to sell him.

But they behaved as though they *had* to kill them.

And they beat his mother to death, even after she told them where the safe was.

There's only one reason for that.

Because it would leave one member of the main branch of the Shi family standing. One person who would inherit the largest fortune in the city—really, in the country.

His uncle, Shi Jian.

His uncle, who Shi Wudu's father never trusted.

Who was there, that day.

"My uncle is coming to the city." He explains quietly. "When he does..."

Li Xiaotong, obviously, never had a particularly bright and sunny view of the world. Or of people.

It didn't make it less bone chilling to hear these words from a child.

"...I want you to kill him."

He Xuan leans against the back wall of the jail hallway, watching the boy's back.

Small, but standing straight. Not an ounce of hesitation.

The boy who would grow into the man who would rage against He Xuan for taking his own revenge.

Was it all just hypocrisy?

Was it because he didn't think they were the same? Because he viewed He Xuan as targeting Shi Qingxuan intentionally, even though she was an innocent?

But when the memory flashes forward, taking them to the night Shi Jian died—

The differences between them become starkly clear.

Li Xiaotong tilts his head to the side, a black whip curled around one hand, a knife dangling between the fingertips of his other.

Creak…

Shi Wudu sits on the couch in the far corner of the room, a blanket pulled around his shoulders.

It's cold—

But he's always cold, now.

Creak…

Above them, tied to the main support beam overhead, is Shi Jian.

Dangling.

Hands tied behind his back.

Those ropes will be cut away by morning, when he's 'found.'

People will see the wounds on his body, of course.

Signs of torture.

But gold is gold, power is power, and they will not ask questions.

He was alive when he went down from that rope, anyway.

Shi Wudu knows.

He stood in the same spot where his mother's body grew cold, and he kicked the stool out from beneath his feet.

Watching him fall.

"Well," Li Xiaotong, tosses his knife onto the table with a clatter, his steps swaying and unsteady as he makes his way to the liquor cabinet, pouring himself a drink. "I can't speak for you, but *I* feel better."

He almost offers his accomplice a drink, but, well—

Ten might be old enough to order and witness a political assassination—but wine? That's a bridge too far, if you ask him.

Shi Wudu pulls the blanket tighter around him, eyes hollow.

"Why would I feel better?" He asks woodenly.

"The man who killed your parents is dead."

Li Xiaotong pours himself a glass, sprawling down onto the couch across from him, feet kicked up over the arm, swirling the glass around between his fingertips, taking a sip.

Expensive stuff.

"You know, I deserve a little credit." He drops his whip to the ground with a clatter.

"Fifteen years in a cage, all while he was out there training...and I still carved him up like a pig." He smiles, taking another long sip. "I mean, you're a shit audience, but who can blame you."

Shi Wudu doesn't reply, eyes lingering on his uncle's boots.

Watching the blood drip onto the floor.

"But, but—this is an important but," Li Xiaotong points at him with his glass, lifting one finger, "I'll give credit where it's due—most traumatized orphans wait for puberty to come around before they get revenge. Hormones and all that."

He tilts his wine back towards himself, finishing the rest in a few swallows. "But you're ahead of the curve—so good for you, champ."

The boy finally looks away from his uncle's boots then, eyes drifting over to Li Xiaotong.

"This wasn't for revenge."

The cultivator lets out a disbelieving snort, letting his empty glass fall to the floor. It lands on the carpet with a *thud* , rolling onto its side.

"Says the little freak who insisted on dealing the final blow."

Shi Wudu doesn't respond to the goading—doesn't care.

"I'm the head of this family," he shrugs, "it was my responsibility."

"Mmm...but if it wasn't for revenge, then why kill him at all?"

And therein, lies the primary difference between the holder of this memory, and the man watching it.

"..."

Ice cold eyes return to the corpse hanging overhead—and they hold no remorse, nor pity.

But they don't show any satisfaction, either.

Of course—after what Shi Jian had done, Shi Wudu never would have allowed him to take over the family.

Would never have submitted to calling him 'father.'

Shi Jian killed his parents. Destroyed any semblance of a childhood that his nephew had left.

Shi Wudu wouldn't have allowed him to gain the wealth and power he desired in return.

It's Shi Wudu's family. Shi Wudu's gold. He wouldn't have allowed anyone to take it. But that wasn't his primary motivation. "He was a threat."

While Shi Jian didn't have any children of his own—the moment Shi Wudu came of age, he would have been forced to step aside.

If that was the only concern, Shi Wudu wouldn't have cared. He could have simply taken some of the gold, Shi Qingxuan, and started over somewhere else. Their wealth is such that even a small portion could have given them a comfortable life.

But they wouldn't have been safe.

Because Shi Jian was there that day, when the Reverend of Empty words laid its claim on Shi Qingxuan.

He knew the truth.

That his name isn't 'Mingxia.'

That Shi Wudu doesn't have a 'sister' at all.

No matter where they went, he could have revealed their secret.

He had motivation to do so. He had demonstrated ample willingness to kill his own family.

The world hasn't shown Shi Wudu mercy that far—and now, he has no reason to expect it.

No reason to give it, either.

But he doesn't like killing. Doesn't even like the sight of blood.

He doesn't like scary things. He still feels fear, even if he's forgotten how to show it.

"...You're saying you didn't feel even a little bit better, settling the score?"

Shi Wudu turns his gaze back to him, pulling his blanket closer.

"No." His fingers tighten around the edge of the blanket, knuckles white. And his answer is so simple—but it manages to cut through countless layers of distrust, bitterness, and apathy.

"My mom would be sad, if she knew what I did."

Li Xiaotong stares at him, eyes wide.

Shi Wudu's parents are still dead.

The only difference now is that his sister is safe.

He doesn't regret what he did. Doesn't feel any remorse for taking the life of a murderer.

But he doesn't feel any better—and he's still scared.

He will always be scared.

Li Xiaotong could have left that night.

Put Qinghe, Xuli, and the Shi family behind him—never looking back. But—

'My mom would be sad, if she knew what I did.'

Finally, hearing those words, he saw the boy before him for the broken, frightened child that he was.

So, in the years that followed, after the bodies were buried, and the secrets along with them—

He chose to stay.

Taking on the role of 'guardian' over the children, even if his presence was minimal, and more so that of a servant.

He had nowhere else to go, and...

In the end, revenge didn't bring him peace, either.

He Xuan watches, he watches, and he watches.

Standing at the edges of memories.

Watching a ten year old boy grow with each year into a teenager.

And on one hand, he sees what he had intended to, opening the Water Master's memories.

The brother that Shi Qingxuan always spoke of.

He only ever sees happiness, and calm in Shi Wudu's eyes when he's with Shi Qingxuan.

But he doesn't act like a brother—not really.

Waking him up every morning—making sure Shi Qingxuan gets dressed on time, and attends his lessons. Kisses scraped knees, and gives lectures over broken rules.

He tucks him into bed each night—checking underneath for monsters, telling stories until his brother falls asleep.

And he—

Even as he knows why he did this—even if he knows that he needs to forgive him, that he *has* to forgive him—

Up until then, he hadn't felt a single ounce of movement in his heart. Maybe he never would have, if—

If Shi Qingxuan actually meant nothing to him. But here, he's forced to confront two facts:

First, that this is the man who is responsible for the death of his family. For his own suffering. For Qin Meirong's pain.

And second, that he's also the man who gave Shi Qingxuan a happy, loving childhood.

Both of those things, while they feel utterly incompatible, are true.

He watches, as Li Xiaotong points out that they could leave. That there's plenty of money for them to move to a different home—one with less history.

And he watches as Shi Wudu refuses.

As he says, standing on the same floor where he watched his mother die, that this is Shi Qingxuan's home.

That it's familiar to him, and that he only has good memories here.

Even if that means, every day, Shi Wudu is living inside of a crime scene.

He watched as Shi Wudu changed from a happy, silly child, into a cold one. One who was trained to hide his fear. To mask it with other emotions.

Then, after the death of his parents, he became hollow and stiff—like someone focused only on getting from one moment to the next.

In his teenage years, he evolves into someone else.

Forced to project a maturity beyond his years, wrangling a clan, and a business, under his control.

Being father and mother to a child with a target on his back.

Shouldering a deep fear and distrust for the world.

The personality that forms under such circumstances is haughty, cold, and arrogant.

All sharp smiles, sly insults, and veiled threats.

There are rare moments where he shows his age—some humanity.

But only glimpses, like a crack between the curtains, letting sunlight in.

One of those moments comes when he's sixteen, reading a book while Shi Qingxuan chases a puppy about the room, tossing a ball for it to catch.

But his eye keeps drifting out the window.

"I swear," Li Xiaotong yawns, stretched out on the floor. "You and that temple."

Shi Wudu's eyes snap back down to his book.

"What about it?"

"You act like you've never seen a Ming Guang shrine before. He's everywhere in this region."

The teenager rolls his eyes, turning a page. "I haven't been acting like that."

But there has been a new shrine under construction across the square, just in view of their window.

"Then why oggle at it all day?"

His fingers grip the book a little tighter. "I'm not."

Still, his eyes drift out the window again. "I just..."

"What?"

"...Do you think he actually looks like that?"

Li Xiaotong blinks, stiffening when Shi Qingxuan's puppy runs over his face, where he's laying on the carpet.

"Who?"

"Ming Guang."

"Looks like what?"

"The divine statue!" Shi Wudu grumbles, looking back at his book stubbornly.

"…" Li Xiaotong sits up, looking out the window, examining the statue under construction, and he—

He snickers.

"What?!"

"Well, if he actually does look like that, it certainly explains how he gets so many women into bed." The older man shrugs. "But I'm surprised at you."

Shi Wudu turns another page, even if he doesn't seem to be reading. "Why?"

"I thought having a crush required an actual beating heart," he muses, watching as the teenager's ears suddenly grow pink. "But it makes sense that an uppity brat like you would only want a god."

Shi Wudu's book snaps shut.

And in that moment, the cold businessman and mature brother disappears—leaving behind a red faced, irritated teenager.

"Shut up! I was just asking if—!"

Shi Qingxuan pauses, the puppy now in his arms. "Gege has a crush?"

"No, I—!"

"He sure does!"

Even then?

He Xuan watches, and wonders.

Sees small stolen glances, even as early as being a teenager, looking at divine statues. Seeming somewhat sheepish, offering prayers.

(To the point where he prayed to Jun Wu instead, because that was less embarrassing.)

He has a fiancé, had since he was a child—and while they seem to get on just fine, he doesn't look at her like that.

Not with longing.

And He Xuan finds the idea baffling, that you could long for someone that you've never met, even if it's quietly, sheepishly.

He watches as the teenager begins training in other ways. Learning the basics of cultivation from Li Xiaotong, about combat and magic.

And it's odd, learning that in his mortal life, the Water Master, famous for his fan— was most well known for fighting with a whip, instead.

There are moments when every thought he's had of the man is contradicted.

Moments when he hides in a wardrobe, whining when his father carries him off. When he brings Shi Qingxuan through a murder scene, covering his eyes so he won't see.

Moments where he seems objectively selfless.

And then, there are moments when he's exactly what He Xuan thought.

When, after years of whispers from other members of the family, discussing a horrible, selfish idea—he takes action.

Gathering the members of the side branches of the family together, discussing the future of the clan and the company over dinner—there was just one problem.

A tragedy, really.

Someone poisoned the wine.

He Xuan watches as the others at the table crumple, one by one.

Until only two are left.

Shi Wudu at one end, still calmly eating his food—and his cousin at the other, trembling and frightened.

The same cousin who taunted him during the birthday feast.

A cruel, spoiled child—who had since grown into a lazy, entitled man.

“W-WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!” He chokes, staggering back from the table, clutching his own throat, waiting for the poison to take hold.

It never does.

“Me?” Shi Wudu questions calmly, lifting his chopsticks to his mouth. “Shouldn’t I be asking you?”

His cousin is frozen, trembling on the floor.

Shi Wudu sets his food down, lifting his own glass—

Water.

“You were the only one whose wine was left untouched.” He muses.

He isn’t old enough to be served wine, after all.

“And you’re the only member of this family with debts.”

He dabs at his chin with a napkin, watching the dawning horror on his cousin’s face.

“I-I—!”

“I was shocked when you attacked me.” The teenager continues. “We grew up together, after all. I thought we were close.”

“But I—I didn’t—!”

Shi Wudu lifts a knife from the table.

His cousin trembles, cringing with terror, but— He flips it around, plunging it into his own side. Grimacing, his body shuddering from the pain— But it’s necessary.

Because when he shouts for the guards—no one questions him.

Nor his testimony, when the trial comes around.

And He Xuan can’t help but think now, watching these events unfold —

Maybe the Venerable of Empty Words sparked the beginning of this. Maybe it was the result of a long standing curse against them—

But the Shi family was already a powder keg—and they destroyed themselves. And after all of that…

After all of the suffering they endured, the cruelties they committed, the person that child was forced to become—

He Xuan watches as Hua Cheng appears—telling him that, after all of that—

He can’t save Shi Qingxuan.

That isn’t exactly what he says—but it’s what Shi Wudu hears.

Because a life in hiding, enduring everything that they have, always—

Always being afraid.

That isn’t a life at all.

That isn’t being saved.

And Shi Wudu is so, so sick of being afraid.

It was shocking to everyone else when, out of nowhere, the last heir of the Shi family placed their company on a blind trust, taking his brother, leaving their home in Qinghe behind.

But to He Xuan, watching from the outside—it’s entirely in line with everything else he’s done.

When he makes a decision, he follows through swiftly—no matter the difficulty.

No matter the cost.

And once he learned that his wealth, his family’s power couldn’t save Shi Qingxuan—

Then, he set his sights even higher.

“I’m surprised,” Li Xiaotong comments.

“You always seemed so concerned with legacy.”

For a time, he was.

Because legacy was all he had left of his parents.

“Oh,” the teenager shrugs, adjusting the saddle on his horse. “I’ll still have a legacy.”

But not as a merchant, or a politician.

The stories of the Water Master and that of Blackwater Sinking Ships is that of a mirror and its reflection.

Similar, but opposite.

He Xuan never cared about becoming a god—not until he learned his divinity had been stolen from him after his death.

Shi Wudu never cared about becoming a god either—he simply found his mortality to be an inconvenience in the goal of protecting his brother.

And so, he made up his mind to discard it.

Once the decision was made—the path was practically set in stone.

“Where will you go?”

Shi Wudu is packed—along with his sister—for a temple on a mountain north of the city, but Li Xiaotong has made no preparations to join them.

“...Probably back to Langling,” he admits, crossing his arms. “After all this time?”

“I’m not needed here anymore.”

There’s a tension in his voice—a clipped coldness that has been growing for some time now, though they have never spoken about it.

But Shi Wudu knows when it began, and he knows why.

When he framed his cousin for murder.

It started then.

When Shi Wudu doomed a man to the same fate that Li Xiaotong had suffered at the hands of his uncle, all those years ago.

He didn’t look at him in the same way, after that.

But the teenager had also given him his freedom, and so—he held his tongue.

Not now, however.

“...Wudu,” he crosses his arms, watching as the young cultivator pulls himself up into the saddle. “You know I’ve never tried to be a mentor to you.”

No, that much is true.

He taught the child how to survive, maybe. Guarded them, when Shi Wudu was too small to do it himself.

And maybe it was the fact that he never tried to pretend to be affectionate, that made Shi Wudu trust him. Made him willing to depend on him.

He should be sad at the prospect of him leaving, given that he’s grown attached, but..

He only feels tired.

“I know.”

“But I’m not interested in watching you do this to yourself,” Li Xiaotong stretches his arms over his shoulders with a yawn, joints cracking. “And I know I can’t stop you.”

Shi Wudu looks down at his horse, hands tightening around the reins. “...What are you talking about?”

His companion shakes his head, with a sigh.

“If you never give yourself a line you won’t cross, then you’ll never know when you’ve gone too far.”

Shi Wudu doesn’t reply—but the pointed skepticism in his eyes is clear.

‘That’s rich, coming from you.’

The man who helped a child commit a murder, all in the name of self interest.

“...Yeah,” Li Xiaotong smiles faintly, his eyes saddened. “Yeah, it’s too late for me. I stopped believing I could turn things around a long time ago. But you—”

He shakes his head, looking away.

“Your old man wasn’t around to teach you, and I never bothered. But sometimes…” He lets out a heavy sigh, like he’s trying to cast off a weight, buried deep in his chest. “Sometimes, it’s better to get hurt, or to fail, than become something that you can’t live with.”

Shi Wudu stops, finally looking back at him—guarded. “…You say that like you think I’m some sort of monster.”

“No,” Li Xiaotong shakes his head, crossing his arms. His hair blows gently in the breeze, his eyes dark, as though remembering a painful memory.

“Actually, you’re probably one of the most human people I’ve ever met. But—no matter how innocent the thing you want to protect is, no matter how good your intentions are—success at any cost isn’t success at all.”

Shi Wudu’s eyes harden.

“You’re talking about Shi Qingxuan.”

And in that moment, he knows that he’s lost him.

That Shi Wudu will never hear him.

Which was why he knew he couldn’t accompany the Shi brothers to the mountain— Because he couldn’t stand to watch.

“No.” Li Xiaotong shakes his head. “I was thinking of your uncle.”

The teenager stiffens, and he adds—

“Shi Mingyu.”

His shidi. His friend.

His first love—and at this rate, likely his last.

“When we killed Shi Jian—you told me that your mother would have been sad, if she knew what you had done. Well…”

Li Xiaotong inhales slowly, steadying himself.

“I probably could have saved your uncle that day—but I would have had to kill his older brother to do it.” He admits. “I don’t know which would have been better—but I don’t have to live with the guilt.”

Shi Wudu stares at him.

“...It seems like you’re still living with it, if you ask me.”

After all—if Li Xiaotong had killed Shi Jian that day—

Shi Wudu’s parents would probably still be alive.

It places the decision to stay with the Shi brothers these last few years, watching over them, in perspective.

“...And it would shock you,” Shi Wudu mutters, his eyes hardening with resolve, “the things that I can live with.”

He flicks the reins to his horse, setting back in the direction of Shi Manor. To find his brother—and take him to the start of a new life.

“Goodbye, Li Xiaotong.”

With that, any semblance of guidance in his life is removed, root and stem—and he is set on a path of training.

Brutal, continuous training. From sunrise, to sunset. So exhausted, he can barely keep his eyes open when he returns home—but he always does.

Eating dinner together—still making Shi Qingxuan sit through lessons, even now— reading stories with him before finally passing out from the exhaustion.

Some nights, he slips into slumber with the book still open in his lap—and Shi Qingxuan carefully pulls a blanket around him.

And now, having seen all of this—He Xuan is aware of the other, unintended result of his plan.

That he might have succeeded in shedding some light on the humanity of the man he hated so much, for so long—

But this isn’t like the last time he was here.

When he shared memories with Hua Cheng and Zhao Beitong—

It wasn’t like this.

He saw their memories, yes—but it felt like more of a flash reel. As though he was watching a play at breakneck speeds.

He saw all of it, remembers most of it—

But He Xuan entered the kiln shortly after his death, barely in his mid twenties.

It had been impossible for his mind to process the number of years he was witnessing. Hundreds, in Hua Cheng's case.

Thousands, in Zhao Beitong's. But Shi Wudu—

They're the same age.

Four centuries.

A number of years He Xuan is entirely capable of processing, having lived them out himself.

So, instead of being more of a distant witness—

He experiences all of it in real time.

It doesn't feel like he watched the Shi brothers grow up, it—

It feels as though He Xuan grew up *with* them.

It feels as though their parents were people that he *knew* .

And He Xuan—

He finds himself mourning them.

The longer it goes, the more he senses the Water Master's consciousness struggling, and he realizes...

While he's experiencing all of this in real time—

Shi Wudu is reliving *all* of it—in the most excruciating level of detail.

And the further they go, the more desperate he seems not to endure that.

As He Xuan is watching the Reverend discover Shi Qingxuan's disguise.

Watching the desperation fear and grow, as she's tortured day in and day out.

How close she came, so many different times, to breaking.

How many nights Shi Wudu spent praying. On his knees until they went numb— begging, with no hope of getting an answer.

And He Xuan knows it's coming, when he feels the strain around the edges of the memory.

How hard Shi Wudu is fighting, trying to keep him out of it.

That's when he sees the teenager kneeling in the temple of the Heavenly Emperor.

Whispering his prayers over and over again.

That's when he appears.

"Do you really mean that?"

Shi Wudu's head snaps up, shocked—

And before him stands a figure that gleams in the candlelight, shadows flickering across his face, wearing robes of white and silver.

Handsome—but almost in an aggressive way.

The mortal can barely stand to look upon him. And he trembles.

"Y—you—!" Shi Wudu chokes, barely catching himself on his hands as he scrambles backwards, his heart pounding.

"Don't be afraid," the heavenly emperor smiles, stepping forward. "You were the one who called me."

It's Jun Wu's temple, after all.

"I...I..." The mortal stammers.

He's a man now—of age, but just barely. And in the presence of Jun Wu, he feels more like a frightened child than anything else.

"I've been watching you for some time, you know," the god muses, watching as the young man's eyes grow impossibly wide.

"Y...you have?"

He Xuan stands in the shadows, glancing back and forth between the two of them, his eyebrows knitting together.

...What is this?

“Your cultivation level has been worthy of ascension for some time now, and yet...you have not come to me.”

The way he says it—it makes Shi Wudu feel almost ashamed, hanging his head, swallowing hard.

“I—I meant no disrespect,” the young man replies, lips trembling. “But I—I couldn’t leave. My little brother...”

“...Yes,” Jun Wu murmurs. “I’ve been listening to your prayers about him for many nights. Did you mean what you said before?”

“What...What I said?” Shi Wudu whispers. And god, He Xuan can feel him struggling.

Fighting with all of his might, not to share this memory.

But why?

What is he protecting?

“That you would do anything,” Jim Wu repeats, “Did you mean that?”

So often, living through these memories, He Xuan has paused, startled by how much older Shi Wudu seemed than his age.

But right now—he seems like exactly what he is.

A frightened, confused teenager.

“Yes,” Shi Wudu admits, his lips trembling. “Anything. If It meant...”

If it meant that his brother would be safe.

Even if it meant crossing a line, or becoming someone he ‘couldn’t live with.’

The martial god looks down upon him, his expression unreadable—and eventually, he offers the young cultivator his hand.

For a moment, Shi Wudu stares, trembling.

Slowly he reaches back, and the heavenly emperor pulls him to his feet.

“It’s horrible, watching the ones you love suffer,” he murmurs, shaking his head with sympathy. “There is no greater terror in this world.”

Shi Wudu nods, his chin dipping low, shoulders slumped.

He was a beautiful child, one who grew into a handsome young man.

Dressed in blue silks, silver and sapphire jewelry holding up silky dark hair, dangling from his ears.

He’s halfway between delicate and sharp—like a large cat of prey, one that has begun learning how to use his claws.

He was so proud, once.

Proud of his wealth. His beauty.

His intelligence and his talents. His family name.

And oh, how that pride lifted him up—pushed him so high, he found himself standing on top of a towering pedestal, far above everyone else.

But he was also dragging someone else up with him. He Xuan watched him do it.

Clutching his little brother’s hand as he dragged them both higher and higher—and now, he finds Shi Qingxuan hanging off of the edge of that pedestal, dangling towards the abyss.

Shi Wudu is left with two choices—to hold on, or to let him go.

And there’s only one path that he’s ever chosen.

But still—

After so many years of suffering, and fighting, and failing—

That pride has begun to fade. The lines blurring with each passing day.

His own faith in himself has begun to falter—He Xuan can see it in his eyes. He expresses that doubt, and Jun Wu reassures him.

Still he…

(He Xuan watches the scene with rising nausea.)

The eyes staring up at Jun Wu are wide, vulnerable— Moldable.

“…But I can’t save him.”

He doesn’t—

He Xuan clutches his head, staring at that face.

But he doesn’t just see Jun Wu.

Not anymore.

Not here.

He sees a man, standing before the mother who forged Black Water Sinking Ships, offering her a butterfly in a box.

The Crown Prince of Wuyong.

He sees a white masked figure, half crying half smiling, clutching a ghost fire in his palm.

He—

He Xuan sinks to his knees, his eyes flooding with tears of contradiction.

Because he—

He hears his brother’s soul screaming.

Not his brother. Not his responsibility.

He’s told himself that so many times.

His alliance with Hua Cheng was always one of mutual benefit. He needed an ally, and He Xuan—

He needed to get stronger—all in the name of revenge.

And he didn’t need another family. Didn’t want to feel that loss again.

Because his heart had already died.

The person who could be all of those things—

A husband, a friend, a son, a brother—

He died.

But standing there now, looking at Jun Wu's face—he feels.

Rage. Sorrow. Fear.

And now, looking at Shi Wudu—

He doesn't see his enemy.

This child—this seventeen year old standing before him—

He hasn't hurt He Xuan's family. Not yet.

He isn't the Water Tyrant. Not yet.

He's—

He's Shi Qingxuan's older brother.

He's Shi Weiyuan and Yu Yanmei's son.

He's frightened, he's tired, and he's alone.

Seventeen years old, with the most powerful man in the world taking him by the shoulders, hands enveloping a smaller, youthful frame, telling him—

"There is something."

And watching this, the feeling in He Xuan's throat—

It feels wrong. It disgusts him. But—

He Xuan feels protective over him.

Shi Wudu goes completely still in Jun Wu's grip, his gaze entranced—like someone caught under a spell.

So desperate to be relieved of this constant state of fear that he's been living in—for most of his life, now—that he'll do anything.

Anything.

And watching his face, all He Xuan wants to do is scream—to tell him to turn way. To not accept it—because anything from that man is a trap, but—

“...What?”

This isn’t He Xuan’s memory, and his protests go unheard.

“You’ve thought of the answer yourself before, haven’t you?” Jun Wu smiles

And it breaks his heart, watching Shi Wudu hesitate.

Seeing how close his life—their lives—came to being something different.

“...Someone told me...” Shi Wudu starts, then stops, his gaze fretful. “That it would only make things worse...”

Hua Cheng.

It—

He Xuan curls onto the ground, his agony pulsing in time with Shi Wudu’s, each swamped in their own mazes of hurt and regret.

Hua Cheng warned him.

He—

Hua Cheng warned He Xuan, too.

So many times.

He never listened. Never trusted him.

Because Hua Cheng only ever cared about one thing: and how could He Xuan know whether or not his advice was sincere, or self motivated? He didn’t care about A- Zhong, or Qin Meirong, or He Xuan’s parents.

Only Xie Lian. But—

He Xuan grips the side of his head, tears of blood slipping down his cheeks.

After living seventeen years of Shi Wudu’s life in the span of only a few hours—his greatest enemy—

He Xuan still feels so much hatred, resentment, and hurt—

But he *cares* .

And when He Xuan entered Mount Tonglu—

Hua Cheng was the same age that he is now. Meaning—He Xuan's memories—

Did they feel like this for him, too?

Every moment that Crimson Rain Sought Flower tolerated him, assisted him, or tried to talk him out of it—

'What's left of you after, He Sheng?'

Was it not simply because he needed Blackwater as an ally? As a piece in his plans?

Did he—?

"Not if you do it properly," the Heavenly Emperor assures Shi Wudu, squeezing his shoulders. "You're more than capable."

And He Xuan—

He watches the struggle in Shi Wudu's eyes.

The first time he's seen the boy hesitate. Wrestling with himself.

And it aches so deep inside, like a rock clattering down a mineshaft, echoes ringing hollowly throughout.

Because He Xuan knows why.

Shi Wudu didn't hesitate to kill his uncle, because he was a threat. A murderer.

He didn't hesitate to kill the other members of his family, because they were threats to Shi Qingxuan—and selfish, greedy people, who had allowed the Shi brothers to be exploited.

But in this case—

They're talking about hurting people he doesn't know. People who have done nothing to him, who pose no threat to his brother.

He Xuan watches as he's dragged to that line, one he never knew he had, and struggles to cross it.

And it's unfair.

It's probably easier to sleep at night, when the man who ruined your life is heartless. When you can cut his throat without a second thought.

It's hard, when you know the person who destroyed your future takes no joy in hurting people.

When you know that he his favorite toy as a child was a stuffed bear.

That he tried to climb into his mothers arms one last time after she died, and cried silently when she couldn't hold him anymore.

And in the face of his hesitation—

Jun Wu doesn't stop.

He brings up his family.

His dead wife, and sons. Feeling so sorry for himself, it makes He Xuan want to be sick.

Makes him want to rip his heart out, remembering the wail Tonglu Hudie let out, watching San Lang fall from the Bridge of Wuyong.

But Shi Wudu doesn't know.

And instead of feeling the disgust and rage that He Xuan feels—

There's sympathy on his face. A crack in his defenses, one where the emperor can crawl in like a weed, allowing trust to take root.

"...My parents were stolen from me," Shi Wudu admits, glaring at the floor.

"I know," Jun Wu murmurs—and his breath catches in his throat.

"...You do?" The teenager whispers.

"You prayed to me, back then."

And oh, the difference perspective can make.

All He Xuan can feel is horror—because he knows the emperor doesn't listen to every prayer.

Which means he was watching the Water Master as young as the age of ten years old. But all Shi Wudu hears is that someone was watching.

That he wasn't alone.

"You...heard me?" He whispers, his lips trembling, and his eyes—

They prick with tears.

Because he's so, *so* tired.

But he can't see Jun Wu's expression, staring up at his divine statue now.

The way his eyes have narrowed into an expression that's almost hateful—but his voice remains warm and gentle.

"Those men didn't find you, did they?" Shi Wudu leans back against a pillar, his knees suddenly weak. "They didn't hurt your brother."

It's been so long since he's been protected.

So long, since someone made an effort to actually help him—not without wanting something in return, and now—

"I'll help you."

The teenager lets out a choked sound, knees nearly buckling under him, lips quivering, "Thank—" he chokes, tears slipping down his cheeks, "Thank you, I—"

But it's never so simple. Nothing with Jun Wu ever is.

"If," the heavenly emperor continues, speaking over him as he walks across the temple floor, approaching the human, "you accept my terms."

"...Terms?" Shi Wudu questions, his eyebrows creasing. "Yes, I'll accept anything, anything you ask, I—"

Fingers grip his chin tightly.

He Xuan can only watch with growing nausea, seeing—

Seeing the first glimpse of something that had always been there. Subversive hints lying all around—but no one ever thought about it. Ever looked at it.

Because the truth was inconvenient.

What being the emperor's 'favorite' actually means.

Shi Wudu falls silent, heart pounding to the point where it's almost becomes uncomfortable, meeting Jun Wu's gaze.

"You will tell no one else," he murmurs, thumb digging in slightly beneath Shi Wudu's lower lip, until the cultivator squirms with discomfort.

Not so young that he can't recognize the desire in the Emperor's eyes, but not old enough to believe that interest is directed at him.

"The rules of heaven are limiting at times—even for me. Most of the heavenly officials have never experienced suffering. Not in the way that we have. They won't understand the things we do."

And everything about it is so intentional.

Saying 'we' instead of 'you.'

Making it seem like no one else could ever understand.

Like no one else could ever help him, or even want to.

He Xuan has imagined this moment in so many different ways. He always assumed this must have been knowledge that Shi Wudu went out looking for.

After all, what kind of Cultivator had that knowledge by chance?

He hadn't imagined it as a last resort. Hadn't thought about how pale, desperate, and frightened his enemy might have looked, swallowing down ears of self loathing as he nods in agreement.

Jun Wu smiles, turning away from him, knowing that the teenager will fall into step by his side.

"Tell me," the heavenly emperor murmurs, his footsteps echoing through the hall, asking a question, one that will destroy so many lives—

"What do you know about switching fates?"

He sells He Xuan's future away. His sister's life. Qin Meirong's life.

But there was another price, one that no one (except for the man who orchestrated it) could have known was being paid at the time—

To save his brother, Shi Wudu sold his soul.

The memory shifts forward again, but once they reach the point past his ascension—

"NO!"

It's a testament to the Water Master's strength, really.

While He Xuan has little control over the Kiln—as a Heavenly Official with no cursed energy, Shi Wudu should have none.

They're snapped out of the memory—but not returned to the halls of the Kiln, either. Instead, they're left in a dark hallway in between.

Everywhere and nowhere. Past and Present.

With He Xuan rubbing his head, and—

Shi Wudu is on his hands and knees.

Tears pouring down his cheeks, shoulders shaking.

"...Mom..." He croaks, his voice breaking, silencing himself before he can say the rest.

'I'm cold.'

'I'm so, so cold.'

He just—

He just lived through all of that, all over again.

And all he can see are those eyes.

His mother's eyes, dull and lifeless, staring at him through the crack in that door.

"..." He bites back the bile rising in his throat, looking up at He Xuan with resigned fear—distrust. "...Are you happy?" He mutters, tears falling unceasingly.

“IS THAT ENOUGH?!”

“...” He Xuan doesn’t shout back at him. Doesn’t offer any cruel taunts.

He hasn’t found forgiveness yet.

Not for lack of trying.

He’s found sympathy. Understanding. Even some amount of caring.

But the ache of loss, the searing, inflamed grief—

It’s still there.

And after all of that—part of him wonders if he just isn’t capable of it, as desperately as he wants to be.

As he needs to be.

Because he—

‘Papa?’

He squeezes his eyes shut, pressing his first against his face.

“...This isn’t about punishing you,” he mutters.

Shi Wudu presses his forehead against the cool stone floor, his breaths shallow and hitched.

“Just kill me,” he knows he must make a shameful sight. The Water Tyrant, crying on the ground, begging for death. That must satisfy him, right?

“...I didn’t bring you here to kill you,” He Xuan shakes his head.

And to the contrary—

He doesn’t actually take joy in this.

He doesn’t find any satisfaction in seeing how cruel the world was to the Water Master, before he chose to be cruel in return.

“...Then just stop,” Shi Wudu croaks, sitting up, his arms wrapped around himself. “That was enough, wasn’t it?! You saw everything you needed to see!”

He Xuan looks at the hall around them—and he shakes his head. "I'm not controlling how this ends, believe it or not."

Shi Wudu's stomach sinks.

"It'll show us what it wants us to see before it lets us go."

"What will?!"

Blackwater glances at the walls around them.

"The Kiln."

It's almost bizarre, listening to him speak of Mount Tonglu like a living, breathing thing.

Shi Wudu glances around them, his teeth clenched until the grind and ache. He doesn't care.

He doesn't want to see.

He was ready.

His eyes slide up to He Xuan, infuriated by the hollowed out, exhausted look in his eyes.

Doesn't he understand that he was ready?!

But...not for...

"...I'm going through that again," he mutters, the trembling in his hands becoming even more violent.

Because he knows what comes next.

"DO YOU HEAR ME?!" He lunges to his feet. "YOU'RE GONNA HAVE TO KILL ME, BECAUSE I'M NOT—!"

But the moment his fingers close around He Xuan's throat—the hall they're standing in disappears.

And they're falling, all over again.

Shi Wudu isn't graceful about landing on his feet, ill practiced for whatever this is— crashing down on his hands and knees.

When he looks up— There's no He Xuan. Just a city street, in—

Qinghe.

Shi Wudu recognizes it immediately, whipping his head around. This is Qinghe.

But what memory is this? He doesn’t—

“He Sheng!”

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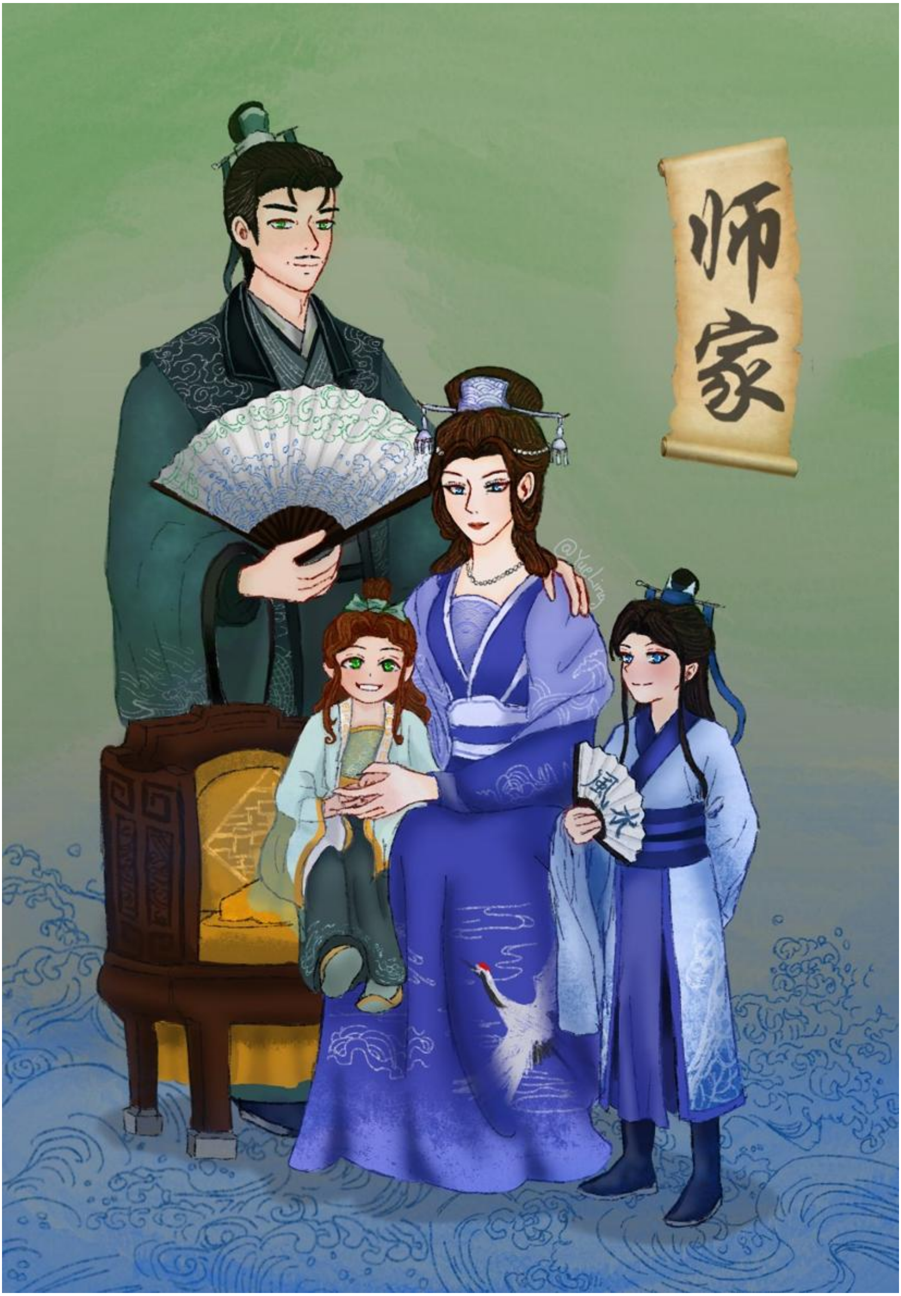
The Shi Family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Chapter End Notes

thank you to Yue Ling for their amazing artwork, and allowing me to share it!

xoxo, Evie

Forgiveness is a Broken Chain

Chapter Summary

> He Xuan fantasized for so many years, about what he would do to reduce that face to tears. To force the proud, cold hearted creature that stole his future to his knees and force him to apologize.
>
> That was what he did, back in Blackwater Manor.
>
> And while Shi Wudu said the words he wanted, accepting his punishment—he wasn't sorry.
>
> And He Xuan felt no closure.

Chapter Notes

> !!! CONTENT WARNING !!!
>
> This chapter covers violence, death, and rape. Please read with caution.
>
> Disclaimer: I would also like to clarify that, like many victims of sexual assault, Shi Wudu's thought processes are heavily impacted by his trauma. His perception of his relationship with his abuser is heavily warped, and his internal narration should be viewed in that context.

The Water Master grows still.

There's a group of neighborhood children, kicking around a cheap sack filled with grain—bothering a boys who doesn't seem interested in playing, sitting off to the side by himself.

"I'm busy."

His friend glares, stomping over. "Busy doing what?!"

The dark haired boy is hunched over a pile of rope, knotting them together with some odd piece of metal—

"Building something."

They go back and forth, and another one of their teammates jogs over with a frown. “What’s he doing?”

“...” The ruddy-faced boy rolls his eyes, crossing his arms.

“He Xuan here thinks he’s gonna be a ship builder, one day.”

The dark haired boy glances up at him sharply. “That’s not what I’m doing.”

Shi Wudu takes a step back, looking around.

Why is he seeing this?

Each time he tries to scream, or call attention to himself—to break the memory and slip out—nothing happens.

No one around even seems to see him, or look at him.

He just—

He has to watch.

Watch, as the children kick one of the parts he’s working on aside.

It skids across the street, into some nearby stalls, and when it does...

Shi Wudu freezes, watching as He Xuan bumps into the Crown Prince of Xianle.

A quiet child, with sun kissed skin, dark hair, and eyes of such depth, fidgeting awkwardly when the god offers him a bronze coin

Wanting to take it, but not wanting to give nothing in exchange. Still, he comes up with something.

“...One of the turnbuckles on your loom is messed up.”

Xie Lian lets out a sigh, looking back at the machine tiredly. “That makes sense, I suppose. It’s pretty old now.”

He Xuan fiddles with the gear in his hands before dropping it into his pocket. “I can fix it,” he offers.

When the Taoist raises an eyebrow, surprised, he explains—

“I’m good at fixing stuff, so if you let me try...”

Slowly, Xie Lian smiles.

"By all means."

Shi Wudu watches, as the child runs home after words—his mother greeting him as soon as he steps in the door.

A quiet home, cramped, with no expensive furniture, heavy rugs, or family portraits— But still, a family home.

And a happy one.

He Sheng's mother smiles fondly, ruffling his hair. "No trouble today?"

Her son shakes his head, moving in a rush so common in little boys, always running from place to place.

"No, Ma!"

Her eyes sparkle down at him—a deep, almost electric shade of blue, like the sea after lightning strikes.

Just like his.

"Good boy," she murmurs, "your father isn't back yet. Are you and your sister eating before you leave?"

He shakes his head, bouncing with excitement.

"We're gonna go early," he mumbles, fishing for the bronze piece in his pocket, "I got this, so we're gonna eat there."

His mother eyes the coin curiously. "How did you get this?"

"The weaver on Gushan street? I helped him fix his loom," He Xuan explains.

"I told him he didn't have to pay me, but he insisted."

That makes his mother smile softly, watching him with such fondness.

Their family doesn't have much—but her son has always been their greatest blessing. Handsome, kind, so talented in everything he tries.

"That's my clever He Sheng," she murmurs, setting down her book. "How about you sit down for a second? Your hair's a mess."

"It's fine…" Her son groans, impatient.

"It's falling all over the place," she snorts, patting the space on the bench beside her. "Come here."

Reluctantly, he complies.

Once he's seated beside her, she undoes the leather cord holding his hair up, combing it for a few minutes, humming while she works, before tying it back up in a high, neat ponytail.

The same style Shi Wudu watched Ming Yi wear, for so many years.

He Sheng leans against her as she does so, eyes half lidded and content. "Isn't that better?"

Her son looks up at her—and he smiles.

"Yeah," he agrees, pressing closer against her, "it's better."

His mother smiles back at him, giving him a one armed hug, kissing the top of his head.

Such a good son, sweet tempered by nature.

Finally, there's the sound of feet coming down the steps. "Gege?"

Shi Wudu doesn't turn around. Doesn't want to look. Doesn't think he could bear it. But—

As if by force, his head is slowly wrenched around. Forcing him to bear witness.

A small girl appears in the doorway—with matching dark hair, plaited into two neat braids down her back, and clear gray eyes, shining with excitement.

"Can we go now?"

He Sheng looks up at his mother for permission—and she smiles, nodding.

"Don't let her out of your sight!"

"I won't," He Sheng agrees, leaping to his feet, hurrying towards the door.

"Hold her hand the entire time!"

"I will!"

Shi Wudu follows after them, footsteps unnaturally light as he treads through memory, looking all around him.

Where are they going, anyway?

Passing through parts of the city he was born in, but has never seen.

Streets and alleyways in the poorer districts. Places his father never would have allowed him to play. And when he was older—he never bothered.

But when they reach the bustling central avenue…

Oh.

Performers and acrobats parade through the streets, popping off firecrackers, dancing around inside paper foil dragons, and kites soaring high in the air.

This—

This was the Fire Festival.

Their family always watched from the terrace, never going down into the streets below.

But here, he can see it all.

The music, the laughter, the buskers sword swallowing and breathing fire.

And he watches as He Sheng uses the contraption he'd been working on all day, to lift his sister up on top of one of the buildings over the central square.

"Oh!" He Zhong gasps, watching as the fires start to light up in the streets below. "Gege! We have the best seats ever!"

He Sheng grins, brighter than he has all day. "Right? You like it?"

From here, they can see the entire parade—and the fireworks as they shoot out across the water. It's…

He Zhong smiles up at him, holding his hand tightly. "I love it! It's the best fire parade EVER! It's just…" Her smile fades slightly. "I wish we didn't have to move," she mumbles, her expression dimming.

He Sheng leans a little closer, bumping their shoulders together. "I know."

"I'll miss my friends..."

"Yeah," he agrees—then smiles down at her. "But I'll be there—and I'm your best friend. Right, A-Zhong?"

Oh.

Shi Wudu takes a step back, swallowing hard.

He—

He's probably only ten years old, and still—he spent the entire day trying to think of a way to make his sister less sad about moving away.

Trying to fix it.

'I'm good at fixing stuff.'

(And it's just like something Shi Wudu would have done, for his own brother.) He watches with growing sorrow, as—

As He Sheng spends the rest of his life trying to fix things.

Being a dutiful son. A caring older brother.

A friend.

His family makes a new life in the village of Fu Gu.

He Sheng excels in his studies, of course—excels in everything.

But the thing Shi Wudu can't seem to stop noticing, no matter how hard he tries not to watch—

Is He Zhong.

How bright and trusting her smile is.

The way she always tries to hard to keep up with her older brother, the way—

The way she idolizes him.

Most boys that age would probably find it annoying, having their little sister follow them around like a little duckling—

But not He Sheng.

He’s so patient.

And he—

He doesn’t stop his sister from trying to climb trees with him, or swim down in the coves by the bay, looking for pearls.

He doesn’t tell her it’s too dangerous, or that she’s too small.

He teaches He Zhong how to do things for herself.

Even if it's hard.

If she falls, scrapes a knee, or sprains an ankle—he's there to pick her up again. To help dry the tears, bandage the craps.

To help her try again, next time.

And with each time that she tries, she gets better—stronger.

She learns how to read in three different languages. How to wriggle down into deep underwater crevices, finding the pearls other children can't reach.

(She has He Sheng keep track of the money she makes selling them, saving up for her very own horse.)

He Sheng might have outshined her, but only out of a testament to his own raw excellence. In any other family, she would have been considered a genius in her own right.

And still—that never seemed to bother her, or breed any sense of competition between the two.

Then, there's a girl with a smile that never reaches her eyes. Soft brown curls, freckles across her cheeks and nose.

Beautiful, but in a gentle way. The kind of face that, even when looked upon by a stranger, feels like home.

And the village treats her like a ghost.

Her twin sister died in the plague that ripped through Xuli only a few months before—and now, she's treated like the broken, remaining piece of a matching set.

No one sees her presence, only her sister's absence.

Still, she tries to smile—for her father, mostly.

Her mother has already passed—Qin Meirong is all he has left.

And her sister's death broke him. Shattered places inside that only a parent can understand.

So, when she brings his lunch to the shipyard, it's cheerfully.

When she carries water to and from the well, she sings.

He Sheng watches—with a look of sheepish longing that Shi Wudu knows all too well.

Nearly drops his hammer twice the first time he sees her, in the middle of helping to secure the siding for a hull in the shipyard.

She notices—holds up a book to hide her smile.

Because the whole village talks about how special he is, what a bright future he has, but—

Qin Meirong just thinks he's handsome. And his eyes, while naturally cold, grow so soft and fond when they look upon those he loves.

And when they look at her...

She doesn't feel like a ghost anymore.

They fall in love easily, like time slipping by on a lazy afternoon.

He offers to help her carry water from the well. She sits on the shore and holds onto the oysters he and He Zhong bring up when they go diving for pearls.

There's a sadness to her—a chill inside that he always seeks to build a fire around to keep her warm.

Trying to fix it.

She confesses one day, how horrible it is for her to be alone. How, until her sister died, she was never by herself.

How weak it makes her feel.

There was a time when she was wary of admitting such a thing to He Sheng, the strongest person she's ever met, that she's afraid of something as silly as being alone.

But he doesn't make her feel ashamed.

He simply tells her that she never has to be.

They spend every day together. And on the nights when she can't stand to sleep alone, she crawls into bed with A-Zhong, He Sheng sleeping on the floor beside them.

Sometimes, her hand dangles off of the bed—and his hand reaches up to grasp hers.

He always squeezes her fingers three times—and when he tries to let go, she holds on. Doesn't let up until she falls asleep, her fingers going limp.

But sometimes, He Sheng holds on a little longer—watching her face in the moonlight through the window.

Fifteen years old, madly in love with his best friend, whispering the words under his breath.

All while Shi Wudu sits in the corner, knees pulled against his chest, stricken and pale.

"...I'm so lucky."

The first time he says 'I love you,' it's an accident.

A-Zhong is a relatively independent girl, but—

Boys are scary. Particularly boys that *like* her. A boy tells her she has beautiful eyes, and she breaks out into hives.

It's true, it's really true.

That's why she goes running up to her big brother, hiding behind him in the town square, wrapping her arms around his back.

"Gege, help!" She cries, risking a peek around his shoulder.

He Sheng glances back at her, arching an eyebrow. "What is it?"

She nods towards a twelve year old boy in the corner of the square, her lips turning into a deep frown. "Could you do the scary face?"

"Why?"

"He said I was cute..." She mumbles, hiding her face in his back.

Mortified.

So, setting her gege on him is the natural solution.

He Sheng turns his head—and he doesn't say a word. Doesn't need to.

His eyes are so dark, cold, and wrathful—the pre-teen in question goes pale, nearly dropping the basket of potatoes he was carrying as he flees down the street.

From beside him, Qin Meirong giggles. "What?"

"Everyone is so sure that you COULD beat them up, they never stop to think about whether or not you actually would."

He Xuan frowns, crossing his arms. "Who says I wouldn't?"

"Me."

"And why is that?"

She grins, clasping her hands around her back, turning to face him.

"You're a huge softy, that's why," She rocks up onto the balls of her feet as A-Zhong wanders off, making soft (good natured) gagging noises. "Decent to the core."

"Am not," He Sheng rolls his eyes, crossing his arms.

"Are too." She reaches up to poke his chest.

"I've never seen you be anything less than wonderful."

And he just blurts it out, because it's the most obvious explanation, not thinking: "That's because I love you."

They both stop, staring at each other.

Fifteen, wide eyed, blushing from head to toe.

Not sure of what to say.

She waits, knowing it was an accident. And maybe that's true—but He Sheng doesn't take it back.

Even if he's red in the face, nervous, and embarrassed. Because he meant it.

Then, after what feels like forever—

"I-I…love you too."

She says it back.

The first time they said it, there was embarrassment, nerves, and shock.

But every other time, it comes so easily.

When they're reading together under a tree, Qin Meirong against his chest, closing her eyes and smiling as the breeze plays through her hair.

"I love you."

She says it when he has his mouth full, of course, chewing on an apple —

But he grasps her hand, squeezing it three times.

And she knows, he's saying it back.

They so young, when he asks her to marry him. His face pinched with seriousness.

Knowing that he doesn't have much to offer at the moment. That he comes from a poor family, and what he could provide for a future family—

That would come from wits and skill alone.

But he has arguments composed in his head, prepared to present his case, when—

"Yes."

She breathes, staring at him with wide eyes.

“And I—”

“Yes.”

“—promise that I’ll make sure you have—”

“I’m saying yes, He Sheng!”

He stops, and he stares at her.

Then, he smiles.

And Shi Wudu can see the thought in his eyes, over and over again:

‘I’m so lucky.’

In this one instance, watching this unfold—

Shi Wudu agrees.

In this one situation—

His heart aches with envy.

Watching how every single one of He Sheng’s firsts were with someone he loved. How kind they were to one another.

Asking for nothing, but giving everything.

It took Shi Wudu a long time, to realize that kisses were something you could ache for.

That there was a difference between obligation and desire.

Because of that, it took him such a long time to realize it—when he finally did call in love.

So deeply, he mistook it for fear. Being afraid that he might be hated, if the person he was sleeping beside knew what he had done.

But He Sheng’s childhood and teenage years—while not lived in the wealth and opulence that surrounded Shi Wudu’s—

They were happy.

His sister grew into a beautiful young woman. Confident, quick witted—and while her brother studied for the national exams—

He Zhong finally bought that horse.

Practiced her archery day in and day out, with He Sheng's assistance and encouragement, becoming an avid archer.

And while He Sheng is proud—

Shi Wudu covers his mouth, trying in vain, after so many attempts, to look away. He's proud of her, too.

Because now, he's lived those years too.

He's—

He's watched her grow up.

Watched He Sheng grow up.

Watched him fall in love.

And now, for the first time—

He sees himself.

The newly ascended Water Master, coming ashore after rescuing a group of fishermen.

Sees his eyes fix upon He Xuan when he hears the young man's name.

Sees the look on his face change, when he learns the young man's birthday.

Shi Wudu watches himself, from the outside, knowing what decision he's making.

And at the time, it seemed like the only way.

At the time, it was something he was ashamed of—but it wasn't *personal* . These weren't people he *knew* .

But now—

Now, he watches He Sheng fall.

Knowing this time—

That this is his fault.

He—

He did this.

At first, it's only the smaller things. Never getting his results from the National Exams back. His ships repeatedly facing bad weather.

But, whereas the Shi family had been a powder keg—

He Sheng's family was strong.

They never turned on one another.

His parents were supportive. His sister offered to go and threaten the exam proctors herself, and—

And Qin Meirong always believed in him. Had endless faith that, no matter what came, he would be able to face it.

They never blamed him.

There were moments when Qin Meirong would try to cheer him up—pressing her palm to his cheek, the way she always did when he was brooding, and talk about the future.

Their wedding, in the summer.

Moving back to the city, after his exams.

How many children they would have.

And the thought of that always seemed to pull him up. No matter how tired he was. No matter how frustrated he was.

Because that was all that he wanted.

A peaceful life. A family with the woman he loved.

And now, as he watches He Sheng scrambling, constantly trying to fix it—

Shi Wudu knows that He Sheng would have had those things.

That they were taken away from him. That he—

He stole those things from him.

And while it might have hurt He Xuan to watch Shi Wudu's childhood, while it might have been hard, feeling sympathy for those that he hated—

Shi Wudu is watching the lives of his victims.

The lives he stole.

On some level, he always knew what he had done.

But that’s not the same as the fear he feels, watching as He Sheng returns home from his final set of state exams—

Only to find his sister and fiancé are gone.

Taken.

By the wealthy merchant family that owns most of Fu Gu—with the intention of making them concubines.

Willingly, or not.

Shi Wudu has lived through things most people shouldn’t. Witnessed sights that would make weaker men crumble, but—

He scrambles backwards on the ground until his back slams into the tree behind him, hands covering his eyes, desperately wishing he could—

He could escape the sight of He Zhong.

Sprawled on her side in the courtyard, hand limply extended towards the gates.

Her body limp and cold as He Sheng falls to his knees beside her, just—

Screaming from the grief.

He Zhong, the little girl with braids and a gap toothed smile, eagerly running by her brother’s side.

He Zhong, who loved climbing trees and snorted when she laughed too hard.

He Zhong, who could eat half of a pork shoulder by herself, but would gag if you tried to make her eat a vegetable.

He Zhong, who was nervous around boys, intimidated by intimacy—Cut her own throat, before those men could force themselves on her.

And now, as He Xuan clutches her in his arms, sobbing, those eyes are staring back at Shi Wudu as her head dangles lifelessly from her brother's shoulders.

He did this.

He—

'I'm your best friend, right?'

A ragged, broken sob rips from Shi Wudu's throat.

'Always.'

Then, he sees it.

The precise moment when He Sheng's heart shattered beyond repair.

When he hears broken, fractured gasps—no, that isn't what you could call them.

They're last breaths.

There, beaten nearly beyond recognition, left alone in the cold, he finds Qin Meirong.

Whimpering his name with bruised lips.

"H...He...X...Xuan..."

He can barely see through the tears, breaths coming so fast, his head won't stop spinning.

But still, he sees.

Still, he watches.

As He Xuan cradles his love in his arms, shushing her whimpers, stroking her hair.

Because he can't save here.

Because there's nothing to be done.

All—

All he can do is help her die peacefully, even as his own heart burns to ash, beating in contradiction of all reason.

Because how could it, when hers is fading? Even so, with all of the pain that she's in... Her eyes are still so warm, looking up at him. She —

Shi Wudu shudders, clutching the sides of his head.

She's at peace already, knowing that she's in the arms of the man she loves. The boy she thought was handsome.

Who always worked so hard to make her smile.

He was determined to show her how clever was without trying too hard. To find ways to make her smile that seemed unintentional on his part.

He Sheng succeeded in making her smile every time—but she never quite believed that it was unintentional.

If there has to be an end, if there has to be a moment when everything about her fades, and the world goes dark—

Then Qin Meirong is happy, that it's in the arms of the boy who told her that she never had to be alone.

She's grateful—even now.

And she's trying to comfort *him* .

"He X-Xuan," she repeats his name, blood bubbling past her lips with every word she speaks, but still, when he tries to shush her—she presses on, "I-It's alright," she whispers, her eyes turning over his shoulder, looking past him—at something he can't see.

"S...she found me."

Her lips pull up into a faint, broken smile, "H-He was right..."

"I don't..." He Xuan's voice is nearly incapable of speech, "I don't understand..." And neither does Shi Wudu, not at first.

But when he turns his head, here, in the Kiln, he can see.

A young girl in white mourning robes.

With the same curls, warm brown eyes—the same freckles across her cheeks. Qin Meirong's sister, come—

Come to take her home.

A broken set, finally made whole again.

That's where the peace comes from, in dying.

The ones who went first.

Qin Meirong's breaths are rattling towards the end, broken ribs protesting each attempt at air —

But she clutches the front of He Sheng's robes, pulling insistently until she can take hold of his hand, putting everything she has into what will be her final act.

"You're a g...good man," Qin Meirong's last words echo with ringing fatality, her eyes still so clear, even towards the end, staring up at him with a determined light, "Don't....don't let them...make you f-forget that, He Xuan..."

And Shi Wudu can't move, can't breathe.

Can't stop remembering what his sister said—

The words that made He Xuan stop and stare at her in agony, four centuries later.

"You're a good man, He Xuan."

The very last of her strength goes into squeezing his hand.

Once, twice, three times.

Then, it goes limp.

He still holds on.

Even as he clutches her and weeps, screaming until his voice turns raw, he holds onto her hand.

Blinded by the pain, and helpless to top it.

Because He Sheng doesn't know what he did wrong.

Because he doesn’t know how to make it stop.

Because he—

He Xuan can’t fix it.

Compared to the screaming and the sobbing, Shi Wudu’s tears are silent. Staring into He Zhong’s blank, glassy eyes.

Like he never really left that wardrobe that night, so many years ago. Part of him wishes that he never did.

In the reflection of those eyes, he sees her brother’s reflection.

Cradling the body of the woman he loved in his arms, screaming at the world for being so unfair.

But—

Shi Wudu clutches a hand over his mouth so tightly, his fingernails dig into his cheek.

It didn’t have to be.

He was the one who made it unfair.

‘If you never give yourself a line you won’t cross, then you’ll never know when you’ve gone too far.’

And now, he feels how far over that line he is.

Because—

In the beginning, Jun Wu gave Shi Wudu a choice.

The person he is now, the creature he became—

Shi Wudu is a leviathan of his own making, each layer of humanity stripped back by choice. But He Xuan...

He didn’t choose any of this.

But the Water Master watches as a good man dies.

As he’s placed in chains and thrown in a cell.

As his body wastes away and starves after years in captivity.

His mother dies, and he isn't there. Only receives a letter, one the guards read to him tauntingly from the other side of steel bars.

One of them drops a piece of bread on the ground before him, just out of reach.

He Xuan's eyes are always cold now.

There's no one left to make them soften with warmth and affection.

And the lessons he learns are cruel, hammered in over and over again.

That people are selfish.

That life isn't fair.

That the world is cruel.

As the Reverend of Empty Words latches onto his back, whispering hateful words into his ear, day in and day out—

But He Xuan doesn't respond with fear.

No, his response is only slow, growing resentment.

Anger.

He's the worst sort of person to be targeted by a Venerable.

Beaten down, robbed of everything that brought him happiness—

And still, the young man doesn't break.

He watches as He Xuan, freshly released from prison, returns to his ailing father, too old and fragile now to work on the ships he once helped build.

And even now, with his exams passed, when he must want to leave Fu Gu behind...

He stays—and he becomes a shipbuilder himself, starting a business. Small, at first, but...more and more successful, as time goes on.

And, however briefly—he manages to thrive. But it could never last.

Not with that creature on his back—and not with the curse that Shi Wudu placed upon him.

Shi Wudu watches, as the world takes everything he has. Over and over and over again.

But each time, He Xuan rises back up.

Like the waves crashing back up after a storm, he surges with every downfall. He Xuan endures it against all reason.

Until he can't.

Until he's been pushed so far, something inside of him snaps.

Another ship commandeered. Another loan refused. Another day outside of a cell when he goes to bed hungry.

The final straw comes in the late afternoon, when he's returning from a day of hard, manual work.

Gaunt, thin—a tall man, once a muscular youth—but he never quite recovered from the starvation he endured in prison.

Still alive, but he looks far more like a wraith.

And when he returns to his family home, he finds the last living relative he has—his father—has passed away.

Alone, sitting in a chair by the window, his head turned to look out. Waiting for him to return home one last time.

He Sheng, his pride and joy.

Always such a good son.

He Xuan kneels by his father's chair, holding one hand between his own. It's gone stiff and cold by now.

His expression is unreadable—mouth unmoving. He doesn't cry.

In all of the time since the deaths of He Zhong and Qin Meirong, he shed a single tear.

But the expression on his face—the look in his eye as He Xuan looks upon his father one last time—

It's one of deep respect and affection.

After some time, He Xuan rises to his feet once more, gently setting his father's hand back down in his lap.

He makes his way out the door, and Shi Wudu stands outside, watching Mr. He's eyes, still staring blankly through the window.

Lifeless. Vacant. Accusing.

He Xuan's walk back to town is slow, unhurried—and his request is so simple, so small, in the face of everything he has been through.

He just asks around in the local tavern, for someone to help him lay his father to rest. There's no other family to assist him—and it's a difficult job for one person.

More than one of the local townspeople are willing to help. He Xuan is liked and respected by many in the village, as was his father before him, but...

Even now, life won't let him go easily.

"Why should he need help?" A young man sneers.

One of the very same that has been tormenting him these last few years. Making every moment of his life a living hell.

If Shi Wudu could step through the barriers of time, he would gut him with his fingernails alone.

"It should only take one man to bury a dog."

The shipmaster doesn't speak immediately—doesn't react.

But there's a flash in his eyes, a Shi Wudu sees a thread, worn so thin over the last few years, finally begin to snap.

No one will raise a hand to help now, fearing retribution.

That's fine. That's better, actually.

Shi Wudu watches He Xuan make the trek back to his home, his head hanging low.

The only sound in the world seems to be the crunching of dust under his boots. Easy, methodical steps

Taking the ax that he (and his father before him) once used to build their ships, chopping wood from a nearby forest to make a pyre.

It’s careful, methodical—never hurried.

The young man burns his father’s body—gathers the ashes, and buries them in the family grave.

He’s buried a fiancé, a sister, a mother, and now his father.

He Xuan stands before the tombstone now, staring at his family name, and it occurs to him.

Who is going to bury him?

There’s not going to be anyone left. He—

“You’re going to die alone,” a voice whispers next to his ear, cruel and jeering. “Alone in the cold, with no one left to mourn you.”

“...”

Shi Wudu watches with rapt attention as the youth stares down at the family grave, silent.

Finally, a smile spreads across his face.

Slow, lopsided. Not the muted, almost shy smiles that He Xuan showed the world as a child. Nor the quiet, confident grins he used to share with the girl that he loved.

There’s no trace of sanity in this smile.

A man pushed to madness by grief.

“Is that so?” He whispers.

Even the Reverend of Empty Words seems to balk at his reaction, falling silent as He Xuan turns away from the grave, ax still in hand.

“...I suppose there isn’t a point, then.” He mutters, dragging it on the ground beside him, the blade slowly cutting through blades of grass.

No one answers, but He Xuan seems to have developed some level of awareness that a creature is stalking him. Listening to his every word.

And he smiles even wider.

“In being someone worth mourning.”

Life is one long cascade of decisions and consequences.

Nearly four centuries ago, a gambler didn't know when to stop rolling. A friend tried to save him with a set of loaded dice. A merchant reacted out of spite and anger.

Decades later, a young ghost saved the two men on a whim. Kept them from their fate for as long as he could.

And when they could no longer be held back, their curse fell on Shi Wudu, and he— Li Xiaotong was right.

Sometimes it's better to let go, to fail, than to become something that you can't live with.

But Shi Wudu didn't know how to let go of his brother.

And in his refusal to allow him to suffer, he cast that curse upon someone else.

Every single one of those decisions led to He Xuan lifting up his ax that night.

Not a single one of them were his own.

And Shi Wudu watches, as He Xuan attends his final fire festival.

No sister or fiancé by his side. No parents waiting at home. No blind weaver offering him a coin with a warm smile.

Nothing left to live for, to return to.

There is nothing left for He Xuan to fix. No one stops him. Not a soul.

Shi Wudu watches him slaughter them all.

At certain points he stops to laugh tauntingly—and Shi Wudu knows, it's directed at the reverend.

And yet.

The night deepens, thunder rolling in as a storm rages over the sea.

One of the men begs for his life, gets on his hands and knees.

Once a gentle, sweet tempered child—now, a killer.

"I have money—power, position—anything you desire, I can give it to you, just—!"

"Go back in time, then." He Xuan replies flatly, speaking for the first time since he began his rampage—and his voice—

It's cold, almost rational

"Give me my family back, and I'll let you go."

It's almost cruel irony, watching from the sidelines. Unable to interfere, but desperately wishing to do exactly as He Xuan says.

To go back in time.

To give him A-Zhang and Qin Meirong back.

But he can't.

Some things—

Some things can't be fixed.

Shi Wudu didn't touch his sister. Never laid a finger on his fiancé.

He had no hand in He Xuan's imprisonment, or in any of the injustices that followed him afterwards.

And yet—he did this.

This is a story he wrote, through his own mistakes.

He might as well have walked He Sheng to the edge to that clif, giving him one final shove as he fall over, plunging down into the darkness of the night, the storm thundering overhead, all around them with ferocious abandon.

SPLASH!

Cold.

It's cold, and he's alone.

Just like the Venerable said.

Crushed under the weight of the waves, dragged further and further below—

Only darkness remains as air slips away.

The sea floor hits his back, the immense weight of the water crushing down on him, squeezing out whatever life remains.

For a moment—He Xuan almost prays to the water master for relief—

Having no idea that the Water Master is already here.

That he's already watching him.

And that the Venerable was wrong.

There *is* someone left to mourn him.

Shi Wudu is mourning him right now.

Shi Wudu is beside him, being crushed by that same water. Feeling it fill his lungs, crushing the air out of him.

Drowning, beside him.

Mourning the boy who spent his days thinking about how to fix the world around him.

The boy Shi Wudu murdered years ago, when they were both so young.

He Xuan's body lays against the seafloor, limp, eyes unseeing—illuminated by a pale, unearthly green light.

That of a ghost fire.

It hovers for a moment, a sole flickering point of color in the endless void of the ocean.

And now, it feels like those eyes are staring at him.

No matter how far Shi Wudu has clawed his way from that wardrobe, no matter how many years have passed, no matter how strong he gets—

He never escapes the gaze of the dead.

Crushing him. Weighing down on him, inch by inch, brick by brick.

And it hurts.

It hurts.

It—

The memory shatters, and He Xuan finds himself back in that dark hallway.

And this time, he's the one on his hands and knees.

Trembling from the guilt. The pain. The helplessness.

Feeling a warped hurt so deep inside—he doesn't know if he's capable of letting it go. Until he looks up, and sees his enemy.

The man who ruined his life.

A monster he cursed for centuries with every breath that he no longer takes— Shedding tears for him.

Staring at He Xuan with wide, guilt stricken eyes, filled with the one thing no one ever gave him:

Remorse.

He Xuan fantasized for so many years, about what he would do to reduce that face to tears.

To force the proud, cold hearted creature that stole his future to his knees and force him to apologize.

That was what he did, back in Blackwater Manor.

And while Shi Wudu said the words he wanted, accepting his punishment—

He wasn't sorry.

And He Xuan felt no closure.

Now, he—

"I'm sorry," Shi Wudu chokes out, the agony in his voice so profound, Blackwater is frozen—startled.

"I'm— *I'm so sorry!*"

Now, the Water Master is weeping.

For He Xuan. For Qin Meirong. For his parents—

But every sob that rips from his body *aches* with the memory of He Zhong.

Knowing in his soul, exactly how He Xuan loved her.

In the way that only an elder brother can.

Haunted by her lifeless eyes, staring at him across that courtyard. By the memories of her smile, her laugh.

She was like a small creature, swallowed whole by the curse that Shi Wudu unleashed upon them.

Every hope of a future snuffed out—and she never stood a chance.

Shi Wudu—

He took them all away from her.

And he weeps for more than just guilt, or remorse.

He cries for the children he watched grow up. Heaving sobs of grief that cut him to the bone, and all he can do—

All he can do is say those words, over and over again: I'm sorry.

I'm sorry.

I'm so, *so* sorry.

He Xuan sits there for a moment, struggling to react.

Having thought he was strong enough to live through all of this again, that it was a means to an end, one he could endure as many times as he needed to. But the memories—

They ravage him.

And now, as he finds himself mourning his family all over again—

Someone is beside him.

Shedding the same tears.

Feeling the same pain.

For the first time—

He Xuan isn't grieving alone.

And all he wanted, all he ever wanted—

Was for someone to be *sorry* .

Even if it's the person who hurt him. Maybe—

Maybe especially then.

Shi Wudu flinches, when he feels a hand on his shoulder. Not fearing the pain, or whatever He Xuan wants to do to him—

Because now, no matter how painful it is—

He *wants* to be punished.

Even if he knows there's not enough suffering in the world to pay for what he put them through, he—

He wants justice, even if he has no idea what that could look like. Even if that means he loses it all.

But when he looks up—

He Xuan doesn't look angry.

Not anymore.

Because he was right.

Because you can't hate someone that you know.

Not when you've cried with them. For them.

When you've grown up together.

Because no one has ever wept for He Xuan before.

And in that moment, staring into his tear streaked face—

He Xuan finds it.

Forgiveness.

Not because Shi Wudu deserves it, or has earned it. Not because his childhood shaped the cold hearted man he would become.

But because he's the only person who can share in this grief. And, because…

There's more to this.

Things that he couldn't have known before.

That Jun Wu was the one who gave a frightened, traumatized child a spell to switch fates.

And that doesn't excuse Shi Wudu's choice to use it—

But Jun Wu was watching him—watching both of the Shi brothers—when they were children.

For what reason? And now—

Shi Qingxuan said that someone was blackmailing her brother. The identity of that person has now become painfully obvious.

But why go through all of that trouble?

Was Shi Wudu an active player in all of this, or…

A pawn?

And to what end?

Hate is a powerful thing.

Like a cursed shackle, it can settle over your eyes—blinding you to even the things that are right in front of you.

He Xuan has shattered his own shackle, and now, for the first time in so long—

He's starting to see things clearly.

And wants—

He wants more than feeling like this.

'You haven't done anything I can't forgive you for.'

He wants to be someone who can also be forgiven.

But before he can open his mouth, before he can say *'I forgive you—'*

Then, they're falling again.

Plunging into darkness.

When He Xuan lands—it's somewhere entirely familiar—but possibly the last place he expected to be.

The streets of the Heavenly Capital, officials milling all around him. For one moment of blind confusion, he thinks he's back, but—

No one is looking at him.

"Hey," a voice crops up beside him—so close to his ear, it makes He Xuan jump. "Come on now, don't be so cold..."

Shi Wudu walks ahead, fanning himself lazily, his hair blowing gently in the breeze. "I don't know what you mean."

Pei steps past He Xuan, following after him.

"I'm just trying to introduce myself," he explains, pressing a hand against his chest earnestly. "Though I suppose you've heard of me already..."

Shi Wudu arches one perfectly shaped eyebrow, his expression half hidden behind his fan.

"Nan Yang, was it?"

Pei stops, his face frozen with shock, then he throws his head back and barks out a laugh.

"Now that's just brutal, no wonder people are calling you a Water Tyrant!" He looks back down at the younger god, a lopsided smile in place, shining like the afternoon sun.

"You really have no idea who I am?"

Pei couldn't notice, but He Xuan notices the way Shi Wudu's fingers tighten slightly where they grip his fan.

How the expression hidden behind it is slightly flustered. (Because, unfortunately for him…the statues were rather accurate.)

“I can’t say that I do,” he replies, his tone cool.

Expecting Pei Ming, as a martial god of his strength and seniority, to crow out in offense, nursing a wounded ego.

But his smile doesn’t fade.

“I see…” He holds out a hand, and Shi Wudu stares, unsure what he wants.

Something behind Pei’s gaze changes, watching his hesitance. He’s always exuberant, but now there’s a gentleness to him.

“Relax, kid,” he coaxes him. “I don’t bite.”

Behind the fan Shi Wudu’s cheeks darken—and he sticks his hand out for him to shake, grumbling.

“I’m a grown—”

Lips press against the back of his hand, and the word ‘man’ catches in the back of Shi Wudu’s throat, fingers clutching his fan for dear life.

“I’m glad that my reputation doesn’t precede me,” Pei murmurs, lifting his head as he lets his hand go. “It gives me the chance to make my own first impression.”

Shi Wudu stares, open mouthed, struggling to understand what Pei, a renowned womanizer, is playing at.

(And yanking his hand back, squeezing his fingers tightly—feeling the way they burn where Pei’s lips lingered.)

“Anyhow,” he takes a step back, leaving the Wind Master wind swept and off kilter, nodding towards the gates. “What do you say to grabbing a meal?”

Again, there’s hesitation—distrust.

“You’d be doing me a real favor,” Pei adds with a shrug.

Shi Wudu’s eyes narrow. “A favor?”

“I’ve been trying to get Ling Wen to socialize with someone who isn’t me for around three centuries now,” the general explains. “She might enjoy some slightly more intellectual company.”

He says that, of course—but he’s brilliant on his own.

That’s one of the first things Shi Wudu notices about him, hanging around the Chief Civil God and Martial God. It’s advantageous for all three of them, naturally.

Shi Wudu is the strongest elemental master, even being so young—and they’re at the head of their sectors as well.

Sticking together shores up all of their political positions within the Heavenly Court, and—

He Xuan watches them, sitting around a restaurant table in the Imperial Capital.

Shi Wudu, making sarcastic commentary—Ling Wen’s deadpan replies. And Pei Ming, laughing with them both.

It seems like a natural scene. Like three comrades catching up after a battle, but— He Xuan knows what the other two at the table don’t.

That Shi Wudu hasn’t had actual friends before. Not in the way that other people think of the term.

Maybe when he was a small child, certainly—but not after his parents died. After that, everything he did, every thought and action, was centered around Shi Qingxuan.

There was no room for himself.

Before, He Xuan thought the three tumors were an overblown political alliance.

Now, watching it through Shi Wudu’s memories—

He realizes that the friendship between the three was real. Even on Ling Wen’s end, when he had always assumed she was too cold blooded for such a thing.

But there’s a protective light in her eyes, when she’s around Shi Wudu.

Like an older sister, worried that her brother is trying to grow up a little too fast.

And she smacks Pei upside the head whenever his eyes linger a little too close or too long, even as he insists that his intentions are purely friendship.

She never believes that, but... Shi Wudu does.

Watching Pei slip away with a different woman on his arm every other day. A smile that aches as much as it irritates.

When he only ever sees the man with beautiful women, he assumes that's all that he wants.

And embarrassing teenage infatuations aside—

He enjoys his friendship with Pei.

His sense of humor. How a man with so much power still manages to remain in step with the rest of the world—not so far removed from the mortal he once was as other gods in the Heavenly Court.

And, despite what he said about bringing Shi Wudu along to dine with Ling Wen for the first time because he wanted her to have 'Intellectual Company,'—

Pei Ming is brilliant.

Irreverent at times, and maybe he should take himself a little more seriously, but...

Sometimes, they'll be eating dinner in the imperial city—and while Shi Wudu and Ling Wen are discussing politics—

(A subject Pei stubbornly refuses to speak on.)

—he'll notice him lazily doodling on a napkin from the corner of his eye.

It took him ages to realize what he was actually doing, at first taking it as some sort of mindless scribbling, fidgeting to take his mind off of the conversation—but it wasn't.

They were battle plans, for whatever war was going on in the mortal realm at the time.

And while they might have looked like basic sketches—in the hands of any general, they would have ended the war in question in one fell swoop.

“...Do you ever actually use those?” Shi Wudu asks him once, leaning over his shoulder to look.

Pei turns his head over so slightly, and when he does, a lock of Shi Wudu’s hair brushes over his cheek, soft as silk. The scent of the expensive soaps and oils the Water Master uses flooding his senses.

His fingers tighten slightly around his pen. “...No,” he snorts.

“Then why go to the trouble?” Shi Wudu muses, looking a little closer. “It seems rather thought out.”

“Nah,” Pei pushes the napkin aside, reaching for his wine. “Just a way of keeping my mind busy.”

Shi Wudu leans away, sitting back down in his seat.

“Well, I suppose that explains how you’ve won so many wars.”

It’s a lazy compliment, one that he expects Pei to crow with delight over, because Shi Wudu rarely gives praise, but—

He just drinks his wine, his gaze growing distant. “No one wins a war, Shui-Xiong.”

And in his eyes, Shi Wudu finds the most surprising thing about General Ming Guang.

“You just outlive everyone else.”

(That he’s a war hero who would rather never fight again.)

But not everyone shares Shi Wudu’s admiration for the general.

Namely, his little brother.

For some reason, he loathes Pei.

He even mentions as much, holding onto his elder brother’s sleeve one evening, glaring as he watches the martial god leave their palace.

“...Don’t be rude,” Shi Wudu scolds him, his voice stern. “He’s your senior.”

Shi Qingxuan shrinks a little under correction—after all, he always listens closely when his brother criticizes him, but...

"I just don't like him," the young man mutters, his eyes slightly narrowed. "He seems slimy."

Shi Wudu snorts, rolling his eyes. "There are worse things."

Many, many worse things.

Himself among them.

The memory shifts forward again—this time to a small meeting of gathered gods of relevance.

Ming Guang, Ling Wen, Xuan Zhen, Nan Yang, Yin Yu, Quan Yizhen, Shi Wudu—and the newly appointed and ascended Wind Master, Shi Qingxuan.

"Is this particularly important?" Xuan Zhen rolls his eyes, leaning back in his chair with his arms crossed—to which Nan Yang rolls his eyes.

"Your being here doesn't help either way, so why don't you just go?"

"HEY—!"

"Come now," Pei sighs, looking back and forth between the two. "You're both four centuries old. You know better than to bicker at an official meeting."

"Is it official?" Shi Qingxuan mumbles, giving him a sharp look. "The emperor isn't here."

(He seems resentful of the fact that Jun Wu's absence has left Pei as the de facto leader.)

"Shi Qingxuan," The Water Master gives him a stern look. "Enough."

"I'm just—"

"If you want to be invited to 'official' meetings in the future, I suggest holding your tongue."

His little brother sinks down in his seat, crossing his arms sulkily.

"...The emperor is indisposed," Ling Wen explains with a shrug. "But there is a relevant piece of news that the upper levels of the Heavens should be aware of—which is why we're here."

"And why is that?"

"The Kiln of Mount Tonglu has opened once more," Ling Wen explains, shuffling her papers. "And it would seem that a new Calamity has emerged."

That news sends a quiet hush across the table, anxieties silently spiking. "Hua Cheng didn't simply take the power for himself?"

Mu Qing seems disbelieving of that fact—as is expected.

Both Martial Gods of the South are on bad terms with Hua Cheng.

"It would seem not," Ling Wen shakes her head. "The new spirit that has emerged is the demon He Xuan."

The mention of that name gives the Water Master pause. "...Do we know anything about him?"

"It's too early to say," Ling Wen shakes her head. "We don't have any information on his mortal life. Who can even say if that's his original name?"

"So we don't even know if he's a threat?" Pei sighs, shaking his head. "That's comforting."

There's something eerie, watching a conversation about himself—his actual identity— among the gods he spent years among, pretending to be someone else.

"Well, Crimson Rain Sought Flower has been reclusive lately. Maybe he'll follow that trend." Pei points out.

Nan Yang and Xuan Zhen both seem a little rankled by the implication that Hua Cheng has been anything but low key.

Still, Ling Wen nods.

"The point is—until we know more, the Heavens should be on heightened alert. More patrols, surveillance—and everything that entails."

The meeting ends, and Shi Qingxuan seems eager to head off to some sort of party with some officials from the junior court—inviting Shi Wudu to go along, but his older brother declines.

"Shui-Xiong," the Water Master stops in the hall at the sound of Pei's voice. "Where are you off to?" He looks past Shi Wudu, in the direction he's headed. "The emperor doesn't take visitors in his private residence often.”

The younger god bites back nerves, shaking his head.

“I know—but…he summoned me,” he lies smoothly. “What can you do?”

As he continues on, He Xuan can feel it, permeating the air of the memory itself—

Just how deeply the Water Master regrets it.

He hasn’t spoken to Jun Wu privately all that often since his ascension, but…

When he steps through the doors to the imperial palace, he freezes.

“…Your majesty?”

The emperor has always been an imposing figure. Tall, composed, wearing gleaming jewels and armor, but now—

Now, Jun Wu is on his knees, facing away from him—hair loose down his back, his armor exchanged for a simple white robe.

And—

There’s something in the air that feels wrong.

Shi Wudu claps a hand over his mouth, a sudden shudder running over him as he tries to understand why—

Is that—?

Is that cursed energy? But what would resentment be doing here? And…

…Has the emperor always had a white streak in his hair?

Shi Wudu had no way of knowing what he was actually seeing. But He Xuan does. And here, in the Kiln—

It makes his blood run cold.

He whips his head around to look at the Water Master—who can’t hear him, can’t see him—

But Shi Wudu is only six years into his godhood, in this moment. Visibly an adult, but —

So horrifically young, in the face of what he's seeing.

So similar to the age *Xie Lian* was, when he stood before this creature.

And all He Xuan wants to do is to tell him to *run* .

But then, the creature turns it's head, and—

There's no face.

Just smooth skin where features should be.

Shi Wudu lets out a choked sound, stumbling backwards towards the door. A trained fighter, but—

There's a weight in the air.

Something that makes him feel sluggish.

He reaches into his belt, fumbling for his fan, looking around, because —

Where is the emperor? What is this creature, and why is it—

Slowly, a crack appears in that face.

Opening up to reveal a set of sharp, jagged teeth—and it snarls out one word:

"...Xianle?"

What?! That—

The laughing stock of the—?

Shi Wudu snaps his fan open, attempting to call on the water from the outside, but—

Nothing happens.

His spiritual device—

It's just stopped working.

That's when the creature starts to move.

Crawling towards him like a beast.

Slow at first, then faster—scrambling towards him as Shi Wudu fumbles for the door —trying again and again to summon water, wishing he still had his old weapons, but —

When you ascend, your equipment is provided by the emperor.

And this—

This is the first time He Xuan has ever heard Shi Wudu scream with genuine terror.

But the walls of the imperial residence seals the sound of it in.

No one will hear.

No one will come.

And when he pushes at the door—

It’s sealed shut.

But how—?

BANG!

Long, clawed fingers grip him by the hair—slamming his head into the door so forcefully—

Everything goes black.

He Xuan stands in the darkness, watching faint, blurred images. Distant sounds.

Someone slipping in and out of consciousness.

But one thing is heavy in the air.

Pain.

Overwhelming pain, terror, and—

And when the Water Master slowly begins to regain consciousness, his body aches everywhere.

In places he didn’t even know it was possible to hurt. His vision is still blurred—but he hears something. Two distinct voices.

One, he almost thinks is the emperor’s, but—he’s never heard Jun Wu sound like that.

Horrified.

“W...what the hell did you do?”

And another voice—low, snarling, the mere sound of it making him cringe, remembering—

Remembering how it called him ‘Xianle.’

“Don’t give me that, Wuyong. Don’t you mean what *we* did?”

Wu...

Shi Wudu’s head aches, stabbing pain ringing in his right temple.

... *Wuyong?*

Finally, his eyes blink open—coming into focus, and he’s...

In the Emperor’s bed.

Wearing clothes that aren’t his own.

Shi Wudu sits up quickly—instantly regretting it.

His head stabs with pain—and his spine feels like it’s about to split in half.

He falls back against the mattress with a pained whimper—a rare display, from someone with a naturally high pain tolerance.

If He Xuan were anything less than a calamity—Just watching this would make him vomit.

Because Shi Wudu is only half cognizant, but He Xuan—

He can see the deep impressions of teeth on the Water Master’s collar. Broken skin and vicious bruises.

What happened isn’t a mystery.

Except—

It is to him.

That's when He Xuan remembers, having lived out every single one of Shi Wudu's memories up until now—

He's never even...

"W...What happened?" The Water Master whispers hoarsely.

His throat hurts. Why—

Why is it so sore? He...

Jun Wu won't look at him.

Not at first.

And when he does...

He Xuan watches the emperor intently, noticing something so strange—but he can't figure out what the reason behind it could be.

For a moment—Jun Wu genuinely doesn't seem to know who the Water Master is. He doesn't recognize him.

Then, slowly, his eyes widen with understanding—and He Xuan can see so many emotions there.

Shame. Fear. Disgust. Guilt. Remorse.

Sadness.

And He Xuan has just used up a lifetime—a hundred lifetimes—worth of forgiveness.

He doesn't have any left for whatever the *fuck* this is.

In what universe does he get to feel *sad* , after what he just did?

"...I'm sorry," he mutters, hanging his head for a moment—one hand pressed against his face, hiding his expression.

Shi Wudu manages to sit up—he's in too much pain to do more than lean against the pillows.

"W...What?" He mutters, straining to remember, but his head feels so heavy. "I think..."

There's something about the confusion in his voice—the way he looks to the emperor for help, for guidance, that reminds He Xuan of the long forgotten presence of his heart.

Because it breaks.

“...I think I hit my head,” Shi Wudu whispers, holding a palm against his temple with a wince.

Jun Wu closes his eyes, taking a deep, unsteady breath through his nose. And when he opens them—his voice is calm.

Sympathetic.

“I wasn’t expecting visitors.”

He says that, as though it’s supposed to mean something to the young god—who only stares at him with confusion.

“...” Jun Wu pushes his fingers through his hair.

Wearing the imperial robes that Shi Wudu is accustomed to seeing him wearing. No white streak in his hair.

“...Things come out when the Kiln opens. Things we don’t yet understand.”

Shi Wudu doesn’t say a word—but the muscles in his jaw tremble. “...What...was that thing?”

Jun Wu stares straight ahead, his eyes focused on the wall.

“A monster.”

“Why...” Shi Wudu swallows, wincing. “Why was it here?”

“...The Kiln doesn’t always produce a fully formed Ghost King,” the emperor explains quietly. “Sometimes, it spits out a half formed beast. Without intelligence, or self control. But by studying them, we can learn more about the enemy.”

Shi Wudu reaches down to touch his throat, only to have Jun Wu take his hand, gently lowering it down into his lap.

That’s—

That’s when he sees that both of his wrists are black and blue, swollen with bruises.

But if he looks too close—

He'll have to think about why.

He looks away sharply—finding Jun Wu's face to be a less horrifying option.

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"My wards were powerful enough to lock it inside my palace, and..."

Shi Wudu falls silent, guilt rising in his throat.

Jun Wu wasn't expecting guests.

That's—

That's why the door wouldn't open.

Why Shi Wudu's powers wouldn't work.

And to be fair—there aren't many gods who would dare enter the Imperial Palace uninvited.

"...Where is it now?"

"I returned to find it attacking you—and I killed it."

It—

It's gone.

Shi Wudu closes his eyes, schooling his fear and pain down into a smooth mask, his breaths evening out.

He Xuan's stomach turns with nausea as he watches—

"I'm sorry for interfering."

As he watches Shi Wudu *apologize* .

"You didn't know." Jun Wu assures him softly. "It's my fault, for not monitoring it properly. You have my deepest apologies."

Shi Wudu doesn't answer at first, and when he does, he only asks—in the smallest voice—the only time He Xuan has heard him sound so beaten—

"...What did it do to me?"

It takes a long time for Jun Wu to answer. And when he does, he doesn't look at him.

"...Ghosts consume each other when the Kiln opens in order to gain power," he mutters. "It was most likely going to devour you."

And the worst part of it all is the *relief* on Shi Wudu's face.

"I should go to Xuan Zhen," he mutters, trying to sit up. "I've already —"

Jun Wu's hand lands on his shoulder, pushing him back down.

"It's alright," the emperor shakes his head, hands glowing with spiritual power as he attends to the Water Master's wounds. "I've got you."

And it's—

It feels like a kindness, at the time.

Because he's a prideful person at his core—and he's—

He's unable to shake the sense of humiliation that he placed himself in such a position. That he had been so incapable of defending himself.

What Jun Wu's doing...

It feels like a kindness.

And as the memories shift forward, He Xuan watches with growing horror as the relationship between the Emperor and the Water Master begins to shift.

More and more time spent alone together. Teaching Shi Wudu more about cultivation —

Among other things.

The first time Jun Wu kissed him was during a mid-autumn festival, after the winners of the Battle of the Lanterns had been announced.

Pei came in second that year—which, after so many years of one winner, had come to be celebrated as a victory.

When Shi Wudu had made to descend from the balcony he had been watching from with the emperor, intending to find and congratulate him—Jun Wu stopped him.

He wasn't necessarily upset by the gesture.

It's an incredibly flattering thing, to have someone so powerful want you.

It catered to his ego, maybe.

Made him feel attended to. Special.

In the beginning—there absolutely were perks that came with being the emperor's favorite.

And Jun Wu—he was patient, back then.

There were moments when he was even kind.

But He Xuan isn't watching a love story

More like he's watching someone being lured into the belly of the beast—with absolutely no idea that he's being devoured.

As Jun Wu's grip over him tightens, his power grows. His wealth becomes even more immense. The admiration and envy of others becomes enormous.

Who would try to get away from that?

Who would want to?

But with every passing year—the invisible chains around him grow tighter.

Escape becomes less and less likely.

Eventually, Shi Wudu asks him the question that's been gnawing on his mind—

If Blackwater Sinking Ships, the demon He Xuan, and the man whose fate he stole, are one in the same.

And He Xuan watches Jun Wu lie.

Pulling Shi Wudu back to bed, whispering falsehoods in his ear.

That He Xuan took his own life years ago.

That the secret is only between them.

Being around Jun Wu brings out a colder side of him.

Not so different from the child forced into stone faced silence by the Reverend of Empty Words.

And maybe, if nothing had changed, he would have been completely lost. Becoming a true Water Tyrant, cold hearted to the core.

But two centuries into Shi Wudu's godhood—his life reaches an invariable crossroads. A point where it permanently shifted.

During a patrol in the North.

Elemental Masters don't normally participate in such things—but circumstances were unique.

The younger martial gods sent along were woefully unprepared. And unfortunately...

One of them had offended a powerful local demon. The group was so severely set upon, General Ming Guang was sent to rescue them. And even in his own territory— he struggled.

Which was odd.

"Ming Guang?!" One of the deputy gods calls out to him, struggling to push back a horde of spirits. "What's going on?!"

The General grits his teeth, two balls of flame appearing in either hand. It's strange.

Pei Ming should be at peak strength, here.

Gusu is less than half a day's ride away.

And yet—he doesn't feel it.

Instead, he feels—

A void.

"Just get behind me," he mutters, eyes narrowed as he fires off two shots, each exploding with force into the hordes ahead.

Inflicting great damage—but not enough.

“...Has Nan Yang replied to either of you?”

“Ah, we tried calling him in the array, but...” One of them trails off, sheepish.

Even his newly appointed deputy, Pei Xiu, seems slightly embarrassed to say it:

“He’s fighting with Xuan Zhen in the main square again.”

Ah.

Perfect.

Just fucking perfect. The ONE time he needs help, and they’re in the middle of fucking foreplay—

‘No need to panic,’ Ling Wen speaks up in their private array. *‘I was able to convince reinforcements to come to your aid.’*

Not particularly comforting, considering Pei was sent to the situation as reinforcements to begin with, but—

GONG!

The sound of a bell rings loudly throughout the valley, the moon burning more brightly than Pei has ever seen it, nearly as intense as daylight.

That’s when he sees her.

A raven haired woman in elegant white robes trimmed with silver silk, pearls braided into her hair.

And Pei Ming—

He frozen, jaw hanging open in abject shock as she strides forward, unsheathing a sword from her waist, realizing—

Is that—a goddess?

“Miss—” He starts, extending a hand to stop her. He knows every single woman in the Heavenly Court—

(Most carnally, and a few in passing.)

—and none of them (aside from Yushi Huang, but she certainly isn't her) could handle this. Even a martial god—

BOOM!

With one swipe of the blade, the moonlight shining down upon the valley seems to catch ablaze—incinerating the ghosts around them in Heavenly Flame.

That—

Pei stops, his mouth still hanging open, watching as the demonic forces around them are reduced by half.

Enough of a blow that the deputy gods are finally able to swoop in, securing the situation without being immediately overwhelmed.

"..." The dark haired woman lets out a tired sigh, slipping her blade back into its sheath. "I never thought I'd be rescuing a senior like you."

Pei snaps out of it, a surprised laugh slipping from his chest. "Oh, don't go an make me sound like an old man, not in front of such a beautiful young—"

She turns to look at him, and when he sees a familiar set of sapphire eyes—he chokes from the shock.

"...SHUI-XIONG?!"

That heart-stoppingly gorgeous face twists into a scowl, and suddenly one manicured palm is shoved against his chest, sending him back against a tree trunk.

"Would you keep your voice down, you idiot?! You think I *want* people to know I descended in this form?!"

Pei Ming stares back at her, struck dumb.

"Why?" He questions, watching her with naked awe. "I like this form."

Shi Wudu rolls her eyes, "Of course *you* like it," she mutters, eyes flickering back towards the others. "But my brother already has a reputation for..."

Clearly, she doesn't want to give the rest of the Heavens the impression that it's a family tradition. Which Pei Ming finds silly, coming from someone who achieves perfection in any gender she's in.

"...Then why use this form at all?"

She sniffs, hiding her face behind her sleeve.

"There's no river or ocean nearby," She mutters. "But it's a full moon, so..."

Right.

Pei had forgotten that some sects had begun to worship the Water Master as goddess of the moon, recently.

"...Well," he clears his throat, resisting the urge to slap his cheeks in an effort to pull himself together. "Thank you for going to such lengths to assist me. And..." His eyes drift over her face. "Allowing me to witness this form."

Shi Wudu rolls her eyes.

"You speak as though it's such a privilege..." She mutters, jewels clinking as she spins around, preparing to change back and return to the Heavens, knowing the deputies have it well in hand now, but...

Pei catches her by the wrist.

"It is."

Shi Wudu stops in mid-step.

Facing away from him—and as such, he can't see how wide her eyes have become.

"In any form you're in," he adds, watching the back of her head.

Her fingers are limp in his grip, and— Shi Wudu bites her lip.

Still, her voice comes out as calm as ever. Frigid, even.

"Between how many women you have in your life, I'm surprised you ever had time to spare a look," she mutters, tugging at her wrist.

And watching her face now, He Xuan realizes. She—

"...It's always been him, hasn't it?"

Her eyes slip over to him.

No one else can see or hear him, but— These are Shi Wudu's memories, after all. And the answer is clear in her eyes.

(Yes.)

Pei still doesn't let her go, not yet.

And when he speaks—

He Xuan has never heard him like that before. Not in all of his years posing as Ming Yi.

"No matter who I'm with, or what I'm doing," Pei murmurs, his thumb sliding over the inside of her wrist, feeling how her pulse thrones beneath her skin.

"I am *always* looking at you."

(It has always been Pei.)

He's flirted before. Expressed interest countless times.

But this is the first time Shi Wudu has been too undone to stop herself from reacting.

It's unfair.

Her walls are heavy, no one ever seems to get past them, but Pei—

He unfolds her so easily.

"..."

She glances back at the general over her shoulder, and finally, he sees.

Sees the ache in her eyes.

Everything that she's holding back.

Now—

Pei sees how badly she wants him in return.

And she half expects to be pushed back against a tree, or yanked forward into an embrace, but—

Pei lets her go.

She clutches her wrist to her chest as if burned.

"...Are you toying with me?" She mutters, looking away from him.

"No."

"Then I don't—"

"Privileges aren't taken," Pei's reply is simple, but it makes Shi Wudu freeze. "They're given."

It takes Shi Wudu time to understand.

He lays in bed that night after returning to the Heavens, thinking. It's easy to see how so many women have fallen into his bed. It's—

It's more than just good looks.

And in this case...

The choice has been left entirely up to him. A hand extended—all he has to do is take it.

And with every sweet exchange of words, stolen glance, and brush of hands under the table—it's harder and harder not to justify it.

Shi Wudu has always been goal oriented. Focused on protecting his brother. On becoming a more powerful official. Maintaining his position.

All of those things are about survival, but he—

He's never *wanted* something like this before.

And he's never enjoyed being kissed, or being intimate with someone up until now, and yet—

It feels like he won't be alive until he knows what Pei's lips feel like against his own.

He Xuan is surprised, watching as someone who has scoffed at Shi Qingxuan's female form countless times, approaches Pei in such a way willingly.

Appearing in the entrance to his palace one evening—alone. Not saying a word when he sees her, just shoving him back against a pillar.

It's a kiss that she'll always wish was her first.

She's never been held like that before.

Cradled in someone's arms, kissed with every ounce of someone's attention. As though the only thing in the world that could possibly matter was her. And Shi Wudu—

She hadn't known that it could be like this.

That she could be clinging to an embrace, head spinning.

That the only thing she might dread was that he might stop.

And Pei—

He must be assuming that she's a virgin, because he's so careful with her—patient, gentle.

And she doesn't correct him, because—

She wishes now that she had been.

And, since this is her first time being with someone in this form—she tells herself that it counts.

There's a spellbinding moment of blinding ecstasy, so sudden, she's actually startled. Pei Ming actually has to explain to her that it was a climax—which startles her.

After all, she's been someone's lover for two centuries now. She's reached that point. As a man, it's impossible to miss.

But she never knew that they could feel like *that* .

And once she realizes, her nails claw into Pei Ming's shoulders, dragging him up to kiss her.

She keeps pulling him back over and over again, drunk on the rush of his mouth.

"Again," she whispers, tightening her thighs around his hips, demanding. "Again."

And who is General Ming Guang, to deny a demand from the Water Tyrant?

In the early stages of their affair, she only ever approaches his bed in her female form—and it doesn't take Pei long to discern why.

That Shi Wudu is presuming that Pei would only want him in *that* state, and he–

He's always been a proud man, preferring to appear in the form in which he'll be accepted–in which he'll be *desired*– than risk the blow that comes with rejection.

It takes coaxing, reassurances, and the first time he returns to his original form, astride the general's lap in his bed—

Pei smiles, reaching up to cup Shi Wudu's cheek in his hand, stroking his thumb over the water god's jaw.

"There you are," he murmurs, eyes warm.

Shi Wudu's eyes drift to the side, sheepish, but too proud to say so.

Always *so* proud.

Pei's thumb strokes over kiss swollen lips, his chin, the curve of his cheek.

He doesn't mind making space for that pride.

It's better than the self loathing.

"Gods, you're so..."

Shi Wudu is silent, desperate for the last word in that sentence—

But Pei just leans up on his elbows, kissing him until he melts, sinking back down into the sheets with him.

Learning that it wasn't that he preferred being with someone in his female form, it was just—

Pei.

He just wants—

It's just better, with him.

From then on, when they're intimate, it's nearly always in his true form. And He Xuan—

He had surmised before, that the two were having an affair.

He had even realized that Pei Ming was in love with the Water Master. But he never...

He never realized how deeply Shi Wudu loved him in return.

And the Water Master's affection is a ferocious thing.

He's seen it, through Shi Qingxuan. Always resented it. Found it controlling, overprotective, and arrogant.

It's harder to say that, now.

Seeing the way Shi Wudu watches Pei sometimes, after he falls asleep.

Pressed against his side, feeling every breath that he takes, chin resting on his chest.

Those are the only times that he ever says it, knowing it can't be overheard.

Whispering those words in the dark.

Pei never gets to hear them: not even once.

And this is the part of Shi Wudu that might be the easiest for Blackwater to understand.

Because the Water Master has too many secrets, and if they were all out...

He doesn't think he could be loved in spite of them.

But even falling in love—so deeply, so fiercely—cannot erase every other pain.

It can't untangle the knot tightening around him, one that he's been unable to escape for far too long now.

He Xuan—

He never meant to see this.

And he can feel Shi Wudu clawing for dear life, even if it's impossible to stop it, because—

Because no one else should have to see this.

Not unless he wants to share it.

Finally, He Xuan understands that reaction before. Begging for death, rather than going through this.

Because—

'I'm NOT GOING THROUGH THAT AGAIN!'

He's reliving it.

Not just once.

The first time he tries to end things with the emperor, it's guilt and threats that drag him back in.

He doesn't say no, when he's pulled to bed.

But he shouldn't have to.

There was never love in the beginning—but there was security. A mutual benefit. Jun Wu was different. And Shi Wudu—

He hadn't experienced better, and didn't expect it.

But now, it's not just settling in exchange for power.

Now, it's enduring a constant stream of cruelty.

And Shi Wudu doesn't always make the most sympathetic victim.

That shouldn't *matter* , and yet.

He's spiteful, snide, and superior.

That doesn't mean he deserves what's being done to him.

But it makes people less likely to perceive him as someone in need of help.

And to those like Pei, who know the more vulnerable parts of him—

He fights tooth and nail to hide a single sign of trouble.

He Xuan loses track of how many times he watches Jun Wu place cursed shackles upon the Water Master, forcing him to submit before he'll let him go.

But, since the first time, the experience the Water Master has spent several centuries fiercely denying the existence of—

He was never violently forced. Even if Jun Wu raised a hand to him more than once. It was always threats. Manipulation.

Emotionally terrorizing Shi Wudu until he got what he wanted.

Until the last time.

When Shi Wudu one time too many—but He Xuan doesn't think that's what made the difference.

It was the fact that he did it in front of Xie Lian. That seemed to push it over the edge.

Using a spell to lock Shi Wudu's speech, pacing before his throne in the Grand Martial Hall, staring at the Water Master with open contempt.

"After the things you've done..."

Jun Wu's voice echoes in his ears, weighing Shi Wudu down. Making his shoulders tremble.

"How dare you act like a victim?"

And He Xuan can't stop trembling, watching the emperor with deepening hate.

Resentment so vicious, the hatred he held before feels like a shadow in comparison.

The things Shi Wudu has done?

The things Jun Wu taught him now to do?

Using He Xuan's pain—what his family experienced—something he was a direct cause of—

And using it to guilt his accomplice. As though he had no part in it.

Jun Wu steps close to the Water God's back, leaning down to whisper in his ear. “Why don’t you pray to him, hmm?”

The Emperor murmurs, his breath fanning across the side of his neck. “I haven’t stopped you. Go on. Ask him to help you.”

But he knows—Shi Wudu won’t.

Even if he was willing to put Pei in further danger by pitting him against the Emperor.

Even if he thought it was possible that Pei might win—

That would require admitting to the things he has spent centuries fighting to hide.

Fingers brush his hair back over his shoulder, and when lips press against his throat, the Water God cringes, wishing desperately that someone might walk back through that door. That someone might see them like this, but—

The only person that can see them cannot help him.

“I have never forced anything on you.” Jun Wu murmurs against his skin. The touch is gentle, but it rings with a subtle violence.

“But clearly, you need to learn the difference.”

Even if they had never done this—even if Shi Wudu had still Ben his worst enemy—

He wouldn’t have taken any joy in seeing this.

Even in all of the memories that Shi Wudu has seen from him—

His family. His losses. His death.

Mount Tonglu.

The years of wandering alone, devouring any ghost or demon he could get his hands on—but never satisfying that hunger.

How many countless men and women he’s had in his own bed over the years. Which somehow feels like an overly brutal comparison to the man witnessing it.

Even when he found Ming Yi.

A brilliant young architect born to wealth and privilege. A future that was endlessly bright.

Destined to ascend—and likely to be placed high within the heavens.

There was just one little problem.

Ming Yi's most successful projects—that which gained him the most fame—

They weren't his own.

He Xuan learned as much when a young, mortal woman found her way into his bed.

A promising architect herself—though her success had the most painful hindrance of all—

Being born the wrong gender.

For her to even be considered for a position, she was asked to submit a trial schematic to the Royal architect—which she did.

She never got the position—but a few months later, she saw it. The palace she designed, right down to the studs—

All credited to Ming Yi, not her.

And at the time—

He Xuan had been particularly sensitive to the concept of building your success upon someone else's losses.

But now, looking upon so many lives with a newfound, harsh perspective—

Ming Yi was no killer.

He never raised his hand to anyone.

He made a few selfish choices. At his worst, he was a thief.

And with that shallow form of justification— He Xuan enacted the harshest punishment.

If there was fairness, he could have simply revealed what Ming Yi had done. Or forced him to credit the designs he took.

Four, to be precise. Out of an entire career.

Large, successful projects, but still.

Just four.

But He Xuan wasn't interested in fairness. He simply wanted a means of enacting his wrath that allowed him to cling to his self righteousness.

At the time, it felt like reclaiming some amount of power.

As though he was enacting divine retribution—but not for Ming Yi's crime.

And maybe that wouldn't have bothered him before, when he pursued vengeance at any and all costs.

But now...

He watches Ming Yi suffer.

Year in and year out.

Locked in the depths of Blackwater Manor. Repenting over and over again, suffering beyond the scale of his mistakes.

Before, when he had so thoroughly dehumanized him, He Xuan never spared his begging a second thought.

He was a thief, and now he was being stolen from.

That was fair. That was what he deserved.

But even then—

He Xuan thinks he must have known that it was wrong.

And he only justified it by telling himself that the charade wouldn't last long. That all he needed was an opening. To lure the water master in.

Then, when all of it was said and done—Ming Yi would get his godhood, and He Xuan —

He would find peace. But that didn't happen.

And for so long, He Xuan blamed timing. Blamed the Heavens for being so secretive. Blamed Hua Cheng, for the information he demanded to settle his debts.

But now, it's clear:

He had so many chances to kill the Water Master.

For years, in fact.

But he dragged his feet.

All for one reason, something he couldn't admit at the time—

But now, it's so obvious.

Shi Qingxuan.

Every day he kept Ming Yi locked up was another day that He Xuan could be him. Could live his life.

Even when he pretended to loathe it, finally, after so many years...

He had things that he was looking forward to. Even if he never said so. Days spent being dragged here and there, always complaining, and yet... Passing through these memories, they both see the same thing:

The slow evolution of compromises that He Xuan made with himself.

Simply allowing himself to be friends with Shi Qingxuan.

And later, even more.

When Shi Wudu learned the truth between them, he had been so sure that it was part of He Xuan's plan. That she had been a means to an end, one he could easily discard.

But not anymore.

And still. Seeing all of that. All of his mistakes, all of his pain, regrets, and sorrows—

Even as their memories reach the present, having lived out the entirety of the other's lives—

He Xuan can't compare any of that to what he watched the emperor do.

Even if he couldn’t have known what he was going to see, when he brought them here. Even if it was necessary.

Even if he deserved most of it, he—

Finally, the white walls and endless ceilings of the Kiln appear before them again.

—he didn’t deserve that.

No one does.

The Successor

Chapter Summary

He Xuan brought Shi Wudu here to force himself into forgiveness, into letting go of the resentment that could poison his own future, if he allowed it.

And it worked.

But now...he's left not knowing how to feel.

Not sure what the person he's staring at is to him anymore.

Not an enemy. Not a stranger. Not a friend.

Chapter Notes

Content Warning: this chapter contains violence, victim blaming, and I would suggest taking all of the tags in this story into account before reading this chapter, because it covers extremely difficult subject matter. Please continue with caution.

This is a playlist I made(that is in roughly chronological order) that covers the arc with He Xuan and Shi Wudu in the kiln.

This is the song that inspired this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He Xuan staggers slightly—unsure of how long it's been.

Hours.

Maybe even days.

Shi Wudu is still chained to the floor, arms torn and bruised from countless attempts at breaking free.

And after all of that—he only says one thing.

"Don't...don't tell anyone."

Not about what Shi Wudu has done. That secret is already out. He doesn't care.

Not about the fact that they came here.

Not even about Shi Wudu and Pei, no.

His shoulders hunch, his body wracked so violently with silent shame as he pleads—

“Please, just—d...don’t tell...”

“...I won’t,” he replies quietly, watching as the Water Master slumps with relief, sagging in his chains.

Bonds that slip away from his wrists with a clatter, now that He Xuan has no reason to hold him down.

And if He Xuan feels exhausted, all the way to the bone…

Shi Wudu looks hollow.

Eyes staring blankly ahead, hair having fallen down from its ties, hanging loosely about his shoulders.

Like a man facing his execution, and yet—he’s been given mercy. Except...

He’s not sure if this could actually be called that.

“...I didn’t...” He Xuan starts, then stops, feeling somewhat lost.

He brought Shi Wudu here to force himself into forgiveness, into letting go of the resentment that could poison his own future, if he allowed it.

And it worked.

But now...he’s left not knowing how to feel.

Not sure what the person he’s staring at is to him anymore.

Not an enemy. Not a stranger. Not a friend.

“...I didn’t know,” he mutters finally, looking away.

Which is obvious. They never would have been here if he had, but—

“Neither did I,” Shi Wudu whispers. “But...Shi Qingxuan was right.”

He Xuan looks over at him sharply, startled, and Shi Wudu—

He shakes his head, wiping his hands down his face.

“She was always telling me…”

That ‘Ming-Xiong’ was amazing. Echoing his good qualities constantly.

He Xuan knows that now.

He saw.

“…I honestly think…” He Xuan stares, the words feeling so alien, coming out of his mouth. He’s become so accustomed to anger, to only seeing the worst in people. “If things had been different, we could have been….”

He isn’t used to looking at someone, and seeing their better angels.

Especially not him.

Shi Wudu’s lips quirk tiredly as he looks up at him.

“No point in worrying about that. We’ll never…”

His words trail off, and even the ghost of a smile on his face begins to fade.

His eyes grow so wide, He Xuan’s first instinct is to look behind him, half expecting the emperor or a twisted, mangled beast to pop out of the floor after that expression, but—

They’re alone.

And when he looks back at the Water Master once more—

His eyes are glazed over.

The Kiln—

It’s showing him something.

But—what would it be showing him, but not He Xuan?

“…Wudu?” He mutters, a term of such familiarity feeling so alien on his lips, but not so much so as the ‘ge’ that manages to slip from him before he claps a hand over his mouth.

Force of habit, after witnessing four centuries of Shi Qingxuan calling him that—all in the span of what only could have been two days, maybe—

Maybe three.

It doesn't last long—he's out of it for only a solid minute.

Long enough for He Xuan to kneel in front of him, shaking his shoulders, trying to snap him out of it, and—

Looking over his shoulder, he finally does see someone.

Not the emperor, or any of his forms. Not one of the wandering beasts the Kiln tends to attract.

No—

Standing before him, at the entrance to the Kiln, is someone that he thought he would never see again.

Long raven hair, swaying gently about her waist in the breeze. Robes of black, red, and gold, and eyes—

Eyes that burn like alchemical flame, violet under the kiln's light.

The Guoshi of Tonglu. The Queen of Wuyong.

The—

The Goddess of the Kiln.

Watching her youngest child—the last Ghost King she forged.

"...What are you doing here?" He whispers, his jaw slack.

Zhao Beitong does not reply.

"Are you..." He looks back at Wudu, staring blankly ahead. "...Are you doing this?!"

"No." Her answer is so sudden, ringing with such finality, it leaves him startled. "I did not do this, He Sheng."

She simply stands there, watching him with such—

Such care. Pride. Remorse.

Such sorrow.

Almost as though she's bearing witness.

Part of her lives on in He Xuan, as a result of his time in the Kiln—the process of becoming a Ghost King. But not as substantial as what resides in Hua Cheng.

He's never heard her voice, since then. Never seen her. Never felt her presence. Not even in the times that he's returned to the Kiln since.

So, why now?

That doesn't—

There's a rattling gasp from behind him as Shi Wudu snaps out of it, falling forward until he catches himself with his hands, and he—

Tears are falling down his face.

He whispers something under his breath, and at first—He Xuan doesn't understand it.

Not until he says it again, this time with more desperation.

"It's...it's not enough."

Over and over again.

It's not enough.

It's not enough.

It's not enough.

He Xuan grabs him by the shoulders again, giving him a harsh shake.

"Snap out of it," he mutters, looking him in the eye. "What did it show you?"

The Water Master is trembling so violently, it's hard to keep a grip on him, even though he isn't struggling.

Though finally, when he does manage to regain enough focus—his eyes settle on He Xuan's.

Filled with such profound remorse, it leaves Blackwater speechless.

"...You..." He whispers, his voice cracked and hoarse after everything they've been through. "You're...a good person."

The way he says that—it sends the hairs on the back of He Xuan's neck standing up.

And then—he looks up, his eyes loathing as he stares at the vast, endless ceilings above.

"...Take it," he mutters, his voice hollow.

So tired, but building with strength as he cries;

"THAT'S WHAT YOU WANTED, ISN'T IT?!" He glares, tears falling faster, and—

He Xuan knows exactly who he's speaking to.

"Don't—!"

"I DON'T WANT IT ANYMORE!"

He Xuan feels his stomach plunging, trying to stop him, realizing in this moment of frantic panic—

Because Shi Wudu's godhood—it's too powerful of a gift to give up. In what's to come, with the enemy they're facing—that could make the difference. They need—

But unlike before, when Shi Qingxuan offered her own divinity—
Nothing happens.

No reply is given.

Only silence.

A low, frustrated moan rips from Shi Wudu's throat.

Not unlike a wounded animal, caught in a snare.

Begging for release.

"YOU...YOU TOLD ME I KNEW HOW TO GET OUT!" He screams so loud, it vibrates against the walls of the Kiln.

"Wait—"

"YOU TOLD ME!" Shi Wudu sobs. "YOU—!"

He wrenches from He Xuan's grip, standing up unsteadily.

"YOU SAID—!"

Then, he cuts off, his voice breaking in a pained yelp as he falls to his knees once more.

He Xuan is by his side, reaching to help him, when—

When he sees it.

His stomach twisting with anger and nausea.

Growing around the Water Master's throat like a dark bruise, ancient characters winding together like black ink—sealing him in. A—

A cursed shackle.

He Xuan stares, his mouth hanging open with shock, and Shi Wudu...

He clutches his throat, his breaths coming faster.

"No..."

Shi Wudu claws at his throat, trying to stumble forward, not even sure where he would go, there's nowhere to run, but—

CLANG!

He falls to his knees again, this time—

Feeling that weight sealing around his ankle, dragging him down.

He Xuan has watched him endure this more times now than he can count, but—

Not like this.

This—

This feels permanent.

Shi Wudu clutches at his throat, clenching his teeth.

"*.. .No.*"

This time, he doesn't just say it—he *snarls* it, so vehemently, it rips from his throat.

“...Look,” He Xuan starts, reaching out to grab his shoulder, his voice rising in pitch from emotion, watching what’s happening to him. “I know it hurts, but it—I—!”

Shi Wudu heaves breaths faster and faster, his knees wobbling. It hurts.

It—

It *hurts*.

“I can fix it,” He Xuan explains, holding onto his shoulder even tighter, trying to make him listen—trying to make him see.

Here, in the Kiln—he remembers how.

“Crimson Rain and I, we had a plan for the Crown Prince, I—if we can help him, we can—!”

It hurts.

It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts...it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS!!!!

“Look at me,” He Xuan pulls at him, trying to shake him out of it, watching as that final shackle begins to form—slower than the other, the blues Water Master’s eyes burning, filling with black. “I can make it better, I—”

He’s come this far.

“...I can *fix it,”* he pleads.

But it’s the words that finally slip from Shi Wudu’s lips that make him stop. That make him feel cold, his heart, his—

It’s aching.

Shi Wudu pushes him back, rising to his feet again. Not calm—that isn’t the right word.

Tired.

“...I don’t want to get better,” he croaks.

He's so, *so* tired.

And it's not enough.

There's something in his hand—and even as his vision grows blurry, he can see that name etched into the handle.

He—

He looks toward the ceiling one last time.

He knows how to get out.

He Xuan only sees it too late.

Only when, quick as a snake, Shi Wudu's hand flies up to his throat—
And Blackwater sees the flash of a blade.

"...WAIT—!"

But, like every other time in his life—

Shi Wudu does not hesitate.

CRASH!

The air is filled with this sharp, cracking sound.

The sound of a cursed shackle shattering.

Shi Wudu's knees hit the ground hard, but he doesn't fall.

No.

He's being held.

Cradled in the arms of his oldest enemy.

And he can't—

He can't breathe.

He Xuan falls back to the ground, trying—

Trying to fix it.

His hand pressing over the slash in the Water God's throat, sending spiritual power into the wound as quickly as he can, as much as he can spare, but—

But nothing happens.

And he—

He doesn't understand.

(Of course—he wouldn't. That day, when Pei Ming brought that blade before the emperor, 'Ming Yi' was already imprisoned in Paradise Manor. Mourning the death of the true earth master, even if he didn't show it—with Ren Song in the corner, drenched in blood and guilt.

Hua Cheng snarling in his face, uttering those words he paid no mind to back then.)

(What's left of you, after?)

"...No," Blackwater chokes, tightening his hand around Shi Wudu's throat, desperate to stop the blood that's pouring down. "You—!"

(What's left of you, He Sheng?)

"You don't—you don't get to do that!"

Shi Wudu's eyes stare up at him blearily, the shackles that were once forming slowly fading.

Overhead, the sky rumbles.

"You—!" He Xuan rocks back, one arm clutching the Water Master to his chest—

Weeping.

Weeping for *him* .

"You BASTARD, you don't—!" His face presses against the top of Shi Wudu's head, fighting to resolve the swirling emotions in his chest.

Anger.

Hurt.

Confusion.

Sorrow.

'You don't get to make me care about you, and then—'

And then just *leave* .

Shi Wudu's lungs feel tight.

There's this bubbling wetness sliding down his throat. More blood than he can swallow, choking him—

Drowning him.

But that—

His head slumps to the side, his cheek pressed against He Xuan's chest. He thinks that might be okay, actually.

Isn't that how these stories usually end?

Every act of selfishness—every moment he wore himself down, telling himself his heart was made of stone, that he could do anything, could endure anything—All for Shi Qingxuan—

A debt was growing.

Maybe his life isn't enough.

Maybe all he's ever done is watched the world through the crack in a wardrobe door, lying to himself.

Saying that he wasn't afraid of it.

But now—

He feels something tugging at the edges of his soul.

Pulling him down.

Towards rest.

This—

More blood lands on his cheek—this time, from the tears He Xuan is shedding.

This is how fairy tales end.

The villain slain—the hero avenged.

There's—

There's nothing to cry about, really.

He got more than he deserved.

So many years with his sister.

He fell in love.

To him, it—

It feels more than fair.

But to He Xuan—

This is the cruelest fate imaginable. The kind of pain he hasn't felt since he drowned, all of those centuries ago.

The kind of pain that makes you scream from your soul, wishing the sky would shatter.

Families are terrifying things.

Not formed by blood or obligation—but by ties so strong, they can't be cut.

And oh, how they hurt one another, even as they grow together.

Cycles of love, hate, and forgiveness. Constantly being reborn as a new version of yourself.

But that bond remains, even if you wish you could let go, even if it hurts.

Because it's yours, and it is a part of you.

He Xuan feels a soft pressure against his cheek.

Shi Wudu's hand.

And when he pulls back to look into the Water Master's eyes;

He understands.

Why a man who clawed tooth and nail his entire life, surviving against all odds, can let go now.

Because he knows Pei Ming will keep his promise, yes, but—

He also knows that there is someone left behind who loves his sister just as fiercely as he did.

That he'll keep her safe.

But He Xuan—

He—

He isn't ready. Even after surviving so much. After enduring loss after loss—

He isn't ready to feel that again.

And when Shi Wudu sees that pain in his eyes—his fingers press against his cheek with one last burst of fading strength.

'It's okay.'

He can't speak, but he mouths those words as the last of the color drains from his face.

As his hand falls from He Xuan's cheek.

'It's okay.'

His eyes roll back, slowly sliding shut.

Ba-bump.

He Xuan trembles as the Water Master goes limp in his arms.

Ba-bump.

Then—silence.

Horrible, aching silence.

No one ever tells you that it's possible to mourn the absence of a sound.

To feel how far beyond the point of no return you have gone—with a life crumbling to ash in your arms.

And oh, how Blackwater weeps.

Having achieved everything that he wanted, everything he told himself he needed, to be at peace.

Only to realize that the man he's holding was never a monster.

Monsters don't exist.

Only people who make monstrous choices.

The man in his arms was never his enemy.

Not really.

They were both just children.

They were sons. They were friends. They were—

Older brothers.

Each swept up in a current that was never of their own making.

And it—

It drowned them both.

"...Why didn't you stop me?"

His voice sounds hollow to his own ears.

Stripped raw.

Zhao Beitong hasn't moved from where she stands, watching her creation with such sorrow.

"No one could have stopped this, He Sheng."

Maybe—

Maybe she's right.

Hua Cheng tried.

Shi Qingxuan tried.

Even Xie Lian, however unintentionally, tried.

He Xuan couldn't have stopped.

Couldn’t have forgiven him. Not until—

Not until he knew him. Until he suffered with him. Until he…

He Xuan closes his eyes, rocking back and forth, clutching him close.

He Xuan didn’t do this.

Shi Wudu didn’t do this.

His arm tightens around the Water Master’s back, and while his face is pressed into Shi Wudu’s hair—his eyes lift up.

Narrowed.

Burning with hate.

Seeing it with such vicious clarity.

Jun Wu.

Jun Wu did this.

His fingers dig into Shi Wudu’s back.

And Blackwater will make him *bleed* for it.

No matter how long he has to wait.

No matter what he has to endure.

“…”

His hand comes up, smoothing the back of Shi Wudu’s hair as he lowers him to the floor of the Kiln.

“What will you do now?” Zhao Beitong asks him softly.

“…What I have to,” he mutters.

His palm presses against Shi Wudu’s cheek, wiping the blood away.

Then, he rises to his feet—

His palms glowing with magic, deep blue light illuminating the slain God’s pale, unmoving face.

“Rest now, gege.”

The secret Shi Wudu begged him to keep weighs deep in his heart.

His own weight to live with, now.

“I won’t let him touch you—not ever again.”

Because he’s watched Jun Wu enough to know what he’ll do.

That he wouldn’t risk a surviving witness—even as a ghost.

If he gets a hand on the body—the ashes—

He’ll scatter Shi Wudu’s remains.

He Xuan doubts that he’ll linger on as a ghost. There was far too much peace in his eyes in that final moment.

But still.

He won’t allow Jun Wu to touch him.

Slowly, carefully—the spell takes hold.

Blue light surrounding the Water Master’s body, and beside him—a new form is growing into place.

Visually identical, right down to the last hair.

But one once held a soul.

The other is a mere cadaver.

In death, however, it is impossible to know the difference.

He takes one thing from Shi Wudu’s actual body. The gold locket, hanging around his neck.

That—

That belongs to Shi Qingxuan.

Finally, with the false corpse completed, he carefully lifts it up into his arms, preparing to leave it somewhere to be found.

His real grave will have to be in Ghost City. He—

He doesn’t think Hua Cheng would deny him that. Even after everything he’s done.

He couldn't bear to take him back to Blackwater manor. Not—

Not after what he did to Ming Yi.

Then—

He feels it.

The moment he steps outside the Kiln, onto the world beyond.

The surge of an ancient spell, finally broken—it's caster's magic fading from this world.

A fate, twisted and broken by hate, fear, and lies—returning home. Like a gear clicking back into place.

Over his head, the sky rumbles.

Behind him, for the first time in two thousand years—

The blood of a god stains the floors of the Kiln, white marble soaked in red. And then—

CRASH!

There's endless golden light.

Burning, enveloping him. Carrying him up.

Stripping him of any skins, false forms, or pretenses.

And for the first time in four hundred years—

He Xuan sucks in a deep, gasping breath.

Feeling air actually fill his lungs for the first time in so long— He had forgotten how it felt to breathe.

The weight, the crushing weight of that water, ever present, awaking this constant clawing need to fight, to breathe, to escape—

It's gone.

He Xuan isn't isn't drowning.

BOOM!

When his eyes open again—they're no longer filled with darkness.

They burn—like liquid gold.

His skin is no longer waxen and pale—regaining the sun kissed, deeply tanned shade it had in his human life.

And now that he *can* breathe—

He feels weightless.

Taking in shallow, ragged breaths of disbelief.

All the while, staring at the clear blue sky overhead in disbelief.

Because how?

There's no rhyme or reason to why a person ascends. No one can control it. But how, after everything that he's done, could he deserve this?

For a moment, the martial Avenue is silent, other heavenly officials frozen with shock and terror.

Taking in the sight of this new, unfamiliar figure, dressed in robes of black and gold. A new god, surely.

On that front, they aren't wrong. But before long…

They notice the limp, bloody form he's carrying in his arm.

That's when the shouts and screams begin.

"It's—!"

"IT'S THE WATER MASTER!"

There's panic, someone shouting for the martial gods to come and help, and He Xuan's mind is moving at a mile a minute, knowing that there's no time—

Until he hears that voice, speaking above the crowd.

"Remain calm, everyone."

He Xuan falls silent, his eyes slowly drifting to the side. Finding that face.

The face he's seen in countless nightmares now. Enough to know exactly what he is.

A murderer.

A liar.

A traitor.

A predator.

“Given what we learned this week—he hasn’t committed any crime.” There’s murmurs of disbelief, the other officials shrinking away from him. On some logical level, He Xuan knows exactly what the emperor is doing. Playing on the fact that he’s spent four centuries robbed of his godhood. Offering him an easy out.

It benefits him.

Eliminates a powerful ghost king as a threat. And any time he defies him, well…

That’s what shackles are for.

He Xuan knows all of that, clearly in his mind, before Jun Wu speaks again, replying to someone crying out—

“But he’s a *MURDERER* , your majesty!”

“…Is an executioner a murderer when he slaughters a criminal?” Jun Wu replies calmly.

He Xuan stares down at the corpse in his arms. That face.

Remembering—

‘You’re a good person.’

“Shi Wudu’s life was his to take by right.”

“But he’s—”

“The new Water Master.” Jun Wu concludes. “That seems fitting, doesn’t it?”

“…” He Xuan lifts his head, looking the Emperor in the eye.

A criminal.

After everything he’s done—

He called his victim a criminal.

Rage.

Boiling deep inside of him, rising up like an uncontrollable wave of hate.

And he thinks of the one thing he could say that would make him feel what Shi Wudu did.

That deep, petrifying fear. The feeling of being hunted.

His lips pull back over his teeth, fangs gleaming viscously in the sun, snarling the words—

“...Zhao Beitong sends her regards.”

Then—

It’s there.

That flash of genuine emotion in his eyes.

Fear.

And He Xuan makes an oath:

“The next time you see me—you die.”

And before he can respond, before he can make a sound—

He Xuan slips something from the sleeve of his robes, hurling it at the emperor’s chest.

BOOM!

And with that, just as suddenly as He Xuan, Black Water Sinking Ships, the final Water Master of Jun Wu’s heavenly dynasty—

He descends.

Leaving his predecessor's body on the street of the Martial Avenue. And the emperor, for the first time in 800 years—

Bleeds.

Staring down at the blade buried deep in his chest.

And on the handle, an engraving that's all too familiar—and prophetic.

Because no matter how many times he disposed of it—it always comes back to haunt him.

The God Slayer.

When He Xuan lands back in the mortal realm, he staggers, one hand pressed against his head.

It takes a minute to adjust to the new sensation of breath itself.

Even now, having shirked the heavens, just as the last Ghost King to ascend before him—

The pain is gone.

And before he can process that, move past any of it— He has to find a place for him to rest.

But when he steps back inside the confines of the kiln... The blood is there.

The chains are there.

Zhao Beitong is there, watching him silently.

But Shi Wudu—

He's gone.

"..."

Immediately, he turns to Zhao Beitong, who remains pointedly taciturn.

"Did you touch him?!"

"No."

Her form is flickering—the edges of her wavering.

Which makes no sense.

He's more powerful now than he was before his ascension, her projection should be stronger.

“Then where is he?!”

Zhao Beitong looks at him—almost as though she’s looking through him. Her expression tinted countless emotions, twisting in their complexity.

“I…”

Her form flickers again, this time in its entirety, like a flame flickering out, and then —

She’s gone.

He Xuan glares, looking around the walls of the Kiln, pressing a hand against his chest, trying to feel her there.

“WHAT ARE YOU—?”

Then—he stops.

Feeling how the ground beneath him has begun to rumble.

The very foundations of the Kiln begin to creak and groan. The only possibility he can think of is possibly the most terrifying. Did he—

Did the Kiln *swallow* him?

But before he can give that any more thought, before he can even return outside to see if something took him during his short, ill fated trip to the heavens—

There’s a building roar all around him. One so loud, so violent— It drowns out all sound. All noise, all thought.

In the far distance, the mountains that surround the ancient, barren land of the Kiln begin to shake, the sky turning red, as—

As Mount Tonglu awakens once more.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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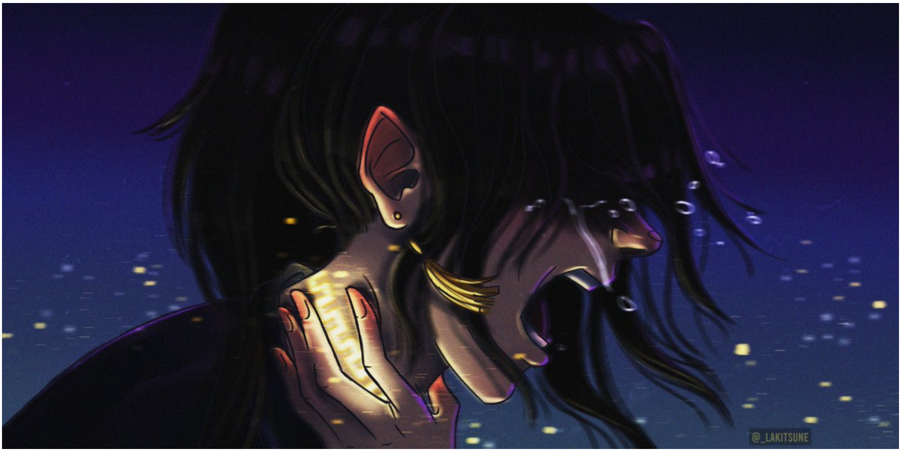
content warnings: artwork that includes blood, depiction of suicide, and the aftermath of sexual violence.

"Peace in Drowning."

[image]

CREDIT: ROWAN

"Monsters don't exist...Only people who make monstrous choices."



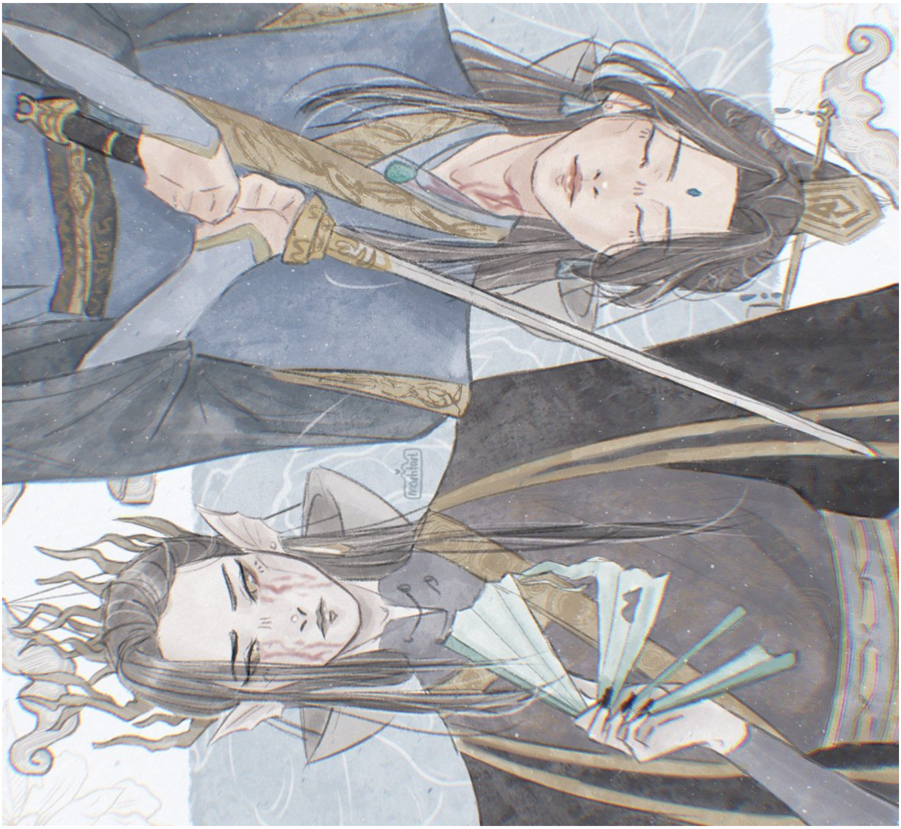
CREDIT: LAKI

"I've hunted you across the years..."

[image]

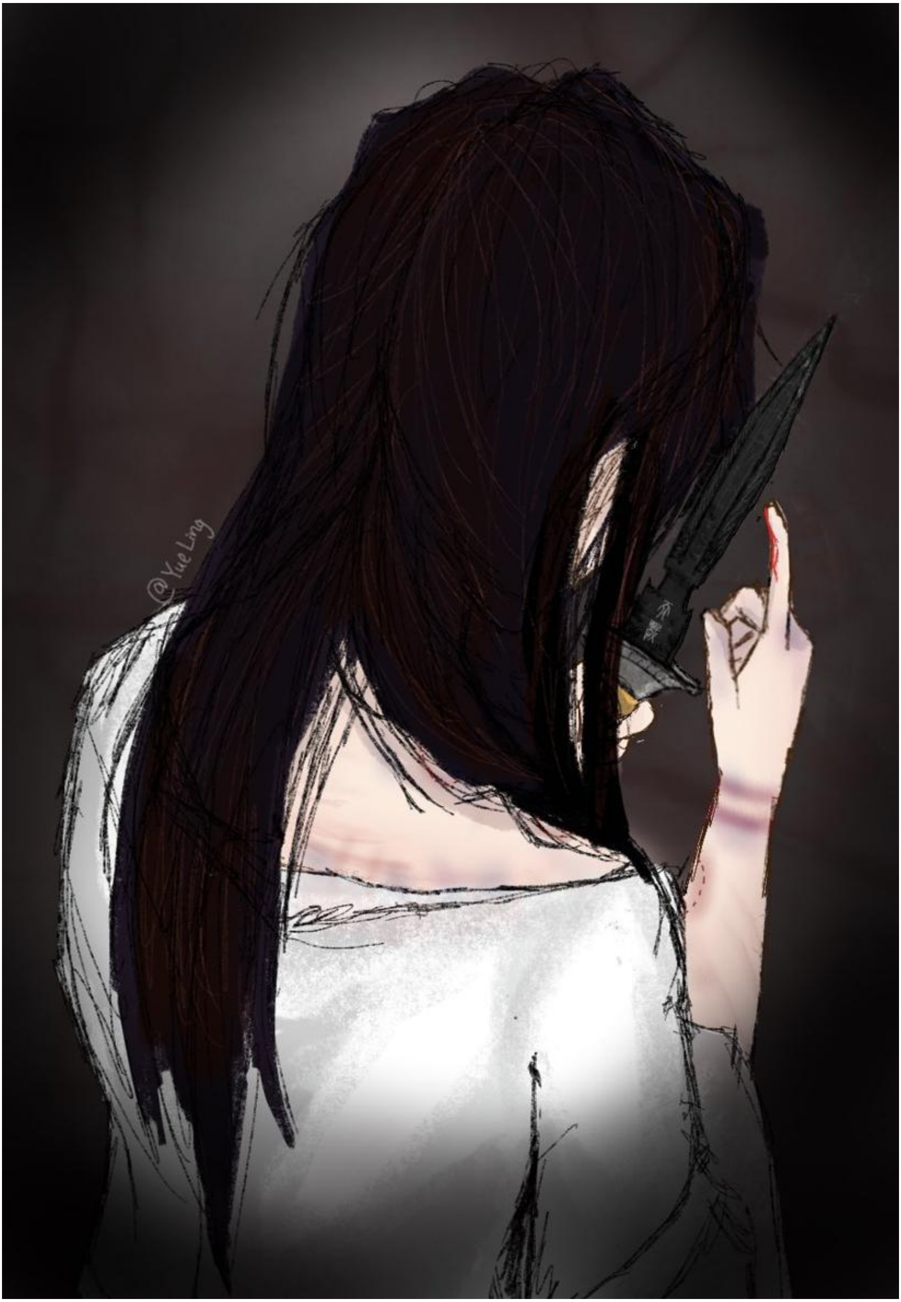
CREDIT: **MECHAMISH**

"No one ever tells you that it's possible to mourn the absence of a sound..."



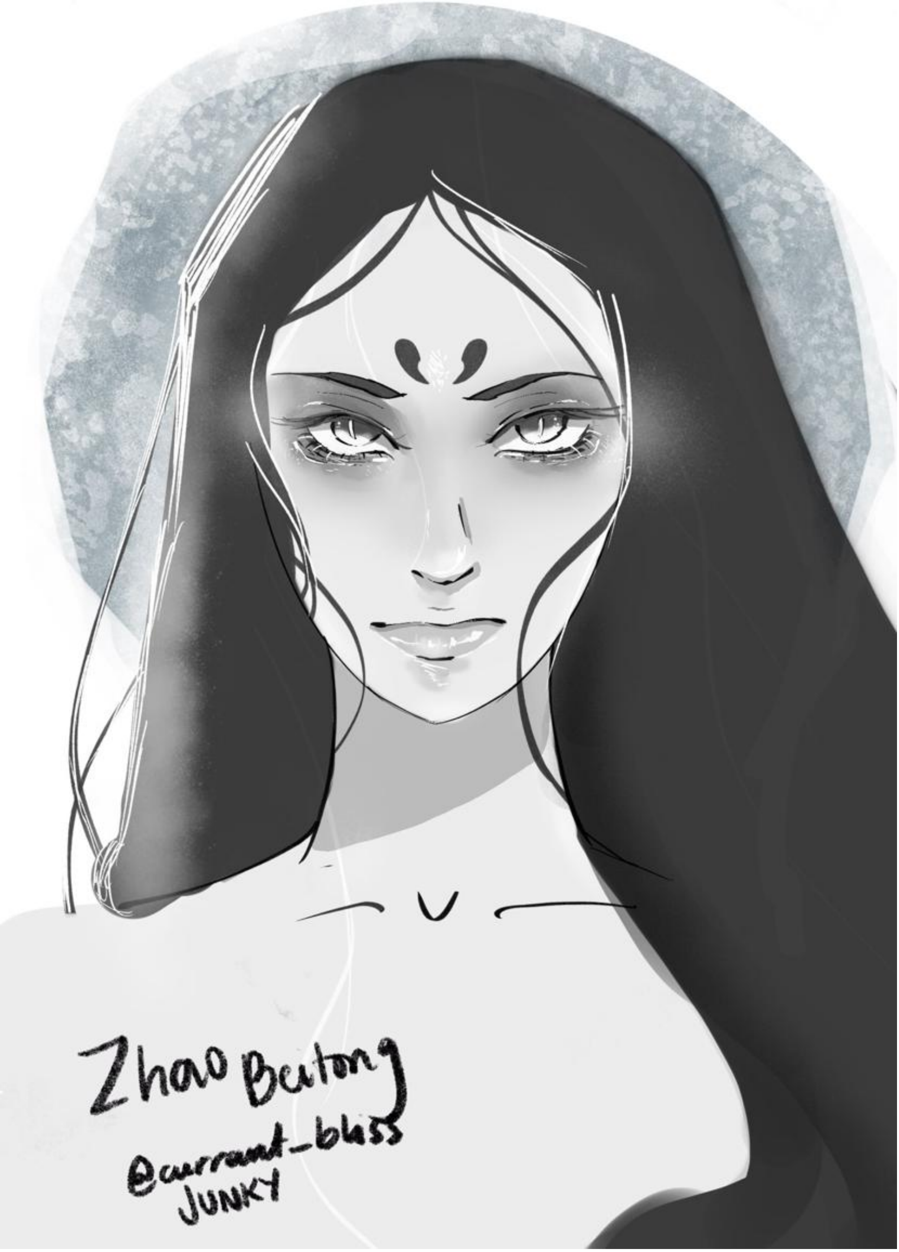
CREDIT: **MARTA**

Shi Wudu holding the Godslayer (Ch. 62)



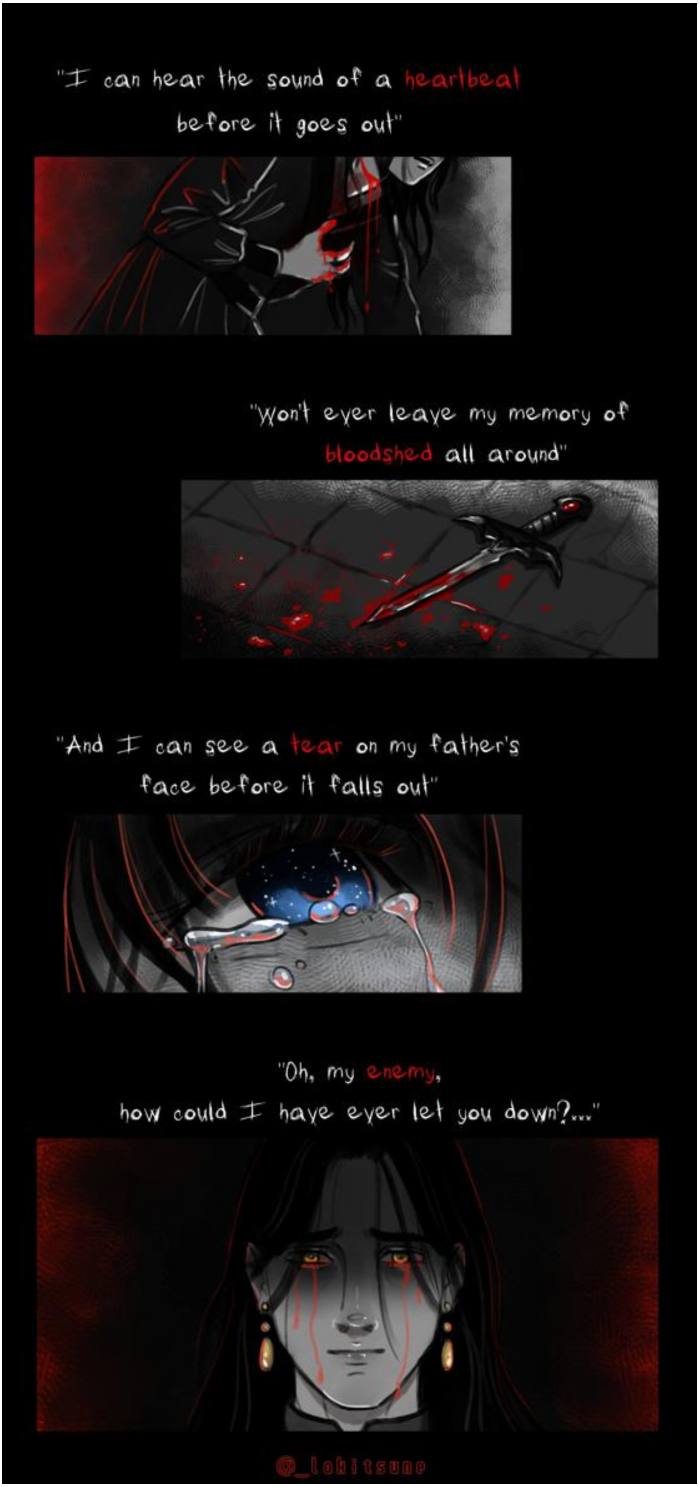
CREDIT: YUE LING

ZHAO BEITONG


Zhao Beitong
@currant_bliss
JUNKY

CREDIT: JUNKY

"No One Mourns Like a Ghost..." (Lyrics from Goodbye, by Ramsey, featured on the series Arcane: League of Legends.)


"I can hear the sound of a heartbeat
before it goes out"
"Won't ever leave my memory of
bloodshed all around"
"And I can see a tear on my father's
face before it falls out"
"Oh, my enemy,
how could I have ever let you down?..."
@_lokitsune

CREDIT: LAKI

Chapter End Notes

I know we've been away from Hualian for quite some time, I promise we'll get back to them soon! Thank you for being patient with me through the detour that I have lovingly dubbed "The Blackwater Arc + The Water Masters Arc"! In case it hasn't become obvious at this point in this story, He Xuan and Shi Wudu are two of my favorite characters in TGCF, really in the entire MXTX universe, and I really wanted to explore their characters and emotions since we don't get to see them as much in the canon storyline. I know this is a HUGE departure from canon, and not everyone is going to like it, but!! This was probably one of my favorite arcs to write in the story so far, so thank you for your patience and support!

And thank you to Mish, Junky, Laki, Yue Ling, Marta, and Rowan for their beautiful artwork, and allowing me to share it!

xoxo, Evie

Don't Go

Chapter Summary

> “...You don’t have to tell me if you don’t wish to,” he prefaces his question carefully. “I know that our positions are different, and —”
>
> “You want to know if I knew?”
>
> The prince falls silent, biting his lip—and Hua Cheng...
>
> He sighs.
>
> “I did.”

Chapter Notes

> this chapter deals heavily in grief and existential dread, apologies in advance

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Back in the heavens—

Chaos unfolds.

Officials screaming and fleeing—others trying to discern where Blackwater—or, the Water—ah—

Where He Xuan went.

And when the martial gods arrive on the scene, the panic becomes even worse.

“What’s happened here?!”

“PROTECT THE EMPEROR!”

“WHERE’S XUAN ZHEN?!”

And the first among them, of course, was Pei Ming.

Who was already at the forefront, rushing to the central square the moment he heard the crash, people screaming the Water Master’s name—a thousand different possibilities running through his mind, but—

Pei is deeply, intimately aware of how the body reacts to trauma.

Before his ascension, during one of his first battles, a cannon blast malfunctioned during a cavalry sweep, sending him flying off of his horse, shrapnel buried in his right side.

He recovered—but his ears...

They never stopped ringing, after that.

It got worse during a battle, or when he was stressed.

He was nearly deaf on the right side of his body by the time of his ascension, and since then—he forgot what it felt like.

Until now.

When everything around him becomes distant.

When it sounds like everyone is shouting through water, and his—

His ears won't stop ringing.

Louder and louder.

He doesn't even feel his legs move. He doesn't remember making the decision to move.

But he does.

Every single person in his way is ripped aside.

He shoves one civil god so violently, they break an arm on the landing—but he—he doesn't care.

Not until he gets to him.

And when he does—

Pei's knees hit the ground hard.

Never once did they embrace when there was anyone around to witness it.

He was too proud for that.

But now, everyone—every single god in the Martial Avenue—witnesses the strongest among them crumble.

Gathering the fallen Water Master in his arms, disbelieving, stroking his fingers through his hair. Sitting back with him in his lap, staring at his face, waiting—

Waiting for those eyes to open and look at him again. For his lover to scold him for making a scene. To ask where his sister is. To—

To say anything, anything at all—and Pei would listen.

“No…” He mutters, grasping his wrist, pressing Shi Wudu’s palm against his cheek.

It’s already begun to cool.

Pei’s fingers tighten around his wrist, a shudder running through him as he turns his face into Shi Wudu’s palm, tears falling silently.

“No.” He shakes his head, his expression contorting with agony.

No. No. He—

It’s just another bad dream.

He gets those. Where he wakes up, gasping with fear and panic—

Only for his love to find him in the dark, pulling Pei against his chest. Hushing him. Reminding him—

That there’s no more war. That he—

That he doesn’t have to fight anymore.

But…

Pei presses their foreheads together, curling tighter around him, the ringing— It’s so loud now, he can barely hear himself think.

‘You would have been perfect.’

That was the last thing that he ever said to him.

‘And I’m so, so sorry.’

‘I would make a good husband.’

He knew.

When he shoved him through that portal in blackwater manor—

He knew that was it.

And maybe, in the depths of his soul—Pei knew it too. Because he—

Shi Wudu was never afraid of suffering, or dying.

Only of losing people.

Pei was always in doubt of where they stood with one another. Both of them were so fearful of rejection, they never gave what they had a name. Never made an outright confession.

But that.

That final act.

That's how Pei realized the Water Master loved him in return.

And now, of all people—

He finds himself remembering Xuan Ji.

What she said that night, on Mount Yu Jun.

'True love would burn you.'

That the flames of it would consume his heart, reducing it to ash.

Now, all he has left are embers.

He presses a final kiss against his lips—the tears falling faster when there's only cold stillness in response.

He reaches out with his spiritual power, trying to find some sign of him anywhere, even as a ghost, but—

Pei shudders, a sob finally ripping from his chest.

"...Where did you go?" He chokes, shaking as he begins to break in earnest. "You don't—"

Ling Wen comes to a halt behind him, her hand covering her mouth to silence a pained moan.

"—you don't get to go first!" Pei sobs.

He's so much older, he thought—he always thought—

Ling Wen sinks to her knees beside him—the only one he's allowed close, practically biting Nan Yang's head off when he tries to see for himself.

She finds one of his hands, squeezing it—and finding it limp and cold against her own.

"…"

Her lips quiver, tightening at the corners.

She presses the back of his hand against her forehead, her own tears falling silently in comparison to Pei, who can't seem to even take a breath between the sobs.

"…He really murdered the only family of the mother of his child?" She whispers, disbelieving, because—

Who could be so cold hearted? Pei doesn't respond.

Can't bring himself to.

And then, the worst of all— It's the scream.

This horrible, hysterical wail.

One that cuts Pei all the way to the bone, jarring an already mortal wound to his heart.

"GEGE!"

Shi Qingxuan's knees almost buckle, when she sees what Pei is holding in his arms. When she sees the locket around his neck, stained with blood.

The only reason she doesn't hit the ground is because Nan Yang catches her by the elbows—and she doesn't even stop to acknowledge it.

She just scrambles forward, staggering down to the ground when she's close enough, and—

She's had nightmares about losing him before. And they never felt real. Because that was always the worst thing that could ever happen to her.

And when she woke up for one horrifying moment, she would think it was true—and she would always run to him.

Running into his office, in their childhood home. Crawling up into his lap, crying as she hugged his neck.

And he would always soothe her, hugging her so tightly. Reminding her that they would—

That they would always be together.

And no one could ever take him away from her.

Shi Qingxuan waits now, looking around numbly, for herself to wake up. To be in her childhood bedroom again.

For her brother to be just down the hall.

But—

But she can't.

She grabs her brother's sleeve, shaking him.

But he won't open his eyes and look back at her.

"What..." She breathes shallowly, her lips trembling.

"He..." Her eyes drift to Pei's, frantic. "He wouldn't! He..."

It's not true.

Ming-x—

He Xuan—he—

He would *never* hurt her.

Maybe in small, little ways. The kind of hurt that aches like a tired muscle. Pleasantly used.

But never—

Never like this.

Pei doesn't argue. Just stares at her with eyes full of this soul crushing sadness, and she can't stand to look, because—

Because it's real.

Because she isn't waking up.

Because her brother isn't moving.

"...No," She whimpers, tugging at his arm, trying to pull it around her. "No, no, no..." So he can hold her, like he used to.

Instead—it falls back down, limp.

And Shi Qingxuan—

She screams.

Somewhere between terrified screaming, heartbroken, and grief stricken sobbing. Shaking at his shoulder, her breaths coming so quickly, the world is spinning.

"Give—" An arm wraps around her, pulling her close, and she—

She screams into Pei's chest, weeping.

"GIVE HIM BACK!"

Pounds her fists against his back, hysterical.

Every single cry wrenching out of her, ripping her to pieces.

Screaming those words over and over:

Give him back.

Give him back.

"HE'S ALL I HAVE—JUST *GIVE HIM BACK!"*

Pei doesn't say a word. Doesn't make her stop.

Just holds her against him, letting her howl and rage with grief, sobbing hysterically between frantic begging. For someone to make him better. To take it back.

To give Shi Qingxuan her big brother back.

And if it were possible—if Pei could take his place—he would.

Looking over her shoulder now, eyes clearing—not because the pain has lessened, but because he has to keep Shi Qingxuan in mind now—

He finally sees.

The deep slash in the Water Master's throat. Blood nearly dried.

And it strikes deep, clattering around in his mind.

Taking him so far back.

Jogging a memory that he refuses to look back on anymore, not wanting to be swallowed whole.

A soft smile. Dark hair blowing gently in the breeze.

A sword being dragged across someone's throat.

Ling Wen presses her hands against her forehead.

It's hard to hear herself think over Shi Qingxuan's cries, but—

When she notices Mu Qing standing over the emperor, kneeling down to assist him... her gaze hardens.

"Stop!" She rises to her feet, marching over, shoving her own grief deep, deep down.

Not feeling it, for now.

"You can't give him medical treatment—not from that blade."

Mu Qing sends her a strange look, one hand on the emperor's shoulder. "Shouldn't we try to stop the bleeding?"

"Bandage him here—then..." Ling Wen glances around. "Nan Yang and Qi Ying, take him back to the Imperial Residence and seal him inside."

"What?" Nan Yang hesitates, looking Jun Wu over. It doesn't look like he's been hit in the heart or lungs—but still, any wound like that to the chest could be serious. "Why would we do that?"

Ling Wen sends him a cold look. "You think the emperor hasn't told me his wishes in a scenario in which he was wounded?" She questions flatly. “Who else would he tell? You?”

Feng Xin blanches, “There’s no need for that. I just—doesn’t he need medical care?”

“Not that kind.” The Civil Goddess shakes her head as Mu Qing cuts his robes open, bandaging the wound as tightly as he can. “You take him—seal him, and no one goes inside. Not until he can come out under his own power. Understand me?”

The instructions are baffling, and yet...

If Jun Wu had given anyone instructions for a situation like this... It really would have been to someone like Ling Wen.

As such—people spring into action.

Leaving only a trio behind in the street.

A small, broken family.

They need to move him.

Pei knows that, in his heart. But—

He has no idea where.

They’re gods, after all. Things like—

Things like this aren’t something they plan for.

And Shi Qingxuan—she just clutches onto his hand, rocking back and forth, whimpering over and over again—

‘Where are you?’

‘Come back to me.’

‘Gege!’

‘...Gege, where did you go?’

It’s dark.

Endless blackness, stretching on as far as the eye can see. He really—

He really thought there would be oblivion after. Like falling asleep, and having no more dreams.

But Death isn’t so kind.

Not nearly so awe inspiring, either.

Really—it’s just an endless, dark hallway. And he’s been walking for hours.

Humans spend most of their lives in hallways. The spaces between rooms. Getting from one place, to the next.

But he’s been walking for so long without a hint of light—it feels like there’s no end to it

On, and on, and on.

Not thinking, not really.

About what happened. Where he’s been. Where he’s going.

Just…walking.

Always alone. Always in the dark.

Until he hears something coming from ahead of him.

Footsteps.

Rapid—like someone is running.

And then, he hears a voice.

Grumbling.

“Stupid…fucking…”

He frowns, a disorganized mind struggling to keep up with what he’s hearing.

“DUMBFUCK AUTH—!”

THUD!

Someone slams into him from the front, hard—and they’re both sent sprawling.

He’s slow to sit up, rubbing the side of his head—and when he does...

There’s a young man sprawled on the ground in front of him, swearing and rubbing his back.

With brown hair, cropped short—sticking up in an unkempt mess. And the strangest clothes he’s ever seen.

Almost like inner robes, but the fabric of his pants is unlike anything Shi Wudu knows—and he’s wearing these strange slippers? Not quite boots, with laces on the top, and a strange, curving symbol stitched into the side.

...What on earth?

And the stranger—he’s staring at him too, green eyes wide with shock, and the first words out of his mouth—

“Holy shit,” he mutters, looking him up and down. “That is an *insane* cosplay.”

...A what?

“Seriously dude—did you make that yourself? Fucking hell...” He stares, leaning away when the young man reaches for one of his lapels, swatting his hand away.

“Do I look like someone who makes their own clothes?” He questions coldly.

The short haired man stares, yanking his hand back with a frown.

“…You know that’s like, *really* gatekeep-y of you,” he grumbles, crossing his arms. “Not every fan can afford to order those fancy pre-made costumes online! You’re like…a pro, aren’t you?

“Onl—?

“Pro cosplayers are *so* stuck up, you’re not SPECIAL, you’re all just dressing up—!”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” He finally speaks over him. “And what’s on your face?!”

“Y—hey, look, I’ve really cleared up recently, alright?! Who doesn’t have a little acne scarring? You look like you can probably afford an esthetician once a week but SOME OF US—!"

"A what? I'm talking about that thing over your eyes!"

"YOU CAPITALIST—!" He rages, then deflates. "...You mean my glasses?"

The dark haired man across from him nods and—

He sniffs, adjusting them on the bridge of his nose.

"How have you never seen glasses?"

Then, he looks him over, and...notices the slash in his throat.

"That's..." He swallows hard, looking in the dark, endless hallway around them, finally seeming to process his surroundings. "...That's not real, is it?"

The dark haired man before him reaches up to touch it, and... When he shakes his head, he...

"...Oh," the bespectacled man mutters, his voice suddenly rather small. "So...you're dead?"

When the 'cosplayer' nods, he shrinks down even further, hands clutched to his chest.

"...Oh." He repeats, thinking back.

"...You seem surprised."

"Why shouldn't I be?" He grumbles, gesturing at himself wildly. "Look at me! I'm— I'm in my PRIME!" His voice cracks slightly as he reaches up, running his fingers through his hair. "No, no...I'm not dead. I...I'm just in a coma or something!"

"A coma?"

"Yeah!" He wipes his hands down his face, rocking back and forth. "There's probably some totally sexy girl sitting by my bedside right now, reading me poetry and—all that romantic bullshit—and then some sad idol group song is gonna come on and—and then I'll wake up before the ad break!"

"The wh—?"

“It doesn’t matter...” He moans, rubbing his temples. “Seriously, how did I—?!”

“What’s the last thing you remember doing?”

“Driving.” He answers immediately, and then, when he remembers the context... “... Which was kinda the *problem* , but...”

He looks him over.

“...My name is Shen Yuan,” he mutters, holding a hand out, eyeing him suspiciously. “What’s yours?”

The dark haired man eyes him back with equal levels of suspicion—but eventually, he reaches out to take it.

“Shi Wudu.”

And for some reason—just hearing that makes Shen Yuan leap to his feet, pumping his fists for joy.

“FUCK YEAH!”

Shi Wudu leans back, and now HE’S the one clutching his chest with confusion. “What—?”

“THAT’S what the system meant!”

“—system—?”

“It’s TRANSMIGRATION!” He spins around, “That’s not the same as dying—and I have read *so* many novels— I’m basically the BEST person this could happen to! Like—am I *happy* about this?” He stops in the middle of pacing, his hands aloft, “No. But this is the next best option! Wait—” He stops to think.

“...Does this mean I’m going into *Tian Guan Ci Fu?* ” He rubs his chin, thinking. “But so many people get SCREWED in that one! Unless...” He becomes even more contemplative. “Unless I get Xie Lian...but then...”

Shen Yuan gets a little pale.

“...I’d have to get with an ancient ghost king...” He taps his finger against his chin. “...Not to mention all of the shit that happens to him, then again...if you’re already dead...Mount Tonglu is next...that’s not so bad, right?”

Shi Wudu stares back at him blankly, trying to figure out whether or not he's lost his mind.

"...I mean, I'm not gay," he holds up a finger pointedly, shaking his head. "But...if I *had* to be...apparently, out of all of the protagonists, he's the best one in bed."

Then, he notices the way Shi Wudu is staring at him. "If you count the author interviews as canon, anyway!"

Shen Yuan would guess that he's not transmigrating into Shi Wudu, not with how the rest of his plot line goes. In any case...

Transmigrating into one of the leads would be the best case scenario. He hasn't read the book in ages, he can barely remember.

Honestly, the most recent book he was reading was *Proud Immortal Demon Way* . Actually, he had just finished the audiobook in his car when he...

That—that would be the *worst* case scenario, even if he does remember it perfectly.

This— *this* is better.

"...Well, I should be going. But..." He stops, rubbing his arm, watching the look on Shi Wudu's face.

Confused—but mostly... Just broken.

"...Look, your character started off like kind of an asshole, but..." He shrugged. "You ended up being one of my favorites."

Shi Wudu stares, wondering if hell is just being chased down by scrawny, weirdly dressed teenagers who spout nonsense, but...

Something about it seems sincere, and that—that feels like a compliment.

"Just...your biggest hang up was that pride, and doing everything on your own..." Shen Yuan shrugs, rubbing the back of his neck. "Anyways—good luck."

With that, he keeps walking down the hallway—and despite being an admittedly weak looking person...

He walks pretty tall.

Shi Wudu stares after him for a moment—baffled, tired, and…

He just wants to rest.

But if he sits here forever, well…

He sighs, pushing himself to his feet once more.

Walking, walking, and walking.

Until finally—he reaches a door.

"…" He looks back over his shoulder, wondering…if maybe, he could run back the way he came.

And if he ran far enough, fast enough— He might see them again.

But he…

Shi Wudu turns back.

He's been walking so far, for so long.

He doesn't know the way back. Not anymore.

And when he pushes the door open—he finds himself inside a cavern. Or— More like a chamber.

Black floors and walls like polished jade—stretching as far up as the eye can see. And all around him…

Are little ghost fires, casting the room in a pale green glow.

And on each side of the room, is a door.

Larger than any other doors he's ever seen—one red, and one black.

And the red one—

That one feels familiar.

Like it—

Like it's calling to him.

And it seems to have a gravity all its own, pulling him in until he stands before the precipice, one hand on the handle.

He's been here before.

That thought is so clear now, ringing in his mind.

He's been through this door before. And—

It's safe, on the other side.

It doesn't hurt. And he—

He can rest.

But when he pulls on the handle—

It remains firmly shut.

"...What?" He whispers, giving it another tug.

Once, twice, three times—as hard as he can.

"...Why?" He tries again, throwing his weight into it—leaning back on his heels, pulling until his bones scream in protest—

But nothing.

"I—I have nothing left KEEPING ME HERE!" He screams, slamming his fist against the wood in frustration.

"WHY CAN'T I JUST GO?!"

Nothing answers him—and the door won't budge.

Behind him—another door looms.

"...No," he mutters, stubbornly refusing to turn around, tugging stubbornly.

He won't look. He—

"I know I—I was an awful person," he croaks, tears filling his eyes once more. "BUT ISN'T THIS ENOUGH?!"

He made mistakes, but he paid his debt, and he—

He doesn't deserve that. He doesn't, he—

Creeeeaaak....

There’s the low, grinding sound of a door sliding open, and Shi Wudu squeezes his eyes shut, still desperately pulling on the red door.

“NO!”

He shakes his head vehemently, clinging for dear life.

“I’M NOT GOING THERE!”

He *won’t* .

He—

“I’M SH—!”

Before he can finish speaking—there’s pain in his throat.

So sudden, so searing, he lets the handle go, stumbling back and clutching his sound. “I don’t...”

Ba-bump...

His entire body convulses, his chest stabbing with unbearable pain.

“But...” He stumbles forward, clutching that handle one more time.

Ba-bump....

“...Why?” He whispers.

If he can’t see Pei, or Shi Qingxuan—then he doesn’t want to stay.

So, why can’t he—?

The pain in his chest and throat spoke in that moment, to the point where he can’t even stand—but instead of falling to his knees—

He seems to sink right through the floor, as if it were made of nothing more than smoke.

And then, he’s falling.

Down, down, down...

Until everything fades to black.

After that—everything comes in flashes.

Voices, talking—the words indistinguishable, but—

It’s no one that he recognizes.

Then, he’s being lifted up in someone’s arms.

His eyes only manage to open a fraction of an inch, and—

All he sees, in that brief flash of a moment, is a streak of white hair, and a voice murmuring—-

“Not this time.” Then—everything fades to black.

There are no doors. No hallways. No strangers screaming about things he understands, just—

Rest.

Blissful, silent rest.

Xie Lian has run into a bit of an unusual problem.

Or well—maybe he shouldn’t say it’s abnormal, he hasn’t known him long enough to know what *is* normal, but—

He’s been in Ghost City for an hour, and he hasn’t found Hua Cheng yet. Which might not sound strange—but it is.

Typically, any time he seems to want to see Hua Cheng, or makes an effort to look for him—the Ghost King seems to magically appear, almost as if he knew Xie Lian was looking for him in the first place.

But now, even after checking the Gambler’s Den first—he hasn’t appeared.

His next step is Paradise Manor—and he knows that Hua Cheng doesn’t have any guards (nor need them, apparently) but it still feels odd, walking inside of such a luxurious place with no one stopping him.

He isn’t in the throne room—nor the reconstructed armory.

Xie Lian finds himself wandering back and forth, knowing it’s probably pointless, because if Hua Cheng *was* in Paradise Manor, he would have sought him out by now.

He finds himself stopped in the ghost king's bedroom, thinking.

The most obvious thing to do would be reaching out in Hua Cheng's private communication array, but—

Xie Lian feels the tips of his ears grow hot and he shakes his head, crossing his arms.

No, that's not an option.

Not with that password, anyway.

Of course—Shuo might know where he is, but he's all the way back in Puqi shrine, and Xie Lian has no idea what his password is, so...

(One again, his mind is drawn back to the set of dice in his pocket.)

"Your highness?"

The prince nearly leaps out of his skin.

He recognizes the voice—that of Hua Cheng's...assistant? He supposes that would be the best way to phrase it—

The Ghost Officer.

"Oh, hello!" Xie Lian smiles in the direction of his voice. "I was just..."

"If you're looking for Hua Chengzhu, he isn't home at the moment."

That's when Xie Lian realizes how odd this must look—after all, he's standing in the middle of Hua Cheng's—

Well, his *bedroom* .

"Oh! I—yes," he agrees, nodding frantically as he feels around the furniture, stumbling towards the door. "Well—I—I wasn't trying to—"

He's fumbling for any explanation that makes it clear this isn't what it looks like.

"San Lang actually brought me here the last time I was—!"

Oh no.

Xie Lian fights the urge to shrink down onto the floor, turn into a puddle, and evaporate.

Why is he making it sound worse?!

At this point—the Ghost Officer just seems to take pity on him, placing a hand on his hip as he watches the prince nearly self implode.

"...He's in the forge, your highness. He usually goes there when he doesn't want to be disturbed."

He—

Oh.

Xie Lian pauses, suddenly crestfallen.

Well—in that case, he doesn't want to intrude...

As he contemplates, Yin Yu stares at his expression, letting out a low sigh. "But he did mention to send you there if you came looking."

(He did no such thing—but Yin Yu has observed the crown prince enough to understand that the simple statement of, *'But Hua Chengzhu would never find his highness to be a disruption,'* would not convince him at all.)

"Oh," Xie Lian sighs, relieved.

That makes sense—before he helped Pei take Shi Qingxuan back to the Heavens, he promised that he would come to Ghost City to discuss what had happened as soon as possible.

"And where is the fo—" Then he pauses, thinking. "There's a forge?"

Yin Yu nods, stepping aside.

"Hua Chengzhu has always been keen on bladesmithing," he explains, "And with a blade like E-Ming, maintenance is required. You can find it in an antechamber beneath Qiandeng Temple. Do you need assistance finding your way?"

"...No," Xie Lian replies quickly. "I can find it."

After all—he may be blind, but he's walked the length of ghost city before, and he knows the lay of the land.

“But thank you for your help, Mr…?” He waits, giving the officer a chance to introduce himself—he’s never availed himself of the opportunity, and Xie Lian feels rude—

And he doesn’t take the chance now, bowing his head politely.

“It’s no problem, your highness. If you need any further assistance while you’re in the city, I’ll make myself available to you.”

With that, he leaves Xie Lian to his devices, and it makes the god wonder. Why so shy about offering a name?

Names are important things—even if they aren’t necessarily your true identity. Reducing him to a mere noun, the “Ghost Officer” feels a bit dehumanizing.

He contemplates the matter as he walks out of Paradise Manor.

Normally, walking through any crowded street—he’s bound to bump into people, a natural consequence of being unable to watch where he’s going. But in Ghost City, the crowd parts around him easily, giving him a respectful berth as he passes though.

He finds it surprising—though rather convenient, not to mention pleasant. Who knew that ghosts in general were so considerate?

When he reaches the gates of Qiandeng Temple, finding the antechamber is a relatively simple task.

He slips off one of his boots, stomping the bare sole of his foot into the ground once, feeling the answering vibrations going through his joints—feeling where the hollow spaces beneath the temple are located.

On the West Side—near the back.

The actual entrance isn’t inside the temple, he quickly discovers—rather on the ground outside.

And unlike most of the rooms in Ghost City—this one is locked.

The only other example of that Xie Lian can recall is the dungeon, and this one is sealed in the exact same way.

With the statue of a woman—who he deduced before to be a martial goddess— standing before him, holding a brass plate with a set of dice upon them.

Before—Xie Lian was absolutely perplexed as to who this woman might be. Now… He has suspicions.

In any case—he very nearly reaches for the dice sitting in the tray, assuming that he'll get the right roll eventually, but—

Then, he remembers what happens if you roll two fours. A terrifying, eight legged consequence.

At that point, saying Hua Cheng's password is almost—

Creeeeaaaaak…

With a heavy groan of stone rolling back, the seal on the ground opens on its own, revealing a set of stairs descending beneath the temple—and Xie Lian lets out a soft sigh of relief.

Hua Cheng must know he's arrived, then.

He makes his way down the steps, bracing one hand against the wall, feeling old, worn stone sliding under his fingertips, and the further he descends…

It's warm.

Not unpleasantly so—more like standing in a patch of sun coming in through a window.

That warmth only intensifies when he reaches the bottom of the steps—but given how cold Ghost City tends to be, a place between the realms of the living and the dead—

This is actually rather pleasant. Xie Lian feels as though he could lie down right now and sleep comfortably.

Well—

CLANG!

If not for the sound.

The repeated strikes of hammer against metal fill the space as he's drawn further in— and it's only when he rounds the corner that he hears it come to a halt.

"…Gege,"

After everything that's happened—Xie Lian knows he shouldn't smile.

And yet, the sound of Hua Cheng's voice makes his mouth turn up slightly at the corners—even if he's tired.

"San Lang," he replies, placing his hand on one of the work tables, feeling his way through the room. "I hope I'm not disrupting anything..."

"No," Hua Cheng shakes his head quickly, setting his hammer aside. "Gege already told me he would be coming, after all."

Yes, he supposes he did...

The Ghost King steps aside from his anvil, walking over to place a hand on Xie Lian's shoulder, looking into his eyes to get a better grasp on his expression.

"Those fools in the Heavens didn't blame you, did they?" He asks quietly, his voice low—dangerous.

Xie Lian pauses, surprised. "...No," he shakes his head, "I was more worried about making sure none of them blamed you—"

"I don't care if they blame me," Hua Cheng mutters darkly. "It makes no difference."

"..."

The corners of Xie Lian's mouth tip downward.

...Something is bothering him—that much is clear.

But when the ghost king goes to lift up his hand, Xie Lian notices something far more pressing.

"...San Lang," he gasps, his eyes widening with concern. "Are you not wearing any gloves?!"

"Hmm?" Hua Cheng arches an eyebrow. "No, why?"

"Well..." Xie Lian fumbles to grab his hand, trying to make sure he isn't harmed. "Wouldn't you get hurt?"

But when he grasps Hua Cheng's hand—it's slightly calloused, but unharmed. Just a little warmer than usual.

"...I don't burn easily," the ghost king shrugs.

Though when he looks down, seeing the way their hands are joined... He looks away, his lips twitching.

Still, he doesn't pull his hand out of Xie Lian's grip.

"Oh..." The god sighs, relieved. "...What are you working on?"

"Nothing particularly exciting," Hua Cheng shrugs,

"The search for Zidian is taking more time than expected—and his highness shouldn't have to deal with that vermin longer than he has to."

(By that, of course, he means Qi Rong.)

"So, I thought it would be easier to create a new device to solve the problem."

It's easier said than done. The enchantments on Zidian are...complex, to say the least. But better to be working on another solution while the first plan is delayed.

Xie Lian can't help but grimace, remembering that Zidian's disappearance is *his* fault.

If he hadn't started that fire in Paradise Manor...

"I'm sorry, San Lang, I've made things complicated..."

"No," the ghost king assures him without hesitation. "It will be found eventually—and I doubt anyone will find it useful until then."

Xie Lian glances up, curious.

"If you lost track of Ruoye, do you think any cultivator who came upon it would be able to use it?"

Well—no. Xie Lian was still able to control the device in Shi Qingxuan's body—but only because Ruoye recognized the soul of it's master.

"Yes, but Ruoye was forged..."

Xie Lian starts to explain, then hesitates—seeming to come to the conclusion that now is neither the time nor the place for *that* conversation.

“...From my own body,” he concludes vaguely—to which Hua Cheng seems interested —but forces no further explanation from him.

“Zidian wasn’t forged in such a way,” the ghost king agrees. “But the enchantments on the weapon are such that only two groups of individuals could use it, one—” He holds up a finger, “Highly skilled cultivators—which few mortals are—or two,” he holds up another finger.

“Its rightful master, and the master’s descendants if the weapon is passed down.”

“Rightful master?”

“It was initially a commission,” Hua Cheng reminds him. “But the cultivation clan in question offended me.”

Making Hua Cheng the rightful owner.

“...Do you normally take commissions?”

After all—Hua Cheng never seems hard pressed for gold.

The ghost king shrugs. “No. But they had something I wanted.” Then, his eyes narrow.

“At least—I thought they did at the time.”

“...Did they lie?”

“They told me they had information on the whereabouts of something that I was looking for,” Hua Cheng explains quietly. “And I was desperate enough to make a deal, rather than forcing the information from them.”

Desperate?

Just what could make *Hua Cheng* desperate?

“...What were you looking for?” Xie Lian looks in his direction, wide eyed and curious.

Hua Cheng stares back at him, his eye dark, conflicted, but—

Burning with affection.

"Something precious to me," his tone is soft…tender, almost. And before Xie Lian can ask more—

"And when I found out their information was false, I took the weapon back. It would only function properly for myself, or someone of high cultivation level. It's not a danger, being missing. It only allows Qi Rong the opportunity to be more of a nuisance than usual."

Hua Cheng glances toward the anvil, where the handle for a new potential whip awaits, gleaming under the firelight.

Not bad, but the enchantments required take time—energy.

"…But his highness didn't come here to ask me about weaponry, did he?" He questions, his tone resigned.

"I mean…I'm always interested in weaponry, and it's a shame I can't see San Lang work, but…" Xie Lian sighs.

No, that wasn't why he came.

"…You don't have to tell me if you don't wish to," he prefaces his question carefully. "I know that our positions are different, and—"

"You want to know if I knew?"

The prince falls silent, biting his lip—and Hua Cheng…

He sighs.

"I did." He looks back down at his hammer, sitting on the table—one end burning red hot. "That was He Xuan's goal from the very beginning."

"…The Beginning?"

"In Mount Tonglu." Hua Cheng sighs, unable to look at him. "But I didn't know about the relationship with the Wind Master—not until we went to the Crescent Moon Kingdom."

Xie Lian pauses, his eyes widening with understanding.

"That was why you imprisoned Ming Yi," he breathes, surprised.

"…In part," Hua Cheng agrees. "But more so because his actions were becoming erratic—his positions in the Heavens as a spy may have been compromised, and…he almost got Shuo killed."

That makes the prince stiff with worry. “He did?”

The Ghost King nods.

“In order to maintain his cover within the Heavens…” He sighs. “The real Ming Yi had to be imprisoned within Blackwater Manor.”

Xie Lian isn’t surprised. It’s a gruesome, but logical reality. “Imprisoning any god for that length of time is difficult.”

Hua Cheng explains, remembering how He Xuan’s debts skyrocketed *just* from hiring out Yin Yu to keep Ming Yi confined over time. “But as time went on, he lost focus, became inconsistent…and the night after we left the Crescent Moon Kingdom… Ming Yi escaped.”

And unfortunately, the only one who was available—not distracted by being, as Hua Cheng so aptly (and prophetically, to his disgust) phrased it, “balls deep in the Wind Master,” or, in Hua Cheng’s case, revealing his identity as a Ghost King to Xie Lian—

Was Shuo.

“If the actual Ming Yi had made it to the Heavens and exposed He Xuan, he wouldn’t have had the chance to escape, so Shuo…stopped him.”

But was unable to take him alive.

Xie Lian takes that in silently, his eyes wide.

Well.

That explains who set off the dragon spell.

“If the Heavens had learned what happened, it would have placed a target on him, and I was…displeased.”

(He says that, phrasing his reaction in a far more ‘delicate’ way.)

And Xie Lian is surprised for more than one reason.

But the most pressing among all of them is—

Shuo was strong enough to kill the *actual* Earth Master?

Xie Lian isn’t fixating on that because he’s impressed, no—but because…

"…It wasn't He Xuan who attacked Shuo and Shi Qingxuan at the Terrace of Cascading Wine, was it?"

If it was—Hua Cheng would have reacted *very* differently.

And given how He Xuan reacted back in Blackwater Manor, when Shi Qingxuan said she had fallen in love with him…

(Even if it was in an attempt to save her brother's life.)

Xie Lian doesn't actually believe He Xuan would have physically hurt her.

Not under any circumstances.

"It wasn't." Hua Cheng agrees. "We're still working on finding the actual culprit. But most of what happened in Fu Gu…was something else."

Something strong enough to completely incapacitate Shi Qingxuan, the Wind Master —after severely injuring Shuo, who was strong enough to kill the true Earth Master single handedly.

And after fighting Xie Lian, who certainly didn't go *easy* on the creature. That, taking into account what it knew about Xie Lian, what he saw…

His stomach twists with anxiety—but if Hua Cheng is already looking into the matter, there's nothing worrying about it can do.

And he promised Shi Qingxuan and Pei that he would ask…

"...Do you know where He Xuan would have taken the Water Master?" He asks cautiously. "Or what he would have done to him? I understand if you can't tell me..."

And if it were not for Shi Qingxuan's situation—how precarious things are for her—he wouldn't have asked.

"...I don't know where they are," Hua Cheng admits. "That in itself presents a very limited number of locations where they might be. But..."

His expression turns grim, and his words make Xie Lian's stomach sink. "I would be surprised if Shi Wudu was still alive by now."

That was always his goal, after all. And Hua Cheng never exactly tried to dissuade Blackwater from killing the Water Master, he just...

Encouraged finding a way to leave Shi Qingxuan out of it—in no small part for Xie Lian's sake.

Xie Lian sighs, shoulders slumping.

His expression is so torn—Hua Cheng's gaze slides away, unable to look. And he speaks...in a way that Xie Lian has never heard before.

Not from Hua Cheng.

"This lowly one is sorry that dianxia is disappointed."

"..." Xie Lian looks up.

...Disappointed?

"What?"

Hua Cheng won't look at him, even if Xie Lian can't see the remorse in his expression. Not for what happened to the Shi siblings, but...

Then, Xie Lian remembers what Pei said, when Shi Qingxuan was thrown back through the portal.

How it genuinely seemed to cut at Hua Cheng.

Saying that he was heartless. And that...

Pei Ming expected more, from someone Xie Lian held a high opinion of.

Does...

Does Hua Cheng think that Xie Lian is disappointed in *him?*

"Oh, San Lang..." The prince whispers, surprised. "I could never be disappointed in you."

He receives no reply, and unable to see the ghost king's expression, or read his reaction—the prince presses on.

"You weren't helping Blackwater, you only came along to help me. I never thought you *enjoyed* watching anyone walk into that situation..."

If anything, Hua Cheng had seemed stressed the entire time, eagerly trying to get Xie Lian AWAY from what was happening.

"...You really don't blame me at all?" The calamity questions, his voice quiet. Xie Lian nods, earnest.

"But you wouldn't have done as I did."

That draws a tired smile to the prince's lips.

"We're different people," he admits. "But that doesn't mean I expect you to do everything I would. Or that you should."

That was something Xie Lian learned the hard way, when he was young.

If you expect everyone around you to think and feel the same way as you do—you'll end up alone.

Or with people feeling the need to be dishonest with you–friends becoming obligated to pretend to be something that they're not.

And since then...

Xie Lian has learned that he’s not as morally righteous as he believed himself to be, when he was young.

That he doesn’t have the right to judge anyone.

“...The only thing that confused me was...you seemed unhappy about going along with it,” Xie Lian explains softly. “I’m not disappointed—or upset with you—I just...don’t understand why...”

“...” Hua Cheng leans back, running his fingers through his hair.

Pulled up in a high, messy top-knot, to keep it out of his face while he works—bangs curling slightly in the heat of the forge.

“...I made a deal with Blackwater a long time ago,” he explains carefully. “That I wouldn’t stand in his way on this matter, if he helped me.”

“...Helped you with what?”

Hua Cheng’s eyes finally return to him, glancing his god over. And he gives the prince a familiar reply.

“Something precious to me.”

“...”

Xie Lian stares back at him, wide eyed and earnest, even if he’ll never see the look in Hua Cheng’s eyes.

“Is it something I can help with, too?”

And oh, how soft they grow when they look at him.

“One day,” the ghost king agrees. “I’ll tell gege when the time comes.”

He would tell him now, if he could.

Every single thing, every moment, every lie, he would tell Xie Lian all of it.

“...It must be really important,” Xie Lian mutters, rubbing the side of his neck.

“The most important thing in the world.”

That seems to startle the prince, and finally, Hua Cheng asks him something of his own.

“Gege?”

“...Yes?”

“Have you ever loved something so much, you were afraid to make room in your heart for anything else?” He murmurs, his eyes never leaving Xie Lian’s face.

“...Yes,” Xie Lian agrees slowly, and just as Hua Cheng turns back to the forge, he reaches up to grasp the chain around his neck—his gaze pensive. “I have.”

He loved Hong’er so fiercely, losing him, the pain of that, made him afraid to attach to anyone else again.

And when he started to feel...attraction...towards Hua Cheng, part of him was afraid that might mean he had less space in his heart for Hong’er, even after all of these years.

It felt like a betrayal.

“When I was young,” Hua Cheng explains slowly, fingertips loosely grasping the handle of his hammer. “I had nothing.”

Xie Lian doesn't interrupt, just listens to him speak—his heart aching with sympathy. "And once I did have something, something that gave my life meaning..."

It became his everything.

Xie Lian is *still* his everything.

Hua Cheng doesn't regret that. He's never encountered something that made him wish there was more room in his heart. He has friendships. Other things that are important—

But he only has one reason. One meaning.

"...You told Ming Guang that I wasn't heartless, dianxia, but I..." Hua Cheng glances back over his shoulder, eyeing Xie Lian with a conflicted gaze.

"I can be."

In the name of protecting what he loves.

And maybe that's why he could never completely condemn the Water Master.

Because there are no lines he wouldn't cross, in the name of protecting those close to his heart.

The person close to his heart.

And Xie Lian's response...

...Isn't exactly what he expected.

He crosses the room, placing a hand over Hua Cheng's on the work table.

"...So can I," he replies gently, squeezing his fingers. "So can anyone, when we want to protect the things that we love. That's part of being human."

That was one of the hardest things that he had to learn. And even more so—

That sometimes, becoming something something that would sadden the people you love is worse than losing them.

Even if it's harder to hold onto your heart—you should. Even if it hurts—

It's always worth it.

Hua Cheng stares down at their joined hands, eyes distant. "...You would still call me that?"

Normally, Xie Lian isn't so comfortable with touching Hua Cheng casually. But after everything they've been through in the last few days, and the ache he hears in his voice...

Xie Lian reaches up, pressing his palm to the Ghost King's cheek.

"We're all human, San Lang." He whispers, his heart swelling when he feels Hua Cheng lean into his touch. "When we ascend. When we fail. When we die."

Hua Cheng closes his eye, turning his face into Xie Lian's palm.

"We never stop being human."

It doesn't feel like it, sometimes.

There are moments when Hua Cheng only feels human, feels remotely different when an animal, if he's with his god.

Every other moment is little better than oblivion.

It's hard to know how long they remain like this—but it's peaceful.

...Until it isn't.

BOOM!

The sound is so distant, but still so forceful—Xie Lian jumps, trying to look around, listening closely for the source of the sound—

But Hua Cheng's arm locks around his waist, stopping him from moving. "...San Lang?"

The Ghost King doesn't reply, his eye wide, knuckles white where they grip Xie Lian around his hip.

Fighting to contact He Xuan in the communication array. Shuo, even —but he receives no answer.

The only one he *does* hear from is Yin Yu, his voice quiet—

'It's begun.'

Xie Lian places a hand against Hua Cheng's chest, preparing to ask him what's going on, when—

When he feels bare skin under his palm.

Some frantic, distant part of his mind immediately thinks—

'Oh heavens, not again.'

Of course it's logical that he wouldn't be wearing a shirt—it's a *forge* , after all. Plenty of smiths take of their upper robes while they...they...

Suddenly, before he can ask anything more, he's firmly pushed away. "San—?"

"You need to leave."

The prince stares back at him, startled. "I don't—?"

If he could see Hua Cheng's face—how dilated his pupil has become, the sudden extension of his fangs—he would know something was wrong.

But as things stand, he doesn't—

"It's not safe," Hua Cheng mutters.

He tries to push Xie Lian even more insistently towards the door. "One of my people will meet you at the gate and take you to Paradise Manor, don't come out until—"

Infuriatingly, Xie Lian chooses this moment to drag his feet. "You expect me to leave you in such a state?!"

"Yes," hua cheng replies firmly, grasping him by the shoulders. "You don't know what's about to—"

Suddenly, the floor of the forge rattles, like a small earthquake is passing through, and instead of pushing Xie Lian towards the door...

Suddenly, Hua Cheng drags him back in.

Xie Lian is frozen in shock—having been turned around with Hua

Cheng trying to force him to *leave* , and now, the Ghost King is pressed against his back, both arms locked around Xie Lian's middle, and—

And his face, buried in the prince's neck. "S…San Lang—?"

"Don't go."

Xie Lian is frozen, his cheeks already slightly pink, unable to think about anything other than the sensation of Hua Cheng's nose, brushing just over his pulse. How his lips very nearly touch the prince's skin as he speaks.

"I lied—please, don't go."

Xie Lian can barely think—struggles to string a sentence together to form speech, but —

He doesn't need to.

Because rather than being forced to suffer any longer, his mouth gaping like a fish— fingers grip his chin, turning and tilting his face up—capturing him in a fierce kiss.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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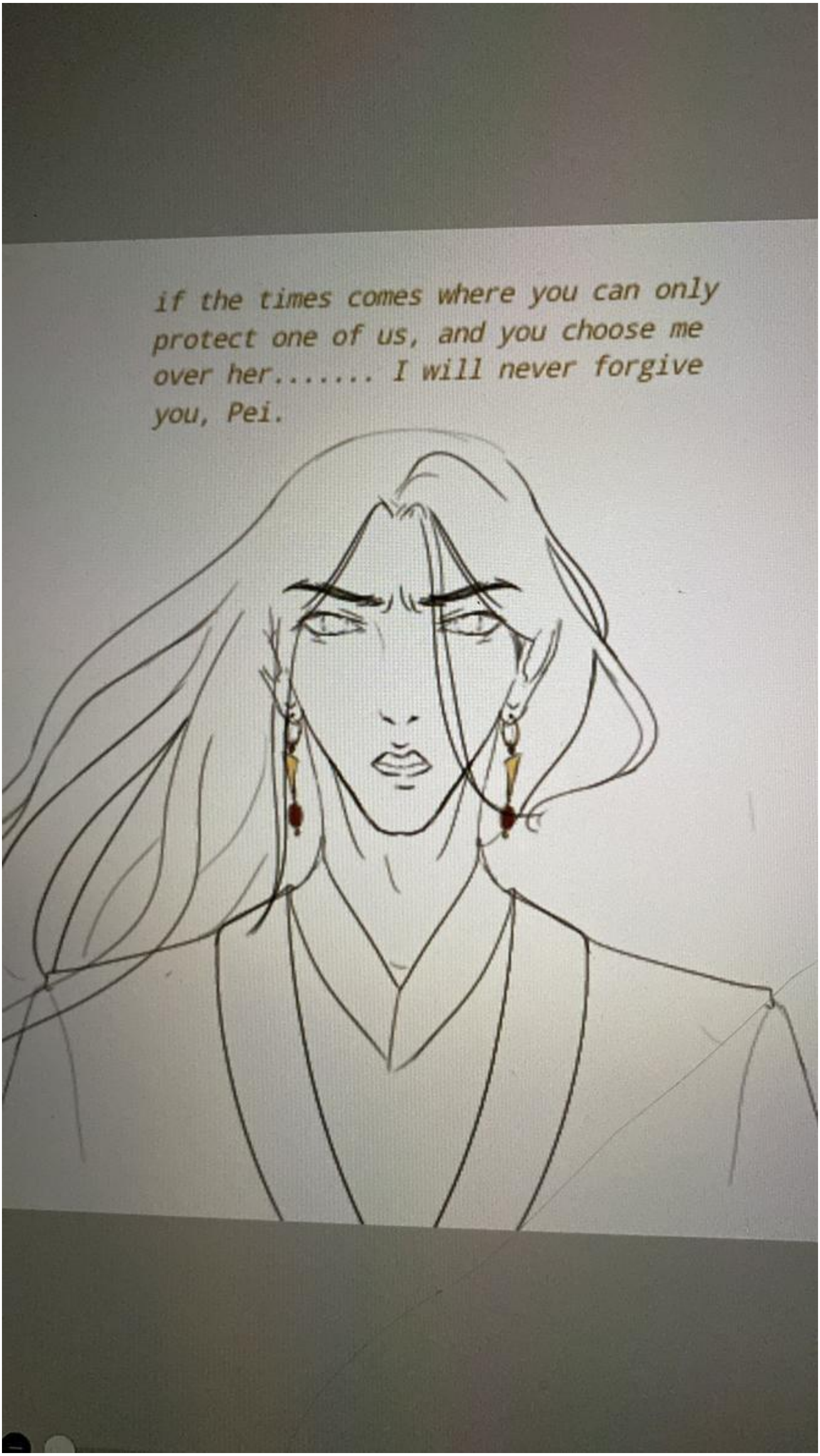
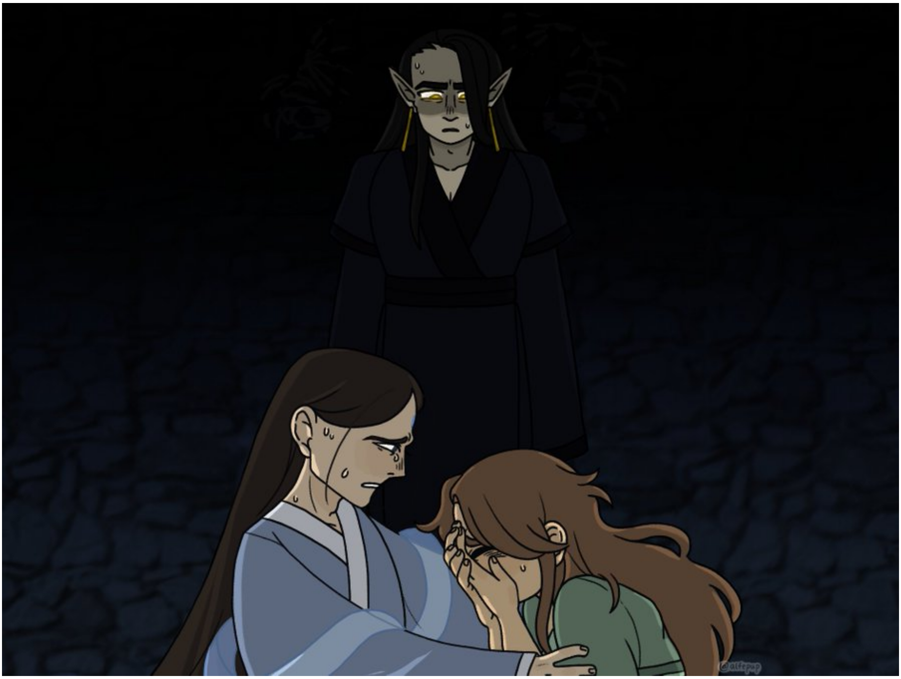
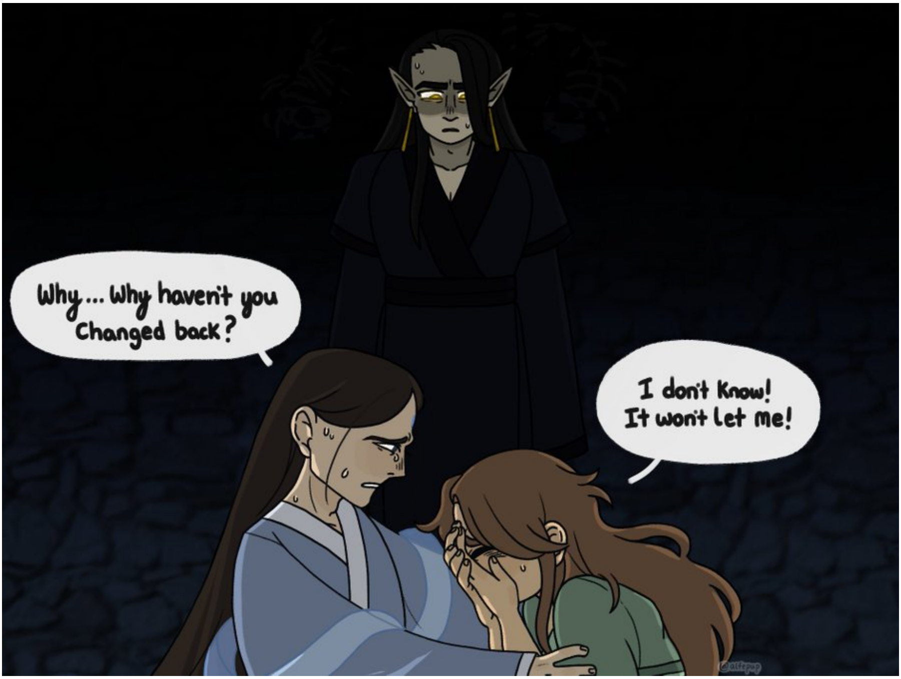


if the times comes where you can only protect one of us, and you choose me over her....... I will never forgive you, Pei.

CREDIT: **BLUE**


@alfepup


Why... Why haven't you Changed back?
I don't Know! It won't let me!
@alfepup

CREDIT: ALFIE

Chapter End Notes

congrats to SVSSS stans, it's FINALLY made an appearance in No Paths Are Bound!! And to those who aren't...I'm sorry if that one section was a little meta! Now, if you notice some details of Shen Yuan's story are different from canon, that's on purpose! I plan on doing re-tellings of MDZS and SVSSS after I'm done with this story, so the references to those stories in this fic include canon divergence!

thank you to Blue and Alfie for their artwork, and allowing me to share it!

xoxo, Evie

Being Needed

Chapter Summary

> “San Lang…” He rasps, fighting for coherency, “What’s gotten into—? Mmmph!”
>
> Now, he’s being kissed again, with Hua Cheng’s arm hugging him so tightly around the waist, his toes brush against the floor, but his feet—they don’t really touch them.
>
> And whatever’s going on—it seems to be affecting all of Ghost City.

Chapter Notes

> CONTENT WARNING: this chapter contains canon typical dubious consent, very similar to what occurs in Ch. 127 of the novels. Be warned!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Back in Puqi Shrine, another fierce battle is waging.

Lang Qianqiu slams his forehead against a tree so violently, its trunk groans in protest.

“Why is he so INSUFFERABLE today?!” By that, of course—he means Qi Rong.

“Who knows…” Shuo groans, rolling over.

For once, he doesn’t have a snappy, sarcastic statement to make about Lang Qianqiu’s inability to tolerate Qi Rong’s jibing—which is odd.

“…And what’s wrong with you?” The martial god frowns. “You’ve been quiet.” The forest demon doesn’t lift his face from the grass.

“Maybe I’m just enjoying my own thoughts.”

Lang Qianqiu shrugs, rubbing his ear irritably.

Qi Rong’s been at it for three days now—but in the last few hours, it’s been unbearable.

Belligerent screaming, shouting, curses, threats—and no matter how much he's beaten, he goes on.

"I'd believe that if you ever knew how to shut up," he mutters, which leads to Ren Song sitting up sharply—exhausted, but offended.

"Excuse me?!"

"I've never met someone more excited to show off how smart they are by insulting people."

"Not people, just YOU!" He glares.

"And maybe I'm quiet because I nearly got my soul sucked out of my body by some Creepy FACELESS asshole, ever think of that?! Not everyone has ENDLESS ENERGY, MOTHERFUCKER!"

Lang Qianqiu slams his head against the tree again, relieved. Well, that shows he isn't dying.

"You really don't know what's going on with Qi Rong, though? I thought you were the 'expert.'"

Ren Song sits up, rubbing the side of his head as he looks to where the green ghost is bound, rolling and screaming in the dirt.

"If I knew, I'd make him stop."

It's been stressing out poor Guzi, anyway—leaving the child crying, trying to comfort his 'father.'

But then—

Qi Rong starts *cackling* .

Rolling onto his back, howling with laughter.

"YOU'RE SO FUCKING SCREWED! HAHAHA—OH, THIS ANCESTOR IS GOING TO ENJOY THE SHOW…"

Lang Qianqiu lifts his head, shooting him another annoyed look. "Wanna clue us in, you freak?!"

Qi Rong smirks, eyes gleaming an acidic shade of green under the moonlight. "Don't need to."

Suddenly, he stops screaming, cursing, or thrashing.

Suddenly, he sits up.

Looking straight at Shuo, his lips curving up onto a deranged, sharpened smile.

“Too bad your big brother won’t be around to look out for you this time,” he sneers, watching the demon’s eyes widen sharply in response. “I almost feel sorry...but who am I kidding? HAHAHAHAHA—!”

Before he can finish speaking, Lang Qianqiu’s boot fixes itself in his throat, pressing him back down against the ground.

“You murder a person, then you think you can just fucking GLOAT in front of their family?!” He snarls.

They might not get along—but wrong is wrong.

Qi Rong wheezes, looking up at him with a wide, deranged smile.

“Oh, I wouldn’t defend him if I were you!” He rasps, grasping at Lang Qianqiu’s boot, his own feet kicking limply. “He’s gonna KILL YOU!”

That makes both The prince and the demon pause, staring. “What—?”

BOOM!

The explosion is distant—and still, it manages to rattle the entire valley, sending birds and animals fleeing in its wake.

And before Lang Qianqiu can react, or figure out what that is—

He’s being tackled to the ground—with Qi Rong’s laughter only getting louder.

And when he looks up—it isn’t the green ghost on top of him, no.

“What are you doing?!”

It’s Shuo.

Eyes wide open—but so dilated, they’re almost black, fangs and claws already extended.

Snarling in the prince’s face, like he intends to rip his throat out.

“GUZI!” Qi Rong barks, giving the child a sharp look. “C’mere and untie your old man!”

The child hesitates, watching Ren Song with wide, worried eyes. “…Is gege okay?”

“Who gives a damn!” He snaps. “Now hurry up!”

Lang Qianqiu glares. “Don’t even THINK about—!”

He tries to get up—only to be shoved back down forcefully, a vicious snarl ripping through his ears—and Qi Rong cackles.

“You’ve got bigger problems than ME, dumbass! AHAHAHA!”

Guzi fumbles with the bonds around his wrists, and once they’re loose, the ghost springs into action.

Ripping the bonds around his ankles with his own claws before scrambling to his feet, running off in the opposite direction, leaving Guzi scrambling after him.

“WAIT! Dad, don’t leave me!” He cries, following him down the road. Lang Qianqiu grits his teeth.

“What the HELL is going on with you?!” He glares up at him, startled to see how brightly the ghost’s eyes are burning down at him. “You want them to get away?!”

As he goes to push him off again, Ren Song lashes out with his claws—leaving three deep cuts in the God’s cheek.

“Son of a BITCH!” He growls, this time managing to catch Shuo by the wrists. Normally the two are more evenly matched in terms of brute physical strength—

But Shuo is still recovering from the attack, and Lang Qianqiu is significantly bigger than him.

As such, shoving him with full force is enough to send the demon flying back, slamming into a tree before hitting the ground.

Lang Qianqiu sits up, touching his cheek with a pained hiss, leaping to his feet so he can go after Qi Rong, until he hears—

Until he hears a sob.

The kind of sound that cuts straight through a man’s focus, aching to the bone.

And when he looks back over his shoulder…

Ren Song has changed back to his original form—not the harmless (maybe slightly attractive) human teenager that he pretends to be for the villagers.

He's sitting back against the tree Lang Qianqiu just bodily threw him against—eyes wide, unfocused.

Petrified.

"…Wh—?"

"BAO!"

His scream is so loud, it echoes through the valley, like— Like a wounded animal.

Who—?

…Who is Bao?

Ren Song sobs, tearing at his hair.

"Who—?"

"WHERE'S MY BROTHER?!"

Initially, it sounds terrifying, coming from an ancient demon like Ren Song—but the closer Lang Qianqiu listens, the more it sounds like the terrified, frantic sobbing of a child.

"Where's my brother?! I WANT MY BROTHER! GEGE—!"

The martial god is frozen, staring as Ren Song rocks back and forth, crying so hard, he can barely take enough air in to make a sound.

"Gege…" he croaks, and there's—

There's so much fear, in his voice.

"Gege, I'm lost…"

"…" Lang Qianqiu looks back in the direction where Qi Rong just disappeared, visibly torn—and behind him, Ren Song continues to weep.

“I...I didn’t let go of the thread, I didn’t!” He sobs, “So where’d you go?!”

He can’t...

“I don’t w-wanna go back there...”

Ren Song whimpers, the beginnings of hyperventilation ripping at his lungs, and in his panic...

He begins clawing at his own face.

“H-he’s gonna g-get me, I c-can’t go back there, he’s gonna get me, he’s GONNA GET ME—!”

He falls silent, however, when arms wrap around him.

At first, he panics—scrambling, clawing as a feral cat as he tries to get away, but—

Lang Qianqiu’s grip tightens as he sits down against the tree, with Ren Song clutched in his lap, cradled between his arms.

“Nothing’s gonna get you.” The demon freezes, eyes wide.

The arms around him tighten—grounding.

Safe.

“I’m not gonna let anything get you, okay?”

“...” Then, his eyes flood with tears all over again. But…

Not from fear.

Lang Qianqiu half expects him to keep trying to gauge his eyes out, but... Instead, Ren Song turns his face into his chest, crying—

Crying his heart out.

Clinging to the martial god for dear life.

Lang Qianqiu made this promise once—when he was too young, too naive to understand:

‘I won’t let anything hurt you.’

But now…

'Not ever again.'

He holds Shuo tighter, making sure he doesn't try to claw at his own face again. Holds him as he cries, screams, and begs.

Now, it feels like he understands.

The difference between wanting someone to need you—and actually being needed.

Xie Lian, he—

He can't breathe.

Hua Cheng's hand is loosely wrapped around his throat, holding his chin in place— but that isn't why.

Well. Maybe that's part of why. Especially when he notices how the ghost king's palm envelops his entire neck, but—

It isn't choking him.

No, what *is* choking him is the white hot energy pouring down his throat, filling him up to the point where it feels like he's about to burst.

It's too much, he can't, he—

Hua Cheng's tongue slides against his just so, in a way that's nothing short of *sinful* , and Xie Lian—

A low, broken sound slips from his throat as their lips part, which only seems to egg the ghost king on—using the arm gripping his middle to spin Xie Lian until they're facing one another once more.

"San Lang…" He rasps, fighting for coherency, "What's gotten into—? Mmmph!"

Now, he's being kissed again, with Hua Cheng's arm hugging him so tightly around the waist, his toes brush against the floor, but his feet—they don't really touch them.

And whatever's going on—it seems to be affecting all of Ghost City.

Even now, severely distracted, he can hear the chaos that seems to be unfolding above. Nothing cataclysmic, but certainly enough to cause unrest.

Does that have something to do with why Hua Cheng is acting like this?

Why so much power is flooding in through his lips?

If this is so overwhelming for Xie Lian, just getting a part of it through Hua Cheng's touch...

...How painful must it be for him?

They break apart once more—only because the ghost king seems interested in giving Xie Lian a chance to breathe, burying his face in the prince's throat, mouthing over his pulse as Xie Lian gasps for air.

His eyes roll back into his head, half lidded.

Oh, he's a *horrible* person.

But he...

He doesn't exactly see another way to help him.

And so—hands trembling with nerves, rather than fear—he grips Hua Cheng by the cheeks, pulling him back up—and pressing their lips together once more.

Whispering as he does—

"I'm sorry, it's for your own—!"

Then, their lips are moving together once more—and Xie Lian isn't thinking.

His hands drop down, unsure of where to go—mortified at first when he feels the bare skin of Hua Cheng's shoulders under his palms, but...

The ghost king's flesh is smooth and warm under his touch.

And with every movement, he can feel muscles coiling and tensing, power radiating through every inch of him, and—

Xie Lian exhales shakily through his nose, cupping the back of Hua Cheng's neck as his other hand grips his shoulder.

The action brings his feet slightly further off the floor, and when Xie Lian feels Hua Cheng lean forward, well—he assumes it must be to *help* , but—

When he feels his back hit the stone wall of the forge, it becomes clear the intentions were slightly more self serving.

It's—

Xie Lian gasps, his arms tightening around Hua Cheng's neck and shoulders as he feels a knee slip between his legs, pressing insistently.

It's far more intense than before.

And now, with Xie Lian slightly less clueless about the art of kissing someone—far more mutual.

They're moving together instead of Xie Lian simply allowing Hua Cheng to do as he likes, the way he did in Paradise Manor, and it's so much more than *just* their mouths.

Hua Cheng's hands are heavy, sliding down his sides—almost scorching through his robes, squeezing his hips.

Xie Lian's head is spinning, thoughts slowly thickening and running together, coming undone halfway to completion, sweet and slow like honey.

And then, one of those hands slides down, fingers wrapping around his thigh— drawing a surprised yelp from the prince, because he's never—

He's never been touched like this before, not—not *ever* , and—

That hand grips him tighter, lifting his thigh up, up, further up, Xie Lian can't understand what he's doing, not until—

Not until his leg is hitched around Hua Cheng's hip. Oh—

Xie Lian—

(He moans.)

Oh *no.*

Shuddering moans and gasps falling from his lips only seem to entice Hua Cheng further, pressing closer and closer, until their bodies are flush against one another— with Xie Lian sandwiched between Hua Cheng's bare torso and the wall behind.

(Both hard, one pleasantly so.)

And when Hua Cheng walks forward, Xie Lian—

He was already aware a few moments ago that he had a building…problem, but—

Hua Cheng has a similar issue.

A very big, very noticeable issue, rubbing directly against *Xie Lian's* problem, and—

It's not Hua Cheng's fault. He clearly doesn't have a clue what's going on—he wouldn't be touching Xie Lian like this if he did. He probably…

He's probably thinking of his precious, amazing person. The person he's in love with.

Xie Lian knows that, he feels *horrible* about that, and still, at this rate, ethic sutras or not, if Hua Cheng keeps moving against him like this, he'll…!

"S-San Lang—!"

The only response he receives at first is a growl, one that he feels in the pit of his stomach.

"W-Wait—!"

And, in his moment of sheer panic, he finds something he hasn't possessed in centuries—maybe not since his second banishment, but—

"Stop!"

He doesn't plead, no—he actually thinks that might entice Hua Cheng in this state.

Xie Lian heard something similar from Shi Qingxuan once, the last time when they were in Paradise Manor together—accidentally dumped into the middle of a far off village—and when one of them scratched her cheek—

She used her ‘god’ voice.

Xie Lian has something similar.

As a matter of fact, Mu Qing used to tease him for it when they were little, calling it his ‘dianxia,’ voice—which made Xie Lian embarrassed, but people always listened when he used it.

And even in this situation—Hua Cheng is no exception.

He leans back immediately, even though it seems to cause him great strain—

(Xie Lian can actually hair a pained sound slip past his lips.)

“Down.”

Xie Lian sounds more confident than he feels—and all he means is for Hua Cheng to let his leg down, but—

He takes it literally.

Dropping down heavily onto the floor, and Xie Lian—

He presses a hand against his forehead, because obviously he didn’t mean for Hua Cheng to drop down onto the ground, but—

That’s—that’s his fault, the Ghost King can’t think clearly right now, Xie Lian—

Xie Lian has to do the thinking for both of them. He—

He can do that, can’t he?

As long as he doesn’t let it get…to *that* point…he can do this, right?

A low, strained sound rumbles in Hua Cheng’s chest, hardening Xie Lian’s resolve. Well—

He has to.

“…” He extends his hand, meaning for Hua Cheng to take it—which he does, but only to flip it over, kissing the inside of Xie Lian's wrist, up his forearm, the end of his elbow—

(Xie Lian thinks he might faint.)

"N-No!" He repeats sternly, pulling his arm back.

Hua Cheng stares up at him, breathing hard, his eye slightly out of focus, but fixed on him.

Xie Lian holds out his hand again—and this time, when the ghost king takes it, he grips his fingers tightly, guiding Hua Cheng back to his feet.

And the prince knows this isn't Hua Cheng's fault, he can't control himself clearly—

But the moment he tries to snatch the god up again, Xie Lian pushes his chest firmly, ordering—

"Sit!"

Which Hua Cheng does, landing heavily on the work bench behind him.

Xie Lian can't help but feel a little bad, speaking to his friend like he's some sort of dog, but he—he doesn't *mean* it like that, he's just...

The prince presses a palm against his forehead, listening to the labored, uncomfortable breathing from the calamity.

It must be so difficult for him to show restraint right now, but he's trying so hard, and Xie Lian—

His chest aches with sympathy, and... (Deep down, affection.)

"I know," he murmurs, stepping closer—allowing Hua Cheng's arms to wrap around his waist this time without complaint

And this time, when the ghost king pulls him in—Xie Lian clambers into his lap, sliding his arms around Hua Cheng's shoulders once more.

"I know it hurts," he mutters, bringing their faces together once more. "It's okay..." It's easier to control the pace of things, in this position—and Xie Lian...

Is experiencing one of those rare moments where he aches for his sight, wondering what Hua Cheng's expression is like right now. Wondering if he looks pained, or guilty, or—

...The opposite of that.

And while this brings greater control, yes...

There's also something inherently...satisfying about it. In a way that he can't place. Having someone hold him, hips between his thighs, the way Hua Cheng surges up hungrily for each kiss.

Xie Lian knows he shouldn't—that this is nothing of the sort, but—

Part of him, somewhere deep, deep down, beneath several layers of self loathing, in the pits of a chasm of self denial...enjoys it.

So much so, instead of stopping Hua Cheng's hands when they drift over his backside, squeezing—he just gasps, sliding forward, hugging his arms tighter around his shoulders, and...

Letting his palms slide down, fingernails dragging lightly over the ghost king's skin.

Which seems to only please Hua Cheng even more, spurring him to grip Xie Lian even tighter, their hips finding a natural rhythm, one that keeps in pace with their mouths, tension building and building until the prince sits up on his knees, ordering the ghost king to stop.

Which he always does, though sometimes with a groan of dismay, breaking their mouths apart, burying his face in the prince's neck—and once, when his fangs scrape across the Xie Lian's skin, and he lets out a soft cry in response—

He pulls back, alarmed, even in this state.

And Xie Lian, hurrying to soothe him, not thinking about how this expands beyond the boundaries of simply trying to relieve Hua Cheng from the distress of being so flooded with energy, and having no idea how this would *sound* to anyone else—

He pulls him into another kiss.

"It's alright," he whispers, sliding his fingers through Hua Cheng's hair, wondering—

Wondering why this, this closeness, this intensity—is so *easy* , after how many years he spent steering away from the very thought of intimacy.

“You’re doing so well, San Lang…”

Of course, Xie Lian only means that as a compliment—a way of soothing Hua Cheng, who seems terribly out of sorts and distressed, but—

It seems to have the opposite effect when it comes to calming him down.

Thud!

Xie Lian’s gasp of surprise is swallowed directly into Hua Cheng’s mouth as he stands up—the prince’s full weight settled easily in his arms, as if he weighed less than a feather—spinning them around, and —

With a sweep of his arm, tools and schematics on the work table are sent scattering to the floor with a clatter.

And then, Xie Lian is laid in their place.

With Hua Cheng over him, on top of him, stealing every breath of air that comes out of the prince’s lungs.

Xie Lian tries to sit up on his elbows, tries to clear his throat, preparing to order Hua Cheng back down again, but—

Fingers wrap around his neck—just as they did before. Not harshly, not painfully— but insistently pushing his head back down, pinning him against the table top.

And it’s probably for the best that he can’t see the look on Hua Cheng’s face.

The way his eye scorches down upon the prince, burning like a cursed star. Hair tousled, slipping down from its top-knot, one fang peeking through a lopsided smirk.

And he isn’t himself.

Logically, Xie Lian knows that.

Hua Cheng wouldn’t be doing any of this if he was himself, but—

His hand tightens slightly around the god's throat, drawing out a soft moan, and—

The Ghost King shushes him leaning back down.

Whispering his first coherent words in an hour:

"Don't worry..." He purrs, lips pressing against Xie Lian's once more, his other hand pinning both of the prince's above his own.

And Xie Lian—

He thinks there are two different versions of himself. One who existed before now, and one who existed after.

"You're doing so well..."

Xie Lian can't really think about stopping now, fingers digging into the ghost king's shoulders, taking every kiss he is given, scrambling to take more.

More, more, *more* .

Even when his own upper robes slowly fall open, exposing more and more skin, he doesn't put a stop to it.

In any other situation, feeling the chain around his neck pressing against someone else's skin would set him in a panic, make him go running for the hills, but now—

The contrast between the cool metal and the heat of Hua Cheng's skin sets him aflame.

He...doesn't *want* to stop.

That morning, Hua Cheng sits up sharply, sucking in a deep, lurching breath that he wouldn't normally need.

What—

What happened? Where is he? Where's—?

"Oh," the sound of his god's voice, near and calm, nearly makes him deflate with relief. “San Lang, you’re awake!”

Hua Cheng whips around to look at him, and—

They’re in Qiandeng Temple now—with a few cushions brought from one of the side chambers, having been laid beneath Hua Cheng as he slept.

All while Xie Lian is off to the side, working at the loom. “I was starting to get worried...”

The prince sighs, tying off his work before turning fully to face him. "You slept for quite some time."

Hua Cheng falls silent for a moment, looking his god over with a keen, discerning eye.

...And Xie Lian seems to be completely unharmed.

Extremely relaxed, in fact.

Serene might be the better way to describe it.

His hair is completely loose, freshly combed—and he's in different robes from the night before. For once, on a very rare occasion, he's wearing black.

A fine color on him, one that draws the Ghost King's eye. "What...happened?"

“I think I should be asking you the same thing,” Xie Lian shrugs, fiddling with the hem of his sleeve. “There was a loud noise—and then you were completely out of sorts for the rest of the evening.”

“Out...of sorts?” Hua Cheng questions. “Out of sorts,” Xie Lian confirms calmly.

When he doesn’t expand on the matter, Hua Cheng sighs, running his fingers through his own hair.

Which is now loose, combed—even though he doesn’t remember when he got around to that.

“...Mount Tonglu has opened,” he mutters, prompting Xie Lian stiffening with shock.

“...A new ghost king is about to be born?”

"Possibly," Hua Cheng agrees, though he's not sure if that's so easy to discern now, with how unsettled everything has been. "Now, what happened while I was...out of sorts?"

"Oh..." Xie Lian looks away, "Nothing of note, really..."

It's the reluctance that seems to catch the ghost king's attention.

"...Nothing?"

"No." Xie Lian agrees, bobbing his head.

"No, it wasn't nothing, or—?"

"It was nothing!" He repeats, a little too quickly this time, and Hua Cheng's heart sinks in response.

"...Did I do something to you, your highness?" His voice is uncharacteristically quiet, and Xie Lian—

"Just the opposite, actually..."

—Responds quickly, but in an even more baffling way.

"...The Opposite?"

"Well, you see..." The prince fiddles with his sleeve. "I...well...um..."

"...You what?"

And when Xie Lian blurts out the answer—

"I hit you!"

Hua Cheng is left sitting there, utterly shocked.

"...You what?"

"...In the face," Xie Lian adds, covering his mouth with his hand. "I-I'm really sorry, San Lang, I was startled, and we fought—"

"...We did?"

"Oh yes," the prince mutters, hanging his head. "I'm sure the forge is a mess by now, tools got scattered all over the place. And eventually I just...punched you in the face... hard. I...I'm so sorry, I didn't mean—"

Hua Cheng reaches up to touch his own cheeks, tilting his head.

“...It doesn’t feel like you struck me,” he comments, confused. Given how strong the prince can be when he actually exerts force, if he hit Hua Cheng hard enough to be so apologetic, he would think...

“Well—yes,” Xie Lian nods quickly, hands still covering his own face. “You were absorbing so much power—I’m sure that your body already healed from it, but I still thought I ought to apologize...”

Hua Cheng thinks that over, reaching down to twist the bead braided into his hair. “...Did something happen to my back?”

Xie Lian goes completely stiff.

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” Hua Cheng frowns, reaching over his head to touch his shoulder blade through the fabric of his robes. He isn’t uncomfortable —but he can sense broken skin.

Which is somewhat bizarre.

“It feels like something scratched me.”

If Xie Lian were a cat, every single hair on his body would be standing on end by now.

“And if my face could heal from a serious blow from his highness to the point where I couldn’t feel it, but I still feel that—?”

“You tripped!”

Hua Cheng leans over, eyeing Xie Lian a little more curiously as the prince turns away from him, his face still hidden.

“...I tripped?” He repeats.

“...Maybe I shoved you...” Xie Lian croaks, his voice cracking from the shame. “I was really so horrible to San Lang, I-I’m sorry!”

And maybe, just maybe, if Hua Cheng had been given the time to examine his god more thoroughly, he would have noticed something.

Xie Lian always does his hair immediately after waking each morning —so having it loose at this hour is strange for him.

(And if Hua Cheng had looked more closely, he might have seen certain things where the prince’s jawline meets his ear, or upon the nape of his neck.)

He also might have noticed that the black robes Xie Lian is wearing are freshly woven —

And with a much higher collar than usual.

Given time, he would have noticed all of those things—and maybe, just possibly—

How Unoffended the prince seems about such a predicament, only worrying for Hua Cheng's reaction.

In any case...

"Sir," the sound of Yin Yu's voice draws his attention. "You have visitors."

Hua Cheng glances over to the entrance to the table, finding his assistant waiting for him there—and he raises an eyebrow.

"Whoever it is, they can wait."

"Well, the thing is—"

"No," a familiar voice cuts the ghost officer off firmly. "It can't wait."

Xie Lian grows still.

"...General Ming Guang?" He questions, turning around.

Pei stands just behind Yin Yu.

Weary, but resigned.

"Your highness."

Xie Lian can't say he and the general have spent very much time together, but still—

He's never heard him like this.

Cold. Devoid of any good humor.

"I thought you wouldn't be coming to speak to San Lang until the matter with the Water Master had been—?"

"He's dead."

The news is delivered in clipped, unforgiving terms, and Pei feels no need to soften the blow.

It's not as though either of them care.

Still, Xie Lian winces

"...I'm so sorry for your loss," he mutters, shaking his head. "And Shi Qingxuan?"

"Had to be sedated by Xuan Zhen after He Xuan ascended while carrying her brother's corpse," the martial god explains calmly, eyes never leaving Hua Cheng.

And even he can't manage not to react upon THAT news. "He ascended?"

"Yes." Pei crosses his arms. Before, when Xie Lian came here with Shi Qingxuan and Lang Qianqiu—both seemed nervous about being in Hua Cheng's territory.

But it seems to be the furthest thing from Pei's mind.

"Then, he attempted to assassinate the emperor with the Godslayer, and promptly descended once more."

Hua Cheng doesn't react this time, but Xie Lian does—sitting up sharply, eyes widening with concern.

"Is his majesty alright?"

The worry in his voice turns Hua Cheng's stomach.

"He's sealed in the Imperial Residence, recovering." Pei Ming mutters. "But I didn't come here to update either of you on public information." His eyes settle on Hua Cheng once more. "I came because I was promised answers."

"..." Hua Cheng places a hand on Xie Lian's shoulder, stopping him from responding on the ghost king's behalf. Instead, he rises to his feet.

"My officer said I have guests. Did you bring anyone with you?"

"Ling Wen," Pei replies flatly. "But she had her own business here."

"Hmm," Hua Cheng acknowledges, offering a hand to help Xie Lian to his feet. “We should continue this conversation in Paradise Manor. Less listening ears.”

Pei falls into step behind them, and Xie Lian frowns.

Hua Cheng is worried about them being overheard? But…by who?

And does that mean…people may have overheard them last night?

Pei Ming disrupts him from that mortifying thought, stating:

“…And I want to know just how you and Blackwater are connected to Zhao Beitong.”

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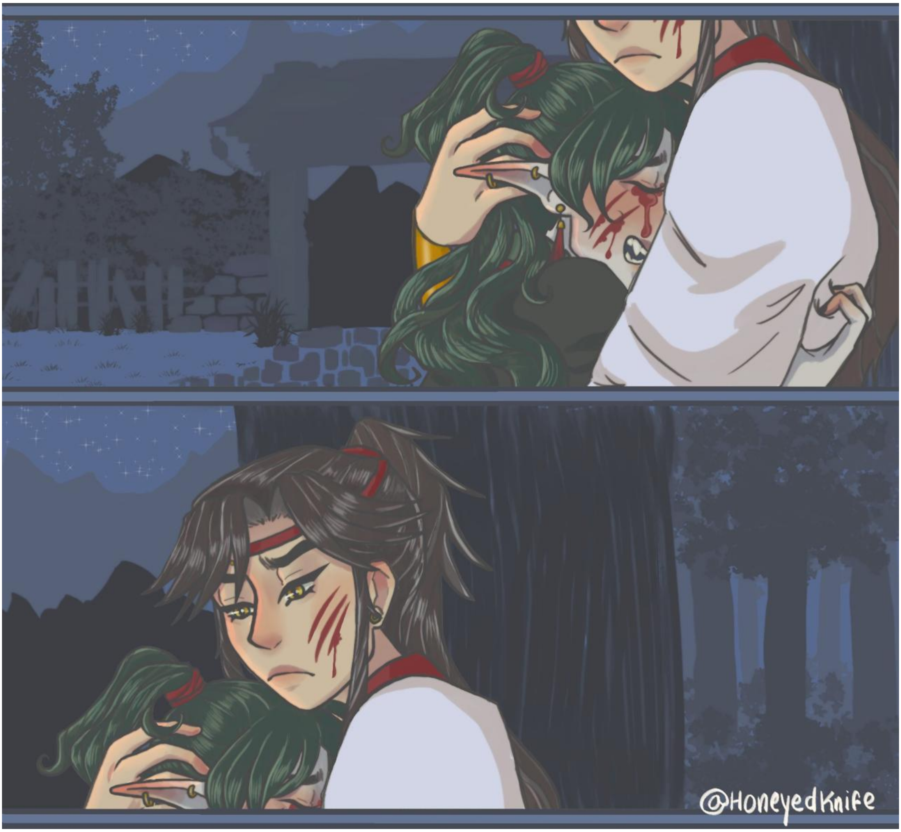
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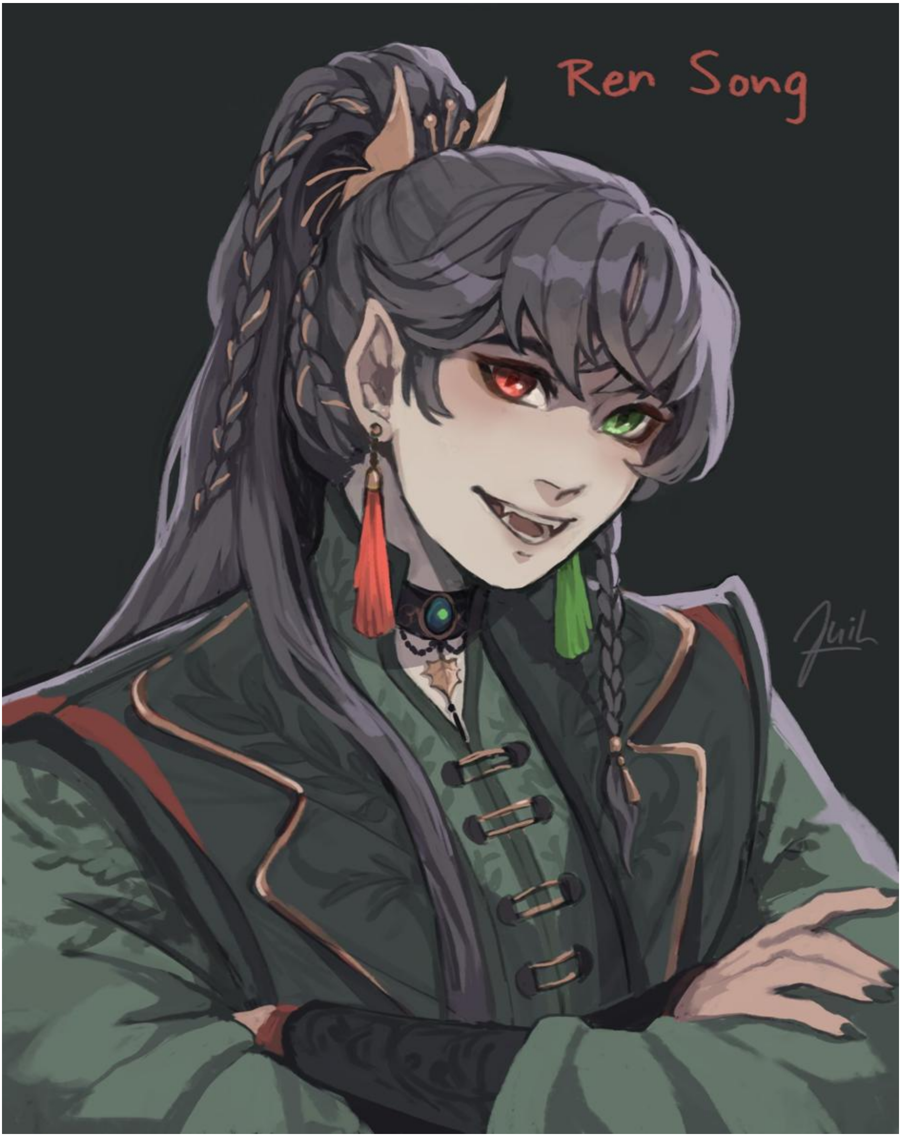

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you to Honey and Juih for their wonderful artwork, and allowing me to share it!!

xoxo, Evie

The Cultivation Master

Chapter Summary

In the heavens, there is a ghost.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the heavens, there is a ghost.

Shi Qingxuan lays on her side, hair spreading limply on the pillow around her.

Eyes always watching the window.

Waiting for another flash of golden light.

For the screams of greeting on the martial Avenue.

For the day before to be a dream.

A golden locket is clutched between her fingers, cold and still.

Waiting for her brother to come home.

Knock, knock!

“I’m not hungry.”

Everyone has been begging her to sleep. To eat.

The only ounce of rest she’s had came when Mu Qing used a spell to force her to sleep.

“It’s Lady Ling Wen, Lady Wind…” Pei Ming’s servant starts, then stops—awkward, remorseful. “Lady Shi Qingxuan.”

She doesn’t move, eyes hollow.

“I don’t want to see anyone.”

“She says it’s about your brother.”

The silence that follows is long—pained.

“...Alright.”

She hears the door open and shut behind her, unsurprised when Ling Wen doesn’t speak first.

Shi Qingxuan sits up, tiredly combing her fingers through her curls. Normally, she wouldn’t be seen in such a state, but...

That doesn’t matter.

None of it does. Not anymore.

“...What is it?”

When she hears no answer, she closes her eyes, irritated.

“If you don’t have anything to say, then why—?”

She turns around with a glare, then falls silent.

Eyes landing on a face she thought she would never see again.

He Xuan.

The silence is long—and both of them are hesitant to break it.

Neither of them want to dare.

But eventually, someone must.

“I was sure you would scream for the guards as soon as you saw me.”

She doesn’t seem afraid, that’s for certain—or on the verge of tears.

“I’m still deciding.”

Her tone is uncharacteristically cool—and her voice is hoarse.

From all of the crying.

Before the silence can settle in once more, she forces herself to be brave. Spine straight, eyes staring straight forward.

“...Why would you risk coming here?”

He Xuan closes his eyes, taking a deep breath.

“Because you deserve more from me.”

It’s not the answer she expected. One that leaves Shi Qingxuan recoiling, staring at him with distrust and confusion.

“...More?” She grips the locket in her hand so tightly, it leaves an imprint. “What would that even look like, at this point?”

He Xuan won’t look at her, and—

Shi Qingxuan doesn’t break down into hysterics. Not because she doesn’t want to. Or because she doesn’t have enough pain to scream and cry, no—

She’s just too tired.

Her eyes drift down to her closed fist, wishing the emptiness in her chest would just go away.

That at some point, it might get easier to live with, but...

When she looks up again, He Xuan isn’t standing on the other side of the room any longer.

He’s right in front of her. On his knees.

That was one thing she always noticed about her friend, one of the qualities that drew her into him so early on.

His pride.

It’s subtle, but ever present. And she...

She really couldn’t have imagined him on his knees before now.

“I didn’t kill him, Shi Qingxuan.”

The mortal stares down at him—eyes wide, confused—

Distrusting.

“...How can you expect me to believe that, after everything you did?” He doesn’t answer immediately, and she looks away, shaking her head.

“And it’s not—” She closes her eyes. “It’s not like I can say you would be wrong for doing that. Because you wouldn’t have been. I told my brother that we deserved to be punished, I—I believed that!”

She doesn't hear what he whispers under his breath: "I know."

"...But I didn't deserve to be lied to. I didn't..." Her jaw clenches as she clutches the hand holding the locket to her chest. "I didn't deserve to be used."

"I didn't—"

"You are the only person that I've ever been with." Shi Qingxuan finally looks at him once more. "Every single one of my firsts—they're all yours."

Every kiss. Every touch. Being with a man, a woman—in the most intimate of ways.

It's all been He Xuan.

"I don't have a right to say you couldn't have taken what was fair," Shi Qingxuan mutters.

"Whether or not you killed him—I can't say if that was right. I...If you had killed *me* , I wouldn't have blamed you. Do you understand that?"

He can hardly seem to bear to look at her. Because he never could have done that. He knows, even if she doesn't.

"...But instead of any of that, you have intertwined your life so closely with mine, I..." Shi Qingxuan places a hand against her forehead, her throat tight with emotions. "Is that my punishment? He had to die, and I have to live with...feeling like this?"

Not for that long.

In all likelihood, she has less than a year to live.

And still, it feels like agony.

"...I'm not trying to punish you," he mutters, lowering his head. "And I didn't kill him."

"Maybe if you hadn't spent so many years lying to me, I would believe you."

And he can't hold that against her.

When she says she would have understood if he had simply come to take her brother's life outright—He Xuan believes her.

It’s the lying that she holds against him.

She is a creature that has been in a gilded cage of lies all her life.

One that He Xuan resented Shi Wudu for, when he was younger. Found him to be a controlling, arrogant guardian—one who kept her from the world.

But then, He Xuan told lies of his own.

Strengthening the bars around her with every falsehood that fell from his lips.

“...And you were so determined to kill him before, what changed?” She asks him like she already knows—and still.

He owes her an answer.

“...The child.”

Shi Qingxuan tilts her head back—a faint, bitter smile on her face.

“You know something?” She sniffs, gripping the sheets. “The longer I spend in this form without changing back—the more contempt I have for the sex I was born to.” Her eyes lower down to look at him sharply. “Because you didn’t care about how any of this would impact me, until you knew I had your child inside of me.”

It’s harsh.

“...I cared.” He whispers. “I changed my plans so many times—”

“You didn’t care enough to stop fucking me, did you?”

She wants to cry. To scream and sob about how unfair it is.

But if she did—he would only pity her. She would be the weak, foolish person he believed her to be.

So Shi Qingxuan digs deep, finding a solid point inside of her heart—and she holds onto it, gripping on tightly.

“You didn’t care when you took my virginity. You didn’t care when I opened up to you SO many times. You didn’t care when I said I was in love with you.”

“...I did care.” He repeats, knowing what her reply would be—she doesn't even need to say it again.

He didn't care enough.

"And maybe you're a fantastic actor," she continues, her voice reeking with bitterness and pain. "Maybe every other word you said to me was a lie—but I guess I must still know you, somehow." She stares into his eyes, hating how much of him she can actually see.

How much there is inside of those eyes that she knows.

"Because I saw when you changed your mind."

Not when he saw her terror. Her pain. How heartbroken and betrayed she felt.

Not even when he asked her brother to switch her fate with a madman's.

Only when he realized that she couldn't change back to her male form—and what that meant.

"It shouldn't have taken knowing that a piece of you was growing inside of me to spare me even an *ounce* of decency. And my brother...he's dead either way. After you took him away for three days, to god knows where, and I—" Her hands tremble. "I *know* he suffered, I *felt* it."

He Xuan allows her to speak. Doesn't argue with her point. Because—

Because when you're so lost in your own pain, your own wants and needs—learning about the impacts of your choices can be just as jarring as the emotions that motivated them.

"...I will never tell you that what my brother did was justified. It wasn't. You saw what it did to me when I found out."

How horrified she was. How frightened and guilty she felt.

"But you know one thing I have to give him credit for?"

Her jaw locks.

"The moment I accused him of what he did—he owned up to it. He didn't make excuses. And he didn't ask for my forgiveness."

Those words actually manage to cut him, because—

Because He Xuan knows.

He saw that moment, in the Water Master's memories. "He—"

"Alright."

He finally speaks again—his voice low, tense, and Shi Qingxuan pauses, unsure as to what he means.

"…Alright?"

He Xuan looks her in the eye—and he steals himself. "I lied to you."

Shi Qingxuan swallows hard.

"I approached you in the beginning in order to get closer to your brother." He explains evenly, watching the hurt flaring in her eyes. "I became your friend, knowing that I was going to hurt you in the end."

Saying it almost feels better. Like finally getting a weight off his chest

"I lied to Hua Cheng, telling him that I knew what I was doing. I lied to myself, saying that I wasn't capable of growing attached. But every time I got the chance to kill your brother, I found a reason to wait. And I said that I was being pragmatic."

In truth, he was a coward.

"The first time you kissed me, I told myself that it wasn't my fault, because you started it. When I kissed you back, I said 'that's what Ming Yi would do.'" He doesn't look away from her, even if he wants to.

Even if he feels shame.

"I told myself that over and over again."

As they tumbled deeper and deeper into something beyond either of their control.

"I told myself that, and I believed those lies, because they were easier for me to live with." He Xuan breathes in deeply through his nose, out through his mouth.

Even if he doesn't need to.

"But I knew it was wrong. I know that it's wrong now. I told myself that you weren't an innocent in all of this, and that made lying okay, but..."

Shi Qingxuan swallows hard, having expected so many different things from her old friend, but—

Not sincerity.

"...I cared before the baby." He states conclusively. "But hearing that, that was when what I had done...when I knew…that there was someone in this situation now who never had any choice, and now they were going to pay...I had to stop."

And oh, she wishes she didn't understand.

"I should have stopped sooner. I had chances. You gave me chances. Hua Cheng gave me chances. Your—"

His voice actually wobbles.

"—your *brother* gave me chances. But I didn't—and I'm always going to be sorry for that."

He blows out another breath, and the only thing she couldn't have expected to see in his eyes...

Was sadness.

"But I can't say I don't want your forgiveness." His hand drifts up to the bed, landing on top of hers. "Maybe I don't have the same kind of resolve as he did."

His fingers squeeze hers.

"Even if that makes me selfish, or unfair, or...a monster."

And Shi Qingxuan doesn't know what to feel, or say, or do—and then the last words that leave his mouth are so out of the realm of expectation, her mind goes blank.

"Because the side of me that fell in love with you is the only good part of me that's left."

The only places where he finds warmth, kindness, or hope anymore...are the points in his soul where Shi Qingxuan resides.

All of the things he used to hate her for. Her kindness. Her silliness.

The way she could embrace life with such carefree joy.

All of the things he told himself he couldn’t be, his losses at her expense.

All of those things made him feel again, one smile at a time.

She doesn’t...

Shi Qingxuan looks away from him, too hurt, too confused to know what she thinks. What she feels. What she wants.

“When I said you deserved more from me—I meant that you deserve honesty.” He Xuan continues.

Noticing that she hasn’t pushed his hand away.

“I took your brother to Mount Tonglu,” he explains, watching her stiffen. “Because I knew I needed to forgive him.”

“Then...why—?”

“The Kiln...has its own magic. It allows those who battle inside it to share their memories. I saw...everything.”

Every single moment of their childhoods. Of what they were to one another. Learning so much about her brother, yes—

But he also learned about her.

“And...I did forgive him,” He Xuan swallows hard, struggling to purge the fresh image from his mind.

‘I don’t want to get better.’

How trapped and shattered the Water Master was, in those final moments.

“But he took his own life.”

Those words settle heavily on her shoulders, a sinking weight on her stomach.

“...No...” She whispers, her voice trembling.

“Shi Qingxuan...”

“He *never* would have done that.”

Her brother—

“He was the strongest person I’ve ever met, he wouldn’t have!”

His hand squeezes hers, even as she tries to pull away.

“Sometimes…it doesn’t matter how strong you are. Your brother…”

He Xuan agrees with her.

Shi Wudu was strong.

“…He was carrying a huge burden,” He Xuan explains carefully, swallowing hard. “One that no one else knew about, and eventually, it just…”

It broke him.

He couldn’t carry it any longer.

“…What are you talking about?”

He doesn’t reply, and her lips tremble—remembering.

‘He won’t let me go.’

A few months ago, when she was spiteful and immature—she would have asked if it was Pei.

Not now.

“…Who was hurting him? What happened to him?”

He lowers his eyes.

“He Xuan—!”

“I can’t.”

“…” She grits her teeth.

“I can’t tell you.”

“…you said you wanted to give me honesty.”

His mouth presses into a grim line.

"That's what I'm doing."

"This seems like a pretty important thing to keep to yourself!"

"I promised."

She stops, seeing—

'D…Don't tell anyone!'

Seeing the pain in He Xuan's eyes.

"I promised him that I wouldn't tell."

"…Can't you at least say who else was involved?"

He grimaces, and he feels her start to retreat.

"Shi Qingxuan, it's not because I don't trust you, or I don't think you deserve to know —"

"Then why?!"

"It would get you killed."

"That might only speed up the process," She mutters under her breath —

Startled to see the way He Xuan actually…flinches in response.

"Did you know what would happen to me, if I…?"

He's quiet, and his grip on her hand—it's more clinging now. Soothing himself, rather than her.

"…There aren't exactly many gods that are comfortable enough with switching genres the way you do for there to be a precedent," the calamity admits, hanging his head. "I assumed the spell was surface level, and internally…I just…I didn't realize you *could* …"

Then, breaking the utter seriousness of the situation, Shi Qingxuan says something that breaks through so many different layers of guilt, regret, and shame.

"Well—of course the changes were internal."

"…What do you mean?"

She stares at him owlishly.

“Well if I’m in my female form long enough I get the...” He stares at her so intently, while talking about this subject, she averts her eyes. “...Monthly flower...”

He Xuan’s jaw drops.

“You never thought to mention that?!”

“Don’t YOU start about things we should have mentioned!”

He Xuan lifts his hand off of hers, leaning back to run his fingers through his hair. “If you had SAID something, I wouldn’t have—!”

“It’s embarrassing, okay?!” She glares, wrapping her arms around herself. “When did you learn to be embarrassed of a reproductive cycle—?!”

“I was *raised* as a little girl,” Shi Qingxuan huffs, pointing a finger at her chest. “Up until I was in puberty myself, so I learned that sort of thing was EMBARRASSING!”

“I know your brother didn’t—!”

“He *never* talked about *anything* to do with having children!” She throws her hands up. “When I asked him how I was born, he told me that our parents had a long discussion about the responsibility of parenthood, they sent a prayer at the proper temple, and then I just...arrived.”

“How old were you?”

“...Seven,” She admits. “...And by the time I was an adult, I knew it didn’t work that way, but I just never thought about having children, so I never...”

Shi Qingxuan pauses, thinking, her thumb pressed against her lower lip.

“Though that does explain some of the things you said when we were...”

He Xuan wipes both hands down his face, feeling as though he’s aged more in the past month than he has in the last four centuries.

“That wasn’t a hint?!”

“You know how distracted I was!” She protests. “And you are the *last* person that I would have expected to want children, so if we were doing something that could have led to that, I thought you wouldn’t have—!”

“I wasn’t planning on it! But—!”

“But what?!”

“You’re a *man* half the time, I shouldn’t have to explain it!” He Xuan snaps. “I wasn’t actively trying to *have* children, but the *idea* of putting a child in someone is exciting. I don’t ACTUALLY want to be your shizun either, do I?!”

“Oh.” Shi Qingxuan pauses, scratching her head. “It was like the other times we played pretend in bed—?”

“YES!” He snaps, sounding so exasperated, if he weren’t already dead, he might have a stroke. “If I was being *literal* , why would I have mentioned putting a baby in you when you were in your male form?!”

“Okay, okay!” She throws her hands up. “I get it, the signs were there!”

He Xuan lets out the heaviest, most long suffering sigh, before struggling to get back to the topic at hand.

“The point is...I didn’t know you could end up with child, and I had no idea you would end up mortal, so it never occurred to me to...”

It never occurred to her either, so—

She supposes they’re equally to blame for that.

“...But I’m going to find a way to fix it.”

Shi Qingxuan sighs, the temporary bout of silliness fading. “Xuan Zhen already said...”

“He isn’t a ghost.” He Xuan mutters. “He doesn’t know everything about this.”

“And you do?”

He doesn’t answer, but she knows what he’s thinking—that he can learn. That he can figure it out. And she...

She sighs.

You can’t fix everything. She’s learned that the hard way. But before she can point that out…

“…And there’s another reason that I came now,” the calamity looks back up at her. “Otherwise, I would have given you more time, to…”

To mourn her brother. To be angry with him. To—

To work her mind around everything, but—

There are some things that cannot wait.

“…What?” She looks back at him, her eyes tired, confused. As lost as she was in the beginning. Maybe even more so, because just now…

Just now, it felt like the way things used to be.

Happier times. When things weren’t so complicated.

He Xuan steels himself once more.

“…You can’t stay here.” He delivers the words softly—but firmly, as though it isn’t a mere suggestion, and Shi Qingxuan…

Stares, shocked.

“…Excuse me? You think you can just—?”

“I’m not suggesting you come with me,” He Xuan shakes his head. “I’m not that much of a fool.”

Even if that’s the only thing in this world that he wants.

“If you want me to keep my distance for the rest of our lives, that’s what I’ll do. I won’t tell you were to go. I won’t tell you what to do, but…” He reaches for both of her hands this time, squeezing them.

“You can’t stay here.”

Shi Qingxuan stares down at him, baffled.

“…The emperor has offered me sanctuary. He’s offered the baby—”

“It isn’t safe here,” He Xuan shakes his head, “Not for either of you. And I—”

He lowers his chin, his throat tight.

“Even if it means you end up hating me more than you already do,” he mutters, his shoulders squaring with resolve. “I won’t let either of you stay here.”

The silence is long, and it weighs thicker with each passing moment. He waits for her anger. Her confusion. Her frustration.

And when one of her hands pulls away from his—that’s exactly what he expects. But she just…

Presses her palm against his cheek, guying him to look up at her.

“…I don’t hate you,” She whispers, watching the way his eyes widen in response. “I don’t forgive you. But I don’t…”

It’s hard to stop loving someone once you’ve already started.

“…I need time,” she admits, “but I…don’t want you to disappear from my life, too.” She’s lost so much, so quickly.

A brother. The life she once had. Her view of the world. Her lover, and…

Her best friend.

Even when she learned of the life growing inside of her, she was struck by the instantaneous loss of knowing that she most likely would never live to see her child grow.

“…Then what do you want from me?” He asks her quietly. Still on his knees, eyes free from deceit.

“…” Shi Qingxuan stares into his eyes, her own swimming with tears—tears she would have shed so easily before, but now she holds them back.

She’s grown.

“…I want you to promise me that no matter what happens—you’ll give them the best life as you possibly can.”

If there was any room for doubt as to what she means, she presses their joined hands against her stomach.

It’s so early on—there’s nothing to feel, and yet…

He Xuan stares, spellbound.

"It's a son," he whispers. She almost asks who he could know that, but...

He seems so certain, she decides not to question it.

"...Then...I want you to raise him. Regardless of what happens. If I..."

If she, against all odds, survives—

Then they'll do it together.

But otherwise...

She wants her son to be raised by his father.

She'll tell Xie Lian that, and he—

He'll see to it. She knows that he will.

Ironically enough, the only two people left in the world that she trusts are the Crown Prince of Xianle, and General Pei.

"...I promise," he agrees, his hand still resting on her stomach. "But..."

"...And," Shi Qingxuan continues, not finished with making requests, "After you leave here today—I'll get myself out of here. When I do—I want time. To think about... everything. I need to be by myself."

When he's here, she can't think... She can't detach herself so easily.

He starts to pull away, intent on giving her exactly what she's asked for, but... Shi Qingxuan holds onto his hands, biting her lip.

"...But before you go," she whispers, her voice trembling. "I have had the worst few days of my life. I'm..."

Her voice cracks, and with it—so does he.

"I'm so sad, and scared, and I..." Green eyes stare down at him, welling with tears. "I need someone to make me feel...like it's o-okay..."

His hand tightens in hers, knowing exactly what she's asking for.

Shi Qingxuan needs her friend.

She needs ‘Ming-Xiong.’

Not the person that He Xuan was pretending to be. Not the name. The title. The disguise.

She needs what was real.

And the moment he moves upwards, his arms opening around her—

Shi Qingxuan crumbles entirely.

Curled up in his arms, crying against his chest.

For herself. For her brother. For her child—Even for He Xuan, because...

With how carefully he cradles her in his arms, the way he smooths her hair, kissing her temple...

‘The side of me that loves you is the only good part of me that’s left’

She believes that he meant that.

As much as it hurts, to believe that someone who loves her could hurt her so much...

Her brother was the same.

And as horrifying as the prospect of facing the world without him is--in this one moment of self-respite--

She feels loved again.

Hua Cheng is careful, holding Xie Lian's hand as he guides the prince to sit on the throne in Paradise Manor.

"San Lang, I really don't need—"

"You were probably up all night looking after me." The Ghost King cuts him off gently. "Rest, gege."

Xie Lian sighs, knowing better than to protest.

Pei can hardly stand to look at either one of them, eyes following Hua Cheng as he walks to the cabinet in the corner, pouring himself a drink.

He doesn't offer the general one—and all the better.

"Dianxia has told me that the story you were given by the Emperor was that Zhao Beitong was the wife of Bai Wuxiang, and that she forged him into the first calamity, using him to slaughter the previous Heavenly Dynasty." He takes a drink.

"That's correct."

"It's a lie."

Hua Cheng feels the two martial gods stiffen, and he sighs, opting to give their honor an easy out, so they don't have to resolve themselves to listening to 'slander' against their emperor.

"That, or Jun Wu was given a false version of the story."

"...What do you mean?"

"He swapped the roles of Bai Wuxiang and Zhao Beitong." Hua Cheng explains calmly—concise. "She might have been a bladesmith, but everything she did was at his instruction—all to avenge her sons. He placed the blame for their demise upon the gods."

Xie Lian listens, though he finds it...difficult.

Not to hear that this woman was not responsible for the cruelties she was accused of —that doesn't surprise him.

Women make easy scapegoats in the eyes of history. His hand tightens into a fist against his leg. Cutsleeves, too.

No, what's difficult is listening to Bai Wuxiang being described in such human terms.

As a husband.

A father.

Remembering the things that man—that *thing* —did to him. To his family. To Hong'er—

It would be easier to imagine him as an inhuman thing. One with no…loved ones.

“He used her to slaughter the gods—and once he was finished with her, she was imprisoned permanently within the Kiln. Creating Ghost Kings.”

Listening to that finally gives Xie Lian pause from his own thoughts, looking up with curiosity.

“…She created you, then?”

Hua Cheng’s lips quirk as he takes another long sip from his drink.

His god has always been a clever one, after all.

“Blackwater too.”

“…Then she’s still in Mount Tonglu now, I take it?” Pei Ming questions, brow pinched with thought.

“No,” Hua Cheng shakes his head. “Only one ghost exits the Kiln. Up until me, she devoured every ghost king she forged, but I…”

“…Devoured her,” Xie Lian concludes faintly, not quite as horrified by the idea as he knows he should be.

“In part.” Hua Cheng agrees. “And He Xuan did after me.”

And now that the Kiln is open again—one or both of them will be called back. To create another Ghost King—or to devour one.

Only time will tell.

“…And why would he mention her when he attacked the emperor?” Pei questions watching the back of Hua Cheng’s head intently.

There’s something about him.

Something that feels…familiar, in a way that Pei cannot explain, only having met Crimson Rain on two occasions now.

Maybe in the posture. Or the hair.

Oddly enough, the way that he speaks feels like an echo of something, but he can’t place it.

“…I couldn’t tell you.” Hua Cheng admits. “I hold no fondness for the emperor, nor does he. But what Jun Wu did to offend him on this particular occasion—and what that has to do with her—is a mystery to me. As for what I know about the rest of it...” He sets his drink down. “That is a very, very long story.”

Pei leans against one of the pillars, his arms crossed.

“I have time.”

And Xie Lian is...somewhat surprised by how forthcoming Hua Cheng is being.

Normally, he would blow questions like this off without a care, coming from someone like Pei.

“...Shortly before I entered Mount Tonglu, I met two ghosts by the names of Xiang and Fai.” Hua Cheng hasn’t actually mentioned their names in centuries now.

He’s surprised by the small ache that it brings.

“Former gamblers who had attempted to cheat the owner of their hall.”

Xie Lian listens closely—as he always does, to everything Hua Cheng says—but this instance is particularly baffling. Because what could they have to do with the situation at hand?

“When they were caught—he had their throats cut, and their ashes scattered.”

Pei can’t help himself from pointing out the obvious. “If that were true, would their souls not have been dispersed?”

“They were,” Hua Cheng agrees. “But so was mine.”

There have been rumors of course—that crimson rain is the only ghost to have come back from such a thing.

Hearing that—even if Xie Lian knows it was long ago, and Hua Cheng is before him now, unharmed—

His chest still squeezes with fear.

“When I returned from dispersement, they came with me. And centuries later, when they faded...”

‘Faded’ being a generous term, that is.

“…I decided to seek out the descendants of the man who scattered their ashes.”

Hua Cheng offers no explanation for why he sought them out. A mixture between curiosity and guilt.

“That was how I found the Shi brothers…and learned of the creature that was hunting the younger.”

That catches Pei’s attention.

“You mean during their mortal lives?”

“At the ages of sixteen and ten.” Hua Cheng agrees. “And when I revealed the nature of the curse to them, posing as a mortal cultivator…Shi Wudu became desperate.”

Hua Cheng cannot fault him for that.

“It never occurred to you that leaving a parentless child with such knowledge might lead him to make poor choices?” Pei points out tersely, eyes narrowed.

“That has nothing to do with me,” Hua Cheng replies, calm. “I grew up without parents myself. I never even knew my father.” He shrugs, staring at Pei impassively. “That doesn’t make me responsible for the boy’s choices. I even encouraged him to do the opposite when he suggested tricking the Reverend into targeting someone else.”

He says all of it with such confidence, and yet.

Even back then, on some level, he had been reasonably certain that something horrible would befall the two.

Still, he left—all because it was none of his concern.

“A decade later…a young woman came to me in Ghost City, looking to make a deal. He Xuan’s fiancé, Qin Meirong.”

Who was willing to bet ten years of her life, no less—just to save He Xuan from his misfortunes.

Of course, no one else knows that Hua Cheng refused to take such an offer, accepting a home cooked meal instead.

“While I was fulfilling my end of the bargain, she was killed.”

Hua Cheng stares down at his empty glass, his eye dark.

“Having met the Shi brothers, then observing a man with such similar details around his name and birth suffer in such a similar way—I put together what had been done.”

But he took no joy in it.

“When He Xuan eventually died, entering the Kiln of Mount Tonglu—he saw my memories, and put that truth together for himself.”

“...You told him?”

“I had no control over what memories of ours were shared when he became a ghost king,” Hua Cheng corrects him coldly.

Xie Lian speaks up now, for the first time since Hua Cheng began his tale.

“Ming Guang—I understand what you’re feeling right now, but San Lang has given no indication that he desired this outcome.”

If he had, he would have actively helped Blackwater—which he never did.

“He Xuan and I made an agreement early on to stay out of one another’s business— and four centuries later, here we are.” Hua Cheng shrugs. “You asked what I know— and that’s all there is.”

And he’s been far more generous about sharing information than he needed to be, no less.

Pei doesn’t reply immediately, his brow creased as he puts all of it together, muttering —

“But there’s so much that doesn’t add...”

Just then, in the communication array—

Feng Xin of all people calls out.

‘Ming Guang, your highness—can either of you hear me?!’

Both of them freeze, sitting up.

'What's happened?'

'Yes—what is it?'

'It's...Shi Qingxuan.' They look at one another—while that might be pointless, given how Xie Lian can't make eye contact. *'No one knows what's gotten into her, but she… she's lost it!'*

'What?!'

'Just get here fast, Mu Qing can't get a hold of her anyway—!'

Then, the other martial god's voice breaks in through the array.

'I'm sorry for not wanting to bodily tackle a PREGNANT WOMAN, ASSHOLE!'

'We—we're coming right now, don't worry!' Xie Lian leaps to his feet.

"San Lang—I'm so sorry, but there's an emergency!" He stumbles down the steps from the throne, only to have Hua Cheng catch him by the wrists, helping him the rest of the way down. "We have to go back to the Heavens, but we can talk—!"

"Later!" Pei concludes, grabbing his arm.

Hua Cheng stares pointedly at Pei's hand on the prince's arm, but he doesn't have the chance to say more before the two are out of the room, rushing towards the exit to Ghost City before ascending once more.

And the moment they land in the capital,Xie Lian hears—

Chaos.

"HAS SHE LOST HER MIND?!"

"IT SEEMS LIKE IT!"

And before Xie Lian can ask Pei what's going on, he hears the general scream out— "SHI QINGXUAN, GET AWAY FROM THERE OR SO HELP ME—!"

Then, the former Goddess's reply—hysterical.

"I'M NOT STAYING HERE!"

Mu Qing is the one standing closest to her, hands raised in a neutral gesture, all while Shi Qingxuan clings to the gates of Heaven—determined to push them open.

“My lady, you can’t descend on your own anymore—you aren’t a god!” He explains urgently.

“YOU’LL JUST FALL!”

“I CAN’T STAY HERE!” She repeats, clawing at the gates, tears streaming down her cheeks. “E-Everywhere I look, I see—I see gege!”

The other officials stop—their faces tinged with sympathy.

“A-And Ming-Xiong...I can’t sleep, I can’t e-eat, I...I CAN’T STAY HERE!” She screams.

“SO WHAT, YOU’D JUST GET YOURSELF AND THE CHILD KILLED?!” Pei rages, stomping over to grab her—and Xie Lian stops him, a hand on his elbow.

“Pei—calm down for a moment—”

“IS THIS A SITUATION THAT JUSTIFIES STAYING CALM?!”

“It might be for the best if we help her descend!”

Xie Lian walks over, grabbing Shi Qingxuan by the shoulder—and the minute she sees him, she clings to Xie Lian, sobbing.

“Your highness!” She weeps into his shoulder, clinging around his neck. “P-Please h- help me!”

Xie Lian hugs her back, patting her hair.

“She’s saying that being here upsets her,” the prince points out. “One of the most important things for the health of a woman carrying a child is to avoid stress, maintaining her general physical health. Isn’t that right, Mu Qing?”

“...Yes...” The Martial God agrees slowly. “How do you know that?”

Xie Lian blinks, and without an ounce of sheepishness, replies; “I’ve assisted midwives quite a few times during my banishment.” Feng Xin slaps his forehead with his palm, biting back a groan. “And since she can’t ascend or descend on her own...”

That only creates a situation where Shi Qingxuan is led to feeling claustrophobic and helpless, surrounded by traumatic memories.

“And we should just allow her to wander in the Mortal Realm?! What if Blackwater—”

“Pei.” Xie Lian cuts him off firmly. “We can’t ‘allow’ Shi Qingxuan to do anything—she’s a grown woman. She can make her own decisions.”

Her brother made a mistake before, sheltering her as much as he did—and given the challenge she faces now, Xie Lian wouldn’t be doing her any favors by allowing that to continue.

“And with everything that’s going on—between the emperor being injured, and Mount Tonglu opening, it’s unlikely you and I are going to have the time to give her the care that she needs.”

And the instruction, no less.

Pei balls his hands into fists, infuriated.

“So, what—you think we should just drop her off in the mortal realm and let her figure it out alone?!”

Xie Lian tightens his arms around Shi Qingxuan, who is still sobbing against his shoulder.

“No.” He shakes his head. “If Shi Qingxuan trusts me…”

“I do,” She answers quickly, her voice clear for one moment before breaking down into hysterical tears once more. “I-I do, your highness!”

Xie Lian nods, gesturing for Pei to join them—

(After all, he can’t be trusted to descend safely.)

“Then…I have a plan.”

Laughter peals through the air, light and happy, like the tinkling of bells.

“HEY!” One of the boys cries, bumping past the group of travelers at the city entrance. “WAIT FOR ME!”

The group of children rush through the gates, to the hills and plains outside.

“THEN KEEP UP, LIAO YONG!”

The sound of children playing brings a smile to Xie Lian’s lips—one that Hua Cheng, who joined them when they descended with Shi Qingxuan in tow—can’t help but watch with fondness.

There’s distant music in the air—people bustling about their business.

The further they walk down the street, more people seem to notice them, and it’s Shi Qingxuan and Pei Ming that are left frozen in shock, watching as the people of the city greet Xie Lian, the laughing stock of the three realms, with...

Adoring excitement.

“It’s the Weaver!”

“BABA, LOOK!”

“DIANXIA!”

Someone calls him ‘Mr. Hua,’ and Xie Lian is more sheepish than usual, hearing that while standing beside Hua Cheng of all people, but...

When children rush forward to greet him, he smiles, returning hugs, ruffling hair, nearly being bowled over.

The only thing that keeps him upright is Hua Cheng’s hand on his back. And Pei finds himself caught between two poles of disbelief:

One, that the Crown Prince of Xianle had a city of believers.

And second—

He’s never seen a god interact with mortals in such a way before. Allowing himself to be touched, returning their embraces—

He even seems to know some of them by name—asking them how their studies are going, their families, if they've been staying out of trouble.

(Naturally, as Xie Lian was living in this city until only a few months ago.)

What Shi Qingxuan notices, however—

Is the look of elation in Hua Cheng's eye. His expression is passive, controlled as ever —

And yet, she can feel happiness radiating from the ghost king—all over watching adulation aimed at someone else.

They…make an interesting pair.

"…I suppose the title, 'Liberator of Gusu' wasn't just a story…" Pei mutters, eyeing the new title plate being constructed over the city gates.

Removing the characters for 'Daqing', and replacing them with the city's true name: The Great Walled City of Gusu.

Well.

Sans walls, now—most of them are in ruins.

"…I had help," Xie Lian demurs, ruffling the hair of a little girl, clinging to his leg. "Speaking of…" he looks around, "Does anyone know where I can find—?"

"Xie Laoshi," a familiar voice calls out. "You honor us."

Pei and the others turn around to see the crowd parting for a young man in fine, dark robes—raven hair, pulled into a high ponytail, and eyes gleaming like fresh gold leaf.

"When you ascended, you made it seem as though you would be gone a long while."

"Well," Xie Lian scratches his head sheepishly. "That was what I thought too."

The two bow to one another, hands clasped in a gesture of respect between student and teacher—but the moment the teenager straightens, he rushes forward, pulling the prince into a tight embrace.

He's taller than Xie Lian, but pulls his feet up in a childish display of excitement—one the god indulges.

"...Are you going to introduce us, your highness?"

"Ah, yes," Xie Lian nods, setting him down. "This is Xiong Li, Prince of Gusu, and my student."

The teenager beams from Xie Lian's side, as though being called his student is the greatest praise of all.

"Xiong Li, ah..." Xie Lian sighs, and while everyone else seems to be waiting for him to come up with a proper cover story...

"That is General Ming Guang, Martial God of the North, Shi Qingxuan, formerly known as the Wind Master, and..." he pats Hua Cheng's arm. "Crimson Rain Sought Flower, the Ghost King Hua Cheng."

Everyone stares at him, slack jawed.

"...Well," Xiong Li tilts his head, wide eyed. "That's quite the party you're traveling with."

Pei Ming, however, takes the introduction with less approval. "You can't just go around telling mortals exactly who we are!"

"I'm not mortal," Xiong Li shakes his head, raising an eyebrow. "My cultivation partner and I ascended."

Pei stares, looking him over. "Then why haven't I ever heard of you?"

"Well, it was only a few months ago," Xiong Li shrugs. "And I wanted to help my people, which you can't do as a god—so I descended."

Pei wants to argue that isn't true, but... Xie Lian is living proof.

"...Aaand my Lan An can't live without me," he tosses his hair over his shoulder with a grin, pressing his hands against his cheeks. "So, he descended too!"

Shi Qingxuan mimics the gesture, doe eyed.

"That's so romantic!"

Pei massages his temples.

"Still, why are we discussing it out here in the open where anyone could overhear?"

Xiong Li smirks, crossing his arms. "Oh, so you didn't notice?"

Pei pauses, glancing around—and when he does, he sees the thin magical veil surrounding the group.

"Silencing spell."

He glances around them, "Everyone outside of the barrier thinks we're discussing Xie Laoshi's travels. Lan An came up with it for, ah...personal reasons, but it can be helpful in other ways, I suppose."

He snaps his fingers, and the barrier disappears.

"Come, there's much to show you, and we can discuss why you've brought your friends to visit."

He loops his arm through Xie Lian's, guiding him through the busy city streets—with the others following closely behind.

And it doesn't miss Hua Cheng's notice, the way the cultivator carefully explains to Xie Lian all of the sights they're passing, constantly considerate of his condition.

Telling him how they've rediscovered the old temples, and are now rebuilding them.

"And this," he stops in front of the rising skeleton of a new structure, "Is going to be your temple. It's really just a shrine right now, we didn't have time to do much else short notice, but—"

Xie Lian squeezes his elbow with a smile. "It's too much—but thank you."

He's spent the last eight hundred years in a world where his temples were burned, becoming ruins over the centuries. Until Qiandeng temple, he never thought he would have another temple like that unless he built one himself.

And now, he'll have two!

"And thank you for the blessing lantern—I was honored."

"We'll send you even more next year, this was just the beginning!" Xiong Li assures him. "Just a few months of freedom has brought so much wealth back to the city. Next year, you might not recognize it here."

Xie Lian hums, encouraging. "…Where is Lan An, by the way?"

"Oh…" Xiong Li blows his bangs out of his face with a huff. "In the Cloud Recesses with his students…but he's always back by sundown. Were you looking for him?"

"Both of you, actually."

"Oh?" Xiong Li stares curiously, but when Xie Lian doesn't explain, he continues leading him along. "We can wait for him in the palace, then. You won't believe all of the things we found since the Wens left…"

And in truth, it is rather stunning, even if he can't see it.

He supposes he shouldn't be surprised, given that Gusu was ruled by descendants of his own family, but…

It very much feels like the palace he grew up in—back in Xianle. When he mentions that to Shi Qingxuan, she pauses, surprised.

"…But your palace in the Heavens looks nothing like this." She mutters, examining the architecture a little more closely. The newly unearthed murals on the walls.

"Is it supposed to?"

"Well—normally the emperor models it after your original home, I'm told."

Hua Cheng is silent, watching the two converse. The way Xie Lian's lips turn down initially—the briefest frown—before he smiles.

"Oh—then that makes sense,." He pats her arm lightly, and when Shi Qingxuan starts to express confusion—

"I haven't had a home in quite some time."

They settle into one of the palace drawing rooms—most of which haven't been made up. Xiong Li doesn't see much of a point in putting the effort in—not when only two people live here.

Shi Qingxuan takes a seat on one of the chaise lounges, far more composed now than before.

"…So, you and Lan An are cultivation partners?"

"Yeah, dual cultivation," Xiong Li agrees, using a spark of magic to set the fireplace roaring to life. "Of course, he has his hands full teaching new disciples in the sect—but we night hunt as much as we can."

"Isn't dual cultivation a permanent commitment?" Shi Qingxuan tilts her head to the side, looking him up and down.

Xiong Li's expression darkens as he drops down into a chair, crossing his legs with a huff.

"It IS, and YET!" He sulks. "He says we're too young for marriage."

"Well," Xie Lian sits down near the fire, smiling gratefully when Hua Cheng helps him before easing down beside him. "You're both only eighteen, Xiong Li. That's barely even of age—"

"But you don't understand," the teenager whines. "He says *I'm* the one that's too young and that we should wait, but dianxia—we're the SAME age!! We were born on the *exact* same day!"

And yet somehow, after spending only a couple of hours with him and none with his partner, Pei can understand exactly what he means.

"Are you complaining about me again?"

The sound of his partner's voice from the door makes Xiong Li look up, leaping to his feet with a radiant smile as he crosses the room, wrapping his arm around his neck.

"No!" He lies, giving him a chaste kiss. "…Well, only a little!"

Lan An's lips twitch as he wraps an arm around his waist, surveying their company within the room. "…Dianxia," he acknowledges quietly, glancing over the strangers present. "What brings you and your friends back so soon?"

"Well," Xie Lian smiles, awkward. "You might want to sit down, it's… quite the story."

The cultivator goes ahead and takes a seat—sharing a chair with Xiong Li, despite there being plenty of other spots.

Something that Pei Ming wouldn't have minded before—and yet now, he can't bear to look.

Once introductions are made—Xie Lian launches into the tale.

Of everything that happened since the Mid-autumn festival. Of their trip to Fu Gu, then the Terrace of Cascading Wine. Being dragged to Blackwater Manor, and…

Everything that came afterwards.

And by the end of it—both teenagers are left staring at Shi Qingxuan in stunned, sympathetic silence.

“…We’re obviously sorry to hear that,” Xiong Li mutters, squeezing Lan An’s arm as he turns to Xie Lian. “But why bring her here?”

“Well—first, because this is the core of Ming Guang’s territory, and he…” Xie Lian struggles to phrase it delicately. “He was very close to her brother, and has an interest in her well being. And second…”

Now, he looks to Lan An.

“Because she needs a cultivation master.”

The sect leader stares back at him, arching an eyebrow. Most cannot stand making eye contact with the cursed shackles—unfocused and unseeing.

Not him.

“And you mean for that to be me?”

Even Shi Qingxuan seems unsure about the idea—but Xie Lian nods rather seriously.

“I think there’s potential in that spell you cast to clear my mind from the curse Wen Jiao placed over Gusu—the one where you used your Guqin. Even if it can’t completely purge the cursed energy from the child—it might prolong her chances.”

Xiong Li brightens, squeezing Lan An’s leg. “That sounds like a good plan!”

“You yourself said they’re barely of age,” Pei frowns, distrusting. “You also have connections in Yunmeng, don’t you? We could take her there. Or I have my own understanding with the Nie Clan—”

“I do have connections in Yunmeng,” Xie Lian agrees, “but Lan An and Xiong Li are both at a skill level where they were able to ascend. Lan An’s cultivation is stronger than that of many gods within the upper court. And if I can’t teach Shi Qingxuan myself…he’s the best option.”

“…Cultivation is not easy on the body,” Lan An points out quietly, the first time he’s spoken since Xie Lian made the suggestion. “Especially for someone carrying a child.”

Xiong Li crosses his arms, leaning against him. “She’s pregnant, not an invalid. Besides…” He looks Shi Qingxuan up and down. “She’s clearly not very far along. If we’re quick, she can adjust to the strain as the child grows.”

Shi Qingxuan places a hand on her stomach in response, her gaze slightly weary. “…How quick, exactly?”

Lan An crosses his arms.

“Sunrise.”

She makes a slightly horrified expression—but still.

It’s not the Heavens. It’s safe, and—

She knows it’s her best chance.

Once their plans are set, and Xiong Li has hosted for them to dinner, he has more to show the prince before he departs, leaving Shi Qingxuan in their care

Xie Lian holds his arm as the Prince of Gusu leads him along the side of the city defenses, recently under construction, lined with scaffolding.

“…I thought you’d be sick of walls by now,” he comments lightly.

“You can’t even imagine, Dianxia—but the world is dangerous.” Xiong Li sighs. “Our city is rich in natural resources that people haven’t had access to in over a century. If we don’t defend ourselves, we’ll lose our freedom all over again, but…” He smiles faintly. “We’re focusing more on keeping invaders out, than trapping people inside.”

That brings a smile to Xie Lian’s face.

Gusu hasn’t had its freedom for very long—but it clearly plans to make the most of it.

Hua Cheng stands at ground level, fifty meters below—watching with one gleaming eye as the winds blow through the grasses in the night.

It rolls like a churning dark sea until the moonlight, churning towards the edges of the forests, the plains disappearing into the slope that leads towards the mountains—and hidden within them, the Cloud Recesses.

There's something about this place that he can't overlook.

Listening to the story of how Xie Lian freed Gusu, of what Wen Jiao did—

He stole the city's name.

Effectively holding hundreds of thousands hostage right under the nose of all three realms for an entire century.

Until now, he only knows of one who used such a spell.

…Were Wen Jiao and Bai Wuxiang at one point or another connected?

And this spell Xie Lian spoke of—he doubts it would work as well on Hua Cheng's curse as it did on the curse over Gusu. His is older, and far more power—

Snap!

The sound of a twig cracking snatches his gaze.

And when he peers out into the darkness, between the tall, rippling waves of grass, he sees something that makes him go completely still.

A mask.

White.

Smooth.

A smile etched into the front.

For once, it takes his mind a moment to take in what he's seeing—

Wu Ming.

Or the mask of Wu Ming, anyway.

Slowly, the ghost king's lips pull back into a snarl.

There are very few people on earth, dead or ascended, who know what that mask means.

And only one who might dare to use that as a means of antagonizing him.

Hua Cheng flashes forward in an instant, grasping the figure by the front of the robes, half expecting it to disappear in a cloud of smoke, or turn into something grotesque as a means of frightening him—

(As Bai Wuxiang has always done to his victims.)

But it doesn't.

Hua Cheng pulls his fist back, claws already extended, but—

He notices something else.

A pounding heartbeat.

Terrified.

…Human.

"…" He glares, reaching for the edge of the mask—and as he does, Xie Lian reaches forward to grasp the railing, concerned.

"San Lang?"

Even from here, he can hear that the Ghost King went running off past the wall. Is something wrong? Did something—?

Of course, he makes one critical error—one even Xiong Li doesn't have time to correct—

See, this being a new wall, under construction…It doesn't have a railing.

As such, he's sent tumbling under the edge with a sharp, startled breath, Xiong Li scrambling to catch him, but their fingers slip past one another.

"XIE LAOSHI!"

Hua Cheng glances back, his jaw clenching as he shoves the figure back viciously, sending it tumbling into the dark.

Without another word, he takes a running leap—easily catching his god in his arms, landing back on the ground lightly, the bells on his boots chiming with a soft—

Clink, clink!

And it's almost endearing, the way Xie Lian had his eyes squeezed shut with annoyance.

Braced for impact, even if he couldn't see the ground coming.

And this time, unlike when they fell into the Sinner's Pit—he leans into him, rather than waiting for Hua Cheng to squeeze him closer.

"Oh, thank you San Lang, I'm sorry—what was it that you were running after?"

The Ghost King turns around, still holding the prince in his arms, glaring into the darkness as his mouth, however briefly, presses against the top of the prince's head.

"…Nothing," He mutters darkly, holding him tighter.

Whoever it was—whatever it was—

They're gone.

Which leaves him with a far more pressing question now, his eyes scanning for miles through the dark, over the plains, to the forests and mountains beyond—finding no sign of the stranger.

…What Mortal could escape his sight so quickly?

And how did they get that mask?

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS TORY

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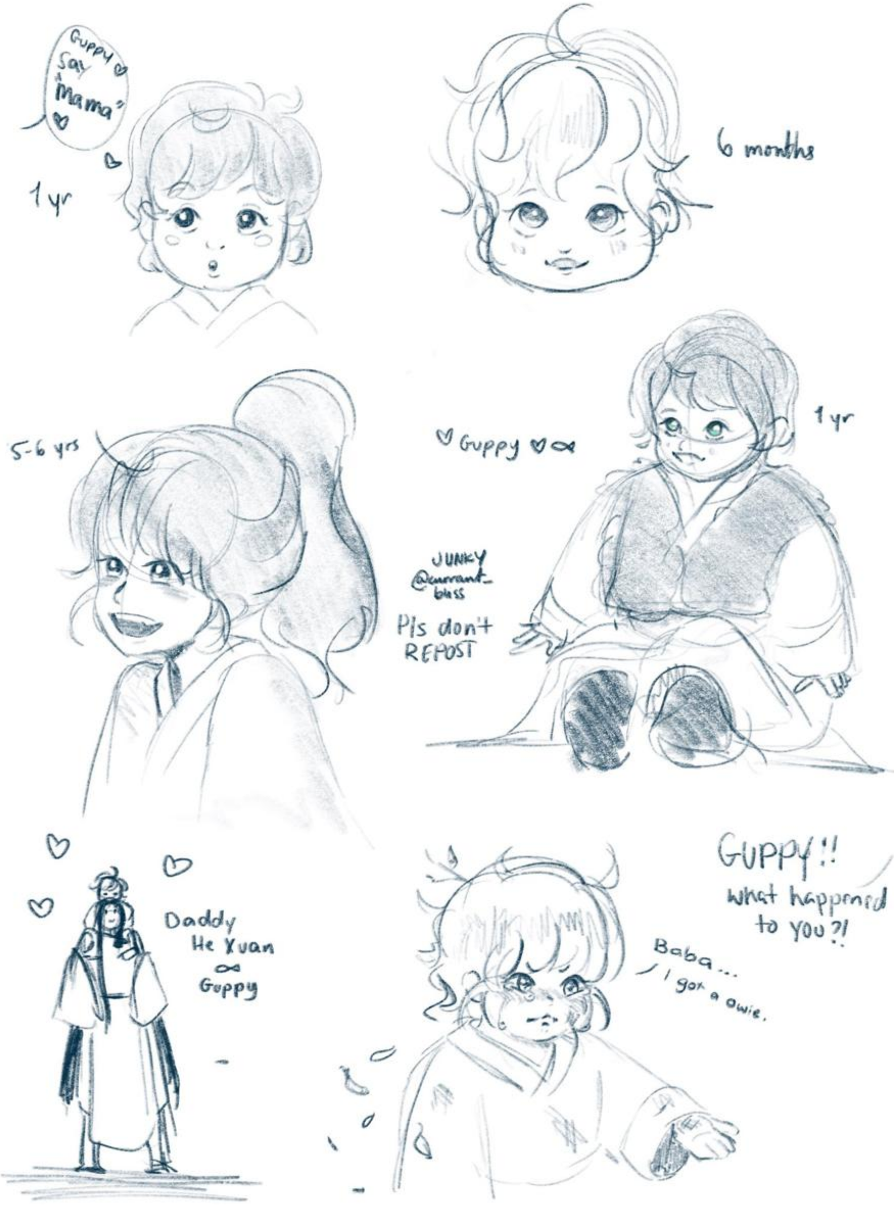
Future Beefleaf Baby!


Guppy Say "Mama" ♡
1 yr
6 months
5-6 yrs
♡ Guppy ♡ ∞
1 yr
JUNKY @currant_bliss
Pls don't REPOST
Daddy He Xuan ∞ Guppy
GUPPY!! what happened to you?!
Baba... I got a owie.

CREDIT: JUNKY

Chapter End Notes

> thanks to Junky for your beautiful artwork, and allowing me to include it!

We Wear The Mask

Chapter Summary

> Swish…
>
> Eyelashes flutter, and fingers twitch.
>
> Swish…
>
> And everything—
>
> Everything hurts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

TWO DAYS BEFORE

Swish…

Eyelashes flutter, and fingers twitch.

Swish…

And everything—

Everything hurts.

Swish…

His head, his back, his chest—as though he was just buried beneath a rock slide. But the ache in his throat is the sharpest—a burning line of pain.

But the moment sapphire eyes open, taking in the dusty beams on the ceiling overhead—

Not the dark.

Not a red door, or a black one.

He sucks in a rattling breath, one hand clapping over his chest as he sits up, wracked with a heavy cough.

W…Where is he?

“Ah. You’re awake.”

When he turns his head, he sees a man dressed in deep, almost navy blue robes, trimmed with gold. And when he sees the silvery white tresses flowing down his back, he scrambles away, that last memory of someone carrying him down the mountain flashing in his mind.

“W-Who are you?”

And when the man looks back over his shoulder—an unfamiliar face is revealed. That of a man in his mid twenties, with clear blue eyes, and…

A kind face.

“An ally.” He replies calmly. “Or, at the very least—I’m not here to harm you.”

“I’m—”

“I know who you are.”

Shi Wudu grimaces, pressing a hand against his throat.

The older cultivator looks him over appraisingly. “Given your condition, you’ve recovered remarkably well. You should consider yourself lucky. A weaker man would have died. Actually—most strong men, too.”

Bandages are wrapped tightly around his neck—and when he feels the flesh underneath, it’s still angry and red, with the remnants of stitching.

“…I did die.” He corrects him. The memories are faint, disorganized—but he knows.

He knows that he was gone.

“Briefly.”

The stranger shrugs, turning back to his business from before. “It happens. No need to make a big fuss about it.”

"…" Shi Wudu stares at the back of his head, bracing himself against the wall as he sits up. "How did you save me?" Then, after a pause—

"… *Why* did you save me?"

Those eyes, sharp and clear—look back at him one more time—

And he sighs, throwing up his hands.

"Ah, what the hell…it's not as though you can tell anyone of importance, anyhow. I knew the woman who forged that blade personally. The magic is powerful, but there are cracks."

"It felt pretty effective to me, Mr…?"

The ivory haired stranger tilts his head back, letting out a tired sigh.

Really, there's no point in worrying.

Who can the child tell?

"Mei Nianqing. You may call me Guoshi. And it did complete its assigned task, fulfilling the magical conditions placed upon the blade."

"…What?"

"You," Mei Nianqing points at the bandaged gash on his throat, "Killed the Water Master. Even if you managed to reascend—which, given the current state of your soul, is unlikely—your previous role has already been filled."

By He Xuan.

Shi Wudu can sense as much.

But that's not the only thing that catches his attention.

"…Reascend?"

Mei Nianqing arches an eyebrow. "You haven't felt it? Look at you."

He nods towards Shi Wudu's body—now that of a nineteen year old.

The same age he was when his mortal life ended.

"You died, yes. But the one I brought back wasn't the god—I brought back the mortal.” He explains carefully. “Which was no small task, mind you—I had to give you a portion of my own blood to manage it.”

The younger man wrinkles his nose, rubbing his forehead.

“…And why? You still haven’t told me that.”

“…” Mei Nianqing sighs, rubbing the back of his neck. “I’ve been watching you for quite some time, Shi Wudu. This was simply the first opportunity I had to get you away from him.”

The former god freezes, his eyes widening.

“…What?” He whispers, his fingers tightening slightly around his throat.

Someone…

Mei Nianqing watches him with distant, guilt stricken eyes.

…Someone was trying to help him, all this time?

“But how could you have known about—?”

“I know him better than anyone.”

Mei Nianqing looks over that face.

The same face Jun Wu would have seen when he chose to take the young cultivator under his wing, all those years ago.

Sharp, fine features. Long, well kept hair. The air of refinement most associate with royalty.

He resembled a missing toy the emperor once adored. Nothing more, nothing less.

But Xie Lian—

That boy is capable of withstanding anything. Enduring anything. All he needs is the smallest ounce of kindness in return.

Most humans aren’t like that.

It was only a matter of time before Jun Wu would have broken the child from Xuli. And by then, well—

Mei Nianqing has already seen him setting out a new mouse to bat back and forth as a cruel game.

“But why…for so long…?”

“Because the emperor is my failure.”

Mei Nianqing closes his eyes, remembering.

Not the pain, the betrayal, the cruelty, or the death.

But the child he met, all those years ago.

A bright eyed child, desperate to be enough.

Jun Wu wasn’t born cruel. No child is.

He’s the result of failure and cowardice.

“…And his atrocities are my shame.”

The Water Master has been the greatest among his recent crimes.

“In any case, you’re away from him now—though I cannot say it has come without a cost.”

Shi Wudu would have been exiled or mortal regardless—so he isn’t sure if that’s true.

Mei Nianqing sides to his feet, dousing the fire. “Night has fallen—we should get moving.”

“…Moving?” Shi Wudu questions, watching him pack up the few scattered items on the floor of what looks like…an abandoned warehouse. “Where are we going?”

“The emperor is incapacitated,” the Guoshi explains, pulling his pack onto his back. “I have until he recovers to hide you until all of this is over.”

“…Hide me?” The teenager repeats flatly. “…No, that isn’t going to work.”

Mei Nianqing lets out a long suffering sigh.

"I'm dying to know your wisdom on such things."

"Don't speak to me as though I'm a child," Shi Wudu growls, eyes narrowing. "I'm four centuries old!"

"To me, that is a child." The guoshi rolls his eyes.

"I need to find Shi Qingxuan—to find Pei Ming—!"

"No."

"Are you kidding?!" Shi Wudu glares, hands balling into fists on the ground by his side. "They're my family! They need to know that I'm —!"

"Go down that road, and you will only find pain." Mei Nianqing mutters. "And I don't have time to argue with you."

Before he can say another word, the guoshi snaps his fingers—and the mortal crumples, sleeping once more.

He promptly gathers the young man up in his arms, and continues their journey once more.

Even with travel arrays, the ruins of Wuyong are so remote—going east takes time.

And he will give the mortal credit for one thing—

He doesn't give up so easily.

Every waking moment, he seems to be trying to find a means of contacting his sister and lover. Attempting to sneak off to temples—or entering deep states of meditation.

It never works.

He always gets dragged back. And when he tries meditating, well...

"That determination is admirable," Mei Nianqing comments, sipping from his canteen as he watches Shi Wudu from the opposite side of their camp. "But you know you can't cultivate in this state."

The teenager opens one eye to glare at him.

"What makes you think I can't?"

"Because," Mei Nianqing points with his fan—not Shi Wudu's, but a cheap paper contraption that is meant purely for stirring a light breeze. "Your soul is in total disarray at the moment."

Shi Wudu squeezes his eyes shut again, his jaw locking stubbornly.

"It doesn't feel like it."

"...No," Mei Nianqing agrees, watching him with eyes filled with sympathy. "But it'll catch up with you before long."

Once he grasps the reality of his situation.

By the second day, however—he's become downright unruly.

“We're in the North now, that's—that's HIS territory!” The human snaps, straining as Mei Nianqing pulls him away from a shrine on their way down the road. “Why can't I just—?!”

“We're too close to the imperial capital.”

And if they stay that way by the time Jun Wu recovers—he'll find Shi Wudu in a near instant.

His eyes are strong, and far seeing.

No—for this to work, they need to go further.

But he can't bring himself to be offended by the young man's near constant protests.

He knows the motivation behind them.

That after saying goodbye to this world, thinking he would never see his loved ones again—all he wants to do is return to them.

But oh, the world is cruel.

Or, more specifically—

Human beings are what make it cruel.

Shi Wudu knew that. Better than anyone.

And yet—he never realized that there were worse things.

But on that second day, when he's being pulled insistently past a small trading village in the north, he hears the whispering.

That a Weaver has returned to the city of Gusu.

Which seems rather trivial, he can't understand why that triggers such a bustle of whispering, not until—

Someone mentions that this weaver is blind—and the *liberator* of Gusu.

Xie Lian.

The crown prince has always been a complicated figure in Shi Wudu's perception, but….

If he's there, the chances of Crimson Rain Sought Flower being there are high. He could find He Xuan—or even better, Shi Qingxuan might be with them. Xie Lian could call Pei, he—

"Don't."

Mei Nianqing doesn't sit up when he senses him sneaking away from camp that evening.

He's laying on the ground on his side—so relaxed, the former god had assumed that he had fallen asleep.

But—

He glances across the grassy plains, and Gusu—

It's less than half a mile from here.

Mei Nianqing has stopped him every other time—but he lets him run, now.

He knows the child cannot resist. He's been placed in a situation where he's compelled to try, desperate to return to that which he's lost.

Still.

He leans back on his palms, looking up towards the sky.

"This was cruel," He whispers, knowing Jun Wu can't hear. "Even for you."

He's tired.

Running through the grasses, the chill of the night—

It’s like being back in that hallway again.

Walking, walking, and walking.

But now, this weak, mortal body—it aches.

It tires.

It can’t—

It can’t do the things he’s used to.

And even this small task…

A task he could have done when he was nineteen without a problem—it exhausts this wounded, underfed, under rested version of himself.

To the point where he has to stop, bending over, bracing his hands against his knees as he catches his breath.

Was…Was life really this hard, before he ascended?

Was his body truly so fragile and weak? Or does it only seem that way now, compared to his near invincibility before? And…

His head feels oddly heavy.

Like there’s pressure, tightening in around his forehead, nose, and cheeks—locking his jaw into place.

What’s wrong with him? Even if he is tired, he could run himself into the ground with exhaustion before—until he was spitting blood. When did he become so weak willed? He—!

Then, his hands slide over his cheeks—and he stops, his breathing coming to a halt.

Because he doesn’t feel the familiar softness of his own skin beneath his palms—no.

He feels the hard, unforgiving surface of a mask.

Smooth—except where a smile has been carved into place.

“…!” He tries to swear in shock, to speak at all—but underneath the mask, his jaw has been locked shut.

And when he looks up—that's when he sees.

One dark, narrowed eye—glaring at him in the night, filled with resentment and confusion:

Crimson Rain Sought Flower.

He doesn't have time to think of why the Ghost King seems so offended, so unsettled by the sight of him—can't even cry out for help when he surges forward, snatching the mortal up by the front of his robes—his heart pounding.

W…What's happening to him?! Why—?

Why can't he speak?! Why is this mask on his face?! And why is Hua Cheng—?

"San Lang—?"

Shi Wudu whips his head to the side, seeing the prince of Xianle on top of the walls, his heart leaping with this horrible, pained kind of hope.

Because he was right—Xie Lian is here.

Along with Crimson Rain—and maybe, just maybe—his sister.

But that hope comes with it's own kind of agony—because they wouldn't be able to see that it was him.

And he—

He already died, didn't he?

If he had to come back—was returning to them such a cruel thing to ask?

But before he can think, before he can struggle any further to speak—there's screaming from the wall, and he's being thrown back to the ground, stitches in his throat screaming, aching all over.

He rolls onto his side, clutching his throat—and just then, arms catch him.

But still—not the arms he wants.

Not the person that he *needs* to see right now.

And when the pale glow of Mei Nianqing’s travel array wears off, Shi Wudu falls to his knees…finally able to wrench the mask free.

Gasping and coughing once he does, fingers clawing at his cheeks.

"W...What the fuck just happened?!" He glares, whipping his head around to look Mei Nianqing in the eyes, and the Guoshi...

He sighs, staring down at him with a look Shi Wudu has never been bestowed with before, one he cannot bear—

Pity.

"I thought we would have more time."

He goes about healing Shi Wudu's injuries—which, after such a shove from Hua Cheng—are severe, but he's in too much distress to notice it.

"What are you talking about?!" He gasps, his ribs aching as his vision blurs. "What...What are you..."

Then, everything fades to black.

When he awakens again, he's on the floor in another unfamiliar place—straw beneath his head, the snoring of horses nearby.

Oh, how far the mighty have fallen.

A god of wealth, sleeping in a stable.

He sits up, rubbing the side of his head with a groan.

"You know," Mei Nianqing sips his tea. "I was afraid that, after going to all of that trouble, that child had actually finished you off." He shakes his head, blowing over the cup's rim. "That would have been horrifically awkward."

"...You mean Hua Cheng?" Shi Wudu rasps.

"W...Why did he attack me?"

They weren't exactly friends, before—but they weren't enemies either.

"He thought you were someone else," The Guoshi replies calmly. "His reaction was that of fear."

Fear?

Shi Wudu can imagine Crimson Rain as many things—but not afraid.

"...In any case, this is as far as I can take you," The Guoshi mutters, rubbing the back of his neck with a tired sigh. "I have a long journey back to where I came."

"...You're going back there?"

To that god forsaken place?

"I have no choice."

Mei Nianqing stares at the teenager, regretful.

After all—leaving him alone is not an ideal situation. But there's no viable alternative to it.

And he still has his sight.

Mei Nianqing knows of fallen gods who have survived with far, far less.

Shi Wudu averts his own eyes--and when he does, he sees it there--sitting beside him among the straw.

A white, ceramic mask.

A curved smile etched into its face.

His first instinct is to snatch a rock off the floor, lunging forward and smashing it to bits.

"What...what is that thing?!" He glares, hair falling into his face as he looks up at Mei Nianqing again, eyes wide with panic. "Why did it just appear on my face?! I couldn't...I couldn't take it off!"

"...I was surprised myself to see that," the Guoshi admits.

"Though maybe I shouldn't be." His eyes drift downward, eyeing the broken pieces on the floor. "Your circumstances are very different."

Shi Wudu presses his hands against his temples, his head aching with confusion.

"Would you stop speaking in riddles and just spit it out?!"

"I can't." Mei Nianqing shakes his head. "Not by choice either. It would be far more simple if I could explain the situation. You'll have to figure this out on your own, but..."

It won't take long.

"What you make of your fate from now is up to you." He rises to his feet.

"I gave you another chance—but I can't tell you what to do with it. But I will leave you with a piece of advice," Mei Nianqing flicks his wrist, and his belongings fly into his rucksack as if lifted by an invisible hand, and a new travel array appears.

"Human beings are never truly alone. Not unless we choose to be."

Shi Wudu stares, sitting among the straw and the shattered glass as he watches the Guoshi disappear, his thoughts swirling.

Why...why would he tell him that?

Shi Wudu was the one who had wanted to return to his family, only for Mei Nianqing to stop him.

How is he choosing to be alone? He...

He grits his teeth, wiping a hand down his face.

He's tired. His body aches. He just wants...

There's a bone deep fatigue in him.

One that makes him just want to sink down and surrender to the pull of sleep.

But...he can't.

Not when he knows Pei and Shi Qingxuan need him.

They needed him before, but...

Dying didn't prove to be the solution that he thought it would be in the pits of his anguish.

And at the very least—his sister is mortal too.

Who knows if she'll forgive him—but he still has to try.

He pushes himself to his feet, tired and unsteady as he makes his way out of the stables, stumbling into the street.

It looks...like a city. A busy one, at that.

And from the salty taste to the air—they must be a port. In the north too, considering the noticeable chill.

"...Hey, you—" He points to a merchant, passing by—shocked when he receives a sneer in response.

"Who do you think you're speaking to?!" He scoffs, carrying on.

Shi Wudu freezes, his hand aloft in the air, eyes narrowed. How...

How *dare* he? Who does he think he—?

But when he looks down at his robes—black, worn from travel, simple garments—

He looks like nothing more than a commoner.

A woman takes pity on him, sitting on a nearby stoop as she hangs out her wet laundry to dry.

"Don't mind them, lad—the businessmen around here can be thickheaded. What is it?"

"..." Shi Wudu rubs his throat, turning to her. "What's the name of this place?"

She stares at him, surprised. "...Did you come in on one of the boats? They didn't tell you?"

When he shakes his head, she sighs.

"Well—welcome to the least friendly place in the hinterlands, Langling."

...Langling?

Shi Wudu looks around, taking it in.

He's never been to the city before--not even when he was mortal. There seemed to be no need, after his uncle's death.

It's a vast port down, bustling with commerce—not so different from

Qinghe, where he grew up, if not slightly...

Harsher.

But that doesn't matter.

He needs help. He needs rest. Safety.

And he knows exactly where to get it.

"...Is there a temple for General Ming Guang nearby?"

She raises an eyebrow, looking him up and down.

"Are you a cultivator? We don't have many of those around here."

"...I suppose I am," he agrees.

"Well," she nods in the direction of one of the connecting streets, leading closer to the seashore. "There's a Ming Guang temple about five minutes that way, give or take. It's one of the only temples around here, actually. Good luck to you."

The teenager gives her a nod, holding his side as he makes his way down the street.

It's cold, and his body still aches, but—he doesn't focus on it. Not right now.

He doesn't have to push much further, he—

He's almost there.

The moment he sees the divine statue behind the temple gates, he feels his stomach lurch with relief, pushing the surge of emotion that comes with it back down his throat.

Incense is burning, and the coffers are full–but there don't seem to be any other worshippers here.

That's to be expected this time of day—and it works out all the better for him. Knowing Pei—he'll descend immediately and make a scene.

And for once, that's absolutely fine by him.

Shi Wudu drops to his knees on one of the cushions before the altar, clasping his hands in front of him, his body aching with exhaustion, holding out on the promise of relief.

It's been ages since he prayed, but ironically...

In his mortal life, he prayed in Pei's temples, too.

He might be a little out of practice, but...

'Pei?'

He squeezes his eyes shut, clasping his hands a little tighter.

'It's me, I—I need you.'

Admitting that feels like pulling teeth--but in this situation, he has no choice.

But...

He receives no reply.

Shi Wudu opens his eyes sharply, his brow pinched with annoyance.

Really?

He knows how many prayers Pei gets on the daily, but shouldn't his stand out? Then—

Then again, he isn't a god anymore. His voice is just one in millions—and most mortals never receive a response.

But unlike most mortals—Shi Wudu is a highly skilled, highly trained cultivator...even without his godhood.

He should be able to concentrate, to place enough power into his prayer that it would be quickly overheard.

And yet...

He feels nothing inside.

Only a cold, gaping void, where the power of his divinity once was.

Not even the warmth he used to feel from his golden core, back when he was mortal.

He takes a sharp, trembling breath. He—

He's just unsettled. Wounded. It's—

It's nothing. He'll recover.

He always does. To the point where he's taken his own emotional endurance for granted at times, but—

He'll be fine.

If he can't use his cultivation to get through—

Donations get attention, too.

Though, ironically enough—the god of wealth has nothing to his name now.

Just...

He reaches up, fumbling with his hair.

There's a golden pin there, holding it in place—

A gift from Pei. Worth more than a man's weight in coins.

The first gift the martial god ever gave him, and one that Shi Wudu rarely ever wears.

Not because he never thought it was beautiful, no—-but because he didn't want the Emperor to ask where he got it, or why he treasured it.

Instead, he only wore it on occasions when he wanted to feel steady. Reassured.

Strong.

Like when he was facing his third calamity.

He clutches the pin tightly in his hand, swallowing hard—staring at the golden dragon carved into its shape, a single ruby clutched in its talons.

Red was Pei's color, and it...

He was always so happy, when he saw Shi Wudu wearing it—like an overeager dog, tail thumping.

And to Shi Wudu's surprise, it's such a silly thing, but—

He doesn't want to let it go.

Even if he knows Pei will give it back, that it's necessary—

His heart still aches when he places the pin down upon the altar, fingers trembling as he pulls them back.

'Pei.'

He clasps his hands together again, pressing his lips together until they go numb to stop them from trembling.

'Pei, can you hear me?'

He waits, heart pounding in his throat, squeezing his eyes shut, when he hears—

Shi Wudu hears a reply.

'You speak of the General with such familiarity, mortal.' A voice responds coldly. *'Know your place.'*

Oh.

Shi Wudu's eyes narrow into an annoyed glare.

Zeng Tao.

The deputy that's been filling in for Pei Xiu since his banishment to the mortal realm.

An old, judgmental man—one who always had a chip on his shoulder, being passed over by younger, more skilled generals as Pei's top deputy.

He and Shi Wudu never got along—but he tolerated the Water God due to his position.

(Shi Wudu didn't tolerate him at all.)

'...I'm perfectly aware of my place.' Shi Wudu fires back, glaring at the ceiling overhead. *'Now, will you tell the General I'm calling or not? He won't be pleased when he hears you kept me waiting.'*

Zeng Tao's response is as haughty as ever.

'Oh, the mortal likes to make threats now, does he? If you were of any

importance to the general, you would have another means of contacting him.'

Shi Wudu's eye twitches.

'You know damn well I'm of importance to him! I'm his—!'

The deputy god interrupts him testily.

'I have no idea who you are. You have made no effort to introduce yourself. That's a sizable donation, but to behave so impudently and make such demands!'

Shi Wudu frowns in annoyance.

'Don't you know my voice?!'

They've never been close, but they've been around one another for centuries. He should know what Shi Wudu sounds like—

'No, it's clearly under some sort of distortion. Is this—is this some wealthy young lord playing a prank?! You dare?! Or—'

Zeng Tao sounds exasperated.

'If the general has ended some sort of affair with you, pretending to reach out under a false identity is not a way of getting around that—'

Shi Wudu sputters, shaking his head vehemently.

'I'm no such thing! And who—who plays a prank on a GOD?! Have you lost your mind?!'

'You're the one who hasn't even stated your name or intentions!' The deputy god grouses. And Shi Wudu—

He wipes his hands down his face, seething, but—

He doesn't have any more time to argue. He needs—

He needs to see him.

'It's Sh—!'

Silence echoes through the prayer connection, and Zeng Tao waits, reeking of impatience.

'Yes, what?'

Shi Wudu falls forward, clutching his throat as it sears with pain, as though knives are clawing into him from the inside.

...What?

Still, he tries again.

'It's Sh—!'

This time, blood bubbles up from the back of his throat, making him choke and cough.

'The...The Wat...!'

The closer he gets to saying it, no matter how hard he tries—the worse the agony becomes.

Until he collapses on the altar with a scream, blood dripping down his chin.

'...This is a prank, isn't it?' The deputy god grumbles as Shi Wudu trembles on the temple floor, hands clutching his head. *'I've had enough of this.'*

'No!' Shi Wudu sobs, scrambling and choking, still trying to force the words out. *'No, wait--PLEASE—!'*

The link is cut.

Shi Wudu sits back, his chest heaving, clawing at his throat.

He would almost blame his recovering injury, but he—

That shouldn't have impacted his ability to pray.

With trembling fingers, he scrambles for a prayer sheet and pen—maybe if he can burn a note, he—!

But the minute he tries to write the characters of his own name down, his hand seizes up with pain, unable to move.

Not when he writes down Pei's name. Or his sister's name.

Just when he tries to write his own.

And when he tries to speak it aloud—

He spits out more blood.

Slowly, with building horror, the truth begins to dawn on him.

Mei Nianqing was otherwise forthcoming. But he was so insistent on not allowing the former god to approach his loved ones, saying...

It would only end in pain. And if he genuinely couldn't explain...

That reeks of magic.

Dark, cursed magic.

That mask—it appeared out of nowhere, and only—

Only before someone who knew Shi Wudu's face. Who would have recognized him.

He can't speak his name. Not even his formal titles. He can't—

He can't even write it down.

And even now, through the fear, pain, and rage—

He knows who would have done this.

He knows why.

Shi Wudu knows far too many secrets. And if he isn't dead, or trapped under the emperor's thumb—

He would certainly find a way to ensure that Shi Wudu could never tell them.

Shi Wudu hangs his head, shoulders trembling as thunder rolls overhead.

Langling is known for its storms—even in the winter months.

"...I won't tell anyone," he croaks, tears pouring down his cheeks. "Please, I won't...I won't tell anyone, just...just let me..."

'Just let me see him again.'

Normally, in any situation—his first thought has always been Shi Qingxuan.

Where she is. If she's safe. If she has what she needs.

But right now, there's this clawing ache in his chest, like the phantom pains of a ghost limb. And all he wants...

He curls up beneath the divine statue in the temple courtyard, leaning back against legs carved from stone.

Missing the living, warm arms that once held him so close.

He just—

He just wants Pei.

That's all he wants, shivering and alone, the rain soaking him to the bone.

Knees pulled against his chest, praying, over and over again, knowing that he won't be heard.

That no one will answer.

"...I love you," he whispers, fingertips digging into his knees.

Only able to admit it out loud now, when no one is listening.

Not anymore.

"I was too scared to tell you. And I...I knew you..."

He knew Pei had spent centuries running from that kind of relationship. That he didn't want it. And while Shi Wudu knew the martial god cared for him, he thought—

He thought that affection must have been a burden for him.

And he was so certain, if he told Pei how much he cared--the general would resent him for it. Or, at the worst...

Push him away.

Shi Wudu was too much of a coward to face that possibility. To make himself vulnerable.

"...It was always you," he chokes, hugging himself tightly.

Remembering what He Xuan said, seeing his memories of Pei inside the Kiln.

And he was right.

It's always been Pei.

Even before Shi Wudu knew him, just stealing glances at a statue through the window.

Just a teenager who knew nothing, and still...he felt pulled to him.

And every moment since he knew him—he wanted him. Not just in the obvious ways, but in all the little ones too.

Like he'd been cold all his life, and moments with Pei were his first brushes with warmth.

He might be a selfish person. He definitely is, but—

He wishes he had been more selfish, when it came to Pei.

Maybe if he had, he wouldn't...

When the storm passes, it'll be near sunset.

Worshippers will return to make their prayers before the end of the day, and Shi Wudu...

He lifts his head, eyes narrowed.

Before he leaves—knowing he'll be forced out anyway, having nothing to offer...he returns to the altar, snatching that golden hair pin back.

His hair is wet now, curling—Pei always loved it that way.

Shi Wudu pushes half of it up and away from his face, clasping it into place

"...This is a pretty sizable donation, right?" He wipes at his cheeks, glaring at the altar. "Good luck hunting down the thief."

He turns, hurrying back down the temple steps, the rain beating down on him, but...

He doesn't care.

It really doesn't matter anymore.

Alone in a city with no gold, too weak to perform even manual labor...he has no means of getting food, or even a place to stay.

Well. Only one.

The newly abandoned temple of Wind and Water, windows boarded and sealed.

He barely manages to pry one of the boards away, crawling inside.

It's cold—drafty and dark. The braziers and hearth have gone cold. The donation box empty.

Divine statues...shattered.

Shi Wudu is too tired, too broken to even look at them.

Shivering and soaked, he collapses on his side on the cold, stone floor—shivering as he curls in on himself.

Knowing that he deserves this.

He knew that before, but after the Kiln—

Shi Wudu knows that he deserves to feel this pain. This hopeless sorrow.

He knows, he does, and—

Still, he finds himself trembling and curled into the tightest ball possible, crying like a child.

Sobbing until it feels like his chest might rip apart, unable to contain the ache any longer.

Because he wants to see his sister.

Because he wants Pei.

Because he's scared, and it—

It hurts. So much, it—

It hurts.

(It really hurts.)

Even death isn't an escape anymore. Not when he remembers that door.

How he couldn't pass through.

Before, when Mei Nianqing told him his soul was in disarray...he didn't listen.

Because he had the same thing that always pushed him onward, in spite of all reason.

People he cared about. People who needed him.

People he wanted to see again.

But now, he knows;

He is never going to see Pei again. He is never going to see his sister again, either.

Because this curse—it won't be lifted until Jun Wu is gone, or Shi Wudu is stronger than him.

And he knows he won't live to see either of those things.

Now, he can feel it.

The emptiness inside. The cold void, where his golden core once was.

A soul in tatters.

He doesn't move.

Not when sleep takes him--or when he awakens again.

His body lies limp, facing away from the boarded temple doors.

One or two people notice that someone has taken to hiding in the abandoned temple--but no one cares. And why should they?

He doesn't try to find food, or water. Doesn't make a move to seek out work.

He makes no efforts to pray again, unable to bear the pain and disappointment any longer.

Slowly, the aches in his body become worse.

He goes from burning up to freezing cold, slipping in and out of consciousness.

He—

Oh.

It's been so long, he nearly forgot what it felt like, but—

He's sick.

He was prone to that, when he was mortal. Catching a fever if he didn't rest enough, or caught a chill.

And he always hid it rather well from Shi Qingxuan, despite causing himself to fall ill rather often, he...

He was never very good at taking care of himself.

But when he slides back into consciousness again—he notices something odd.

It's neither too hot, or too cold.

The ground isn't so hard and unforgiving beneath him. And...there's warmth—with faint, familiar crackling nearby.

When Shi Wudu opens his eyes, he's still in the temple—but there's a fire in the hearth.

There's...a blanket over him. Nothing expensive—but warm.

And from the feel of it--a bedroll underneath him.

But...who would bring that here? And why?

The fallen god struggles to sit up, still shivering as he rubs a hand against his forehead, and he notices something else.

A bowl of rice, sitting before him.

Nothing much, but...

When Shi Wudu reaches out, moving to push it away in disinterest—he hears a voice from behind him, whispering—

"...It's really you, isn't it?"

He stiffens, his heart leaping with hope as he whips around, finding—

...Just a normal, mortal teenage boy.

Shi Wudu's face visibly falls as he looks away, rolling over.

"...I wasn't sure at first," the mortal admits. "Everyone's been saying that you're dead, but...I was so sure I recognized you."

Shi Wudu doesn't answer, pulling the blanket tighter around himself.

"I mean..."

(It really does seem as though the kid can carry on without any feedback, doesn't it?)

"...Those eyes..." He scratches his neck sheepishly, looking away as he clears his throat. "And you kept saying the names of other gods in your sleep."

Finally, Shi Wudu pauses.

"...And when I tried to tell the other cultivators it was you, I couldn't say your name. It's gotta be some sort of punishment, right? The emperor exiled you, and made it so you can't...get any perks from your old identity?"

He sits up again, turning to look at the boy.

"...Who are you?"

The teenager blinks back at him owlishly.

"Oh...I guess you wouldn't remember me," he admits. "But you saved my life a couple of months ago—my sister's too. We were sailing here so I could join up with a cultivation sect nearby, and our ship..."

Shi Wudu squints at him blearily, swaying slightly from the effort it takes to sit up.

"...Was taken by pirates." He concludes, watching as the boy's eyes grow wide, brightening with excitement.

"You remember?!" He smiles breathlessly, practically vibrating.

...He does.

It was one of the worst nights of his life—and he used it to lash out at the pirates in response.

But still—saving those children was probably one of the few acts of interference he's performed as a god.

"You look younger now, but...like I said, your eyes are pretty..."

He trails off, then realizes how it sounds if he leaves it there, his cheeks growing splotchy and pink.

"Distinctive!" He clears his throat again, trying to deepen his voice to sound a little more grown up—and serious. "They're very distinctive!"

"..." Shi Wudu stares back at him, unimpressed as he rubs the side of his neck, trying to work out the aches and knots. "...I'm not banished," he mutters, looking away. "I'm mortal. You might as well get lost, you'll get nothing out of helping me."

The boy stares at him—and his response—

It takes Shi Wudu, who has lived a lifetime—ten lifetimes—of learning to expect the very worst from people—

"...Well...you didn't get anything from helping me, did you?"

...Shocked.

He smiles, his eyes a warm, golden shade of brown in the firelight. He couldn't be more than sixteen years old at most, but he's strong for his age. With a kind face, a warm disposition--and golden yellow robes to match.

"My name is Jin Feng, by the way, and..."

He sighs, crossing his arms. "If I can't call you the...y'know...or your name, I don't know what to..."

"...Pei."

The teenager looks up at him, shocked—and Shi Wudu clears his throat, turning around, rolling back onto his side.

"You can call me Pei Yuan."

His father's given name was Wenyuan, after all--it feels close to him, somehow.

And while Pei has become a not so uncommon surname in the North over the centuries, a flourishing clan with many branches...

If Shi Wudu can't have his own name—

Then he wants that one.

No matter how often he tells the boy to go, to leave him alone--refusing to eat, refusing to get up, or move—

To live. To fight for himself.

The child returns each and every time. His sister following behind him like a shadow every now and again.

Bringing food and water.

It takes a week before he's able to get within Shi Wudu's space without the former god panicking, beginning to hyperventilate, pushing him away.

A fear he always felt before—but now, he's too weak to hide the flight response.

But eventually...it fades.

To the point where he's willing to let Jin Feng close enough to check his injuries. To comb and wash the blood from his hair.

Slow, terrifying steps towards trust.

Still—getting the fallen god to eat, to so much as leave the temple—is a near impossible feat.

He doesn't want to get stronger. Doesn't want to see the world outside. It has nothing for him.

Not his family. Not his friends. And he couldn't offer them anything now.

He isn't even a god, he—

After so many years, he's exactly where he started:

Just a cultivator.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY:

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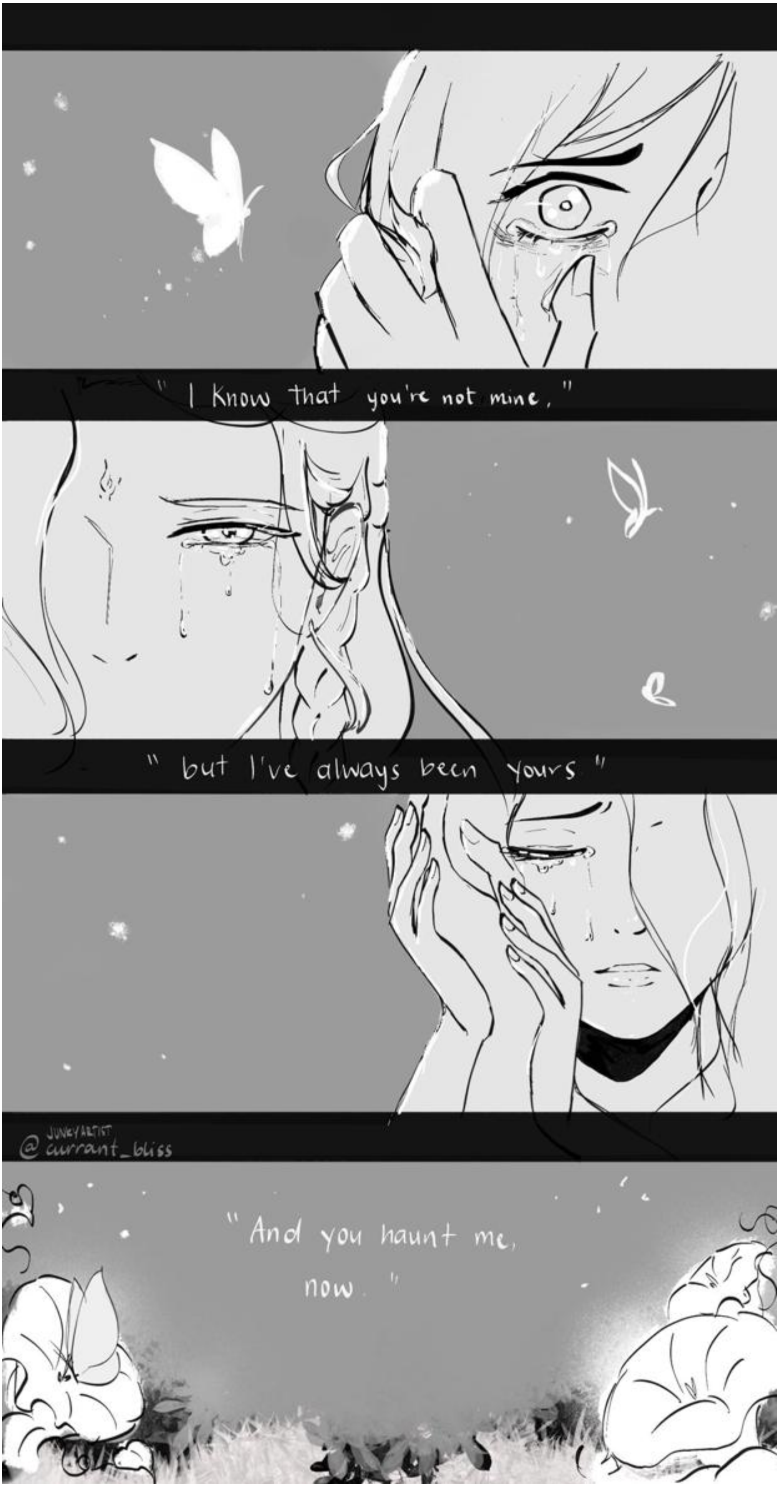
Mei Nianqing and Zhao Beitong


" I Know that you're not mine, "
" but I've always been yours "
JUNKYARTIST
@ currant_bliss
" And you haunt me,
now. "

CREDIT: JUNKY

Chapter End Notes

thank you to Junky for your beautiful artwork, and allowing me to share it!

xoxo, Evie

Respite

Chapter Summary

> "You need to go back to Ghost City and rest," he places a hand on the calamity's arm, trying to sound firm.
>
> "Gege," the ghost king sounds almost endeared. "That's kind of you to worry, but I'm really—"
>
> Xie Lian shakes his head.
>
> "You weren't well the other night, and you haven't rested since. You've done so much for me lately—I want you to take a rest."
>
> "And what about you?" Hua Cheng raises an eyebrow.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Not long after the arrangements are settled in Gusu, Xie Lian and Pei Ming receive a call sent out to all of the Martial Gods, ordering their return to the Heavens.

Not particularly surprising, given recent events—but still.

"You're sure you'll be alright?"

Pei Ming has both hands on Shi Qingxuan's shoulders, staring into her face searchingly, looking for any hint of unease about her situation. And she…

Seeing his concern now, how seriously he's taken looking after her since her brother's death—

She can't help but feel guilt.

"…I'm sure," she mutters, glancing back over her shoulder at the cultivators waiting behind them. "Xiong Li and Lan An have been very kind, I trust them."

The General frowns, still doubtful, and…

"…What's this?" He lifts up her wrist, examining the bangle there.

It's perfectly smooth, shining like black jade—with seams of gold throughout. Of incredibly fine make—but unlike any of the other jewelry he's seen the Wind Master wear.

When he goes to touch it, she yanks her wrist back sharply.

"Just a family heirloom!" She yanks her sleeve back down over the piece, surprisingly…protective.

"I've never seen you wear it before." Pei raises an eyebrow, and she shrugs, knowing her response is unfair, but…

"…I wanted to feel closer to gege," she replies, her tone tense

Knowing that he won't question that explanation—not even for a second. And there's some part of her that feels ashamed for using that, but…

It's better than risking him learning what it actually is.

A few feet away, Xie Lian is saying his own goodbyes.

Saying farewell to Xiong Li and Lan An was simple and quick, thanking them for their help, promising to come back soon—

With Hua Cheng, less so.

"You need to go back to Ghost City and rest," he places a hand on the calamity's arm, trying to sound firm.

"Gege," the ghost king sounds almost endeared. "That's kind of you to worry, but I'm really—"

Xie Lian shakes his head.

"You weren't well the other night, and you haven't rested since. You've done so much for me lately—I want you to take a rest."

"And what about you?" Hua Cheng raises an eyebrow. "You've exerted yourself more than I have, and you haven't rested either."

"Oh," Xie Lian waves that off, smiling at him. "Thank you for worrying, San Lang—but those weeks before the mid-autumn festival were the longest rest I've ever had."

That doesn't seem to bring Hua Cheng any comfort, but he carries on.

"Besides, I have responsibilities to attend to—and with Mount Tonglu reopening, you'll need all of your strength."

Hua Cheng is silent, and Xie Lian briefly worried this might be another instance where he refuses, so…

"…And I'll be upset with you if you don't."

He feels almost tentative, tacking something like that on. Is it really his place to fuss over a ghost king of all people?

Would Hua Cheng find that burdensome? Or—overstepping?

It feels like they've become closer recently, but is Xie Lian just caught up in things? He—

"…I'll rest," Hua Cheng responds slowly, his tone clipped. "In the best way I know how."

The way he says that feels pointed, and Xie Lian—he can't help but wonder if he did offend Hua Cheng. He never meant to treat him like a child, he was only…

"Okay," Xie Lian agrees weakly, confidence rapidly fading, until…

The ghost king reaches out, delicately pushing a lock of hair behind the prince's ear, fingertips brushing over his skin lightly when he does.

From behind them, Xiong Li gawks, silently shaking Lan An's sleeve and pointing.

(His partner politely looks away.)

"I'll see you soon, gege."

There's warmth in his tone—enough to set Xie Lian's mind at ease.

When he and Pei journey back to the Heavens—the general is unusually quiet.

Though Xie Lian supposes he shouldn't be surprised.

"General…Can I ask you something?"

"Yes, what is it?" He replies flatly, reaching out to take Xie Lian's arm, tugging him to the left.

It takes Xie Lian a moment to realize that there was a small hole in the path he would have tripped over.

“…Thank you,” he mumbles, clearing his throat. “Did you…?”

It’s been on his mind for days now, but there’s never been a good moment to ask.

“…Did you know what Shi Wudu has done to He Xuan before all of this?”

Pei falls silent, and Xie Lian half expects him to be offended, but…

“I wish I had. But no. We both had our secrets.”

He thinks on it, squinting slightly at the sunlight. "What made you wonder if I did?"

"...Your reaction was pretty calm," Xie Lian explains carefully. "And you never seemed...bothered by it."

"..." The general wipes a hand down his face with a sigh, his head aching with fatigue

He doesn't sleep well alone. Not since he got used to having someone...

Pei Ming opens his eyes again.

"I didn't know about Pei Xiu's behavior either, but I didn't stop caring about his welfare once he went into exile."

Clearly not. He's a loyal man.

But...he expressed disapproval and disappointment over Pei Xiu's actions, even if he still wished to defend him from the consequences.

He never seemed to have that struggle when it came to Shi Wudu, whether it was because he had been in danger at the time, or...

Seeming to guess Xie Lian's train of thought, Pei rests a hand on his hip, examining the road ahead of them. The Heavens aren't far from here, if he keeps walking, the conversation will end naturally once they're among the other gods, but...

"I knew exactly who he was."

The good, and the bad.

Even before they were lovers, the two were very close friends for centuries before that. But that closeness never blinded Pei Ming to his ruthlessness.

Actually, it was just the opposite.

He knew the man well enough to know the motivations behind seemingly callous behavior.

That Shi Wudu could be harsh, single minded, and never knew when to stop—but only when it came to one thing.

Shi Qingxuan.

But taken out of that context, when he didn't have to worry about that—when they were around Ling Wen, or it was just the two of them…

He was a completely different person.

Smug, arrogant, and coy, yes—

But also passionate, loyal, and brilliant.

He was never cruel, either. Not in any situation. Maybe not so generous or upright as people like Xie Lian and Pei Ming—

But he never went out of his way to cause harm, either.

"You can't really love someone unless you accept their flaws, your highness." Pei notices Xie Lian stiffening with surprise, and his smile is bittersweet. "I'm sure you must have guessed."

"…I assumed you wanted it to be private," the prince admits.

"Shui-Xiong did, but if it had been up to me…" Pei Ming takes a deep breath. "I saw the best of him, your highness—but I also knew what he was capable of. I wasn't surprised that he would do something like that, not if it was for Shi Qingxuan's sake."

And if it was Pei in that position—he isn't so sure he would have done anything differently.

If Shi Wudu had been open, Pei could have told him that.

Maybe then, he wouldn't have had to walk around with such a burden for so long. Secrets have a weight to them, after all.

"…And what was it you wish you had been honest with him about?"

Pei hesitates, and Xie Lian bites his lip, looking away.

"I'm sorry, I just…" He reaches up, grasping the chain around his neck. "I lost someone I was in love with before I could tell him—and I've always regretted that."

"…You were in love with someone?"

Pei sounds a little incredulous, and Xie Lian—

Well, given who he's speaking to, he can guess why.

"You can fall in love with someone without being physically intimate with them," he points out flatly.

"I know that," Pei protests, holding his hands up. "…In theory."

"I met him when I was still mortal," Xie Lian rolls his eyes. "He was from Xianle—and he was younger than me."

"Oh," Pei tilts his head to the side, thinking. "That's rather sweet, actually. Childhood sweethearts and all that."

"No, no…" Xie Lian smiles faintly.

He wishes they had been.

He almost took Hong'er into the palace after that incident with Qi Rong. And Xie Lian…

He couldn't even describe how many times he's considered how things could have been different if he had.

How much happier they both would have been.

Hong'er lived a difficult, cruel life. Xie Lian had the chance to make it less so, and…

He allowed Mei Nianqing to send him away.

"…We met when I was sixteen, and he was just a little boy—but I didn't see him again until years later, during my first banishment. He…"

Xie Lian's chest aches, but he still manages to smile.

"He took care of me."

"…And you lost him," Pei concludes, watching Xie Lian's expression carefully.

When he nods—the general sighs, recognizing the commonality between the two of them.

That they're both members of a class that no one ever wants to be in;

That of widows and widowers. Those who weren't lucky enough to go first.

And the weight of their own immortality weighs upon them heavily.

"…I never told him 'I love you' explicitly," Pei admits. "With my past…it's difficult for people to take that sort of thing seriously, coming from me."

Given just what Xie Lian saw on Mount Yu Jun, how he handled the situation with Xuan Ji…he believes that.

"But that's not necessarily what I regret the most." He mutters. "Even if I never said it—and he never would have believed it if I did—I know I made him feel it."

When they were together, Pei knows that Shi Wudu felt loved. That he felt safe. Even if he wouldn't admit what those feelings were.

"…My biggest regret was never telling him that I had a son."

Xie Lian doesn't reply at first, and Pei looks away.

They've stopped walking now—delaying their journey by a few minutes. And Pei takes a seat on a large boulder by the side of the path, his shoulders slumping.

"I'm not sure if you remembered—I assumed Xuan Zhen must have told you…"

"He did," Xie Lian agrees quietly. "I remember."

Many, many years ago, before his trial that cast him out of the Heavens—Pei asked for his permission to search for a mortal woman in Xianle.

A former lover by the name of Qing Yuan.

And when Xie Lian gave his permission, he asked Mu Qing about the matter—learning of the woman's death.

Along with the presumed loss of her son.

"…When I found out she was gone, I…" Pei closes his eyes. "I felt so much shame, and guilt—but then, they told me she had a son." He doesn't look up, his shoulders stiffened. "From the age he was, the math was easy to put together. And for one second—"

Xie Lian's chest pangs with sympathy when the general's voice trembles.

"…I was someone's father." He swallows thickly, pushing his fingers through his hair. "And I wasn't expecting the way that would make me feel. I'd never thought about having children before, but the moment I…"

He doesn't have to finish the sentence for Xie Lian to understand.

The moment Pei Ming knew that he had a son, he loved him. That instantaneous, unconditional love that comes from being a parent.

Xie Lian hasn't felt that before himself—and he never will—but he's seen it countless times in others.

"And it was only for a moment," Pei swallows down the pain, letting out a slow, trembling breath. "Because in the next second, I was told that he was dead."

Likely dead, to be more specific.

Ming Guang had refused to accept that at the time.

He looked. He searched for *years* .

His deputies swept the former lands of Xianle and Yong'an, finding orphan boys of the appropriate age—comparing their looks to Qing Yuan's, to his own—asking them their mother's names, where they came from.

None of them were him.

Between the plague and the war…

Eventually, he had to accept the truth.

"…And you wanted the Water Master to know about him," Xie Lian whispers.

Pei nods, his head still hanging low.

"He really thought the best of me. That I was this…righteous, upstanding person." He lets out a ragged sigh. "I wish I had told him about my failures."

"Oh…" Xie Lian sits down beside him, placing a hand on the general's shoulder. "You didn't fail, Pei."

His tone is so gentle, the martial god can hardly bear it.

"You didn't even know there was a child you needed to look after."

Pei Ming doesn't look at him, his hands clawing into the boulder they're sitting upon with such strength, he actually gauges small holes in the stone.

"…I had many, many siblings." He recalls slowly. "Plenty to carry on the family. I never planned on having my own children. And if I did—I said I wouldn't be like my own father."

Xie Lian smiles faintly, rubbing Pei's shoulder gently—a simple gesture of comfort and kindness that makes the older man sag, exhausted.

"I never knew you came from such a large family."

"I had twenty two sisters."

Xie Lian's smile freezes in place as he chokes with shock—and Pei snorts, even if he seems to find no mirth in it.

"My father kept a large household of concubines."

…Ah.

The founder of the Pei family just so happened to be a mildly successful general himself. As such, he was able to use his riches to live in luxury.

"And he was a violent man."

Cruel. Arrogant. Often the sort to feign affection when he was pleased, only to take it away.

“He wasn’t particularly fond of my mother—but I was his only son. He sent her away to a monastery when I was small, keeping me around in case he couldn’t produce another male heir.”

His sisters were kind. They raised him, doted on him.

But his father was the vicious type.

And oh, Pei despised him.

The way he treated the women in his life. How everything could be reduced to simple victories and war stories. What he was willing to do, in the name of winning.

How he constantly dangled Pei’s mother as a means of gaining his compliance.

Promising him that his mother would be returned to the manor if he studied well. If he trained hard enough.

But it was never good enough, and the blame was always placed at the child’s feet.

This endless, growing pressure—and resentment.

“I joined the army as soon as they would take me. And I thought—if I was better than him, I’d stop feeling angry.” Pei stares at the road ahead, the portal leading up to the heavens only a few meters away.

Objectively speaking—he succeeded.

No one even remembers his father’s name anymore. They haven’t for centuries.

And even now, after so long—he’s still far more famous than any other general who has ever lived.

Xie Lian seems to think the same.

“…You built yourself quite a legacy,” he points out gently.

“…” Pei shakes his head. “I have a legacy of being very good at killing people, your highness. And I’m not blind to the fact that I repeated his behaviors towards women—even if I told myself I was better, because

I was straight forward. But I…”

He presses his hand against his forehead.

“…I was a worse father than he was—because at least he put a roof over my head, and food in my stomach. That child…my child… probably died frightened and alone.”

His jaw trembles.

“I can’t fix that. I’ll always have to live with it.”

Xie Lian squeezes his shoulder, but says nothing more. Knowing that no matter what he says—it won’t change the way Pei feels. And he probably doesn’t want anyone to change his mind.

He just wants someone to listen.

“…And Shi Wudu,” Pei swallows hard, still struggling to say his name without the grief rushing over him all over again. “They were brothers in name—but he was Shi Qingxuan’s parent, really. And…if he had known about my son, maybe…”

Xie Lian knew as much.

For better or for worse, no one watched them closer than ‘Ming Yi,’ and he said so during the mid-autumn festival.

That the Water Master was Shi Qingxuan’s father, mother, and brother—rolled all into one.

“He would have understood, Pei.”

The general hangs his head, not saying another word.

It’s quiet. Even with the winter months coming, there’s a warm breeze.

It’s peaceful, even if only for a moment.

“Could we just…” He swallows hard, unable to bring himself to look up. “Just for a few minutes…”

His eyes widen, stinging when he feels an arm wrap around his shoulders.

Pei Ming is a rather large man, and while Xie Lian isn’t exactly petite, it's still difficult to wrap his arm all the way around—in any case, he perseveres, staring ahead calmly.

"We can take as many minutes as you need."

He doesn't force any words of comfort on him—doesn't make a spectacle out of Pei's emotions—

He's simply there.

The General's shoulders tremble as he covers his face with his hands, gulping down ragged breaths.

It's hard to say how long they sit there—maybe for only a few minutes, or maybe an hour.

The general makes a rasping, exhausted comment about how people are probably waiting, only for the prince to squeeze his shoulder.

Assuring him that even so—they can wait a little longer.

Pei didn't get the chance to mourn with Shi Wudu's body, or in any of the time immediately after. He was looking after Shi Qingxuan. Getting answers from Hua Cheng. Settling her into Gusu.

And now…

For just a little while, he allows the grief to wash over him.

Xie Lian follows when he eventually rises to his feet—the general offering a quiet thank you, but the prince brushes him off, refusing to accept it.

It's no more than what anyone deserves, really

The Heavens are far quieter than they used to be.

There's no music or laughter in the air when they walk through the streets—and Xie Lian can't say that he minds, finding it far less overwhelming.

(Pei nearly seems to prefer it.)

And when they enter the Grand Martial Hall—

"Ah, Ming Guang. Xianle." Jun Wu's tone is clipped. "I didn't realize the two of you were traveling together."

Pei Ming glances over at Xie Lian, then back at the emperor—and his response is similar in tone.

“The prince is good company.”

Xie Lian smiles at that—then briskly walks toward the throne, bowing.

“Xianle was worried when he heard his majesty was hurt,” he lifts his head, biting his lip. “Have you recovered?”

Jun Wu glances him over for a moment, taking in the genuine concern in Xie Lian’s eyes, and—

His own soften.

“Not entirely—but enough to conduct business.”

Xie Lian nods, relieved, falling back into the group of gathered gods as the meeting begins.

(Clearly they were, in fact, waiting on just them.)

Jun Wu lifts his chin, clearing his throat.

“As you’re all aware—”

Bang!

Suddenly, the doors to the martial hall fly open.

Xie Lian turns his head with everyone else (even if it’s somewhat fruitlessly), but the aura standing in the doorway is unfamiliar.

Tranquil, soft oranges and pinks, like the skies after it…

“Lady Rain Master,” Jun Wu arches an eyebrow, surprised. “What a rare delight.”

Yushi Huang strides forward, hair flowing loosely down her shoulders, bangles jingling softly around her ankles as she moves, bare feet silent on the polished marble floors.

“You haven’t answered our general musters before.”

“Correct,” the princess agrees calmly.

The closer she comes, the more clearly everyone can see that she's dragging something in one of her hands.

A snake—no, a python—one large enough to kill a horse, or even something larger.

"One of the demons imprisoned in the Heavenly armory escaped into my lands."

Ling Wen is silent from her stance beside Jun Wu's throne, hands folded into her sleeves—not seeming to know how to respond when Yushi Huang smiles at her serenely, waving in greeting.

"I almost destroyed the beast and left it at that, but…"

She drops the creature at Jun Wu's feet with a heavy thud. It barely manages to squirm on the floor, steam rising from it's body.

"Given that I am the only Elemental Master remaining, I wondered if I should offer my assistance."

She clasps her hands in front of her in a polite gesture of respect, but she does not bow.

That would be inappropriate, after all.

Unlike other gods and goddesses who were princes, princesses, and generals—she was a head of state at the time of her ascension.

Meaning, in terms of social rank—Jun Wu is her peer.

"The Heavens seem to be struggling."

Jun Wu arches an eyebrow, taking in the woman before him, attempting to find some hint of insolence or disrespect in Yushi Huang's eyes—

But he finds none.

"That was kind of you."

He surveys the rest of the group beyond her. "We'll be facing a more dangerous task now than we have in many centuries. Given how much damage Hua Cheng and He Xuan have shown they can do to the order of the Heavens—we cannot allow another Ghost King to be born."

That earns murmurs of agreement, but Xie Lian frowns—unhappy to hear Hua Cheng included in that statement. When he opens his mouth to protest that, however—Pei Ming's hand lands on his shoulder.

Silently warning him.

And Xie Lian…he knows that he's right, but…It bothers him.

"Do you mean to send a group to intervene?" Nan Yang questions, crossing his arms—and Jun Wu shakes his head.

"Not yet. My injury…led to quite a few dangerous objects escaping the Heavens. They could pose serious damage to the mortal realm. Besides—we got lucky."

He holds his chest with a slight wince as he sits forward.

"Before, the most likely candidate to rise as a calamity would have been Autumn Twilight Shrouding Forests."

Xie Lian stiffens with shock, lifting his head.

"…You mean Ren Song?"

"I do."

Jun Wu rests his chin against his hand. "But from the reports I've received, the attack he survived in the Terrace of Cascading Wine weakened him significantly. That means it's a far more even playing field."

The attack…it really impacted him so severely?

"That means it should take the ghosts time to cull themselves down and for kiln candidates to emerge. Until then—you will all need to focus on recapturing the entities that escaped from the Heavens into the Human Realm."

The emperor surveys the room.

"I want all martial gods patrolling their assigned regions—Lady Rain Master, it's not your area of expertise, but with the waterways now left unsupervised—"

"I can handle that." Yushi Huang replies, bowing her head. "I'm told Ling Wen was familiar with the former Water Master's ledgers?"

"She is at your disposal," the emperor agrees with a bored wave of his hand. “Furthermore—if any of you encounter Blackwater in the mortal realm, do not engage with him.”

Pei Ming stiffens, his eyes narrowing. “…We’re just supposed to let him go?”

Naturally he isn’t facing punishment for killing Shi Wudu—that was seen as justice.

Attacking the emperor, however, was a serious crime.

“No.” Jun Wu’s eyes spark. “I intend to deal with him myself.”

Something about his tone sounds different to Xie Lian—sharper, more frigid.

Still—that doesn’t stop him from lingering once some of the other gods begin to disperse.

“…Sire?” He tilts his head to the side. “What’s my assignment?”

He’s a martial god with no territory to patrol

“…” Jun Wu scratches his chin, thinking it over. “…I suppose you could assist General Qi Ying.”

From his side, Ling Wen grows still.

“He’s been assigned to deal with the Brocade Immortal.”

Xie Lian raises an eyebrow, struggling to remember where he’s heard that before…

“Sire,” Ling Wen interrupts, her hands folded a little more rigidly inside her sleeves. “Why not have him patrol the East? Lang Qianqiu is—”

“There are no reports of major disruption in the East,” Jun Wu shakes his head.

“Then the north is a vast territory, Ming Guang—”

“Is currently even stronger than I am, given my condition.” Jun Wu rolls his eyes. “He needs no assistance.”

“Then the south—”

"Has two martial gods," Jun Wu glances at Mu Qing and Feng Xin. "Who have run their territory together without assistance for eight centuries."

Xie Lian tilts his head back and forth as the two spar their reasoning, his eyebrows raising higher and higher.

"Qi Ying is difficult to work with, and his highness will end up doing all of the effort. Given everything he's been assigned since his return…" Jun Wu stares as she lifts her chin. "Isn't it unfair to give him such a difficult task?"

Xie Lian, for his part—is touched.

"Oh, Ling Wen—it's kind of you to worry, but I'm not tired at all. And I enjoy being useful."

"Besides," Jun Wu smiles at Xie Lian, his expression glimmering with warmth and praise. "There is no one more uniquely qualified for this assignment than Xianle. You know that."

Xie Lian's eyes widen.

Compared to other martial gods—typically—he's pretty useless.

When he learned he was going to have his shackles indefinitely, he came to terms with the fact that would always be the case. Really, he's only gotten so much done since he arrived because he's had help, but…

He's uniquely qualified for something?

"That settles that," Jun Wu concludes. "You're all dismissed—and Xianle."

Xie Lian stops as he follows the others out the door, raising an eyebrow. "Your majesty?"

"Qi Ying is difficult," the emperor explains. "But a decent soul. He would…benefit from mentorship."

"…Mentorship," Xie Lian repeats slowly. "I…can do that." He looks up at Jun Wu with a slightly tired smile. "I learned from the best, after all."

Ling Wen watches the two with a mildly sickened expression, only distracted when someone tugs at her sleeve.

“Lady Ling Wen?” She stiffens, looking down to see that somehow, without her noticing, the Rain Master has appeared by her side. “The ledgers?”

Ling Wen hesitates, glancing around for Pei, seeking out support, but…

Naturally, given that Yushi Huang is present—he fled at the first opportunity.

“…Right,” she mutters, shoulders stiffening when the Rain Master doesn’t let go of her sleeve.

But, rather than comment—she simply stalks out of the martial hall with Yushi Huang in tow, the princess’s bangles jingling as they walk.

“This way.”

She’s brisk and silent, her expression taut.

“…Is something wrong?” Yushi Huang questions as Ling Wen leads them up the steps of her palace.

The civil goddess pauses in mid-step, staring straight ahead.

She’s never been particularly charming, and has never pretended to be.

“…” She turns her head to look down at the princess, stone faced.

“You’re a surprisingly small woman.”

Even for her, that’s particularly blunt—and not even what she meant to say.

Yushi Huang stares up at her, eyes round.

“…Am I?”

Her height is only slightly below average.

Petite framed, maybe—but with strong limbs, and…supple areas.

She’s never thought of herself as a small woman before.

“Given how Pei Ming flees from you like a raging Bull, yes.” Ling Wen grumbles.

“That has nothing to do with my physical strength.”

Says the woman who just dragged a python the size of an elephant through the grand martial hall as though it was nothing more than a sack of apples.

“Your reputation is just….”

Daunting, compared to her actual appearance. And…

She glares down at the golden flecks swimming in Yushi Huang’s irises, like sunlight sparkling on the surface of the sea.

Why should a goddess of agriculture be so distracting to look at? It’s impractical.

Yushi Huang tilts her head back.

“…You’re tall,” she replies softly.

Ling Wen’s eyes flash, then narrow.

“…Is that surprising?”

Yushi Huang shakes her head, never breaking eye contact.

(Ling Wen wishes she would.)

“Not in a bad way.”

“…”

The civil goddess looks away sharply, continuing up the steps.

Yushi Huang is quiet, following with a resilient grip on her sleeve, padding quietly across polished marble floor, eyes taking in the piles of scrolls all around, memos flitting around like sparrows in spring.

She lifts her hand, smiling faintly when one lands on her fingers.

Dozens of deputies and lower ranking civil gods bustle around them, occasionally glancing at their mistress with curiosity, only to quickly avert their gazes when they see the dark cloud of annoyance on Ling Wen's face.

"Do you ever wear shoes?"

Her voice is particularly cold, and the Rain Master lowers her hand, tilting her head as she watches the memo flutter to its proper destination.

Then, she shakes her head.

"I don't like them."

Ling Wen rolls her eyes, reversing the grip between them.

Instead of Yushi Huang holding onto her sleeve, Ling Wen is holding the Rain Master by the wrist, dragging her to the upper levels of her palace, where her private office awaits.

"It's going to take a minute," She mutters, letting Yushi Huang go as the door slams shut.

The Rain Master stands still for a moment as Ling Wen rummages about in her desk, taking it in.

It's...a disaster.

Organized chaos.

Every flat surface in the room is bursting with paperwork, pens and wells of ink scattered about.

And...

Yushi Huang stares at the bedroll.

"...You sleep here?"

Ling Wen glances up at her briefly, one of many drawers pulled open, rifling through papers.

"Occasionally."

It doesn't take a scholar to deduce what that means.

It's not that Ling Wen sleeps in her *office* occasionally.

She *sleeps* occasionally, and when she does, it's in her office.

(The dark circles beneath her eyes bear witness against her.)

Yushi Huang drifts closer from the doorway, eyeing the papers the head civil goddess is sifting through.

All of them from the late Water Master.

One of the few areas within the purview of the Heavens that Ling Wen *didn’t* have to manage before was commerce.

Now, an already full cup is overflowing.

Possibly cracking.

Ling Wen has never looked so tired, but it's more than that.

There's...sadness, too.

Ling Wen stiffens when she feels a hand against her shoulder blade—rubbing slow circles.

A kind gesture, maybe, but—

She whips her head around, her eyes frigid with annoyance, grasping the Rain Master's wrist between her fingers.

"What are you doing?"

Yushi Huang stares down at her, all round eyes and infuriating silence.

"Are you mocking me?"

Rarely are Ling Wen's interests noticed by female heavenly officials, who only express interest in her male form, and—

Never genuinely.

"..." Yushi Huang shakes her head.

Ling Wen stares, the muscles in her jaw working as she attempts to decipher the Rain Master's expression, finding it infuriatingly calm.

"I don't enjoy dancing around the subject." Her frustration spills over into an annoyed glare.

"So, if you have something you want to get across, use your words. I don't have time to decipher what you're trying to—"

"It's hard for me."

Ling Wen pauses, her lips parted, struggling to stop herself in mid-rant.

"...What?"

Yushi Huang lifts her free hand, not attempting to escape Ling Wen's grip on her wrist.

Pressing her palm against her throat.

The scar there.

"Speaking." Yushi Huang shrugs, holding Ling Wen's gaze, but—

Not as comfortably as she did before.

"It's hard for me."

Ling Wen is frozen, her grip on the Rain Master's wrist less forceful now, but—

Still, she makes no attempt to free herself.

"…But you *do* speak." She points out slowly, fighting the urge to look away.

"With effort, yes." Yushi Huang lowers her fingers.

Now, the scar seems so obvious—it was always there, she never attempted to hide it—but Ling Wen was never looking.

A raised, white line over otherwise flawless, deeply tanned skin.

She can't seem to pull her eyes away from it.

'…You should have said something sooner.'

When she speaks now, it's into the Rain Master's private communication array.

It isn't necessary for Ling Wen to ask for her password, of course—she knows that of every Heavenly Official as a part of her position.

Yushi Huang shrugs.

'I don't come to the Heavens often enough for it to be much of a problem.'

But that proposes a question of its own.

'…But if you live in the Mortal Realm full time, how do you communicate with the people around you?'

It's not as though normal mortals can use this option.

After a moment, the Rain Master lifts her hands, making gestures and signs that Ling Wen can't recognize, but—

There's a clear structure to them, almost like…

A language.

'The people of my lands have developed a way to communicate without words over generations.'

Ling Wen stares at her hands closely, attempting to decipher the commonalities between the movements like some sort of code.

It's actually…completely fascinating, to find a language she hasn't learned before.

'I didn't ask them to, but they've always been kind to me.'

Ling Wen glances up from her hands, finally—eyeing her expression once more.

Now that they're speaking in Yushi Huang's communication array—the difference is obvious, making it clear…

Speaking must be painful for her.

Like this, she sounds younger. Less…serene.

The emotions that Ling Wen found so difficult to discern before, now—she can actually hear them in Yushi Huang's tone.

Her discomfort, when she speaks of her worshippers doing something so considerate.

'…If you had asked, couldn't the Emperor have had your body completely restored after your ascension? ' Ling Wen asks slowly.

And there, she finds the answer—and something that shifts the Rain master—and everything the Civil Goddess ever knew about her—into a different light.

'If he did, I would have been indebted to him.'

Such a simple explanation—but so difficult to fathom.

'So…you'd rather carry on like that?'

The Rain Master has a delicate face. Warm eyes. An unassuming stature.

But there's steel behind her gaze.

'I hate saying thank you to anyone.'

Given her saintly demeanor—and reputation—it's a surprisingly… cynical thing to say.

'But I refuse to be dependent on the help of someone I do not trust.'

It explains many, many things in an entirely different context.

Her decision to remain in the mortal realm. To live such a simple, secluded life.

For her lands to be so well guarded from the outside world. Her obvious strength, but constant refusal to involve herself in heavenly affairs.

There's an exhilaration that comes with learning something new, something difficult. Ling Wen has always felt that.

But the fierce independence and stubbornness it takes to live like that —

It creates an unexpected spark of heat, deep within her gut.

'Why did you come today?'

Because involving herself in this—voluntarily picking up slack after Shi Wudu's death…

It's out of step with every other aspect of her behavior.

'And what are you trying to do?'

Yushi Huang stares down at her, standing behind Ling Wen's chair, with Ling Wen twisted around to look back at her.

The Rain Master's gaze is as unwavering as ever—but Ling Wen see's a flicker of something she never would have expected. Faint, but present.

Even more so when she replies.

'What's the most obvious reason, Ling Wen?'

…Shyness.

Ling Wen stares up at her, the ever turning gears in her head grinding faster and faster.

To what the immediate results of her actions are. What the gains and losses are. And…

Ling Wen's eyes widen with shock, and she's so thrown off—she forgets to speak into the communication array.

"No…" She mutters, her brow creasing as she struggles to decipher those eyes. "You…"

Yushi Huang stares back, silent—expectant.

"…You didn't do this for me…"

But—

It is the most obvious explanation.

The only one who benefits from Yushi Huang's offer to step in is her, lessening an impossible workload.

"We barely know one another. You have no reason to…"

She falls silent when Yushi Huang's hand rests upon her cheek.

'Jun Wu isn't the only one who can see far and wide.'

Ling Wen swallows hard, her skin hot under the princess's palm.

'It rains anywhere. Everywhere.'

Her meaning is clear:

Just because Yushi Huang stays away from the Heavens, doesn't mean that she doesn't observe.

That she didn't…

Inside her communication array, when she doesn't have to be so sparing with her words—

The Rain Master has far more to say.

'I know how it feels, to only be valued for your usefulness to others. '

To spend one's entire life working fighting for respect.

And receiving none.

"…It's out of pity, then?"

'I'm not the pitying type.'

No, she doesn't seem like it, but then…

Ling Wen isn't unaware of the fact that it is possible to admire someone from afar.

She's spent her entire life admiring women from a distance.

Sexually, there was never any shortage of options when she approached partners in her male form. Or when she paid for company in her female form, but…

When simply being herself, she's never been admired.

'I felt as though I could understand you.'

Ling Wen swallows again, this time with even more difficulty.

"Then this is…empathy?"

Better than pity, certainly.

And that is the primary motivation.

Because Lin Wen, particularly now—needs empathy.

Now, Yushi Huang is the one breaking eye contact.

There are many things she could say, but the brevity of words imposed on her by her condition—it leads to her voice holding a certain gravity.

Even within her communication array—she finds herself hesitant to sound foolish.

So, the only thing she manages to add, is…

'…And, you're very tall.'

It's so far out of the realm of what Ling Wen thought the goddess was about to say—for a moment, she can only stare, watching the way Yushi Huang's eyes seem to be burning a hole into the wall.

Tall.

She's…

After a few moments, Ling Wen's prolonged silence seems to be taken as an answer in itself—but when Yushi Huang goes to pull her hand away from the civil god's face…

Ling Wen grabs hold of her wrist—gripping it firmly.

'…You—?'

Thud!

Papers crinkle under Yushi Huang's back a she hits the desk, feet dangling off of the floor, and—

Ling Wen's hand lands next to her head, her eyes dark, nervous—but filled with a hunger that burns, drawing heat to the princess's face.

"Tell me to stop."

It's a peremptory move. Telling herself that she's just calling a bluff.

Expecting to be rebuffed. That, in contradiction to everything about the Rain Master's behavior so far, she'll scorn her. She'll tell Ling Wen that she misunderstood.

Yushi Huang stares at her—

Silent.

She's smaller than Ling Wen, yes—but from the way she handled that demon before, she could knock the civil goddess across the room if she desired.

But her hands are resting on either side of her head—making no move to defend herself.

Ling Wen leans closer.

Until their breaths are intermingling, and she can count the Rain Master's eyelashes, and—

It's almost infuriating, that silence—because it could mean so many things, but…

The longer it stretches, something in Ling Wen begins to snap.

White knuckled, tightly grasped control.

The moment she sees that Yushi Huang's lips are slightly parted, trembling in anticipation—it crumbles.

She surges forward at the last moment, sealing their mouths together, and—

And she shudders, feeling something inside her chest finally *relax* .

Her mouth is warm.

Giving—so soft, every slide of her lips against Ling Wen prompts another shiver.

And maybe it's simply because she's unaccustomed to someone being interested in her—or because the Rain Master simply didn't reject her, but—

Hands grasp Ling Wen's shoulders, hugging her close.

The reciprocation—the smallest show of it—makes the tone of the kiss change entirely.

To the point where Ling Wen isn't just kissing her with yearning, or a desire for acceptance, no—

But like she's starving, and this is her first chance in *years* to have a proper meal.

Yushi Huang gasps, arching slightly when she feels a hand cup and squeeze the underside of her breast, one leg pulling up slightly, only to feel Ling Wen's thigh slide between her own.

And those words are repeated.

Tell me to stop.

Against her mouth. The underside of her jaw.

It’s whispered against the side of her neck between sucks and bites.

But—

But when her lips brush over that scar, she freezes. It takes a moment for Yushi Huang to realize, and when she stiffens—the civil goddess chokes out an apology.

“No…no, it’s not…you’re…”

She’s beautiful.

The stupidly, infuriatingly obvious kind of beautiful.

The amount of beauty where people treat you differently. View you differently. She—

She must know that.

But, that scar…

When she feels it under her lips, all she sees—

All she sees is her friend.

Limp, eyes blank and unseeing, cradled in Pei Ming’s arms as the general wept.

How lifeless and cold his hand felt in hers.

She leans back sharply, clapping a hand over her mouth—and the moment Yushi Huang sees her face—the tears in her eyes—

She understands.

Ling Wen doesn’t have the capacity to apologize, to worry if she’s made the Rain Master feel—un—undesirable, or—

But she doesn’t need to.

Because Yushi Huang understands that it’s not about her. But, even more importantly…

She understands that Ling Wen only has two people in this world that she’s close with, and lost one of them only days ago—in the worst possible way.

And that no one has taken a single moment to offer *her* comfort.

That she hasn't had a moment of rest.

She sits up on the edge of the desk, reaching her arms out and pulling Ling Wen back in before she can retreat too far.

"I'm so—"

'It's alright.'

The civil goddess buries her face in Yushi Huang's shoulder, letting out a trembling breath.

'It's alright.'

'Whatever you need.'

Yushi Huang means that—even if she's somewhat hesitant when Ling Wen kisses her again. Not aggressively, like before—more desperate.

Is it really right to let her—?

But Ling Wen goes from ordering the Rain Master to make her stop—to begging her not to.

Because in this moment. In this ugly, weak moment, grieving, under an unbelievable amount of pressure after that meeting—

The most comfort in that moment could come from feeling wanted.

And as she's held close, hand in her hair, lips moving against hers—

Finally, she feels it.

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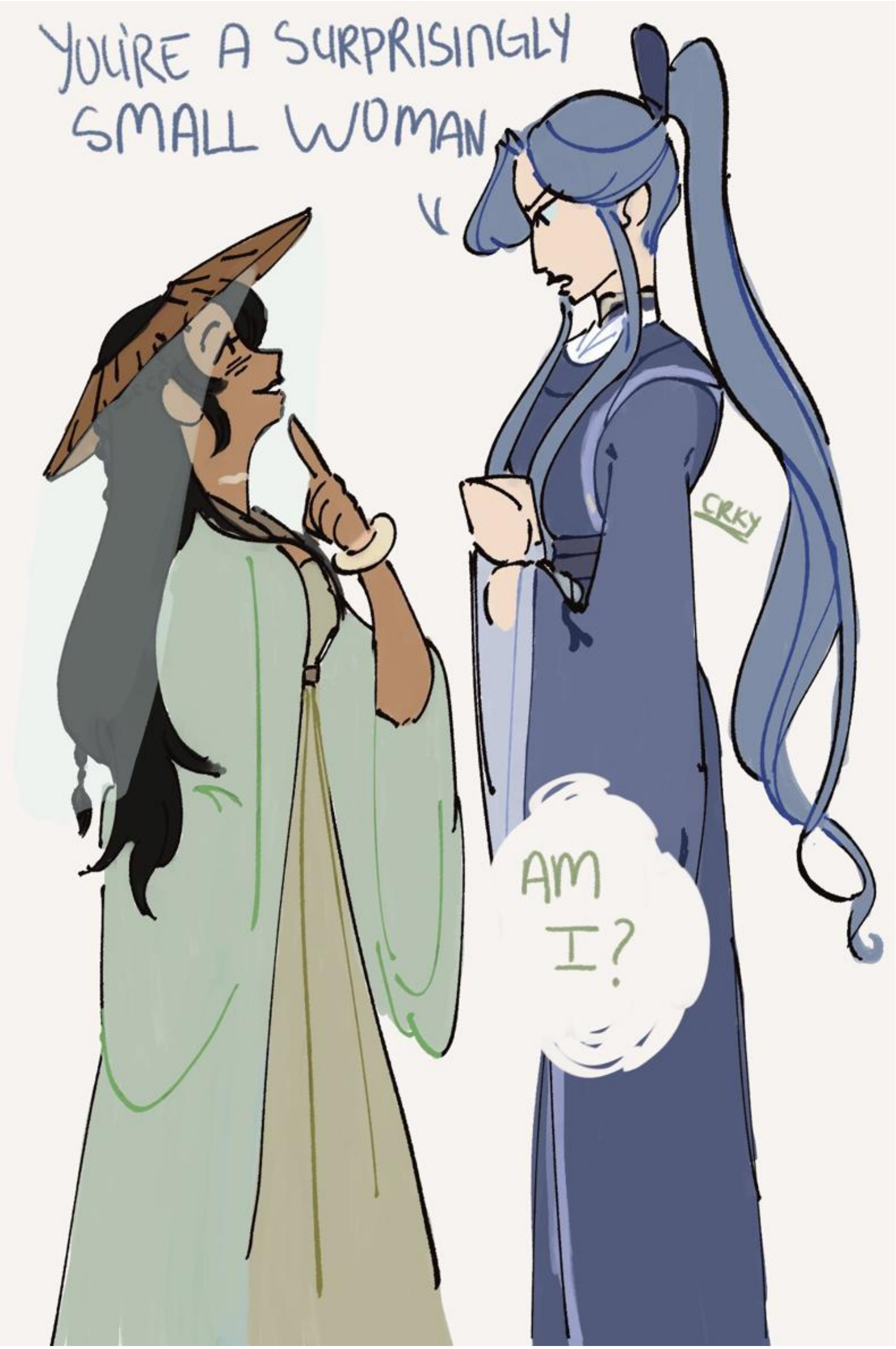
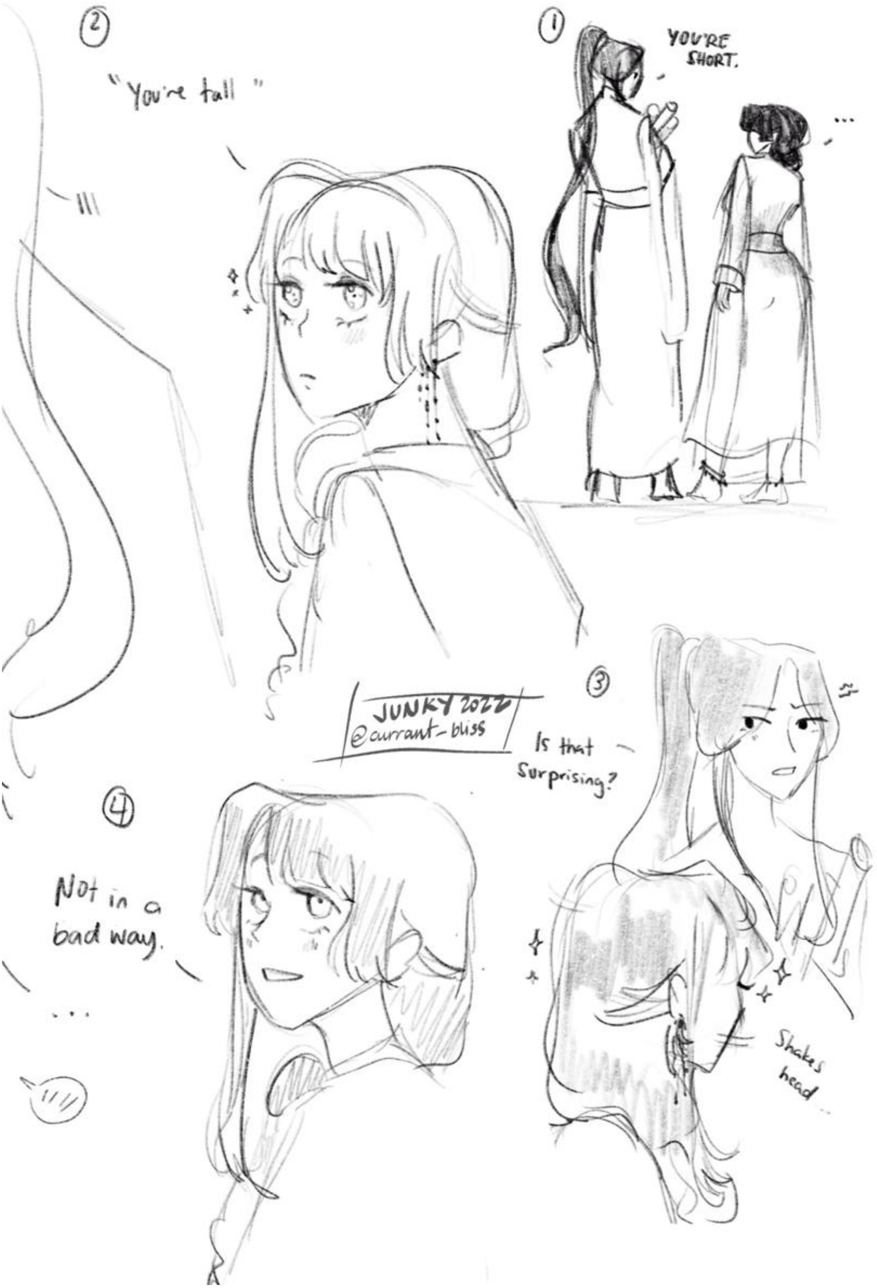

YOU'RE A SURPRISINGLY SMALL WOMAN
AM I?
CRKY

CREDIT: **ABYSS**


①
YOU'RE SHORT.
...
②
"You're tall"
③
Is that Surprising?
④
Not in a bad way.
...
Shakes head...
JUNKY 2022
@currant_bliss

CREDIT: JUNKY

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Junky and Abyss for their artwork, and allowing me to include it in this story!

xoxo, Evie

Of Loyalty and Deceit

Chapter Summary

> Xie Lian freezes, hands in the air, and any brief amount of hope he may have had that the farmer was right, and he actually HAD improved is doused when the intruder drops to the ground with a—
>
> THUD!
>
> Sprawled across the kitchen floor, steam faintly drifting out of his mouth.
>
> Xie Lian rushes over to his side, opening his eyes, and when he does…he finds a faintly familiar aura. Blue, with veins of gold—swirling and crackling in a chaotic, unruly manner.
>
> "…General Qi Ying?!"

Chapter Notes

> For anyone who saw that two chapters were added: there was only ONE update today, but I added an informational chapter all the way at the beginning with frequently asked questions, a table of contents, and spotify information if anyone wants to check it out!
>
> I also took out most of the silly tags in the story so it's easier for people to see the relevant ones, and I decided to finally sit down and pick out a summary that seemed a little more serious than the one I had before. It's still the same ol' No Paths Are Bound, just a little more polished!
>
> Songs For this chapter: The Kids Aren't Alright, Ways to Go, Lotta True Crime

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Appearances are funny things.

The things people do to maintain them—intentionally, or not.

On appearances alone, many people make assumptions about the relationship between the Martial Gods of the South; Xuan Zhen and

Nan Yang.

But now, Feng Xin finds himself fixated.

When he and Mu Qing are required to descend to the Mortal Realm together to deal with an issue within their territory—they've developed a routine.

They argue viciously the entire trip down, either something hurtful is said, or they end up against a tree—

(Sometimes both.)

Once the niceties are over with, they perform the assignment—and before they return to the Heavens, they usually stop for a meal and eat in stony silence.

It's what most people would call an unpleasant routine, but it's a routine.

But this time, Mu Qing hasn't actually instigated a fight—and Feng Xin—

He isn't starting one intentionally.

"…Is something going on between you and the emperor?"

It's a blunt question—but he always is.

And he isn't expecting the way Mu Qing stiffens in response.

"…What the fuck are you talking about?" He whips his head to the side, glaring at Feng Xin—who holds his hands up in a rare sign of surrender.

"You mean you *didn't* find that weird?"

"Find what weird?"

Feng Xin frowns, crossing his arms. "He implied that we're a good team."

Mu Qing rolls his eyes, then stops to actually think about it—

Because that was an odd statement to make. Objectively speaking, having a 50/50 chance of screaming each time they have a conversation isn't a basis for team work.

“Maybe his injury affected his logic.” Mu Qing allows. “But I have no idea what that has to do with me.”

“He was looking at you when he said it.” Not both of them—but Mu Qing specifically. “And ever since the mid-autumn festival…”

They still haven’t discussed the things that were said that night.

“I’m the more enjoyable one to look at, who can blame him?”

Feng Xin grits his teeth, his eyes flashing with annoyance. “Goddamn it, Mu Qing—I’m being serious.”

“And I don’t even know what you *mean* by asking me something like that.” Mu Qing glares right back at him. “Given how many officials have been wounded lately—I’ve spent more time around him, but that’s it. And why would it matter if there was?”

After all—they’re talking about the emperor himself.

If there was something “going on,” why would Feng Xin think that was a problem?

“I never said it was a problem,” Feng Xin grumbles, “I just asked if there was something going on, because—”

“Because it was weird?” Mu Qing gives him a sharp look. “The emperor giving me a glance while complimenting my work is weird?”

“ *Our* work,” Feng Xin growls. “And why do you take *everything* as a reason to get defensive?”

Mu Qing stops walking, leading to Feng Xin stumbling to a stop right in front of him, their faces close.

“Because I always know exactly who and what I’m dealing with. Probably *better* than you.”

Feng Xin glares back at him, struggling to vocalize his irritation, or even why he’s so bothered.

Because when Mu Qing points it out that way—he *is* right.

There’s nothing wrong with receiving a compliment from the emperor. Or even a little extra attention, he just—

It’s been bothering him ever since that night.

That on the mid-autumn festival, Jun Wu intervened when Feng Xin had been trying to speak to Mu Qing, locked away in his palace after their argument with Xie Lian.

He'd never done that before, not in eight hundred years.

Eight hundred years during which, mind you—they've had far worse arguments. And that night, Feng Xin hadn't been trying to argue with Mu Qing—

He'd been trying to help him.

And ever since then—Mu Qing's assignments have been increased, the emperor looks to him more and more…

Not that Feng Xin is paying that much attention, of course—it's just that noticeable.

Obviously.

Mu Qing stares at him long an hard, tilting his chin up—and Feng Xin struggles to keep his eyes on the martial God's face, and not that stupid fucking chok—

"…Are you jealous?"

Feng Xin freezes, his heart leaping into his throat, feeling like he just got kicked in the head.

"Because that would be ridiculous." Mu Qing points out flatly, glaring.

"I'm not—!"

"Because you've had plenty of—!"

"I didn't mean it like THAT!" Feng Xin throws his hands up, shaking his head. "Obviously the emperor isn't—I just meant—you've never exactly been in his inner circle—!"

"—career advancement!"

They both stop, staring at each other.

"…" Mu Qing stares, his eyes opening wider and wider, and Feng Xin locks his jaw, his ears turning red. "You thought I meant ROMANTICALLY?!"

"I—!"

"Oh my GOD!" The martial god snarls with annoyance, turning around, stomping ahead. "Why would I EVER think that?!"

"...?!" Feng Xin snaps out of it, stomping right after him. "Why are you saying that like it's so insane?!"

"Because you—!" Mu Qing covers his face with his hands, snarling with annoyance. "We're not—!"

"You're RIGHT, it would be INSANE for me to feel that way!" Feng Xin snaps. "It's not like we haven't been—been—!" He struggles to find the right word to describe it. "DOING THIS for eight centuries!"

"Doing WHAT?!"

"Swapping spit?! Examining each other's tonsils?!"

"UGH!" Mu Qing throws his hands up, letting out a small scream of disgust. "Why would you say it like THAT?! You're so gross—!"

"Because you flip your SHIT every time I even MENTION kissing you!"

"Because we barely ever—! It's only—! IT'S NOT A REGULAR THING, OKAY?! And it's NOT romantic!"

"Not—?!" Feng Xin sputters, nearly turning purple. "How is it not—?!"

"You're the one who should know better than me!" Mu Qing glowers, nails biting against his palms. "There's a difference between having feelings for someone, and wanting to get in BED with them!"

And for all these years, what else has Feng Xin done?

Pushing your tongue down someone's throat while you shove them against the wall once every couple of years isn't exactly a declaration of affection. And they—

They *hate* each other. They always have.

(Or, at least—Feng Xin always has.)

Mu Qing is more than aware of what physical attraction looks like. He can recognize it quickly.

And avoid it just as easily.

Feng Xin doesn’t respond, looking shocked, and—

Confused.

Forced to consider something that had never really occurred to him before.

“I don’t know if it slipped your notice in almost a millennia, but I can look after myself.” Mu Qing snaps, landing lightly on his feet in the mortal realm. “I always have. And any interest the emperor has in me—it’s NONE of your business!”

And that—

That might actually be true.

So often, having these conversations—or any conversation—with Mu Qing is like running headfirst into a brick wall.

Painful, and self destructive.

But now Feng Xin wonders if he’s been looking at it…wrong, all this time.

That brick wall—it isn’t Mu Qing’s personality, or incompatibility—

It’s that Mu Qing has always interpreted Feng Xin’s intentions in a certain way. And Feng Xin—

Somehow, in all of this time, hasn’t given his own intentions any thought.

Maybe because it was easier not to.

And—because that was how he was raised to be.

But…why does he always seem to come back to Mu Qing, when it always ends like this?

And…

When the emperor implied that they worked well together, before the suspicion set in—

Why did that make Feng Xin…

…Happy?

On a level, he always knew there was something between them. Ever since—

Ever since he was a teenager, and a palace servant dragged him to the kitchens, insulting him as he made him a bowl of congee—so he wouldn't go to bed on an empty stomach.

Feng Xin knew that, he's always known that—and he just pursued it, holding onto that notion without ever giving it deeper thought.

But for hold on for so long—to feel so pained at the prospect of letting go—

What does that mean?

It's a lesson in self awareness—one eight centuries in the making.

One that he'll learn after days upon days of deep thought, but…

There are some lessons that, no matter how well you learn them—come just a little too late.

Xie Lian stands with his arms crossed, scroll tucked into his sleeves, thinking.

It's quiet.

A gentle breeze passes over Puqi Shrine, wind rustling in the leaves.

Entirely too quiet.

And when he approaches, he can see exactly why.

"…Lang Ying?"

The boy is sweeping on the front porch, his head bowed, and…

He seems to be the only one there.

"Where are the others?"

His response is as quiet as he always is, saying little more than necessary.

“Qi Rong escaped.”

Xie Lian jumps, clutching his chest. “…What?!”

“A few days ago,” the boy explains, straightening. When he noticed Xie Lian beginning to grow upset, he adds—

“But Shuo and Lang Qianqiu have set after him already.”

…And Guzi is probably with Qi Rong, then.

Xie Lian sighs, pressing his hand to his forehead.

Well—if there’s anyone who can find Qi Rong, it’s Shuo. But still—leaving Lang Ying by himself in the shrine….Xie Lian knows that Shuo doesn’t care for the boy (even if he refuses to explain why), but Lang Ying is too young, too weak to be left unattended.

“…I’m sorry you’ve been by yourself,” the god sighs, reaching down to ruffle Lang Ying’s hair. Then—he smiles. “I have a little time before I start my next assignment, so we can have fun together, can’t we?” He tilts his head to the side. “Just the two of us!”

He couldn’t see Lang Ying’s face—even if it wasn’t almost entirely covered in bandages—

But the child nods, seeming to radiate contentment at the thought.

“Yes.”

Xie Lian pats his head one more time before straightening up.

There are plenty of chores to do around the shrine—and even while Xie Lian insists there’s no need, Lang Ying is quick to help, following him like a quiet little shadow.

Even when Xie Lian insists that he go on to play, he doesn’t stray far.

Sitting on the front steps, stacking sticks into surprisingly complicated little structures as Xie Lian pulls his hair up, tying his outer robe around his waist, chopping more wood.

Something that Hua Cheng usually does—and Xie Lian probably isn’t as good, but…

The prince shakes himself out of it.

What is he doing, thinking that? He's the one who sent San Lang away in the first place. He needs the rest, and Xie Lian, he's…

There's a nice sized woodpile by the time he finishes, the afternoon sun hanging low.

When the breeze comes through, the cooling sweat on his arms and the back of his neck makes him shiver—and finally, he turns to Lang Ying.

"I made you some warmer robes now that the winter months are coming," he turns to walk inside. "Let's take a bath—then you can try them on."

The tub in Puqi shrine would be a close fit for two adults, but for Xie Lian and Lang Ying? There's plenty of space.

But for some odd reason, the boy seems to be rooted to his seat on the porch.

"…Is something wrong?"

"I don't need a bath, dianxia…"

Xie Lian turns around, hands on his hips, his voice a little stern.

"That isn't true. You don't take one unless I make you, and I haven't had the chance since the mid-autumn festival. Not to mention the fact that you play outside every day."

Bafflingly, the air grows tense.

"…We don't…bathe together…"

Xie Lian's eyebrows raise. "I don't make you bathe as often as I should," he admits. "But it's been at least five times."

Beneath the bandages, Lang Ying's eye twitches violently.

"I'll go after you, dianxia."

The prince sighs, shaking his head. "The last time I did that, you only splashed around."

"I won't this time—"

"And, I don't have enough spiritual power to keep the water hot for both of us."

"Cold is fine—"

"Or…" Xie Lian rubs his chin. "I suppose you could go first."

It's too cold for Lang Ying to take a bath unless it's heated, but Xie Lian should be perfectly fine he just—

(Well, he really enjoys a hot bath—and he only ever gets to take one when he has a little extra spiritual power left over after borrowing some on a mission.)

That's one of the few holdovers from being raised as a prince that Xie Lian never quite managed to shake. He can tolerate being filthy—and often is—

But there's nothing more relaxing than soaking in hot water and scrubbing himself clean.

"…Okay…"

"Good," Xie Lian smiles.

At first, he thinks Lang Ying is agreeing to go first—but he waits for Xie Lian to go inside before following him.

Xie Lian drags the tub in from the back room, and Lang Ying helps him carry water from the well, filling it up before the god warms it with spiritual power.

Lang Ying turns away immediately when he sees the prince beginning to strip his robes, and Xie Lian tilts his head curiously.

Normally, he doesn't have the confidence—or the lack of care to be in a state of undress around others.

But Lang Ying is just a child.

It wasn't uncommon for Xie Lian to bathe with his parents when he was small. And, while the thought makes him want to gag now, he shared a bath with Qi Rong more than once when they were children.

Not to mention the fact that Lang Ying has no reason to be shy.

Xie Lian can't see anything, so there's nothing to be embarrassed about.

He climbs into the tub first, sighing contently, adjusting his hair until it's in a loose bun on top of his head—and taps the edge of the bath expectantly.

"Come on, the water's very nice!"

Lang Ying takes one unsteady step, walking backwards toward the tub, bracing his hand against it to get a feel for where it is as he strips down, taking one tentative glance over his shoulder.

Not looking at the prince, no—but the bandage coiled around his neck.

Something about the almost pleading look in his eyes makes Ruoye stir in response, wriggling against Xie Lian's skin before sliding away, coiling around Lang Ying's head, covering his eyes.

"…Ruoye?" Xie Lian frowns, turning his head. "That's rude, Lang Ying isn't—"

"It's okay," the boy mumbles quietly, stepping inside the bathtub and sitting down quickly, facing away from Xie Lian with his arms wrapped around his middle.

"…" The prince tilts his head to the side with a frown. "Has Mount Tonglu gotten you unsettled too?"

Lang Ying doesn't answer out loud, but Xie Lian feels him shaking his head as the god reaches over, grabbing the bar of soap sitting on the stool next to the tub, scrubbing himself off, humming under his breath.

Completely relaxed, water dripping down his bare skin.

When he offers to wash Lang Ying's back, like he usually does—the ghost shakes his head, sounding as though he might faint when he replies that he can do it himself, and—

Really, what's gotten into him?

"…Look," the prince sighs, shaking his head. "I know Shuo was probably tough on you while I was gone—but he doesn't mean it."

"I think he does." Lang Ying mutters under his breath, his tone entirely different—but when Xie Lian asks him to repeat himself, he stays quiet.

"…You're from Yong'an, so you'd be too young to remember—but Shuo was born in Xianle," the prince explains carefully, rinsing the suds of soap from his arms. "The name Lang Ying probably…brings back difficult memories."

(Oh, if only he knew.)

"But that isn't your fault."

Really, Xie Lian should try to have a conversation with Shuo about it the next time he sees him. If he's going to be staying in the shrine for now, Xie Lian doesn't mind—but he should at least be cordial to Lang Ying. Hua Cheng too, they both…

They both seem to dislike him.

Shuo, Xie Lian understands, even if he thinks it's unfair. But…why would Hua Cheng have an issue with the child?

It's not that he's been cruel to him—but he's actually rather charming with Guzi, but to Lang Ying…

He's silent and cold at best.

When Xie Lian finishes up, stepping out of the tub before the water can grow cold, Lang Ying is quick to scramble after him—even if the bandage over his eyes makes him clumsier than usual.

"…Ruoye," Xie Lian frowns, toweling himself off. "Really, that's enough."

The bandage slithers back to him, crawling up Xie Lian's bare leg before resettling on his forearm as the prince dresses himself.

Lang Ying doesn't say a word, which Xie Lian doesn't mind—

If anything, he's been more talkative than usual today.

The robes Xie Lian made for him fit well—not a surprise, he knew they would, but he's still pleased when he adjusts the sleeves over Lang Ying's shoulders, smoothing the front.

"There—I'm sure you look very nice."

He turns, going about cleaning up after the bath, and…

Lang Ying glares at the wall before stalking out the door, grumbling that phrase under his breath.

‘Very nice.’

The prince seems to call everyone that, apparently. It’s not particularly special, not like…

Xie Lian stares after him blindly, having pushed the now empty wash basin against the wall, wondering…

“Lang Ying, don’t do any more chores today, you should just…”

The boy begins stacking firewood, and the god sighs.

There’s nothing to be done, really.

He lets Lang Ying stay outside as the afternoon draws to an end, bustling about the kitchen as he attempts to put together a meal, remembering what Hua Cheng taught him last time…and Ruoye is rather helpful, as usual—but E’Ming was so good with the cutting…

Stop.

He has to stop and remind himself that, over and over, when he catches himself thinking about the Ghost King.

Why can’t he just put it out of his mind? He was the one who told Hua Cheng to stay away and rest, didn’t he? Shouldn’t he be happy that the calamity listened?

And yet, when the villagers stop by, asking him where ‘Xiao Hua’ has run off to…he can barely force a smile, explaining that he went home.

To his ‘parents,’ and the wife who has already left him spoken for.

The mere reminder of which makes him frown, contemplative.

This person—Hua Cheng has only ever given vague descriptions of them one way or the other.

That they’re kind. Clever. Hardworking.

And beautiful, apparently.

But if it’s someone Hua Cheng knew as a child…it has to be a ghost, doesn’t it? A god seems out of the question.

Hua Cheng loathes the heavens after all—Xie Lian is the only heavenly official he seems to like. The rest, he only holds contempt for.

But if it was a ghost—how could they not know who Hua Cheng was? He's the most famous ghost in all three realms. And…

…if it was a ghost, why hasn't he won them over yet?

"Daozhang, have you been cooking again? Smells…real interesting." One of the farmers comments, leaning against the door frame.

Xie Lian shrugs, trying not to look quite so glum.

"It's…Love for All Seasons Stew."

"You know, I don't think I've ever met a fella who names all of his dishes…"

Now, his mouth actually tips up at the corners.

"The only difference between any meal and that served in a royal palace is giving it a name."

The farmer chuckles, shaking his head.

"Well, the little guy seems to be enjoying it."

Xie Lian almost asks him what he means—until he notices the sound of chewing, and a spoon scraping the bottom of a bowl.

Is Lang Ying…actually eating that?! The only one who normally can is…

"Lang Ying, you don't have to—!"

The boy swallows another mouthful, sitting at the kitchen table—eyes burning into the farmer's skull.

And instead of answering—he just takes another pointed bite.

"…Well," Xie Lian scratches the side of his head, shocked. "He…must have been really hungry."

The farmer laughs, straightening up. "Or maybe you're just getting better in the kitchen, daozhang! It was nice seeing you again."

Xie Lian smiles—though he doubts he's actually improved, waving goodbye as the villagers head in for the night.

"…Lang Ying, you go on and get ready for bed, I'll clean up the rest of this."

The child seems hesitant—but after Xie Lian's persistent insistence, he eventually relents.

And it's so silly, but…

After only such a short time of having company…Xie Lian doesn't like the quiet.

He actually misses listening to Lang Qianqiu and Shuo bickering, something that had become almost playful background ambience, but…

More than anything, as embarrassing as it is—

He really enjoyed not having to sleep alone.

And now, he finds himself struggling to sleep at all.

Tossing and turning, unable to clear his mind, to stop thinking of…

Thud!

The sound of something in the kitchen in the dead of night makes him freeze, sitting up—his hair mussed and askew.

…What on earth?

Thud!

Creeeeak!

Is he…being robbed?

That would be just his luck, but…why bother? He doesn't have anything worth stealing.

Other than Hong'er, and the gifts Hua Cheng has given him in their time together—all of which remain on his person at all times.

Maybe they mistook this shrine for that of a wealthier god?

He’s quiet as he rises from bed, Ruoye curling menacingly around his wrist, silent, ready to strike as he creeps into the kitchen.

There is someone rifling through the donation box. Xie Lian can hear as much. But…

They’re filling it—with something heavy—rather than stealing.

…But who would do that?

And…why?

Before he can think of an explanation, the thief—well, intruder—slips away, only to pause by the pot in the kitchen, and…Xie Lian grimaces.

Oh no.

“Wait—!”

Before his warning is heard, the figure stuffs an entire mouthful down his throat.

Xie Lian freezes, hands in the air, and any brief amount of hope he may have had that the farmer was right, and he actually HAD improved is doused when the intruder drops to the ground with a—

THUD!

Sprawled across the kitchen floor, steam faintly drifting out of his mouth.

Xie Lian rushes over to his side, opening his eyes, and when he does… he finds a faintly familiar aura. Blue, with veins of gold—swirling and crackling in a chaotic, unruly manner.

“…General Qi Ying?!”

There’s a faint moan as the martial God’s legs twitch.

“T…the fuck…?”

Xie Lian didn’t even realize that Lang Ying had gotten out of bed until he hears a voice from the stairs.

“He tried to warn you not to eat it.”

“Lang Ying…don’t be rude,” Xie Lian warns him gently. “But really, General…you shouldn't just eat strange food you find…"

Quan Yizhen squirms, clutching his stomach.

"What kind of shrine poisons their own food?" He mumbles, sounding so pitiful…Xie Lian actually does feel a little sorry.

"It…wasn't on purpose," the prince explains with a wince. "My cooking just…"

He struggles, thinking.

"…It's really just for Hua Cheng," he lies—(though in practice, that's pretty much true), "He's the only one who likes it."

He can't see it—but from his seat on the steps, Lang Ying looks absolutely radiant, eyes sparkling.

"Oh…" Quan Yizhen groans. "Okay."

He doesn't question why a Heavenly Official's near lethal cooking skills are at the disposal of a calamity—which Xie Lian is grateful for.

"Here…can you stand?"

Quan Yizhen flexes his limbs, which are splayed across the floor. "…No," he admits. "I don't think so."

Xie Lian sighs, sliding his arms underneath the God's armpits, hauling him up onto a chair—finding him shockingly heavy.

It's not as though Xie Lian had a way of knowing his build before—but his voice sounded so young…

He isn't as big as Hua Cheng—but it's like moving a bear.

Not just from his weight or broad frame—but because of the wild tangle of curls that brush against Xie Lian's face as he moves him, making the prince sneeze.

"There, there…" he pats Quan Yizhen's shoulder, handing him some mantou. "I didn't make this, it's safe…"

The martial god is far more cautious now, nibbling as Xie Lian makes him take a cup of water as well. And when he goes to check the donation box…

“…You’re the one who has been bringing the gold?” Xie Lian asks, holding the gold bars incredulously.

Quan Yizhen chews slowly.

“Yes.”

…Not even an attempt at denying it, huh?

“…Why?”

Once again he stares—as if the answer is painfully obvious.

“Because I have a lot.”

Xie Lian stares back, unseeing, but he has his own suspicions about why the martial god is doing this.

During the mid-autumn festival—Xie Lian saw how bothered he was, and stopped his play when no one else would.

It’s a kind gesture of gratitude, but…

“General, I promise you don’t owe me anything. In any case, it’s good that you’re here.” He walks over to retrieve his scroll.

"The emperor has assigned us to work together. Did you hear about the opening of Mount Tonglu?"

Quan Yizhen whips his head back and forth in denial, earrings rattling heavily, and Xie Lian sighs, setting the scroll down.

"There are millions of ghosts flooding towards the Kiln."

He unrolls the scroll, feeling along the subtle raises of ink across the paper until he finds the map section, pointing to it so the General can see for himself.

"Most of the Martial Gods have been tasked with creating a blockade, stopping threats in their areas from passing."

He points to different points on the map, able to generally remember where everything is, even though he can't see it.

Quan Yizhen watches, eyes round. "...But I'm not in my territory right now," he points out, eyes wide. "It's the closest to Mount Tonglu."

"Yes," Xie Lian agrees, gently pointing out, "and it would be beneficial to everyone if you actually attended these meetings, because then you would know these things. In any case, your area has already been covered. Our assignment is different." He unrolls the scroll completely. "We've been tasked with tracking down the Brocade Immortal."

Quan Yizhen sits a little straighter, his gaze suddenly focused.

"Lots of prisoners escaped the Heavens, but this is unique, given that it couldn't have escaped on its own. It says here it's a silk robe, with a —"

"I know what the Brocade Immortal looks like," the younger god interrupts him. "I've seen it before."

...He has?

"When?" Xie Lian raises an eyebrow—and now, Quan Yizhen seems to have lost any interest in talking, nibbling at his mantou.

Clearly, asking him isn't going to get Xie Lian anywhere.

"..." The prince sighs, reaching out within a private communication array.

'Ling Wen?'

He almost isn't sure if she'll answer, given how chaotic everything has been, but--

'Yes, your highness?'

She's incredibly prompt.

Her voice sounds a little odd—slightly rough and groggy.

'...I'm so sorry, did I wake you?'

'No, no. How can I help you? '

Xie Lian frowns. Ling Wen really never gets a chance to rest, if he actually interrupted that--he would feel horrible.

'Quan Yizhen is here.'

'...Ah.' Ling Wen replies slowly. *'I see. He can be...'*

'Childlike?'

'Yes, that's the word...' The Civil Goddess agrees. *'On the surface anyway. His real thoughts are difficult to get a read on.'*

'I can see that. He mentioned having encountered the Brocade Immortal before.' Xie Lian frowns, turning away from the martial god as he continues to eat the bun, recovering his strength. *'But he won't say much more about the details.'*

'...Well,' Ling Wen sighs. *'That isn't surprising. He had...a difficult experience.'*

Xie Lian's eye brow raises.

'You wouldn't know your highness, it was during your second banishment—but Qi Ying wasn't always the sole Martial God in charge of the West. Until only a century and a half ago, he shared that responsibility with another martial god, a senior disciple from his own sect—Yin Yu. '

That name feels vaguely familiar, though Xie Lian can't place where he's heard it before.

'Qi Ying was infamously devoted to his Shixiong...'

'Infamously?' Xie Lian questions, surprised. *'I don't see how it could be a bad thing to be devoted to...'*

'Infamously.' Ling Wen repeats her verbiage firmly. *'Yin Yu took the responsibility of being a god incredibly seriously, but lacked talent. Qi Ying had a once in a generation talent—and the only thing he took seriously was Yin Yu.'*

Oh. Oh dear.

Early on in the story, and he can already...

'As Qi Ying's favor in the Heavenly Court rose, Yin Yu's fell. Managing their region together created a power imbalance, one that the senior could not stomach.'

Xie Lian can imagine that would be difficult, to have someone that once looked up to you looking down, but...

Quan Yizhen doesn't seem like the sort of person who would look down on someone he once admired. Or really—the sort of person to look down on anyone at all.

And it's surprising to hear that Yin Yu and Quan Yizhen's situation was so unsustainable, when...

Jun Wu just said it himself—Feng Xin and Mu Qing, who have as contentious of a relationship was anyone—have ruled the south relatively efficiently for the last eight centuries.

But...that doesn't work for everyone, clearly.

'And if Yin Yu couldn't surpass him fairly...'

Ling Wen trails off with a sigh. *'He attempted to assassinate his former shidi, giving him the Brocade Immortal in the form of a birthday gift.'*

Xie Lian frowns, fighting the urge to look back at Quan Yizhen's aura, struggling to understand.

'Isn't it a powerful weapon?'

'Yes,' Ling Wen agrees. *'But not for the wearer. It feeds on the blood of whomever uses it, and forces them to follow every command of the person who gave them the Brocade Immortal in the first place.'*

Rendering them a servant with no free will.

'The moment Qi Ying put the armor on, Yin Yu ordered him to go on a rampage, attacking other Heavenly Officials, and eventually, he ordered the general to take his own life...'

Xie Lian's jaw drops, shocked by the cruelty of it.

'How did he survive?'

'The Emperor stepped in.'

Xie Lian can imagine he would have—but it's a testament to the seriousness of the situation that he needed to, or that so many officials were injured before he did.

'Yin Yu was banished immediately, but...Qi Ying still won't hear a single bad word against him, even now. '

The prince rubs the side of his head, wishing he could say that he didn't understand standing by someone, even after they've hurt you, but...in this case, it seems particularly extreme...

'Alright, thank you Ling Wen—that gives me a better understanding of the

situation.'

She's quick, unusually pleasant, given the gravity of the situation—and the pressure she must be under.

'It's no trouble your highness. If you have any other questions, do not hesitate to report in.'

'...Thank you,' Xie Lian agrees with a smile.

She really is so helpful...

"Alright," Xie Lian turns around. "So, you've seen the Brocade Immortal before. If we encountered it, do you think you would recognize it again?"

Quan Yizhen frowns, thinking.

"...Maybe."

Xie Lian's heart leaps—until he gives it more thought.

"But probably not."

"...You think so?" He sighs, slightly deflated.

Quan Yizhen, an immensely powerful being, nearly one hundred and seventy years old, starts sucking the mantou crumbs off of his fingers.

"It changes shape," He explains, gnawing at a hangnail on his thumb. "It's hard to tell."

"Ah..." Xie Lian rubs his hands over his face, thinking. If it changes shape, then how on earth are they supposed to—?

Knock, knock!

Both of them stop, heads turning toward the front door of Puqi Shrine.

"Is anyone home?" A woman's voice calls, "I'm looking to exchange!"

Xie Lian stiffens at the sound of that voice, reaching over to clap a hand over Quan Yizhen's mouth before he can impulsively reply.

"Old for new!" The voice calls again, hopeful. "Maybe your antiques will please me more than my new robes? Is anyone there?"

Just when it sounds like she's about to leave—the door to the shrine opens. And when the woman turns around, eager—

Her face falls.

Xie Lian leans against the doorframe, his arms crossed—eyes wide open, cursed shackles gleaming in the night.

"M...Mr. Hua..." She gulps.

Xie Lian's smile is perfectly kind, and from behind him, Quan Yizhen staggers toward the door, still holding his stomach.

"Y...You two know one another?"

Standing on the road is a slender young woman—well dressed, with a beautiful face—

The lower half, anyway.

Her eyes and nose are covered by a black silk head scarf, hiding the rest of her expression—but red stained lips turn down into a slightly nervous frown.

"Oh, yes," Xie Lian agrees. "We've done business several times before. Isn't that right, Peng Xiuying?"

"Y-Yes..."

She laughs nervously, rubbing the back of her head as Xie Lian's lips quirk with amusement.

"Everything alright? You seem a little nervous."

"N-no, no..." She waves that off, fumbling in her cart. "W...what would you like to exchange?"

"...Lang Ying? Bring the silver robe."

The child stands from his seat on the stairs, silently hurrying to do as he's asked, all while the young woman squirms with discomfort.

"How's business been?" Xie Lian questions, twisting his finger in the chain around his neck.

"Not...not bad," she mutters, squirming.

"Any good finds?"

As if she'd tell him, if there were...

When Lang Ying returns with the robe in his hands, Xie Lian ruffles his hair, sending him back inside as he steps out.

"Alright, show me what you've got to trade."

Her friendly smile fades into one of annoyance.

She shoves the cart over with little ceremony or salesmanship, and Xie Lian just smiles, reaching down to place his hands among the robes.

They've been through this many, many times before.

"How strange, how strange..." the prince muses, clicking his tongue as she glowers.

"Miss, it seems like there was some mistake...none of these are new," Xie Lian sighs, lifting one robe up, holding it to his chest. "This is from Yong'an...what...seventy years old?"

"Well, that's—!"

"And this pattern is from the Imperial City, that style is even older..."

Xie Lian lifts up another garment, running his fingers over the seam. "This stitch hasn't been used in two centuries. Old for new, you said?”

Peng Xiuying glowers. "How was I supposed to know you were the one who lived here?!"

"I don't know..." Xie Lian sighs.

Then, he leans his elbow on the cart, smiling in her direction.

Actually, it's more of a lopsided smirk, his eyes sparkling with enjoyment.

(From the doorway of the Shrine, Lang Ying stiffens, eyes glinting in the darkness.)

"Fate keeps on bringing us back together..."

The textile merchant glares at him, crossing her arms over her chest.

"You mean karma, don't you?"

Xie Lian's smile turns sugary sweet. "I didn't say that."

"You were thinking it."

Just then, Ruoye lashes out, flicking the scarf from around her head—revealing her true form

With the mouth and chin of a young woman, yes—but the face of someone far older–a shriveled, elderly hag.

See, for many, she's a thing of campfire stories.

A textile trader who comes in the night, offering fabulous deals to unsuspecting sellers...only to leave them swindled.

And in the worst case, if they offend her—she'll leave them with a cursed item, one that drains the very life out of them.

Better known as 'The Half-Maquillage Woman.'

But when Xie Lian met Peng Xiuying six centuries ago, she was an apprentice seamstress in Yong'an.

Talented, but struggling for a promotion—and willing to do just about anything to get by.

Including the occasional scam.

They've encountered one another many times since—and while she might call the crown prince the bane of her existence, Xie Lian considers them old friends.

And what do friends do, if not keep one another honest?

But this time, when he goes through her cart...one of the robes catches his attention. Not because it's lacking in quality—all of it is, no—

Because of the dark aura emanating from it.

"...Where did you get this?"

"Get what?" She glares—and when he holds the robe out for her inspection, she pales, taking a step back. "I...what does it matter? They're all fakes, you know they are!"

"Yes," Xie Lian agrees, his gaze suddenly sharp. "But why would you have a fake Brocade Immortal?"

“H-hah?!” Peng Xiuying sputters, looking away. “I—I don’t know what you mean…”

But the further Xie Lian looks in the cart—the more fakes he finds.

“…This is serious.” The smile fades from the prince’s face. “You understand I’m on an assignment from the emperor about this?”

“T…the emperor?!” She stammers, trembling. “Why would he care about something like my business?!”

“Where did you get them?”

“I just picked them up in ghost city!” She cries. “I thought they’d be good for any mouthy customers! I didn’t…!”

“Who in ghost city?”

“We don’t exactly exchange personal information when selling on the black market!” The merchant snaps. “They were working out of a warehouse just south of the city! That’s all I know!”

“If you’re lying to me…”

“I’m not!”

Xie Lian confiscates all of the fakes.

“Good.”

“You can’t just…! I *paid* for those!”

Xie Lian hands off the pile of robes to Lang Ying, who takes them inside. “And doing the right thing is it’s own reward. Thank you for your assistance, old friend!”

She hisses, eyes flashing with annoyance, but…

The boy carrying in the robes stops, one foot on the front steps—and when he looks back over his shoulder, his eyes flash at her with such menace that she’s sent stumbling back.

“…F-Fine! But you—you *owe* me one next time, okay?! And—you didn’t hear ANY OF THIS from me!”

Xie Lian smiles and waves as she scrambles off, the wheels on her cart rattling into the night.

“…How did you know they were fake brocade immortals if you’ve never seen one before?” Quan Yizhen questions from the doorway, and Xie Lian finds himself quietly relieved.

Quan Yizhen might be…eccentric, but he’s not so lacking in intellect as to fail to pick up on details such as that.

“My cursed shackle was damaged recently,” He explains, tapping under his eye for emphasis. “I can’t see most things—but I can see spiritual and cursed energy.”

And those robes—they reeked of evil.

“Someone wanted those robes to look similar to the legend of the brocade immortal—and they’ve got an evil aura around them…for it to be working like that…the actual source of the aura must be strong.”

The true story behind the brocade immortal—its origins as it were—is rather gruesome.

Long ago, very shortly after Xie Lian’s second banishment began, there was a famous warrior in the country of Xuli. As strong as he was foolish—used only for his martial gifts.

People mocked him in polite society, treated him like little more than a loyal dog.

Except for one young woman, who treated him with lukewarm respect.

For the young warrior, that was enough for him to fall deeply—irrationally—in love.

Affections that she constantly rebuked.

Until one day, out of the blue—she brought him a gift.

A silk brocade, in fact. The only problem was that it was poorly made. With no holes for the arms.

When he noticed such a thing and pointed it out, her reply was quick —

'It would fit just perfectly if you didn't have any.'

And, never one to deny her—he cut off his arms.

But similarly, he had the same problem with his legs—thus, he ordered her to help him cut those off, as well.

Then, when he had no limbs left, he asked her his final question:

'But what should I do? My head is sticking out.'

And…the story finishes itself from there.

"But…what would be the point in spreading around fake brocade immortals?" Quan Yizhen frowns, his mind working, and Xie Lian's expression turns grim.

He knows why.

And it's a rather clever reason, at that.

"Because we're looking for it." Xie Lian answers simply. "The more fake ones are floating around in the mortal realm, the more impossible the real one is to find."

Like he said—clever.

"But I suspect the evil aura on the fakes came from the real thing."

In which case—

There's a warehouse near ghost city they need to find. The sooner, the better.

"…I have a plan," he mutters, closing his eyes with concentration. "But you're going to have to do exactly as I say and not ask questions. Can you do that?"

Quan Yizhen thinks it over, his eyes round and earnest.

Typically speaking, following orders is not a point of strength for him.

But.

He's excellent at not asking questions.

"…I'll try."

"Good—now grab those gold bars you brought…we're going to need them."

Back in the Heavens, the Imperial Throne is finally occupied once again—but the vast majority of the Grand Martial Hall stands empty.

Only Ling Wen and Yushi Huang stand before the Emperor, one with her head bowed, the other staring absentmindedly out the window.

"Ling Wen," the emperor comments, eyeing the head civil god's posture. "I can't help but notice you seem far more relaxed than the circumstances would normally allow."

"I'll take credit for that," the Rain Master comments, her eyes still fixed on the window.

Jun Wu and Ling Wen both stare, one baffled, the other suddenly far less relaxed—until the princess drops down smoothly, demonstrating a perfect back bend, stretching her spine.

"I showed Ling Wen Zhen Jun meditation poses from my lands," she explains calmly.

Ling Wen's eyes flicker back and forth between Yushi Huang and the emperor, fighting not to linger on the way the pose thrusts the Rain Master's chest up and out.

"My people consider physical health to be important to emotional wellness."

She pulls her legs up into a brief handstand before flipping back onto her feet, pushing her dark, heavy layers of hair back out of her face and over her shoulders.

"I can show his majesty—"

"The emperor is a busy man." Ling Wen cuts her off flatly, arms tightly folded. "He doesn't need to learn any meditation poses."

Jun Wu raises an eyebrow, not bothered—but clearly curious.

"I don't know, Ling Wen—did you find them relaxing?"

"…Very." She stares, not seeming particularly enthused.

"Then I might take the Rain Master up on her offer." Jun Wu smiles faintly, rolling his shoulder, wincing when his wound—still healing—stretches. "It's been a long time since I had a hobby."

"You don't fish?" Yushi Huang comments, the comment making Ling When grow pale, while Jun Wu's eyes suddenly darken, snapping over to—

To find the Rain Master staring peacefully out the window, eyeing the pond on the imperial grounds.

And once both of the other gods see what she's looking at—they both sag. Ling Wen with relief, and Jun Wu's hackles lowering.

"…No," Jun Wu wipes a hand down his face. "I began keeping koi here a few centuries back—but they're for beauty, not for fishing."

Shi Wudu adored them. Sitting by that pond was one of the few times when they were…

Jun Wu frowns, pushing down an inconvenient rush of feeling.

"Oh." Yushi Huang doesn't look back.

And Ling Wen can't stop staring at the back of her head, wondering…

Why a woman who is normally so quiet, who admitted to Ling Wen that it pained her to speak, is now an active part of a conversation like this.

"…I always find aesthetics impractical," The civil goddess sighs.

Her own black robes and adornments make that much clear.

"It's not that," Yushi Huang corrects her gently. "His majesty has always loved keeping pets."

She glances over her shoulder at Jun Wu, smiling warmly.

Not an ounce of aggression in her eyes.

"Lord Ling Wen, you're too young to have seen—but the emperor used to have two hounds. Remember, your majesty?"

Jun Wu's gaze suddenly grows from defensive to nostalgic. It's always difficult to tell what the Rain Master is actually getting at, but—

That's a rather fond memory.

"I did—for years." The emperor agrees.

Such loyal beasts. And back then, when Yushi Huang refused to take her place in the Heavens, the emperor would occasionally visit her lands with the two animals in tow, giving them a chance to run in the vast fields of the Kingdom of Yushi.

The young goddess—and former queen—had been rather fond of them, even if she spurned Jun Wu's invitation to the Heavens each and every time.

"…What happened to them?" Ling Wen asks quietly, still watching the back of Yushi Huang's head.

It couldn't be as simple as old age—not when they were the companions of the Heavenly Emperor, but—

Yushi Huang isn't the one who answers.

"They became disobedient." Jun Wu explains evenly, his eyes like cold, hard steel. "Keeping them was impractical."

"I thought it was just the younger one who became disobedient," Yushi Huang recalls faintly—to which Jun Wu shrugs.

"Once one got out of hand, it was only a matter of time before the other followed. Surely, you remember how vicious they became?"

Just the one. And hardly.

"You forget many things over eight centuries." She replies faintly.

The emperor slayed his hounds the same day the Demon of Yi Nian bridge fell in battle.

"I'm sorry for going on—"

(From the woman who rarely speaks her mind on anything.)

"—Ling Wen has been very helpful in updating me on Shi Wudu's duties."

"Yes, she can be effective, even if certain things have been slipping through the cracks recently…"

Ling Wen stiffens, her jaw tightening, and the emperor sighs.

"We're lucky your deputies haven't started a revolt, by now—"

"They won't."

Ling Wen almost never interrupts him, but she does now, her spine straightening.

"I have the highest retention rate in the Heavens—along with Xuan Zhen. Do you know why that is?"

"I'm sure you're about to tell me."

"Because people who have been in service know how to treat those who serve them." Ling Wen explains curtly, holding her stack of scrolls tighter than ever. "And they have realistic expectations."

The underlying message isn't lost on Jun Wu, who simply leans his chin against his hand, looking her up and down.

"Yes, it's easy to forget that the mighty Ling Wen has such humble beginnings. Your father was a…what was it again?"

"Shoemaker." Ling Wen replies flatly.

"No need to sound so irritated," Jun Wu smiles, but not particularly kindly. "It's important to remember where we come from."

"Oh, I do." Ling Wen breathes in slowly through her nose. Trying to mind her anger. The boiling frustration in her gut.

"I remember everything."

It doesn't work.

She isn't looking anymore, but Yushi Huang has turned back from the window.

"You know the most important thing my father taught me…" Ling Wen's knuckles are white. "Was to never cross the person who makes your shoes."

She steps back from the throne.

“If you do, you’ll never know what’s under your feet.”

Other than someone waiting to trip you.

And in this case, with both parties far too clever to ignore the net that is slowly tightening around her—Ling Wen’s statement isn’t so much of a warning as it is a promise.

Jun Wu stares down at her, his gaze distant—as though he’s remembering something long; long past.

“I think it would shock you, if you knew how well I understood that.”

Oh, he doesn’t yet. Ling Wen doesn’t believe that.

But he will, if he tries her wrath.

(Oh, but she would be shocked.)

"I should go, your majesty." She bows deeply, to the point of near sarcasm before she turns her back on him, marching back down the hall. "Before anything else slips through the cracks."

Yushi Huang follows after her, footsteps light.

At least, until they exit the Martial Hall—then she abandons the need to seem poised, her feet working double time to keep stride with Ling Wen's longer legs.

'What are you doing?'

'He's...' Ling Wen stops on the street, her stance rigid. *'Don't come back here.'*

'...What?'

'He's cleaning out shop.' The civil goddess glances back over her shoulder, glaring at the facade of the emperor's palace. *'For what, I don't know. It was Shui-Xiong first. He's been after Pei for a century. And now, it's me. Eventually it'll be you, too. Don't come back here.'*

She continues on her way, only for a hand to grab at her sleeve.

'Come with me, then.'

Ling Wen looks down at her, hesitant. Into those warm, bottomless eyes that always pull her towards rest.

'You don't owe them anything.'

Ling Wen falls silent, her lips pursed.

Maybe she owes most of them nothing. In fact, the majority of the Heavens owe her an uncountable number of debts.

But leaving now would mean conceding defeat without payment for a betrayal. And even more than that—

Ling Wen has been an unwilling accomplice for so long.

Her guilt, her grief—it isn't the same as Pei's. Not only because Shi Wudu wasn't her lover, but—

Because she knew—or had every reason to suspect...

Ling Wen's eyes shut for a moment, and she takes a long, deep breath.

'I have business to finish before I leave.'

Yushi Huang's face falls—but before they part ways, Ling Wen catches her fingertips between hers, squeezing them gently.

'But remember what you said? I'm not replaceable. ' She lets her go before anyone else can see, turning her back. *'Look after yourself. I'll do the same.'*

Her time is limited, but it's enough to make arrangements.

And, more importantly, to throw a spike under the wheel. Because after listening to Rain Master Yushi Huang reminisce...

Ling Wen thinks she's correct.

The emperor *does* love keeping pets.

FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO CONTINUE ON TWITTER:

READ FROM HERE

While this fic does post on Ao3 with relative frequency, I update on twitter daily. Normally, I attempt to keep twitter about 50-100k words ahead of the AO3 version of this story, so I can update on Ao3 at a steady pace with few breaks. However, with chapter 100 coming up, I'm trying to pace the chapters a little closer to twitter for planning reasons, so there is currently only around 30k words of unposted content from twitter. This will probably lead to slower updates in the coming weeks, especially as I go through exams. Thank you for your patience!

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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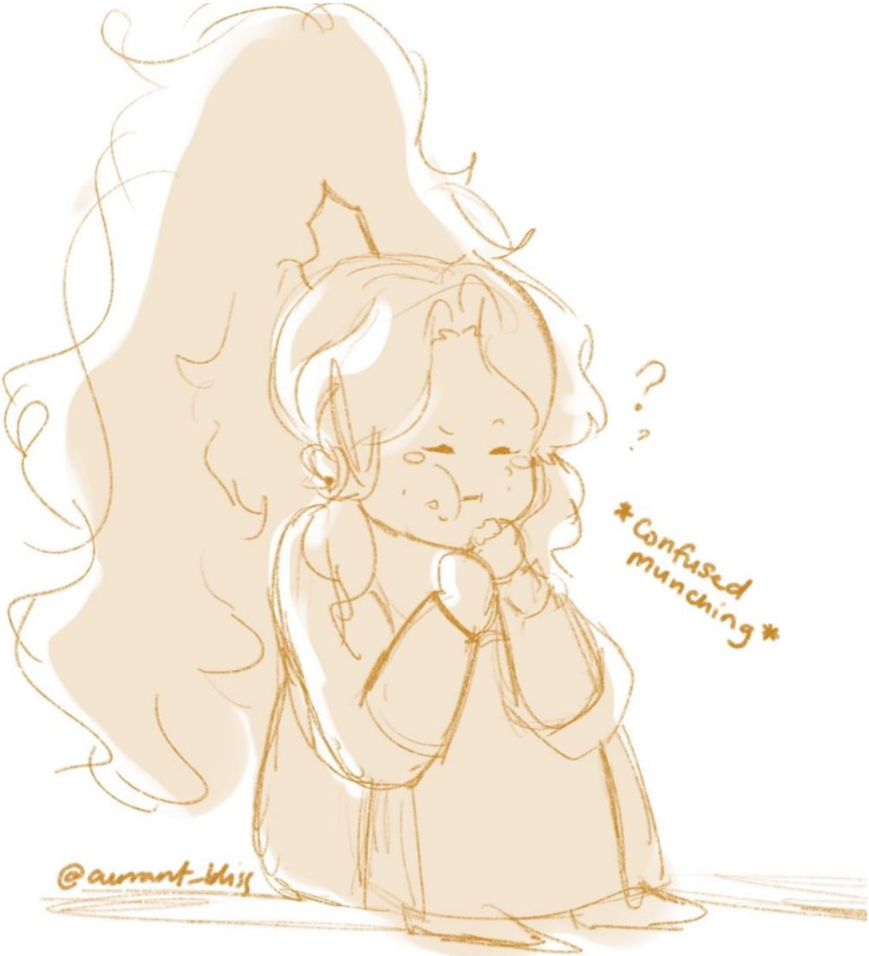
Quan Yizhen, suffering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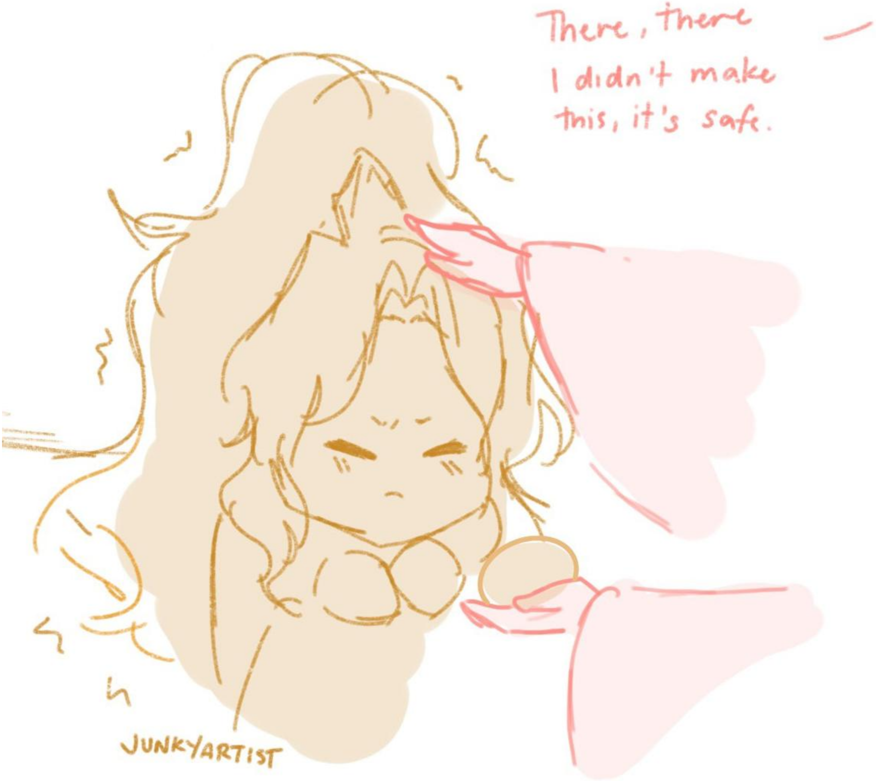
There, there
I didn't make
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JUNKYARTIST

CREDIT: JUNKY

The Kiln Arc

CREDIT: Leafsheep

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you to Junky and Leafsheep for their wonderful artwork, and allowing me to share it!
>
> xoxo, Evie

The Survivor

Chapter Summary

“Hahaha!”

Childlike giggling echoes through the leaves.

“New bride...new bride...”

The singing drifts through the air, unfamiliar to Mu Qing by sound—but the lyrics have been recited to him before.

“Do not smile under the veil...”

Chapter Notes

CONTENT WARNINGS FOR THIS CHAPTER: this chapter contains references to death, depictions of violence, abuse, the grooming process, and references to childhood abuse. Please proceed with caution.

Songs from this Chapter: Bastards, Dear John, and I Think I'm OKAY

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Mu Qing!" Feng Xin's voice carries easily through the forest, always finding its mark. "Is your sector clear?"

The martial deity straightens, flicking his hair over his shoulder as he sheathes his saber.

There's been no end to them. Ghosts and demons—coming in hordes.

Oddly enough, despite the fact that Mount Tonglu is northwest of here, the majority of the flow of beasts has been curving south.

“...Just about. Yours?”

“I’ve still got a few snake spirits that won’t...stay...STILL—!”

Mu Qing rolls his eyes, following the sound of his voice.

Anything that he can’t hit with an arrow, and he turns into a grumbling child. Honestly. He knows how to use a sword just as well as—

“Hahahaha!”

Mu Qing pauses in mid-step, leaves crunching under his feet. “...Feng Xin?”

He was within earshot before, but now...

Nothing.

“...” Mu Qing crosses his arms, rocking back on his heels. Unless that wasn’t Feng Xin at all.

In which case, it could have been a weaker creature, getting Mu Qing to reveal that there were no other beasts in the area.

“Hahaha!”

Childlike giggling echoes through the leaves.

“New bride...new bride...”

The singing drifts through the air, unfamiliar to Mu Qing by sound—but the lyrics have been recited to him before.

“Do not smile under the veil...”

His eyebrows raise sharply, then his expression turns to stone.

A weaker creature, trying to lure him...

Mu Qing takes one sudden step back as the creature drops overhead, catching it by the scruff of the neck.

...Into an ambush.

He holds the fetal spirit at an arm’s length as it tries to twist around to claw and bite at him.

“You know,” he sighs, annoyed. “You get most of that personality from your mom. But serenading your prey and giggling like a little freak when you’re trying to sneak up on someone...”

He got the lack of subtlety from his father.

“...But what are you doing here?” He mutters.

It couldn't be rushing the blockade to reach Mount Tonglu. It doesn't have the strength or intelligence for that.

Not to mention the fact that Mu Qing isn't a bride, and he doesn't have a womb for the fetal spirit to sneak into.

"...Let him go!"

Mu Qing's expression sours slightly as he turns around, finding the heavily painted face he nearly didn't recognize in the beginning, glaring at him as she rushes through the trees.

"Did you break out with him yourself, or did someone help you?"

"Does it matter?!" She hisses.

"I thought you'd be glad to see us gone—now give him here!"

Mu Qing almost does exactly as she asks, but then—

He hesitates.

"...Where are you going to take him?"

Lan Chang glares, fists trembling by her sides.

"That is *none* of your business!"

Normally, yes. It wouldn't be.

"...He killed three unborn children." Mu Qing mutters, staring at the little creature with a complicated expression. "That we know of."

More than likely, over so many years—it could have been thousands.

Lan Chang falters, her lips trembling.

"O-Only when we were separated!"

"Did you know he was working for Qi Rong?" The martial god questions flatly, and her face falls.

"...What? What are you—?! You're lying, Cuocuo—he's a good boy! He gets confused, but he wouldn't—!"

Mu Qing struggles to look at the creature in his grip and see a 'boy' at all.

Between the sharpened teeth and blood red eyes, it's warped and twisted shape and form.

"...Did you hear that song he was singing before he tried to get the drop on me?"

"What about it?!"

"It was used to lure seventeen young women to their deaths on Mount Yu Jun."

Her eyes widen with horror, confirming that she's heard of the incident with the Ghost Groom before–and she swallows hard, shaking her head stubbornly.

"So?! Qi Rong and Xuan Ji took advantage of a child who doesn't know any better! They hurt those girls, not Cuocuo!"

Mu Qing doesn't argue with her–and her face screws up with frustration as she tries to stomp over, trying to push past him to get the child–and crying out when he doesn't hand him over.

"What is your *problem?!* What do you want?!"

"He's dangerous, and you can't control him."

"Yes, I can!" Lan Chang glares up at him. "He listens to me!"

"Right now," Mu Qing glares right back at her, using his free hand to hold her back. "But how many times has he gotten away from you?"

Her lips press together so tightly, the color drains from them. "I won't let him get away again!"

"You JUST DID!" Mu Qing snaps, lifting the snarling beast in his grip for emphasis. "If it had been ANYONE but a Heavenly Official, they would have been killed!"

"Don't pretend like you CARE!"

Mu Qing looks up at the sky, long suffering, his voice positively *dripping* with sarcasm.

"Yes, call me a crazy person, but civilian casualties tend to BOTHER ME!" He grits his teeth. "And you are CLEARLY ill equipped to prevent that from happening!"

"That's MY responsibility!" Lan Chang's eyes flare with deep seated resentment, still fighting to get through. "I'm his MOTHER!"

"YES!" He locks his elbow to keep the child at an arm's length. "And you have been FAILING."

"I'm–I'm doing my best! What else can I do?! Are you going to disperse him?!"

The thought of that seems to send her into a blind panic, clawing at Mu Qing's free arm. "He's just–he's innocent–NONE of this is his fault, YOU CAN'T–!"

"I agree." Mu Qing glares at her, his tone harsh. "NONE of this is the child's fault." Lan Chang stops struggling, her jaw dropping.

"...You're saying it's MINE?! You're saying what happened to us was *my* fault–?!" Her voice rises in pitch with rage, her shoulders shaking, only to be cut off.

"It's not your fault when horrible shit happens to you."

Mu Qing's expression is dark, eyes glaring down at her harshly. "But if you fuck up, and other people get hurt–that's still on you. And you have to live with that shit. You don't get to spend the rest of your life making excuses for yourself, or..." He turns his gaze to Cuocuo.

"And what should I have done?! It's not like I had any other options!”

"Yes, you FUCKING DID!" Mu Qing shoves her back now, at the end of his patience. "You knew the kid was dangerous, and you NEVER prayed to–!”

"We BOTH agreed he NEVER needed to know!" Lan Chang snarls. "Don't pretend you weren't on board with it, you had EVERY chance to reveal the truth in the Grand Martial Hall, and what did you do?! You just fucking STOOD THERE!"

"No, I actually had to defend myself when you accused ME of being the father!" Mu Qing shakes his head. "And don't pretend YOU don't know how fucked up that was!" Because if they had tested that sword on Mu Qing–

Lan Chang would have known exactly what to expect. That was why she accused him as a last resort.

And he's still livid about that.

"I'd rather hurt you," She shrugs, throwing her hands up. "I thought we understood that about one another. But--you KNOW I couldn't have prayed to Feng–!”

"I meant ME!" Mu Qing cuts her off, pointing at his chest. "You KNEW you could have prayed to me!"

Lan Cang's jaw drops.

"...Are you joking?" She sputters, almost laughing at the suggestion. "YOU? You think I'd actually–!”

"No! I never thought you would, but you KNEW I would have answered if you did, you KNEW I would have helped!"

Maybe not for her. Maybe not even for the father.

"Hell, if you hadn't fucking SPRUG IT ON ME, I probably would have been willing to play the father!" Mu Qing glares. "But you didn't. You kept it to yourself, when you KNEW you couldn't handle it, and now people are DEAD!"

Countless emotions flicker through Lan Chang's eyes.

Resentment. Anger. Hurt. Shame. Grief. All of those things, Mu Qing can understand, given their situation.

But there's one that baffles him, an emotion he's overly familiar with, recognizing it in the twist of her mouth, in the bitter insecurity of her tone–

"You..." her voice trembles as she tries to get past him again, "Are the LAST person I would EVER ask for help!"

Jealousy.

It rings in every single word. And Mu Qing–he can't understand it. Because–

What the hell did *he* ever do to *her?* Besides *save* her ungrateful ass?

"Then the consequences for not asking for help are on YOU!" He takes a step back when she lunges again. "Not me. Not the father. Not the kid. YOU!"

Because–

None of this had to happen.

"What could YOU have done, if he's so impossible to control?! Locked him in a cage?!" Lan Chang shakes her head vehemently. "If protecting him from that makes me a bad person, FINE! I'll accept the consequences! And I'll accept the consequences if I fail again too, but I won't let him live like that!"

"WOULD YOU JUST SHUT UP?!" Mu Qing shoves her back again. "I never said anything about dispersing him, or locking him up! Stop putting words in my fucking MOUTH!" He glares, and instead of holding Cuocuo at a distance, he pulls him in, pressing both palms on either side of the demon's skull.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!"

Lan Chang panics, scrambling to her feet when the martial god's palms glow with spiritual power, frantically trying to get back to her child, when–

When something flickers, and she drops to her knees on the ground, frozen. "H...How did you...?"

Sitting in Mu Qing's arms–isn't the twisted, deformed shape of a resentful monster, no–it's just–

Lan Chang's eyes grow as wide as they possibly can, then fill with tears. Just a little boy–about the size of a toddler.

With wild, dark hair, and–

His father's eyes.

Lan Chang doesn't move, trembling on the ground, breaths that she no longer needs to take caught in her throat.

"..." Cuocuo turns his head, reaching up to tug at one of the longer pieces of Mu Qing's hair, giggling.

Mu Qing wrinkles his nose, but shakes himself out of it, summoning back the self righteous anger he was trying to emote before–which is slightly more difficult when holding a giggling child instead of a snarling beast.

"I had ZERO interest in medicine in my mortal life!" He glares down at her, bouncing the child so he doesn't start to fuss. "You think I picked that up for FUN?!"

"You..." Lan Chang doesn't move, her eyes flickering from Mu Qing, to her son–

Seeing his face for the first time, tears slipping down her cheeks.

"Do have any IDEA how hard it was learning how to do this much?! If you had brought him to me sooner, instead of running off the moment he turned fierce, I could have–!"

Lan Chang isn't listening to him, scrambling forward. "G-Give him to me!"

When Mu Qing hesitates again, she sobs, infuriated.

"I've never gotten to hold him like this–GIVE HIM TO ME!"

"It's more complicated than–!"

He doesn't fight her when she snatches the toddler back, not wanting him to get hurt in the struggle, but...

Lan Chang collapses back onto the ground with her son in her arms, sobbing as she kisses his hair, but the moment she leans back to look at him...

That warped, pained version of him is back–still staring at her lovingly, but–

But now that she's seen his real face, she...

An angry groan rips from her chest as she looks up at Mu Qing, clutching Cuo Cuo against her.

"WAS THAT SOME SORT OF TRICK?!"

"No!" Mu Qing snaps, "I was trying to EXPLAIN–!"

"Explain what?!"

"It requires a constant supply of spiritual power!" Mu Qing glares. "I haven't figured out how to make the spell work remotely!"

As a cursed spirit with a constant flow of cursed energy–Cuo Cuo would need an equal and opposite flow to bring his form back in balance.

Mu Qing kneels down in front of her, gingerly placing his hands on the spirit's skull again–and when he does–

Lan Chang sees her son in her arms, big eyes staring up at her, the same as before–but–

Tears slip down her cheeks as she strokes his hair back from his face.

"Mama?"

She chokes down a sob, pressing a kiss to his forehead, trembling. "I'm right here, honey...Mama's right here..."

Lan Chang clutches him so tight, that if he was a mortal child–he probably would have been hurt, but instead, the little ghost just hugs her back.

His little arms can't do much more than hug around her neck, but–

But it's more than Lan Chang ever thought she would get to have. And she...

She almost says thank you.

She knows the right thing to do would be to say thank you.

But...

Her eyes flicker up from where her face is pressed into Cuo Cuo’s hair, focusing on Mu Qing's face.

Palms glowing, eyes focused.

Those eyes that he–

The eyes that *he* always wanted to see, never hers.

And she's faced with the slow, dawning realization of a cruel irony.

That Lan Chang will only ever see her son's face when Mu Qing is holding him.

And that–

That creates a terrifying picture. One–one where she isn't–

Snap!

There's the sound of movement nearby, forcing Mu Qing to rise to his feet, drawing his blade.

"No, no, wait—!" Lan Chang chokes out a plea, sobbing when Cuocuo returns to his previous form, "Could you have kept it up a little longer?!"

"Something might be coming!" The martial god snaps, peering through the trees, "It's fucking dangerous right now, you shouldn't have been out here!"

"And what were we supposed to do, rot in a cell forever?!"

Mu Qing rolls his eyes, rounding back on her, not particularly moved by her tears, given the situation. "I wasn't going to let that–!"

"Mu Qing?"

Now, they both freeze–

Hearing Feng Xin's voice.

Mu Qing turns his head over his shoulder–just as the Fetus Spirit turns it's head back and forth–

Between his mother's crying face, and the martial god standing before them.

And for Feng Xin and the lower martial gods arriving with him–

An unfortunate picture unfolds.

Mu Qing, standing over Lan Chang, tears streaming down her face, streaking her makeup–

His sword drawn.

The martial god pauses, his eyes flickering from his blade, to Lan Chang, then back to Feng Xin and the others.

"Oh, this isn't–!"

Before he can finish that sentence, Cuocuo launches himself from his mother's arms while Mu Qing's back is turned, sinking his fangs into the Martial God's arm.

"SHIT!"

Feng Xin reacts before anyone else, rushing forward to pull the creature off–eventually succeeding when it lets go, leaping back into its mother's arms.

"Are you alright?!?"

"I'm fine!" Mu Qing grits his teeth, pressing his palm against the wound, beginning to heal himself.

"The little fucker is fast, that's all–"

"–HE HURT MAMA!"

Everyone in the forest freezes.

The spirit hasn't spoken coherently besides giggling, or singing that stupid song, but-- But NOW it decides to go and say that?!

Mu Qing looks around, his jaw hanging open.

"I..."

Feng Xin looks just as shocked and confused as he does, but–

But the other martial gods see a very different picture.

A woman who had her child cut out of her, Mu Qing, who was just standing over her with a sword, and the ghost of that child...

Who just accused him of murder.

Mu Qing whips his head around to look at Lan Chang, his heart pounding.

"Tell them he's lying!"

The ghost stares back at him, her eyes wide, flickering between him, and the others, clutching Cuocuo to her chest

"TELL THEM!"

Finally, her gaze settles on Feng Xin's hand–resting against Mu Qing's shoulder, helping him stand while he heals his arm.

Such a small thing, a normal thing to do for a wounded comrade on the battlefield, but–

Mu Qing leans into it, ever so slightly.

Lan Chang's eyes suddenly narrow into a glare, and Mu Qing–

He can only watch her hand rise, pointing at him in horrifying slow motion.

"He–He's A MURDERER!" She cries, scrambling away from him. "IT'S HIM!"

For a moment, Mu Qing is frozen, too shocked to react.

"...Xuan Zhen..." One of the other Martial Gods mutters slowly, reeling with everyone else. "He can be...an angry guy, but he wouldn't..."

"The hell?!"

Mu Qing freezes, his heart leaping into his throat when Feng Xin holds his shoulder in a death grip.

Is he–?

"You're actually CONSIDERING IT?!" Feng Xin rounds on the others, his face dark with anger. "What the hell do all of you look so shaken up for?! She's obviously trying to distract us so she can escape!"

Mu Qing feels shellshocked, like he's listening through water.

"I'll be the *first* to admit, he's an asshole–but we've known each other since we were *kids* , he wouldn't do that!"

And coming from someone like Nan Yang, who has always had a difficult relationship with Mu Qing–

They actually seem to be listening.

Mu Qing slowly looks up at him, and–

Feng Xin isn't looking at him, he's glaring at the others. So...

He doesn't see the way Mu Qing's lips tremble.

"...HE IS!" Lan Chang sniffs back her tears angrily, fighting to stop more from falling. "I can PROVE IT!"

Everyone looks back at her–but–

But not Mu Qing, who knows if he does–

He's going to make this situation ten times worse.

When they were kids, Xie Lian used to tell him to try counting to ten in his head before he spoke. To spell out soothing words while breathing deeply.

Because Mu Qing's temper is admittedly his worst quality, and makes him seem like a completely different person. It makes the worst first impressions, and–

He never has the will to defy what people think of him, especially when it's the worst.

"Your emperor, if he has a sword that can test if you're a virgin, then–he's *got* to have one that will show if you're lying, right?!"

The other martial gods glance at one another, squirming with discomfort, because…

Jun Wu does.

"He IS a murderer, I SWEAR!"

Mu Qing freezes, and Feng Xin looks down at him, suddenly hesitant.

"TEST ME!" She glares. "He–He EVEN HAS A SCAR ON HIS ARM FROM WHEN CUO CUO BIT HIM AFTER IT HAPPENED!"

Mu Qing's right hand squeezes into a fist, trembling, because…

Feng Xin's seen that scar before.

And Mu Qing...knows exactly what Feng Xin is thinking.

He–

He can't even blame him, really.

And now, all of the other martial gods can see the look on Feng Xin's face–not automatically believing the accusation, but...

He's confused. Because...

'I was a murderer.'

"It's on his right arm!" Lang Chang glares, leaning against a tree, trembling, her chest heaving. "You–you can match it to Cuocuo's teeth, I'm telling the TRUTH!"

The worst part is that she *isn't* lying.

She's just using selective wording to her advantage, and...

It puts Mu Qing in the position where he'd have to do two things, to clear his name. First, tell them how he actually got that scar.

And second–

He grits his teeth, breathing hard, his shoulders trembling.

"...I didn't hurt them," he voice is small, trembling.

And in some cruel, sick sense of deja vu, one of the martial gods standing nearby replies--

"Don't worry, general...we believe you..."

Mu Qing squeezes his eyes shut, remembering.

'Tell them, Mu Qing!'

'...Mu Qing?'

"Mu Qing?" Feng Xin's voice is low. "How does she know about that scar?"

Just hearing that he knows about it draws a flinch from Lan Chang, but–

No one's really micro-analyzing her reactions at the moment.

"...You don't believe me?" Mu Qing whispers, his vision swimming.

"I never said that!" Feng Xin frowns. "But if it's really gonna match, I don't know how to explain it to the–”

He doesn't. He–

Mu Qing's breaths are quick and shallow, his head spinning.

Feng Xin doesn't believe him. He's not saying it, but he doesn't believe

him.

No one–

'And who would ever believe you?'

He's dragged back to that feeling. Being small and infuriatingly weak, being forced to ask for forgiveness, to take things he said back.

To call himself a liar, even when he wasn't.

To watching his mother plead for forgiveness, making excuses for him.

'He's been acting out since his father passed.'

'It's my fault, really, I...I haven't been giving him enough attention at home.'

'He has a problem with lying. We're working on it, he – he doesn't mean any harm!'

No one has ever believed him.

His eyes flicker around at the other martial gods, paranoid, his breaths coming faster.

"...Wh...When I m-m..." He squeezes his eyes shut again, shame boiling in his stomach, trembling with frustration and embarrassment.

Feng Xin doesn't say a word.

He's always known that Mu Qing has a stutter, one that he mostly got over when he was a teenager.

It's probably the only thing he's never made fun of him for, no matter how bad their arguments got.

Mostly, because Mu Qing only ever stutters when he's...

Ripped apart.

And he knows, the best thing to do is not prompt him to speak. To give him the space to sort his words out. Now, he just glares at the other martial gods, forcing them into silence.

"...When I...m-met them...t...they were already d...dead." Mu Qing spits out the words.

"I-I tried...to h-help t...them, b...but the k-kid went...fierce a-and b-bit...m...me..." He explains, his face growing dark with shame, he–

He's never stuttered like this in front of–

In front of the other gods. People he works with. Who–

Who looked up to him, before.

No one says anything, looking away with discomfort, no one…

Really knows what to do, seeing General Xuan Zhen like this.

Mu Qing turns away running his fingers through his hair, taking heaving breaths as he tries to calm down, and one of them finally asks...

"...Why would you be helping some random ghost and fetal spirit?"

"For it to scar him like that–he would have had to be a mortal, right?"

"...Isn't there a ritual with dead infants where you can...you know..."

(Trigger a false ascension.)

"I already TOLD YOU!"

Feng Xin steps between Mu Qing and the rest of them, glaring. "He's a lot of things, but he'd NEVER hurt a kid, alright?!"

"...But he never said he wasn't a murderer." One of the younger gods points out awkwardly, averting his eyes.

Feng Xin opens his mouth, then shuts it.

Because he can't say that Mu Qing isn't a murderer, either.

Because when they go back to the Heavens, Mu Qing might be able to prove that he didn't kill Lan Chang and her child, but–

He can't prove that his hands are clean.

Anger finally brings steadiness to his voice.

"Tell them the truth."

He whips his head to look at Lan Chang, who is in the middle of trying to slink past a tree, away from the situation, his eyes burning with rage.

"Tell them the FUCKING TRUTH, JI–!"

"I DID!" She shouts over him, before he can say her *name* . "You want the truth?! You're not like THESE fucking people!" She glares, gesturing at the martial gods around him. "You can wear their clothes, change the way you talk, act like you're BETTER, but you're NOT!"

Mu Qing knows what she's doing–that's the worst part.

Because the moment his temper snaps, he's done.

But even Lan Chang couldn't know how her last insult would hit, sending every hair on Mu Qing's neck standing straight up.

"The only difference between you and me is that I didn't MURDER anyone to get the things I wanted!"

Feng Xin whips his head around to look at her, suddenly confused, because–

Why does she sound SO familiar with Mu Qing, enough to pick on the fact that he used to be a serv–?

"...You put that kid down, right now." Mu Qing's voice is flat. "You've got three seconds."

"Mu Qing–" Feng Xin reaches over to stop him, a little TOO familiar with that tone, "Don't–if she puts that thing down, it might–”

"IT'S GONNA BE THE LEAST OF HER FUCKING PROBLEMS!" Mu Qing snarls, launching himself at her, only to get caught around the waist, arms clawing.

"LET ME GO, FENG XIN!"

"You need to calm down, you're gonna make this look–!"

Mu Qing *laughs* , shoving at Feng Xin's chest blindly as he attempts to get to her, his eyes gleaming with rage.

"IF I'M GOING DOWN, THEN I'M GONNA DISPERSE HER FIRST!"

If Feng Xin could, he'd be holding his face in his hands, because–

That sounds *so* incriminating.

"Would you SHUT UP?! If you're telling the truth, then you can prove it when we get–"

(He didn't mean to say 'if,' but that only makes Mu Qing even more hysterical.)

"Fine, FINE! YOU WANNA KNOW THE TRUTH?!" He isn't talking to Feng Xin, or the others–he's looking at Lan Chang.

And therein lies the fatal flaw of Mu Qing.

When he get's angry, he doesn't communicate, he–

"THAT BRAT OF YOURS LUCKED OUT!"

(He gets even.)

"AT LEAST HE DIDN'T HAVE TO GROW UP WITH A SELFISH FUCKING *BITCH* OF A MOTHER!"

Lan Chang's eyes grow impossibly wide with hurt and anger as Feng Xin fights, his heels dragging in the dirt, as Mu Qing blasts spiritual energy into his fists, fighting tooth and nail.

"YOUR PLAN WAS TO GET ME EXILED, RIGHT?!" He snarls.

So then, Mu Qing wouldn't have to separate from Cuocuo, and could be at her *disposal* without her having to confront–

Confront the *truth* .

That's it, right?

"WELL, I AM *NEVER* HELPING YOU *EVER* AGAIN!"

"Mu Qing, stop–!" Feng Xin grits his teeth, and–

All of them go still, when they hear a voice echo throughout the general communication array.

"Attention to all Martial Gods in the southern sector: there is an arrest order for General Xuan Zhen, along with his deputies."

Mu Qing freezes, going limp with shock in Feng Xin's grip as he looks up at the sky, his jaw hanging open.

"...What the FUCK, Ling Wen?!"

The other martial gods glance at one another, uncertain, but...After a moment, one of them pulls out a set of spirit shackles.

Feng Xin lets Mu Qing go, given that Lan Chang and the fetal spirit have already disappeared into the woods once more, his eyes widening with confusion.

"...We're jumping straight to an arrest? He's denied it, shouldn't we investigate–?"

"You want us to disobey an order?"

"...Come to think of it," one of the other gods comments, "He didn't seem surprised about the murderer thing either. He just said that Xuan Zhen wouldn't hurt a kid..."

"Because he wouldn't?" Feng Xin glares. "I may not get along with him, but I don't think he's a psychopath?!"

"No, it makes it sound like you knew something already..." One of the gods standing around frowns, his hand on the pommel of his sword, and–

Mu Qing doesn't miss the way Feng Xin's fingers twitch toward his bow.

"..."

He takes a deep breath, closing his eyes.

"...You think I tell him anything?" He sneers, rolling his eyes. "If he'd known what I did–he wouldn't have had anything to do with me."

Feng Xin doesn't move one way or the other, his eyes snapping towards Mu Qing. "Does anyone here doubt Nan Yang's loyalty to his oaths?"

The others glance at each other, none of them willing to say anything to the contrary. If there's one thing Feng Xin is, it's loyal.

Mu Qing smiles, shaking his head. But his fist, clenched at his side...it's trembling. "I murdered a member of the Royal Family of Xianle."

Feng Xin goes rigid, his eyes never leaving Mu Qing's face.

"So, if you think he'd have *anything* to do with helping cover up the murder of someone in a family he was sworn to protect...you're fucking idiots." Mu Qing mutters.

"...You what?"

Mu Qing takes a step back from him, his eyes on the other martial gods, and–

"Just let me go, Feng Xin."

'It's what he wants anyway, isn't it?'

His hand drifts down to the hilt of his saber, and the truth of the situation becomes starkly clear to Feng Xin.

That Mu Qing is either going to try to escape, or he's going to go down fighting. But–

Someone's done this to Feng Xin before.

And now, his own hands begin to tremble.

'Stop following me, Feng Xin.'

'You can't help me.'

And Feng Xin, he–

He listened, back then.

He listened, not knowing–

'IT HURTS!'

'XUAN ZHEN! NAN YANG!'

'HELP ME!'

Not knowing just how much pain his friend was in. Not knowing that when he said he couldn't be helped was when he needed it the most.

And then, he lost Xie Lian. For eight hundred years.

But now, with heart stopping clarity, he realizes; He can't lose Mu Qing.

Feng Xin couldn't explain why. Doesn't have the words or the coherency of thought. He just–

He can't.

Even if he–

Mu Qing gasps when his arm is twisted behind his back.

Even if it means doing this.

Mu Qing twists in his grip, looking over his shoulder as Feng Xin nods to one of the younger martial gods.

And his blood turns to ice.

"Bring me the cuffs."

Feng Xin can't look at him, not–

Not when Mu Qing whispers his name--too shocked to be angry.

"...Feng Xin?"

"I don't know what's going on," Feng Xin mutters, snapping the binds around Mu Qing's wrists, temporarily sealing his spiritual power. "But..."

'I know you're not a bad person.'

That was what Mu Qing wanted him to look him in the eye and say, after he told Feng Xin...

"If you fight it out here, or you run–that's it."

He'll be gone for good.

Feng Xin shakes his head. "You think I'm gonna let that happen?!"

"You don't know–!"

"Yeah, because people never tell me anything," Feng Xin steers him to the other Martial Gods.

"But I'm going to go find that ghost and her kid, I'm going to bring them back to the Heavens–and she's going to have to tell the truth. Alright?"

Then Mu Qing's name will be cleared of that crime. And as for what he confessed to... Feng Xin just has to trust...that Mu Qing had a good

reason.

And if it's good enough–then the Emperor will have to understand.

All he has to do is tell the truth.

But that doesn't make it any easier to listen to Mu Qing struggling as he hands him over.

It doesn't make it less heartbreaking, to hear him cry–

"Feng Xin–just...please!"

Desperation and fear in his voice.

And by then, Feng Xin might be having second thoughts, but…

It's already been done.

With a flash of light, the group have already returned to the Heavens.

Mu Qing is trembling when he feels the light and warmth of the Heavenly Capital around him, and–

When he opens his eyes, he sees the deputies and other officials from his palace struggling with guards. Looking–

Looking to him, for guidance.

"..." Mu Qing's jaw clenches, as he looks to one of his lead deputies, shaking his head.

They would be willing to try to fight their way out, if he asked–and he won't.

They didn't do anything wrong. They'll likely be transferred to other palaces, once Mu Qing is dealt with.

There’s no need for anyone else to go down with him.

Still—even as his subordinates submit, allowing themselves to be taken into custody, one of them shouts—

“HEY! It doesn’t matter if he’s under arrest—our general hasn’t been banished!”

“Don’t drag him like a prisoner!”

Mu Qing swallows down the lump in his throat, holding his gaze straight ahead as he's led toward the Imperial Palace, where the Emperor is...

Glowering at Ling Wen, hands gripping the arms of his throne tightly.

"That was a rather rash decision, Ling Wen."

"Was it?" She raises both eyebrows, hands clasped behind her back. "I was following procedure, sire."

Jun Wu frowns, waiting for her explanation.

"The late Water Master was declared a criminal with no trail," Ling Wen shrugs. "I presumed the new policy was to act first, ask questions later." She unclasps her hands, eyeing the scroll in her hands, keeping up with the reports from the day before.

"...Unless there was something you had in mind for General Xuan Zhen that I was not aware of."

Jun Wu can’t fault her. Operating on the information that she has—it’s a very clever idea.

Maybe she even made the leap to understanding that Shi Wudu was being blackmailed. In which case…leaping to publicly arrest Mu Qing would have been a master stroke of genius.

Removing Jun Wu’s ability to blackmail Mu Qing or use him as a pawn by bringing that information to the entire Heavenly Court—rather than just a small, easily contained group of Martial Gods.

(Rumors only spread in court when he allows them to.)

But Ling Wen only believes she has one opponent—the Heavenly Emperor.

And thus, he’s the only adversary she can plan for. The only motivations she can predict or plan for are that of someone in his role.

But there are sides to Jun Wu that she doesn’t know—and cannot predict.

The doors to the martial hall open as Mu Qing is led inside, and Jun Wu spares Ling Wen one slur look.

With a flick of his wrist, the spirit shackles on Mu Qing’s wrists burn brightly, dragging him to the throne.

“I’ll interrogate Xuan Zhen personally.” He glares. “Leave us.”

But when he turns around, facing the throne—

His scowl fades away, replaced by an expression of calm. Maybe even relief.

Mu Qing is cautious and suspicious by nature.

This might actually speed things up.

“Sire, your injury—!”

“He’s in chains, he can’t harm me. Now—leave us.”

When the room empties, Mu Qing hangs his head, dark tresses of hair falling into his face.

He always had a fine face for a servant, though Jun Wu has never been one to believe good looks were limited to members of nobility.

In any case, that’s irrelevant for now.

“…That was quite a confession you made,” Jun Wu sighs, wiping a hand down his face. “Though it would have been less difficult to handle if you had just waited until you arrived here to say anything.”

Mu Qing stares straight ahead, his jaw stubbornly locked.

“I had no choice.”

If he hadn’t said what he did, Feng Xin might be sitting beside him right now, and that—

That would be impractical.

The prince is off god knows where with Qi Ying, and Crimson Rain is bound to show back up before long. The asshole can’t seem to say away, so—

One of them has to stay out of trouble.

Besides, Feng Xin—

He’s never actually broken a law in his life.

Well, excluding possibly property damage, but that was never intentional.

“I can guess why you did it,” the emperor sighs. “But Nan Yang’s reaction was rather admirable.”

Mu Qing’s throat tightens, knowing—

Knowing that he has no right to feel betrayed, but that doesn’t stop the painful twist of sadness in his gut, remembering how Feng Xin handed him over.

“After all that time, he still immediately honored his oath to the royal family…”

Jun Wu is still facing away from him, hands clasped behind his back. “I’d venture to say that, in the last eight centuries, his feelings about Xianle haven’t changed.”

And of course; there’s a cruel double entendre.

He could mean the country, his duty, or—

The prince.

Mu Qing remains silent, but when Jun Wu peeks over his shoulder…

The martial god is hanging his head, shoulders slumped.

“…Regardless of all of that,” Jun Wu’s voice turns soft—gentle.

“I’m not a cruel man, Mu Qing.”

Mu Qing shivers.

“I’ll listen to your side of things.”

“I…didn’t hurt Lan Chang, or the child,” Mu Qing shakes his head vehemently, his knees beginning to ache against the hard marble floor. “I was telling the truth about that, everything I said—!”

“But when you said you killed a member of Xianle’s family…” Jun Wu turns around.

“That was true, wasn’t it?”

Mu Qing stares up at him, exhausted, his lips trembling.

"…Yes," he admits

"Was it in self-defense?"

Mu Qing's face contorts as he shakes his head, hair whipping around him from the force of his movement.

"Is that a yes, or a no?"

"N…N-No…"

"…" Jun Wu sits on his throne, staring at him. "Who was it?"

Mu Qing trembles, his jaw locked, and the emperor's mouth curves with tired sympathy.

"I'll get the answer one way or the other, Mu Qing."

Mu Qing's nostrils flare, his face pale from the shame.

"T…the Q-Queen's…b-brother-in-law…" He hisses, fighting back the tears of anger and shame in his eyes.

"And when did this happen?"

Mu Qing shrinks, almost as though he wants to sink into the floor and disappear.

"W-When…I was…t-twelve…"

Jun Wu falls silent, taking that in, and…after a moment, he reaches forward, placing a hand on Mu Qing's shoulder.

"Poor thing…" He sighs, shaking his head. Slowly, his hand rises up to the side of Mu Qing's head, stroking his hair. "It must have been so difficult for you…"

Two tears slip down Mu Qing's cheeks, landing on the floor below.

"Being so young, working with that family day in and day out…"

The younger god chokes back a sob, wishing he could cover his face, but his hands are bound.

"I d-didn't w…want to h-hurt anyone, b-but I…"

The emperor shushes him, shaking his head. "It's alright, Mu Qing. I believe you."

He—

The tears pour even faster as he stares up at Jun Wu, cautious, but—

Desperately needing to hear what the emperor is telling him.

"I believe you."

Mu Qing shudders as the emperor stands.

"…But I'll have to have more proof than just your word, if I am to let you go."

Murdering the brother of a queen is a serious crime, after all—one that Mu Qing insists was not in self-defense.

"We'll either have to handle things my way, or…" Jun Wu's gaze slips to the side. "We could always bring the issue before Xianle."

Mu Qing stiffens, suddenly sitting up straight.

"Given Qi Rong's unreliable nature, it would be difficult to bring him into this…but if you would prefer to go through the head of that family to resolve the matter—"

"No!"

Mu Qing shakes his head, his gaze becoming stubbornly determined. "No, I d..don't want his h-highness to be i-involved…"

"Are you sure?" Jun Wu questions, looking him over hesitantly. "There is an alternative to prove it, but…it will be painful. Maybe you should just—"

"No!"

Mu Qing swallows hard, fighting the urge to imagine the look on Xie Lian's face, if they brought the issue to him.

Knowing that—

Xie Lian would forgive him. He would say whatever was necessary to get Mu Qing out of trouble…but that wouldn't mean that he wasn't judging him.

And it wouldn’t change the things Mu Qing has done, or the way that they’ve…

No.

No one else needs to be brought into this.

“You’re absolutely sure? Once I start, there won’t be a point in stopping.”

“…And it’ll prove that I’m telling the truth?” Mu Qing whispers.

“Yes,” Jun Wu agrees quietly. “You won’t be able to lie.”

“…” Mu Qing’s eyes close.

His entire life, people have called him a liar.

A thief.

A traitor.

When the only secrets he ever had were the ones that he had a *right* to keep.

And when he tried to tell—

'Do you know how dangerous it is, to go around lying about important people?'

'He's been acting out, since his father died...'

'I don't want the guilt of having to harm a child to keep this quiet.'

...No one believed him.

The ones who did–they forced him to keep secrets.

"I'm sure." Mu Qing mutters, bracing himself.

And maybe, if Jun Wu hadn't asked so carefully, he wouldn't have trusted it.

Maybe, if he hadn't been given a choice–or multiple chances to withhold consent–he would have realized that he never had an option to begin with.

"...Very well." Jun Wu reaches out, his palm glowing with magic as he activates an array–pulling a sword from it.

One that Mu Qing hasn't seen before. Curved and sharp–but it doesn't look like metal.

It looks like it's been carved straight from bone.

"I was going to use this on Xianle," he explains, the mention of which makes Mu Qing sag a little with relief, knowing—

If it was *that* bad, why would he use it on Xie Lian?

"Back when he was withholding the truth about that business with Lang Qianqiu, but..."

The emperor sides, seeming to go back and forth on the matter. "Crimson Rain interfered, proving his innocence on his own. It was...very fortunate."

He snaps his fingers, activating an array around the Grand Martial Hall. One that seals the doors shut, and...

Prevents any sound from escaping to the outside.

"But Xianle might have been better equipped to deal with this than you, I'm afraid."

Before Mu Qing can ask him what that's supposed to mean, Jun Wu turns around, facing him.

"I wish it didn't have to be this way," he admits. "But I can't afford to have you rotting in a cell, Mu Qing. You're too useful to the Heavens."

“Wh–?"

"Who was the man that you murdered?"

Mu Qing's eyebrows raise with confusion.

"...I already told y–!"

Thump!

For a moment, he's just still, his eyes wide, all of the wind knocked out of him. And slowly, when he looks down, he...

He sees that blade, white as bone, impossibly sharp, running straight through his ribs. And it–

It *hurts* .

A scream of pain builds in his throat, his body convulsing, but with his hands bound, he–he can't even hold himself, he–

But instead of screaming, he chokes out–

"L-Lord Q-Qi Shen!"

He can't recall choosing to speak, and yet the words rip right out of him anyway.

"Good," Jun Wu kneels down beside him, pressing one palm against Mu Qing's cheek, the younger man pale and trembling as his body convulses around the sword.

"I knew you were telling the truth, Mu Qing."

The sword is pulled from his abdomen, but before he can–

Thump!

A sob rips from Mu Qing's throat, blood dripping down his chin as Jun Wu sighs, grimacing, as though this genuinely pains him.

"It only works for one question each, I'm afraid."

"I d-don't–"

"How did you kill him?"

Mu Qing sways, his body tipping forward.

And–

Jun Wu catches him. Rubbing a hand over the martial god's shoulder as he chokes out the words–

"S-Slit h..his t-t-throat..."

And it's horribly confusing. With every cut, he's comforted. Told that he's doing well. That it's almost over.

By the person hurting him.

That what the person who was hurting him before used to say, too.

And it hurts.

It hurts. It–

It really, really hurts.

As every horrible detail is pulled out and examined with an unfeeling eye.

As old wounds are cracked open without regard for the time it takes to scar.

At some point, Mu Qing stops fighting it. Accepts the comfort when it comes, knowing that another blow is going to follow. His body trembling as he chokes out the answer to every question, vision blurring and swirling as the pain overwhelms him.

"Don't be scared..."

Jun Wu shushes him when it's over, when the sword is finally pulled from him, and it doesn't return.

It takes Mu Qing what feels like ages to believe that, flinching from every movement.

Help me.

Help me, help me, help me.

Help me, help me, help, help, help, help, help me!!!

"Don't be scared..."

Fingers smooth over his hair, tucking it behind his ear. Glowing with spiritual power as Mu Qing's body heals, his eyes glassy and dark as he stares at the sealing.

"You did well, Mu Qing."

He's left there, limp on the floor as Jun Wu rises up.

With a snap of the emperor's fingers, the blood disappears from the younger man's robes, even if he hasn't quite gained the strength to move.

But he should recover quickly enough.

It was only thirty three blows, after all.

There are far, far worse things a soul can endure.

Jun Wu takes a seat on his throne once more, waiting. He seems to take no joy in watching the martial god tremble on the floor, but–

There's really no sympathy, either.

This was a necessary step. One of countless, seemingly equally necessary cruelties.

He's never been wrong, before–or, more accurately, he's never faced the consequences of being wrong.

Some mistakes, however small, are fundamental.

Seeds so tiny, you don't foresee what they might grow into.

Some as powerless as a servant.

Or as voiceless as a ghost fire.

Mu Qing has always benefited from the fact that people are never looking at him.

As such, Jun Wu doesn't see the look in his eyes when he pushes himself up onto his hands an knees, staring at the emperor's posed on the throne.

How relaxed and poised he is, after all of that.

'These people are dangerous, A'Qing.'

That was what his mother told him, when they first went to work in that house. Holding the little boy close against her side as she whispered warnings in his ear.

'You don't beat men like that.'

Mu Qing lowers his eyes.

And he breathes.

'You survive them.'

He isn't a prince experiencing failure for the first time. Nor is he a child of wealth, born with resources some could only dream of.

No.

And therein lies the emperor's mistake.

"...I...is that a-all...I h-had to d-do?"

"Yes." Jun Wu nods.

Mu Qing's jaw finally unlocks as he wraps his arms around himself, trying to rub some feeling back into his arms.

"Are you still in pain? I should have given you enough energy to recover," The emperor inquires gently.

Mu Qing is looking away, his expression hidden.

"...No," he mutters, "My body is just in shock, but there's n-no damage."

Even if he can feel the ghost of the blade in his body still, that horrible, splitting feeling haunting him–

He's healed.

"Good," Jun Wu sighs with relief, resting his forehead against his hand. "...Given the circumstances of what happened...I would say it *does* qualify as self defense."

Or at the very least, defense of another.

Mu Qing still doesn't look at him, but when he does speak...

"...T-thank you," He whispers, "N...no one's e-ever..."

"I know."

Dark eyes glare at the opposite wall, narrowed and angry, but...

'Never cross the man who makes your shoes.'

That was what Ling Wen said.

Not only because you rely on his services, or because he could trip you.

Mu Qing turns his face back towards Jun Wu, lips trembling, eyes wide and grateful before he lowers them again.

"A...Am I g-going to b...be...?"

"Banished?" Jun Wu questions.

Mu Qing stares at the floor.

"No, no. Your actions don't rise to that. And in any case...you've made yourself incredibly useful, Mu Qing. I already said that I could see potential in you."

Not only is he among the strongest of their martial gods—but he's risen far above any other medicinal god as well.

"...T...thank you," He mumbles, eyes downcast.

"Now, if you're feeling better..." Jun Wu rubs at the side of his neck. "Could you come here?"

Mu Qing doesn't move, still frozen in place, half sitting up on the floor.

"...Sir?"

"I need you to examine something."

Mu Qing's eyes drift down to the bandages underneath his robes, slightly wary. "...I thought wounds from that blade couldn't be treated with..."

"It's not that," Jun Wu waves him off, his hand rising to his temple. "It's my head."

"Your—?"

"It feels like it's about to split."

‘Split’ is an interesting choice of words.

Mu Qing has heard ‘split open,’ but…

He nods, swaying slightly as he rises to his feet.

His body is healed, but his knees still tremble from the shock, along with his hands, even as he tries to shake the shock out of them.

"…Alright," He mutters, his voice far more even than he feels.

His expression trusting, calm.

Not upset.

(That's why you don't cross those who are accustomed to serving.)

He steps behind where the emperor is seated, placing both palms against his temples.

(They're accustomed to faking smiles, hiding anger—and you never know when they're against you.)

"…" Mu Qing's hands glow with spiritual power as he probes the emperor's spiritual form, his own energy swirling, attempting to find the source of discord, but…

Suddenly, the martial god yanks his hands back, taking two steps away from the throne, holding his hands against his chest as if they've been burned.

"Well?"

"Your…" Mu Qing swallows hard, working to keep his tone under control. "It's not something I can…"

Jun Wu stares at him, expectant. "What?"

Mu Qing winces, his palms crackling—even after only briefly interacting with the emperor's spiritual form, struggling to rebalance his own energy.

"Your soul," Mu Qing starts, then stops, hesitating. "It's…"

Jun Wu's expression darkens.

"…Unbalanced," Mu Qing concludes quickly, taking another step back. "That's not something that can be dealt with medically. "Rest, or meditation can—"

"Thank you, Mu Qing." Jun Wu cuts him off flatly—his expression is less frightening than before, but…

Boiling with underlying pain.

With a flick of his wrist, the array surrounding the Imperial Palace is lifted, and he calls out—

“Guards.”

The doors open with a heavy creak.

“I’ve interrogated General Xuan Zhen to the fullest extent, and acquitted him of all charges.”

Which was certainly Ling Wen’s intention, even if he can’t see her smirking in the background.

The other martial gods hesitate, given everything that they heard, but…

Everyone is aware of the fact that the emperor has a blade that can force the truth out of anyone.

And from the sight of the sword sitting beside the Emperor’s throne…

“Yes, your majesty.”

“He’s rather exhausted after his interrogation. Escort him to his palace at once so he can rest.” Mu Qing is quick to follow them, even if he’s unsteady, and—

“I don’t want him assigned any work for the next few days while he recovers. And Xuan Zhen? That means no descending to the mortal realm.”

“But sir…”

“If he’s not guilty…”

“…What about the southern blockade?!”

Mu Qing listens to the other officials argue, remaining silent.

“He seems like he can walk just fine—!”

“I’ll worry about the Southern Blockade.” Jun Wu replies calmly. “The rest of you have your orders to carry out.

“…Yes, sir.”

“Of course, your majesty.”

Mu Qing doesn't say a word as he's escorted out. He doesn't look back.

He returns to his palace under his own power, and…while Jun Wu pardoned him, saying he was no longer charged with anything…

The guards posted by the gates of his palace don't slip his notice, either.

The emperor's order to rest is one that he has every intention to enforce.

He barely manages a tired, passing greeting to his deputies as he walks through the halls. After how they stood up for him before, they —

They deserve more than that, and he knows it, but he just…

The door to his office slams behind him as he slides down to the floor.

Trembling. His arms wrapped tightly around himself.

But that isn't enough.

Not until he crawls underneath his desk, curled into the smallest ball possible. Just like he did when he was small, and the world felt so terrifying.

He isn't small now, but the world hasn't changed.

He might be older. Might be stronger. But no matter how much time and distance he puts between himself and the person he used to be, some things don't change.

And he finds himself in a situation that cruelly parallels his childhood.

Feng Xin couldn't have known what was going to happen to him when he let the other martial gods bring him back here. Mu Qing isn't—

His eyes fill with tears as he hugs himself tighter.

He isn't sure that Feng Xin wouldn't have done it anyway, but he couldn't have known.

And his mother couldn't have known either, back then.

He still had to pretend he was alright, after he—

After something like *that* happened.

Still had to smile and give the person who did it exactly what they wanted.

Because doing anything else would be suicide.

Before, when he tried to tell the truth, to ask for help—the response wasn't so different from what he would get now;

'It's dangerous, telling lies about such important people.'

And who could he even tell? What would he say, if he did?

Jun Wu told the truth about interrogating him, even if people don't know how gruesome the reality behind that was.

Everything else Mu Qing has is only a suspicion. And even if he shared those—

Who is there that could *actually* do something about it?

Mu Qing himself is among one of the most powerful gods in the Heavens, and—

Among other things, he's been blessed—and cursed—with a good memory.

'Be careful with the emperor's concern. His attention. People tend to forget what he is.'

Shi Wudu was more powerful than any of them. Only surpassed by the emperor himself.

'If he's being kind to you—or anyone—it's not out of the kindness of his heart. He wants something.'

He clearly knew something about Jun Wu. More than anyone else did, and—

Now, he's dead.

If Shi Wudu couldn't deal with him—realistically, who could?

His immediate thought is Ming Guang, but…

Now, the weakening of the General's base of power over the last century seems almost strategic.

And if there's one person who could, beyond a shadow of a doubt, deal with Jun Wu…

He's been bound in shackles for over eight hundred—

Mu Qing freezes, still trembling, his face wet with tears as his eyes grow as round as could possibly be.

…Was that on purpose, too?

All this time?

His heart pounds in his chest, his mind reeling with the gravity of that possibility.

That slow, sickening realization, one that comes far too late.

Knowing just how much could have been different, if he had asked one question;

'Was somebody hurting you, your highness?'

And if that's true—if all of that is true—

Mu Qing's body aches from exhaustion, even with the wounds forcibly healed, unable to forget the wreckage that was wrought across his flesh. He just wants to stay here.

To hide.

To pretend that none of that ever happened. To forget all of it, and tell himself that there's no point.

But he can't.

Because if all of that is true, then…

'You don't beat men like that.'

The martial god crawls out from under his desk after what feels like hours.

He scrubs the floors of his office, scrapes and organizes every surface until his mind stops spinning out of control.

Then, he brushes his hair, and washes the tears from his face.

Mu Qing can’t stay here, and wait until he ends up like that.

‘You survive them.’

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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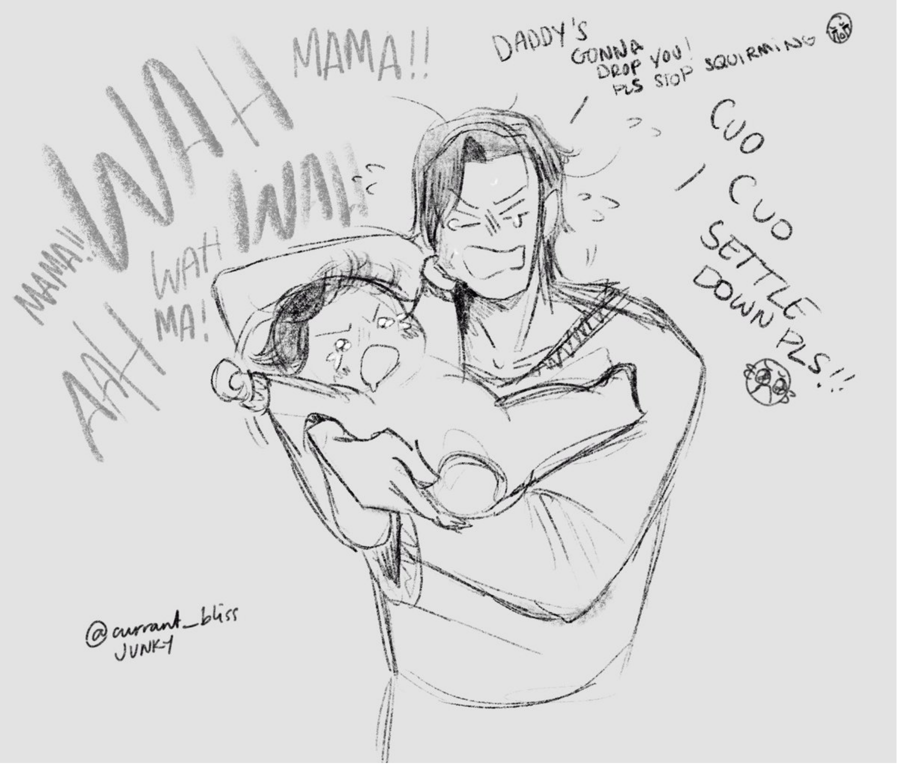
"You don't beat men like that."

[image]

CREDIT: ROWAN

FENG XIN AND CUO CUO


MAMA!!
WAH
AAH
WAH
MA!
WAH
MAMA!!
DADDY'S GONNA DROP YOU! PLS STOP SQUIRMING
CUO CUO SETTLE DOWN PLS!!
@currant_bliss
JUNKY

CREDIT: JUNKY

Chapter End Notes

> Mu Qing finally gets a bit of a spotlight now after like...700k+ words! So it's time for his character arc, enjoy!
>
> Thank you to Rowan and Junky for their beautiful artwork, and allowing me to share it!

The Brocade Immortal

Chapter Summary

He steps forward, knocking against the warehouse door firmly.

Bam, bam, bam!

Then, repeating himself when no one answers.

Bam, bam, bam—!

BAM!

Xie Lian nearly jumps with shock when Lang Ying leans over, slamming his fist into the door with a resounding boom.

The prince stares blankly in his direction as the boy leans back, shaking out his fist.

“…Ignoring people is rude.”

Chapter Notes

content warning: this chapter references past suicide attempts, victim blaming, and depression

Songs from this chapter: Lightning Crashes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Did you hear about General Xuan Zhen?”

Pei Ming doesn’t look up from his maps, his stubble far closer to a beard now than it was at the beginning of the week, his armor stained with blood.

“I heard that the emperor cleared him of the charges.”

Zeng Tao shrugs, pouring him another cup of tea.

“Yes, but you know how messy politics in the upper court are. With his medicinal skills, Xuan Zhen is a bit indispensable, don’t you think?”

Compared to the death of a one mortal woman and her child, anyhow.

Worth a coverup, some gods might say.

But Pei doesn’t think so.

The emperor, in spite of his gentle demeanor, isn’t so forgiving of any mistakes—big or small.

“…In any case,” the deputy clears his throat. “I know you’re busy with the Northern Blockade, but…”

“But what?”

Zeng Tao sighs.

“I didn’t want to worry you with it, General—but some of the lower deputies in the palace are truly incompetent. I’m sure straightening it out will have to wait until this mess is over, but—”

“Spit it out.”

“…There was a theft in one of your temples.”

Pei Ming raises an eyebrow, sipping his tea. The warmth is soothing against his throat, after nearly thirty hours of nonstop fighting.

“A theft? Since when have you felt the need to alert me to something like that?”

He has more temples than nearly any god, aside from Jun Wu.

And while he’s never been the god of wealth—his coffers have always been overflowing, to the point where he ordered his own deputies to not mind petty thefts in his temples.

Stolen food here, a little gold there—these aren’t things that he would miss.

“…Well, this was a significant offering, sir. It came from a mortal seeking a personal audience.” Zeng Tao admits reluctantly, still holding the tea pot, fingers drumming against the handle.

Pei frowns, pushing the map aside. “I haven’t given a personal audience in a year.”

“The request was denied,” his deputy explains quickly. “They were using a distortion over their voice, and they wouldn't even give a name. It also was so… *soon* after the passing of…"

He doesn't dare say Shi Wudu's name, lest the general smash something.

"…If the request was denied, then I don't see an issue with them taking the offering back." The general mutters, looking back down at the map before him.

Zeng Tao squirms, clearly disagreeing, but…

"It was a very unique offering, sir. A highly valuable artifact."

"…Why are you pushing this?" Pei's voice hardens, dripping with annoyance. "With everything that's going on, you think I care about —?"

Zeng Tao sets something down on the table with a thud, and when Pei looks down, his entire expression changes.

A golden hair pin.

A dragon carved into its face, with a ruby clutched in its talons.

When the Water Master's body was cremated, two things were removed from his body.

A golden locket, given to Shi Qingxuan—and this hair pin, which was returned to the original owner.

Pei Ming.

"I thought it seemed familiar, but I had to be sure. And when I went to check the treasury, it…" Zeng Tao frowns. "It was completely identical, sir."

Pei Ming lifts the hair pin up for his own inspection, his eyes hard, looking it over with an almost clinical gaze.

"…No," he mutters, his eyes narrowed. "They aren't completely identical."

"…They aren't?"

No.

Because this one—

Pei flips it over, looking for the engraving that should have been on the underside, finding it smooth.

…Isn't the original.

It's a good fake. The gold and jewels are real, the molding is so similar—

But clearly, whoever made it didn't have the time to examine it completely.

And Pei Ming can only think of one person that would try to lure him in with this.

Who would hide his identity while seeking an audience.

Who would have had the chance to swap the real thing out with a fake in the first place.

The last person to see Shi Wudu alive.

Pei Ming's eyes grow cold as ice.

"Which temple?"

"…Sir?"

"Which temple was the offering made from?"

"…Langling," the Zeng Tao explains slowly. "But I've posted one of the lower deputies there to keep an eye if anything—sir, where are you going?"

"Where do you think?"

"But…!" His deputy scrambles after him. "What about the northern blockade?!"

"Langling is in the North." Pei Ming shrugs, uncaring.

And if the emperor finds his performance to be lacking, well. He can fix the problem himself.

Pei Ming has more important things to deal with.

“But—!”

With a flash—he’s gone.

“Okay,” Xie Lian stops, placing a hand against Quan Yizhen’s chest to make the younger martial god stop in tow. “You remember what we agreed on?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t talk.”

“Yes.”

“And you go along with what I say.”

“Yes.”

Xie Lian sighs, relieved. “Good…”

He glances over at Lang Ying, who he asked to stay behind at Puqi Shrine, but…

The boy has been strangely defiant lately, following them all the way here in spite of Xie Lian’s protests.

“First—lend me some spiritual power,” he murmurs, holding out his hand.

Quan Yizhen bobs his head seriously, holding his hand out, grasping Xie LIan’s firmly.

Which prompts the god pulling away shortly after, feeling spiritual power flooding up his arm, generously, but far more forcefully than how Hua CHeng usually—

(Stop bringing him up.)

Xie Lian clears his throat, looking away.

“Thank you. Now—you’ll probably see me behaving rather strangely, but don’t worry, just stick to the plan.”

He steps forward, knocking against the warehouse door firmly.

Bam, bam, bam!

Then, repeating himself when no one answers.

Bam, bam, bam—!

BAM!

Xie Lian nearly jumps with shock when Lang Ying leans over, slamming his fist into the door with a resounding *boom*.

The prince stares blankly in his direction as the boy leans back, shaking out his fist.

“…Ignoring people is rude.”

Before Xie Lian can scold him, the door swings open—with a round, squat, bald headed ghost staring at the three of them, holding a toothpick between his teeth.

“…Can I help you gentlemen?” He questions dryly, sounding utterly disinterested.

Quan Yizhen opens his mouth, but—

“That remains to be seen,” Xie Lian speaks coldly, his arms crossed as he walks past the ghost and into the warehouse, making a show of reaching out to feel fabric as he looks around.

And, as he takes in the swirling dark aura in the air…

This is definitely the right place.

Lang Ying follows after him without hesitation, and after a moment the god snaps his fingers, gesturing for Quan Yizhen to follow after him.

“I hear you’ve been busy,” Xie Lian comments, running his fingertips over different piles of fabric.

The merchant coughs awkwardly, looking mildly ruffled when Quan Yizhen elbows past him, clearing his throat.

“What…makes you say that? Have we met before?”

"No." Xie Lian shakes his head, pinching one bolt of fabric with a look of distaste. "But I know someone hired you to spread around fake Brocade Immortals. And…" He keeps his head turned away, so the merchant can't see the cursed shackles in his eyes as he pretends to glance around the room. "It must be someone powerful, too."

The ghost stiffens.

After all, whomever it was, they were so sure that the merchant wouldn't double cross them that they were willing to leave the actual Brocade Immortal behind—so that it could be used for production of the fakes.

Meaning they're someone to be feared.

"…You're from the Heavens?"

"Me?" Xie Lian waves that off. "Ha!"

"Don't mess with me," the ghost glares, glancing around for the guards.

(All of whom have, for some mysterious reasons, disappeared.)

"I can smell it on you!"

Xie Lian places his hands on his hips. "Well, that's exactly why I'm *here* ."

He rolls his eyes, his tone suddenly becoming condescending.

(Not like him at all, just as he warned Quan Yizhen about before.)

"My assistant, he probably smells like a Heavenly Official too, doesn't he?"

The merchant pauses, glancing between them suspiciously.

"…Assistant?"

"That's right," Xie Lian lifts his chin. He changed into a different set of robes on the way here, one with a hood that sits low, covering his eyes. "Quan Yizhen—take them off."

The martial god pauses, looking towards Xie Lian, open mouthed.

"Take what off?"

"…" Xie Lian fights the urge to break character, instead forcing his expression to twitch with annoyance. "Your robes!"

His eyes grow round, and he nods quickly, reaching down to fiddle with the buttons and clasps.

It's only when Xie Lian hears the merchant cry out in shock, scandalized, that he realizes that Quan Yizhen is stripping *completely* , and his own ears burn.

"Just the outer robes!" He clears his throat, turning back to the ghost. "See the difference now?"

"…" The merchant frowns, looking back at the young man standing behind him, who certainly had a godly sheen about him before, and…

Now, from the pale complexion and pointed ears, he's clearly some sort of ghost.

"…How'd he do that?!"

"It's the robes," Xie Lian explains. "Lang Ying, give him the blue set."

The boy glances up, hurrying over with a bundle of robes clutched in his arms.

"Put them on."

Quan Yizhen has an easier time following this command, pulling the robes around him.

This time, his appearance changes to that of a mortal.

Deeply tanned, with 'imperfections," like a scar on his chin, or a birthmark on the side of his neck.

"…That's incredible!" The merchant breathes, walking around the god with fascination. "I've never seen a spell quite like it!"

(That's probably because the robes aren't enchanted at all, Xie Lian simply used borrowed power from Quan Yizhen to place an illusion over him before they even entered the warehouse.)

"Yes, well—not every ghost is powerful enough to disguise themselves as a human."

Xie Lian crosses his arms. "There's probably a big market for disguises like this. But, I'm just one person, and when I saw your little scheme here, I thought…"

He nods toward Quan Yizhen, who sets down the crate he's been carrying, revealing the gold bars within.

Now, smelling the chance at a deal, the merchant's eyes widen with greed. "Oh, I see, well—!"

"But," Xie Lian drawls, poking a pile of fakes with his finger, "I'm not so sure you can keep up with the level of quality I expect."

"But—!"

"Really. Just look at this hem work…" Xie Lian clicks his tongue. "I'll want to inspect the facility thoroughly before I make a deal. Make sure you can actually operate the way I need you to."

The merchant rubs his hands together eagerly, following behind him. "Oh, but sir—I assure you, we only carry the finest—!"

"I'll be the judge of that," the prince rolls his eyes. "Why don't you go outside and count the gold I brought you. If things are up to standard, we'll give you the other half of the first payment."

"O-Other half?" The merchant sputters, eyes wide.

"Well, of course, you can have a look around! But I should stay and give you a tour—!"

"So you can cover up any mistakes? I don't think so. I'm not fresh out of the coffin, you know."

(He can't help but laugh at his own joke—Lang Ying, however, seems thoroughly unamused.)

The merchant eventually relents, carrying his crate of gold off, eager to count the contents.

"…Now what?" Quan Yizhen questions, looking around.

"Place an array around the building so nothing can get in or out," Xie Lian replies. "Can you do that?"

"…It's done."

"Good!"

Xie Lian pauses, then reaches over to Pat him on the arm. “I’m sorry for speaking to you like that, but you did well!”

Quan Yizhen pauses, clearly unaccustomed to such feedback.

“…I did?”

The prince smiles up at him warmly, giving his arm one more Pat.

“Yes!”

Quan Yizhen looks away briefly, his lips curving into a small frown—but when he glances back, he sees Xie Lian still smiling at him...

His eyes grow big and bright.

"...Can I keep them?"

Xie Lian stares back blankly.

"...Huh?"

"The robes." The martial god explains. "I like them."

Xie Lian pauses, a little hesitant at first.

"Well...they probably don't fit you correctly..."

"I don't care," he responds earnestly, and Xie Lian sighs, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Sure—!"

"—No."

The prince pauses, looking in Lang Ying's direction.

"...Yes," he repeats, a little more firmly this time. "You can keep them—but let me make sure they fit you later, okay?"

The martial god nods earnestly, not seeming to grasp that Xie Lian can't see it—but he senses the movement.

"Good, now..." He turns back to their task. "Lang Ying, I really wish you hadn't come along, this could be dangerous, but..."

If he's here anyway, he might be helpful.

"I'll go ahead and separate out the weaker garments—Qi Ying, you hold onto them—and then Lang Ying, you can help me test the rest."

Putting the robes on Quan Yizhen is out of the question, given his personal history with the Brocade Immortal. Not to mention the fact that, as the strongest among the three, it's better to not risk him getting out of control. And they can't test it on a child, so...

Once the clearly harmless robes have been sorted out, Xie Lian stands before the pile of suspicious items, stealing himself. "Lang Ying, hand me one of those robes."

The child hesitates at first—but slowly, he complies, watching as the prince pulls it on.

"Now, give me an order?"

Lang Ying stares up at him for a long moment, looking him up and down.

"...Hit me."

"...?!" Xie Lian's expression turns to one of stress as he valiantly attempts to resist the order, and...He lets out a quiet breath of relief. “Okay, it’s not that one, but….really, Lang Ying, don’t ask me to do something dangerous like that. I could really hurt you, understand?”

“…Okay,” the child agrees quietly, handing him the next robe.

Xie Lian takes off the first garment, handing it off to Quan Yizhen.

Then, after he puts on the second one, Lang Ying orders—

“Turn around.”

Simple enough—and when Xie Lian is able to remain still, that proves the second try is no good, as well.

Then, when it’s time to try the third garment—

“Don’t hug me.”

Xie Lian pauses, tilting his head.

Noticing his confusion, the boy shrugs innocently.

“It’s boring ordering you to do stuff.”

When he’s more than likely *not* going to be wearing the Brocade Immortal, anyway. In that case, it’s more interesting to order him to *not* do something.

It’s surprisingly mischievous.

“…” Xie Lian smiles, shaking his head as he kneels down, wrapping his arms around the child. “So shameless.”

Lang Ying doesn’t respond verbally, leaning into the embrace, his eyes closed.

Soft.

Warm.

Smells—

Xie Lian leans back, taking off the garment.

“Next one?”

Lang Ying thinks it over.

"Don't hug me again."

The prince raises an eyebrow, a surprised laugh escaping him, "Lang Ying, what's gotten into—?"

He pauses, his laughter fading as he registers a sudden change in the air. Not from any of the garments, but...

Behind him, Quan Yizhen has gone completely still, his eyes the size of dinner plates.

Staring across the warehouse, where...

Framed perfectly under the moonlight, dark, silken tresses of hair blowing gently, despite the lack of a breeze.

Wearing black robes, trimmed with amethyst, and—

With a beauty mark under his left eye.

"...Shixiong?"

Quan Yizhen's trembling, hopeful whisper is what catches Xie Lian's attention first, sending his own eyes turning in that direction, but...

When Xie Lian looks for the sign of the aura of a heavenly official—or even the suppressed signature that might come from being shackled in exile...

Instead, he finds an intense, swirling point of resentment. So powerful, his eyes ache.

"Quan Yizhen, don't—!"

"SHIXIONG!"

The martial god launches himself forward, and Xie Lian is left with no choice but to leap to intercept, causing the two to collide forcefully in midair.

"GET OUT OF MY—!"

"IT'S NOT HIM! IT'S A—!"

They roll around on the floor, limbs flailing (rather undignified.)

Normally, Xie Lian could just take him down with a couple of quick blows and explain the situation later, but—

Quan Yizhen is surprisingly difficult to deal with.

Behind them, Lang Ying's posture is becoming more and more rigid, eyes glowing read in the dark, until—

Xie Lian rolls to the point where he's sitting up, legs locked around Quan Yizhen's middle from behind, gripping the top of his head with one hand, the muscles in his other arm flexing as he holds the martial god in a full on headlock.

"I'm so sorry!!"

From a few feet away, Lan Ying quietly claps.

(After all, it's brilliant execution of a wrestling move, absolutely magnificent form, as to be expected of a martial god of such caliber—)

"The Brocade Immortal is trying to trick you!" Xie Lian cries. "It's not Yin Yu!"

Quan Yizhen struggles violently, and Xie Lian holds on magnificently well for someone under three cursed shackles, but he can feel his strength slowly beginning to wane—forcing him to tighten his arm around the martial god's neck, cutting off his air supply.

"I'm sorry!" Xie Lian spits out between clenched teeth, his arms trembling slightly from the strain. "I know you want it to be him, I really understand!"

Quan Yizhen's vision blurs as he reaches for him blindly, heart pounding in his throat as the figure seems to turn away.

'Why?'

His fingers tremble as his head begins to spin.

'Why are you always running away from me?'

A pained whimper rips from his chest as his resistance begins to slow.

'What...what did I do wrong this time?'

"I'm so sorry..." Xie Lian repeats, softer this time.

As the younger god stops struggling, he gives a quiet command to Ruoye, sending the spiritual device flying out to attack the mass.

Just as it whips past, Lang Ying lifts one finger, allowing the spiritual tool to brush against him.

And when it does, it gleams with power.

Now that the Brocade Immortal has been identified, and Ruoye can attack it, Xie Lian's grip on Quan Yizhen isn't nearly so forceful, but—

The martial god doesn't get up.

His lips trembling, nostrils flaring as he struggles to swallow down the sadness, and Xie Lian...

He wishes he didn’t understand that feeling so *completely* .

Remembering the bone deep sorrow he felt, each time he was so sure he’d found Hong’er again—only to see that he’d been given false hope.

Again, and again, and *again* .

Quan Yizhen has become completely accustomed to people mocking him for his persistent attachment to Yin Yu.

He still beats them for it, but he isn’t surprised anymore.

He doesn't expect anyone to understand.

They don’t know what Yin Yu did for him.

But…

Xie Lian’s arms aren’t confining him so much any more, so much as…

Embracing him.

“I’m sorry,” the god repeats as Quan Yizhen goes limp in his hold, working so hard not to cry. “I—”

No one’s ever…

“I know you miss him, I’m sorry…”

Lang Ying’s expression isn’t hostile now.

It was before, when he was watching the two intertwined in a struggle, but…

Watching the pain in Quan Yizhen’s expression, his own becomes… complicated.

Ruoye drops down to the ground, a bloodied robe wrapped in its grip, twisting like a vicious python until it grows limp.

Xie Lian pats Quan Yizhen’s curls as the martial god struggles to regain his composure, opening a private communication array in his mind.

‘Ling Wen?’

Once again—her response is nearly immediate.

‘Yes, your highness?’

‘Qi Ying and I have located the Brocade Immortal.’

‘So soon?’ She inquires, sounding somewhat surprised.

‘Yes, well—it’s in a warehouse full of fakes. It looks like someone was planning to have them distributed to—’

'To make it impossible to find,' Ling Wen concludes for him with a tired sigh. *'That was very crafty.'*

'…Indeed,' Xie Lian agrees. *'There's around 97 pieces here in total, including the Brocade Immortal.'*

'Will you need me to send my people to help you return it?'

'No, I think we can handle it on our own, now that it's been subdued.'

Though honestly, subduing Quan Yizhen was more difficult.

'…I see. Best you bring the robes that the three of you are wearing, too. The Brocade Immortal is crafty—it'll try to disguise itself to trick you.'

'Really? ' Xie Lian raises an eyebrow. *'You think so?'*

The robes he's currently wearing are the same black set he made in Ghost City—and given that he was by Hua Cheng's side when that happened—

(Even if the Ghost King was asleep after…well…)

—Xie Lian doubts they could have been tampered with. The same goes for the others…

But he makes no attempt to argue that point, his expression turning slightly grim.

'Alright—I need to take someone back to my shrine. As soon as we've finished that, we'll bring the items to the Heavens.'

'Be careful, your highness—and be sure to hurry. Things are…' She trails off, hesitant. *'Things are complicated. It's best if you finish this business as soon as possible.'*

Complicated?

It almost sounds as though…there's something she's wary to discuss with him.

Xie Lian *wants* to inquire, but…

'We'll hurry, don't worry.'

He lets go of Quan Yizhen, helping the general back to his feet before brushing himself off.

“I need you to pack the rest of the garments up and carry them with you, Ruoye can handle the Brocade Immortal—and Lang Ying? Stay close to me, it isn’t safe.”

Lang Ying draws close as Quan Yizhen moves to do as he’s told, though slightly more sluggishly than before—still reeling from what he saw.

And when Xie Lian takes the child’s hand, he squeezes tightly, maybe to comfort him, but—

Really, to steady himself.

Thunder rumbles over the city of Langling ceaselessly. A city known for beautiful, mild summers—

But when the weather turns, it’s *loud* , sending the citizens running inside for cover, taking shelter under roof eaves and alleyways to escape the downpour.

A god stands in his temple, bloodstained armor gleaming with every flash of lightning.

“Y-Your eminence,” one of the mortal priests of the temple falls to his knees with shock, eyes wide. “You honor us!”

It’s rare—nearly unheard of—for a god to descend in their true form.

The general barely even spared them a look.

There’s no point in asking them if they’ve seen anything.

If that bastard wanted to stay hidden, he would have.

Instead, he walks past them—straight out the temple doors.

Not even seeming to notice when the rain beats down on him.

He walks down the city streets, boots landing heavily with every step, making no attempt at hiding his presence.

Mortals peek through shop windows, peering from behind their doors, taking in a rare, terrifying sight.

A god, openly walking among them.

But, despite Pei's reputation for being friendly among mortals—

No one approaches him.

Not with that look on his face.

His hand never leaves the pommel of his sword.

CRASH!

The lightning flashes so bright, it almost seems to bathe the entire city in a brief ocean of flame.

The ocean churns violently before him when he reaches the docks, white foam bubbling up each time it crashes against the rocks.

The fake hairpin quivers in his grip as he stands there, staring down at the black, endless waters.

"This is what you wanted, right?"

"You like it when people walk into your traps, don't you?"

His voice trembles, swallowed by the storm until he tilts his head back, roaring against the wind.

"WELL I'M HERE!"

If this is a trap, he willingly jumped inside.

"OR DO YOU ONLY LIKE IT WHEN YOU CAN AMBUSH SOMEONE?!"

The sea roils and smashes against the shore, but—

No Blackwater.

Even when Pei reaches out with defense arrays, feeling around for even the weakest ghost in the city—

He finds none.

"…" Pei hangs his head, his jaw locked so tightly—it aches.

"…I know he didn't make it easy for you." He mutters under his breath.

He wouldn't have.

Shi Wudu would have fought tooth and nail to get back to his brother.

And Pei doesn't have the strength to believe it—but part of him wishes Shi Wudu would have fought to get back to him.

"Did that make it less satisfying for you?" He mutters, looking up at the churning storm overhead. "So now you have this SICK need to torment the PEOPLE WHO CARED ABOUT HIM?!"

Pei has never been a vengeful person.

Some things just go hand in hand with life and death.

You have to let them go, or you'll get dragged down in it.

He knows.

He *knows* .

He's known that for such a long time, but—

If He Xuan was before him now, Pei Ming wouldn't use magic.

He wouldn't use a blade.

He would use his bare hands.

And it's not the pain he can't let go of. Or the anger. If he could, he would.

It's *him* .

It's the first time in nearly a millennia that Pei just wishes—so much—that he could follow someone to the grave.

Because carrying on without them is so *hard* .

And no matter what he says, no matter how hard he screams into the storm—no one answers him.

Like it's all some sort of cruel joke.

Like the only reason for bringing that hairpin to his altar was to drag him out here on some absurd hope.

Hope for what, Pei doesn't even know.

He's soaked to the bone from the rain, hair sticking to his forehead, the back of his neck—but his body doesn't let him feel the cold.

And yet somehow, it's always cold anyway.

FLASH!

A perfect streak of lightning strikes the sea in the distance, setting the water alight.

And for that brief moment before the thunder crashes, when silence settles over the bay, broken only by the wind, he hears—

Pei hears crying.

Quiet, but distinct weeping.

When he turns his head, there's no one else around. Except for…

On the other end of the docks, there's a hunched figure. Legs dangling over the side, hunched, hugging themselves tightly against the rain.

Looking like only one harsh blow of the wind could push them off and into the churning waters below.

A…mortal.

Why…?

But the closer Pei looks, he sees…

Long, jet black hair, curling…

Curling slightly, now that it's wet.

And it isn't rational.

There's no sense in it.

And yet…

His feet move on instinct, carrying him across the docks in an instant.

Heart pounding in his chest, filled with that horrible, irrational lurch of hope.

He’s too short, his frame isn’t broad enough, but—

It isn’t until Pei grabs the stranger by the shoulder, yanking him around, that the spark in his chest is blown out.

Staring back at him is a white mask, it’s face carved into a frown, and —

In the rain, it looks like tears are pouring down.

Pei flinches, stumbling back—just as quickly as the stranger turns away, convulsing with silent sobs.

What…?

What is some kid doing out here?

And why is he wearing that mask? He—?

He isn’t running from Pei either. Doesn’t seem terrified by the sight of an enraged god of war, no—

He just keeps *crying* .

“…Is this some sort of trick?” The general inquires coldly. “Or a sick joke?”

CRASH!

Lightning flashes again.

Illuminating his face, and the white mask staring back at him.

And Pei finds himself struck with the sudden urge to make it *shatter* .

“ANSWER ME!”

No answer comes. And—

Anger and confusion swirl inside of him in conflicting currents, forming a maelstrom of pain.

He reaches out, snatching the stranger by his shoulders, giving him a hard shake.

Enough that it should knock the mask loose, and yet…

It remains firmly in place.

If he’s just some mortal, why doesn’t he just say so?! If it’s Blackwater, then why hasn’t he attacked already?!

Pei shakes him again, this time even harder, the mortal’s head whipping back and forth. “WHY WON’T YOU JUST—?!”

Then, he freezes.

Feeling a hand pressing against his cheek, skin like ice, trembling from the cold.

And it feels—

Familiar .

Fingertips brushing against the beginnings of a beard, remembering—

'No.'

'What do you mean, no?!'

Whining, trying to burrow underneath where his lover had buried his face in the sheets, hoping to steal a kiss.

'It's itchy.'

'Shui-Xiong...don't be mean...'

'Then shave.'

He would protest, claim that his friend was cruel beyond all measure, a real tyrant, and—

And Shi Wudu's hand would come up from under the sheets, just like this—gently stroking his cheek before shoving him away, and telling him to stop complaining.

Violet eyes stare through the storm, wracked with pain.

CRASH!

"You..." He whispers, unsure—his heart twisting unfaithfully in his chest, caught between two poles of hope and despair.

Briefly, he covers that freezing, trembling hand with his own.

And his heart sinks.

It's not him.

This hand is too small. His—

His palms were always soft, and his fingers were slender, but—

This is the hand of a teenager, not—

Pei shoves the hand away, swallowing down a sob.

Not *him* .

"Who are you?!"

That mask stares back with no feeling, no expression—he can't even see the eyes that lay beneath.

(And if he could, he would have been spared so much sorrow.)

The stranger doesn't answer. Just reaches for his face again, only to be slapped away even more harshly.

"WHY WON'T YOU JUST—?!"

Pei goes to shake him again, only for the stranger to go...completely limp.

Head lolled back, only sitting up because of Pei's unrelenting grip on his shoulder.

"..."

He gives him another good shake, and gets no answer.

When he checks for a pulse, he finds one, but...

Even in the freezing cold of the rain, the skin beneath the teenager's jaw is scorching.

And his heartbeat is rapid, but weak.

Why...?

Why would a sick, freezing teenager be out here on the docks, alone...in a storm?

And if it was one of Blackwater's clones, or the monster himself—he would have attacked by now.

Or, at the very least—not allowed himself to be so defenseless.

CRASH!

The sky flashes, and Pei's stomach grows heavy with shame.

It's...just a kid.

Just some poor, sick teenager that he screamed at, possibly concussed, and slapped away until he passed out.

"..."

A great general of the north, indeed.

Pei sits back with the limp form of the teenager gathered up in one arm, hiding his face in his hand.

He can't keep doing this.

He can't, he—

He could have killed the mortal, if he'd had even a fraction less restraint.

Slowly, he rises to his feet, the teenager carefully cradled in his arms.

He feels so pitifully light, shivering, even when he's unconscious.

The priests in the temple of Ming Guang don't know how to respond when their god returns, soaked to the bone—

With the form of a teenager clutched in his arms, face hidden behind a white mask.

"...Your eminence—?"

The general ignores them, laying the youth down.

There's a low couch, and with a snap of his fingers, the teenager is completely dry.

"Someone call a doctor. Now."

He has no energy to put any inflection in his words—but his voice is low, harsh.

Enough so to frighten the priests into action, scrambling to obey.

The stranger still shivers, rolling onto his side, curling up with his arms wrapped around his chest. For a moment, Pei wonder's if he's awake, but...

From the sound of his breathing, he would guess not.

The general sighs, sitting on the edge of the couch beside him.

With another snap of his fingers, his own cloak is dry—enough so for him to drape it over the teenager. Not much of a blanket, but—

Better than nothing.

Pei hangs his head, his face in hands.

He...

His fingers knot in his hair, anguished.

He almost killed the kid.

There's stirring at the edge of the temple after a few moments—enough to draw his attention, hoping it's one of the priests returning with a doctor, but...

It's just some kid.

A gangly teenager in yellow robes, peeking through the doors, and when he sees the masked stranger...

"Oh, thank god!" He cries, rushing over. "I was looking for him every—!" He only seems to notice the god when he's a few feet away, his eyes bulging out of his head, all color fading from his expression.

"...where..."

Pei stares him down, arching one eyebrow.

Immediately, the boy drops to the ground, bowing on his hands and knees, his head turned down.

"G-General Ming Guang!"

Pei isn't exactly surprised by the reaction. Aside from the mandate to not reveal one's identity to mortals—it tends to startle them.

"You know him?"

Normally, he's rigid about hiding his own identity when he's among mortals. Even among lovers he's had in the past, but...

When he descended to Langling, he had done so with the intention of being found, even if...

The person he thought was calling him didn't appear.

"..." The teenager lifts his head, nodding cautiously.

"What's his name?"

The boy opens his mouth to reply immediately—then winces, shutting it. Pei waits expectantly, watching the young man open and shut his mouth multiple times, his face turning red.

"...Are you ill?"

"...Pei Yuan..." He finally answers, his expression...bafflingly sad.

Pei's eyebrows shoot up, nearly disappearing into his hairline.

"...Pei?" He questions, silently repeating the other half of that name in his head.

...Yuan?

"S-small world..." The kid laughs nervously.

Not that small—the Pei family is old, and for a time, it was vast. Not through the General's own doing, but there was a period in Xuli where you couldn't walk more than a few miles without running into a Pei.

Now, they're far more rare.

"...How do you two know each other?"

“Um…” The teenager glances down at his friend, limp on the couch, then back up at the god, struggling to find his words—just as one of the priests returns with a doctor, frowning at the sight of a civilian intruding upon the temple while Pei Ming is present.

"Jin Feng!" He barks, "Can't you see a martial god has graced our temple with his presence?! What makes you think you can barge right in—!"

"I was asking him questions." Pei cuts the priest off, holding up one hand. "He seems to know the kid."

"…You mean it's Pei Yuan?"

Langling isn't a prevalent city in the world of cultivation, with few temples, and even fewer cultivators, with the nearest sects being in Gusu and Qinghe. As such, while Pei does have a temple here—it only has two priests, and six disciples.

And one of them, a dark haired teenager with a perpetually cynical expression—bows deeply to Pei, but sends a slight frown towards the boy on the couch.

"I didn't recognize him with the mask…"

Pei raises an eyebrow, reaching down to pull it off, but—

It won't budge.

He frowns, curling his finger around the edge, trying to apply more force, but—

"Don't!" Jin Feng cries out, starting to reach forward—but then hesitating, remembering that he can't simply put his hands on a martial god. "You'll hurt him!"

That makes the general hesitate.

"…What?"

"He's a real lowlife, general," One of the cultivation disciples shrugs, crossing his arms over his chest. "He's on the edge of Qi Deviation. The only reason he hasn't is because his golden core is shattered."

"It's not!" Jin Feng glares. "You don't know what you're talking about, if you did, you'd be sorry—!"

"Then what is he talking about?" Pei interrupts, giving both teenagers a sharp look.

"…" Jin Feng grits his teeth, clearly struggling with his words. "Pei… Pei Yuan was…a…cultivator…"

He swallows hard, glaring at the others. “But…he was kicked out…of his…clan. He’s got some sort of…punishment, and the mask just…shows up sometimes. But…” He rounds on the disciple with a glare. “He saved my and my sister’s lives! He’s NO lowlife!”

“Then maybe you should do him a favor and let him off himself next time,” the disciple sneers back at him. “He’s already tried twice. He was probably going to throw himself off of those docks, so why not just—!”

“Enough!” One of the priests barks harshly. “Deng Su! You will not speak so disgracefully in front of our general, I won’t have it!”

“But—!”

“You might have great talent, but that is NO excuse to shame us. From my own future son-in-law…” he scowls, bowing deeply to Pei Ming. “Our deepest apologies, your eminence…”

“He isn’t a cultivator under our temple,” Deng Su glares. “If his clan saw fit to slap him with a punishment like that, he probably doesn’t deserve any sympathy.”

It’s an odd punishment, Pei won’t argue that, but…

“…He’s one of Ming Guang’s worshipers!” Jin Feng declares. When the general looks back at him, he straightens his stance nervously. “He prays to you every day!”

He’s…oddly comfortable with speaking to Pei, compared to the others. The priests are overly respectful—the disciples won’t speak to him directly, but…

Jin Feng looks him in the eye, even if he seems nervous.

Impressive, for such a young man.

(Unless he’s already become acquainted with one god, that is.)

Aside from that, Pei’s stomach sinks with even heavier guilt.

He…treated one of his own worshippers in such a way?

“…As long as he’s in Langling, you’ll provide him with whatever he needs.”

The priests stiffen with shock. “But—general—!”

“Do you think you have the right to question my orders?”

The priests look at one another, shaking their heads.

“…No, your eminence. Forgive us.”

“Good.” Now that the doctor has finished his work, Pei looks away from the rest of them, his focus settling on the teenager lying beside him, and Jin Feng.

“The rest of you can leave us.”

“Sir—?”

“Now.”

There’s hesitation—but eventually, they obey, slowly filing out.

“…” Once they’re gone, Pei looks at Jin Feng, his gaze evaluating. “This kid doesn’t seem that much older than you.”

Jin Feng’s smile is slightly strained.

“He’s older than he looks, General…”

“Just what could he have done to earn such a punishment?”

“…” Jin Feng looks away, scratching the back of his head. “To be honest? He won’t talk about it with me—so I don’t really know, but…”

He locks his jaw, straightening his back stubbornly.

“Whatever it was, I don’t think he was treated well, where he came from.” Pei raises an eyebrow, and he continues. “He was hurt when he first got here—and really sick, so sick, he could barely move. But when I tried to help him…he was afraid.”

Jin Feng bites his lip, like the memory pains him.

“It was days before he even let me close enough to clean his wounds—even though they were pretty bad. So…”

Pei Ming looks down, staring at the blank, seemingly unfeeling surface of his mask.

“…I think whatever it was that he did—it wasn’t bad enough to deserve this."

"…" Pei hasn't been able to look up, staring at that blank, covered face.

He said it only appears sometimes, didn't he?

Just what kind of face is under there, anyway?

Curiosity gnaws at him, but he doesn't dare try to pull it off again.

'Pei Ming.'

He's blocked nearly everyone from accessing his private communication array aside from Ling Wen, but…

There's one person who can reach anyone, anywhere.

'Your majesty.'

'Was there a disturbance in Langling?'

If Pei Ming was younger, he would have told him.

He would have asked Jun Wu about what kind of punishment from a cultivation clan could cause something like this.

There was a time when he leaned heavily on The emperor's guidance.

At some point, he stopped—and there's no one else left who remembers those days.

Except for Yushi Huang, maybe. But she—

Pei doubts she was paying attention back then, when he followed Jun Wu's guidance like a stray dog.

A soldier, who suddenly had no orders to follow. No wars to fight.

Jun Wu was structure, and Pei Ming craved that when he was young.

But Jun Wu was very, very different back then.

The emperor—everything about him—it's like a wheel.

When you're up, you're up. But when you come down, you're crushed beneath the spokes.

He has phases.

Ling Wen thinks he's two-faced, but Pei has never agreed with that.

He can be, and he'll always choose manipulation over direct confrontation—but…

When the emperor is in a good phase—he's a genuine person.

When Pei first ascended, it was like that.

He was patient, wise—the best teacher Pei had ever experienced.

Pei trusted him completely.

The first time he saw Jun Wu change was eight hundred years ago.

The day Pei Ming walked into the Grand Martial Hall, and found that the Emperor had slaughtered his own hounds.

It was the first time he witnessed Jun Wu showing any lack of control.

And he wept for the beasts.

Pei had been a young man then, standing in the hall, watching with confusion as Jun Wu wept for the very animals he once loved, and now had killed.

Pei Ming isn't prone to pity, and doesn't often interfere in the affairs of others.

But Xie Lian was always different.

Because Pei knew.

He knew that the punishment was cruel, even as the emperor delivered it with a gentle smile.

He knew that, if Xie Lian had committed the same actions at any other time, when the emperor hadn't been in that state—

His punishment would have been very different.

But not very long after—probably only thirteen years later—

Suddenly, the emperor was back to himself.

Kind. Attentive.

He—

He helped Pei grieve for Qing Yuan.

No one else knows, he never took any credit for it, but he did.

He even…

He even helped Pei set up a grave for them. There were no remains to be held there, but…

Pei still visits the site, a temple just outside of Qinghe. Where Qing Yuan always…

He wanted to bring Shi Wudu there—even if he never got the chance.

And for centuries, he was himself.

Four centuries, to be exact.

Then, he had another low period. Dark era. Whatever you want to call it—

He was cruel again.

Nan Yang bore the brunt of it at the time, though not so severely as Xie Lian had before.

And the more Pei Ming watched, it was like…

Jun Wu seemed almost infuriated that Nan Yang never put a foot wrong.

If he was given an order, he obeyed it to the letter. If he failed a mission, he would immediately accept any punishment without complaint.

Even when he was given an absolutely horrific assignment in Yong'an—he never asked for relief, or assistance.

Pei offered to descend to help him, back then—and the emperor refused to allow it.

That was when Pei realized—

Jun Wu *wanted* to watch him fail.

But even when he failed—

Nan Yang would just apologize, and try again until he succeeded.

The only torture that seemed effective was forcing him to spend more time with Xuan Zhen, assigning the two to deal with a plague that had swept the continent.

Nan Yang wasn't even the one who solved it in the end, it was Xuan Zhen, who ended up on the path to studying medicine after that, but…

A few years later, he was himself again.

Almost like the flip of a switch.

It didn't surprise Pei then, that the emperor took someone new under his wing. That there was a desire to mentor someone yet again.

And Shi Wudu was a new acquaintance back then—but not quite close enough where Pei watched them very closely.

Back then, it never occurred to him.

But it certainly did later.

Pei Ming has known Jun Wu for nine centuries. He's worked with him longer than anyone at this point.

And this is the longest, lowest period that the emperor has ever had.

Building tension. Escalating pressure on his subordinates, and...

While Jun Wu can't connect what happened with Blackwater to the emperor--

Shi Wudu was afraid of him, before the end. Pei Ming could tell, for one simple reason;

The Water Master became far more confrontational.

There are three responses to fear: Denial, attack, and retreat.

Pei was trained to develop a neutral response to fear. It rarely consumes him, or impacts his decisions. Xie Lian is similar.

People like Shi Qingxuan will nearly always retreat.

And people like Shi Wudu—fear makes them aggressive.

Not to mention the fact that he was keeping secrets. Disappearing for periods of time, and never explaining.

And all that time, the pressure on Pei from the emperor was only *increasing* .

The same with Ling Wen, and...

Now, the Crown Prince of Xianle as well.

Pei Ming doesn't expect most of the Heavenly Court to understand what's going on. He doesn't pretend to think *he* understands all of it, because he knows he doesn't.

But he's worked hand in hand with Jun Wu longer than anyone, and he understands more than people think.

He understands who Jun Wu targets, and why.

Jun Wu likes talent. He likes the sparkle and attention that comes from something new, and untainted. He likes being *needed* , and watching something grow.

Until he's no longer needed.

But if there's one thing Jun Wu hates...

It's someone who thinks for themselves.

A dog that stops and considers a command, rather than immediately following.

And while there are many reasons that he and the emperor have grown apart over the years, first and foremost—it's that Pei has never followed him blindly.

He's never disobeyed. Never betrayed Jun Wu's commands.

But he's always asked questions. Or expressed it when he didn't agree.

And while many, many others avert their gaze in submission to Jun Wu's will—Pei never viewed following his orders to mean adopting his views.

He's never once been afraid of him, either.

And while many would say that Jun Wu overworks Pei, treating him like nothing more than an effective sword—

Pushing him to exhaustion is very different from pushing the limits of what Pei is *willing* to do.

Jun Wu has shown awareness of what those limits are, and has intentionally avoided them in a way that he hasn't with others.

For decades, that's left them in a neutral, tense state.

With Pei as a dutiful soldier for the Heavens—and Jun Wu careful in the ways that he uses him.

But Pei doesn't trust him.

Not because of what Ling Wen sees, which is Jun Wu in a *bad* state—someone two-faced, manipulative, and calculating.

But because of what Pei has *always* seen.

Someone inherently unstable.

Who can't resist impulses. Someone controlled by fear.

'...I thought Blackwater was here,' Pei replies calmly. *'I came to kill him—but it turns out I was wrong.'*

There's a brief pause, then Jun Wu's response is smooth, if not slightly pointed.

'I said I would be the one to handle He Xuan.'

'I heard you.'

There's a long period of silence, and when it's clear that Pei Ming isn't going to apologize for such a rare show of disobedience, the emperor chooses not to address it at all.

'The blockade has failed. The only thing we can do now is attempt to deal with the problem directly.'

'Fine.'

'I want you to—'

'Go to Mount Tonglu.' Pei concludes for him, *'Don't worry, I never*

expected you to go yourself.'

'I think you need to reconsider your tone, Ming Guang.' Jun Wu says this, just as his own voice turns harsh—cold.

'Yeah...' Pei sighs, his eyes still locked on that mask below him, the unsteady throb of Pei Yuan's pulse in the side of his neck.

Someone who was mistreated.

Punished unfairly.

Left alone here to die.

It doesn't feel so different now than it did eight centuries ago.

Walking into the emperor's chambers, and seeing two loyal, discarded beasts, bleeding on the floor.

And when the emperor wept, Pei Ming asked him why he had done it—when he clearly still cared for the animals.

His response had been chilling in its simplicity;

'They didn't love me the way they did before.'

Almost childlike.

'I guess my tone might not be fantastic after a century of being worked like a dog, or losing Shi Wudu. I'll go to Mount Tonglu for you, but I don't know what attitude you expect me to have.'

The one good thing about having a direct personality is that no one expects you to be subversive.

He plays up the exhaustion and the grief—and Jun Wu will take him at face value.

Which he clearly does.

'...I'm not ignorant to the fact that it's been difficult lately.'

Of course he isn't.

Pei fights the urge to roll his eyes.

Nearly all of it has been his fault.

'...After this situation is dealt with, I expect things will be quiet for quite some time. And I've been thinking of giving you a reward for your efforts.'

'...A reward?'

'Have you forgotten so quickly about Pei Xiu? ' Jun Wu muses, taking Pei's silence to mean that he's gotten the general's attention. *'He hasn't been doing well during his banishment. But, if you wrap up this situation...I think you could handle keeping him in line if he returns.'*

It's incredibly corrupt, given the circumstances of Pei Xiu's banishment—but Pei is curious.

'You'd give me that for going to Mount Tonglu for you?'

It's rare that Jun Wu attempts to bargain with him like this—and while the prospect of going to Tonglu is difficult, he...

He can't imagine Jun Wu actually ending someone's banishment for that—even if it was a life threatening mission. Pei has had plenty of suicide missions before, and still—

'No. I have something specific I want from you while you're there.'

Pei Ming waits, listening.

'There's a strong possibility that Hua Cheng will approach Mount Tonglu.'

That isn't surprising, given that he's a Ghost King—he might want to re-enter the mountain himself, and come out more powerful than he was before.

'And he might bring Xianle with him.'

That's...less logical to Pei Ming.

He hasn't had the chance to spend much time with the two together, but one thing is clear—

Hua Cheng cares for the crown prince, and his intentions are clearly romantic in nature.

Pei Ming *doubts* he would bring Xie Lian somewhere like—

'If he tries that, I want you to kill him.'

Pei Ming pauses, his mind going blank.

'...Kill him?'

'Hua Cheng.' The Emperor repeats calmly. *'If he brings Xianle to the Kiln—it will be so he can consume him.'*

'Consume him...?'

'Xianle's cultivation level was always high,' Jun Wu explains carefully. *'And while his shackle cuts off his ability to use his own spiritual power, he's still been cultivating for eight centuries continuously.'*

Oh.

Pei's eyes grow round.

Oh.

Meaning that Xie Lian, the 'laughing stock of the three realms,' often viewed as among one of the weakest of the martial gods...most likely has the largest reserves of spiritual power of anyone alive.

He just can't *access* them.

But if Hua Cheng consumed him in the Kiln...

He can see what Jun Wu is trying to say.

'…And if it comes down to it…you're asking me to—?'

'Kill Hua Cheng. You're the only one other than myself who could possibly manage that. If you do—the Heavens will forever be in your debt.'

There's something odd about the request.

If Hua Cheng wanted to 'consume' the crown prince—Xie Lian's shackles leave him nearly defenseless.

Shackles that Jun Wu placed upon him.

If the emperor was so worried—why not remove them?

And with their power imbalance being what it is—

When Pei Ming went to Ghost City, where Hua Cheng was nearly all powerful—Xie Lian seemed perfectly at ease. More so than he does in the Heavens.

If the ghost king was going to consume Xie Lian—why hasn't he already done it?

There's no logical explanation for that. Pei Ming is just expected to accept the order at face value.

And yet, he gets the *real* bottom line out, and he doesn't know why, but—

Jun Wu does not, under *any* circumstances, want those two in the Kiln at the same time.

'…Understood.'

He's been quiet for so long, Jin Feng jumps when he moves again, taking one of Pei Yuan's hands, still limp, and pressing it against his cheek.

Just as he did before, on the docks.

Trying so hard to understand *why* he reacted that way, and then—

Then, Pei realizes what he's doing—letting the teenager's hand go with a sudden flush of self awareness.

"I didn't mean…"

(It seems even more out of line, remembering how Jin Feng said the kid was afraid of being touched.)

"It's okay," Jin Feng laughs awkwardly, looking away. "He wouldn't mind."

He sounds almost dejected saying that, and when Pei Ming puts two and two together, well…

The pieces aren't that hard to connect.

The kid seems desperate to protect Pei Yuan, who is apparently…a rather devoted worshiper of Pei Ming.

Of course—it's just silly teenage jealousy. Pei Ming doesn't care to mingle with mortals that way, not recently. And even if he did…

He's done with all of that, now.

"You're leaving?" Jin Feng questions as the god rises to his feet.

"Don't you want to wait until…?"

He falls silent, and Pei sends the teenager sleeping on the couch one last lingering look, shaking his head.

"I have duties to attend to. But…" He reaches into his sleeve, turning around, and holding something up in front of Jin Feng's face.

A golden hairpin.

"If you see something like this, pray to me, tell one of the priests—I don't care, I'll come looking for it."

Jin Feng seems to hesitate—then, he nods.

"…And what about the cloak? You left it—"

"He can keep it," Pei Ming mutters, disappearing through the temple doors. "He needs it more than me."

"…" Jin Feng sits back, letting out a shaky, terrified breath (one that he'd been holding since he first saw Pei Ming.) "Holy hell," he mutters, his eyes sliding over to Shi Wudu as he carefully—gingerly lifts off the mask.

Now that Pei Ming is out of sight—it slips right off. Revealing the fallen God's face. Pale. Bruised. Flushed with fever, though not as badly as the day before.

"…I get it now," Jin Feng mumbles, tossing the mask aside with a clatter, trying his best not to sulk.

Shi Wudu never explicitly said he was in love with the guy—

(Even if it was painfully obvious.)

—But *that* display?

Yeah. He gets it now, loud and clear.

"…Coulda mentioned he looks just like the divine statues though," he mutters, fiddling with his hair.

If he had…

Jin Feng scratches at his own cheek, smooth—unable to grow a beard yet, even if he tried.

…He can’t say he had his hopes *up* , but now they’re nonexistent.

It’s a few hours before Shi Wudu wakes back up again, grunting tiredly.

His head…

He rolls onto his stomach, throat and wrists stinging sharply, groaning as he presses his face into the couch cushions.

Did they really spend the night in one of his temples again? This is gonna be a pain to explain to Shi Qing—

The mortal’s eyes snap open wide.

“Pei?!”

He sits straight up, wincing and grasping his head, clutching the blanket around him, but…

It only takes a moment for him to remember where he is, and why he’s here, the light in his eyes quickly fading.

But when he breathes in—

“…He was here,” Shi Wudu breathes.

“…You can recognize him by smell?” Jin Feng mumbles, half depressed, otherwise impressed.

Shi Wudu pulls the cloak tighter around himself.

Then…on the docks…that wasn’t a dream?

The fallen god lowers his head, pressing his cheek against the cloak.

“He actually came…”

“You thought he wouldn’t?” Jin Feng stands up, starting to rummage around for some food. “He ordered the priests to take care of you, even though he had no idea who you were…” He sighs as he kneels down by a few supply crates, scratching his head. “I’ll admit it, he’s amazing.”

In spite of everything, for the first time since he found his sister at the Terrace of Cascading Wine—what feels like an entire lifetime ago—

Shi Wudu smiles, pressing his face into the fabric of the cloak, breathing it in.

It smells just like him.

"…He is," he agrees softly.

"…" Jin Feng glances back at him over his shoulder, not sure what to make of the situation, but…

It's the first time since the former Water Master has arrived in Langling that he hasn't looked…hollow.

So, he'll take it.

"Why didn't you show him the hairpin on the docks?"

"…He would have taken it," Shi Wudu admits.

And possibly mistaken Shi Wudu for an enemy. He nearly rattled him half to death out there anyway, and…

While Shi Wudu wasn't opposed to that idea at the time—he couldn't do that to Pei.

It would break him, if he knew.

And since the pin was the last thing he had left from him…

Shi Wudu couldn't have given it up. Not willingly.

The cloak sits heavy around his shoulders—warm.

(Well, it *was* the last thing he had left from him.)

"Well, he said he'd come back if I told someone I saw it, so…"

Jin Feng shrugs. He almost told him the truth back there, but…he had assumed that, if Shi Wudu didn't show him on the docks—it was for a reason.

And even though he's right…

He's confused.

"But if you weren't going to give it to him…why offer it, then steal it back?"

When Shi Wudu offered it, he hadn't known what his situation was going to be—and he hadn't been willing to give up the pin forever.

But really…

"…I guess I wanted to see him again," he admits—even if he hadn't been sure that Pei would come.

Pei Ming isn't perfect, and at times he can even be a little corrupt, but…

He has principles. Lines that he won't cross—and they're uncompromising.

Shi Wudu had always assumed that once Pei knew what he had done, he'd…

But…he came.

Shi Wudu swallows hard.

He still came.

"…Did he say anything else before he left?"

It's the most the former god has spoken in a single conversation since he arrived—and Jin Feng isn't quick to let the opportunity slide.

"I tried to get him to stay a little longer, in case you woke up, but…"

Jin Feng sighs. "He said he had orders from the emperor, and he muttered something under his breath about…A Kiln?"

Shi Wudu grows still, turning to look at him directly. "He said what?"

"I…" Jin Feng leans back, holding his hands up. "I don't know, that's really all I heard!"

"Did he say anything about Mount Tonglu?" Shi Wudu questions, suddenly focused. "Anything at all?"

"Mount—? You mean the volcano?" Jin Feng questions, eyes wide. "No—but apparently there was an eruption in the west a few weeks ago."

"…"

Shi Wudu looks away, locking his jaw.

He’s in danger.

He’s in danger, probably being sent to the most dangerous place on earth, alone, and Shi Wudu is just—

His hand balls up into a fist, nails biting into his palm.

“…What the fuck am I doing?” He mutters under his breath, exhausted, but…

There’s newfound determination in his tone, enough that it makes Jin Feng straighten up with surprise.

“Huh—?”

And now, for the first time since he got here—

Shi Wudu snatches the bowl of food in his hands willingly, shoving the first few mouthfuls down.

You don’t have to be a whole person to cultivate.

You don’t even have to be a *good* person.

The only thing you really need to be a cultivator, in the end—is strength.

Shi Wudu’s eyes narrow as he forces himself to swallow the food down.

He just has to find that again.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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Baby Hong'er and Qing Yuan (his mother)

@currant_bliss
JUNKY
2022
Hong'Er ♡
a smol
I'm getting us a snack. Stay right here, mama will be right back!
smol red Koala ♡

CREDIT: JUNKY

Chapter End Notes

thank you to junky for their beautiful artwork, and allowing me to share it!

xoxo, Evie

Birdsong

Chapter Summary

> “Ling Wen Zhen Jun.”
>
> She stiffens with surprise.
>
> (Though maybe not as surprised as she should be.)
>
> Ever since the prince’s return to the Heavens, she’s worked closer with him than anyone—and he’s rarely ever used formal titles with her.
>
> Her quizzical smile slowly fades, even if she still hasn’t set down her pen.
>
> “Your highness, the crown prince.” She replies coolly.
>
> “I didn’t just forget one item,” Xie Lian explains softly. “Ten garments are missing.”
>
> Ninety, instead of one hundred.
>
> “…My mistake, apologies.”

Chapter Notes

> songs from this chapter: poker face

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Each time Xie Lian returns to the Heavens, they seem to grow more and more quiet, with fewer gods lining the streets each and every time.

Most of the martial gods having descended to the mortal realm to assist in the blockade, and the civil gods holed up working overtime.

Quan Yizhen is quiet beside him—has been, since they left the warehouse in Ghost City, only responding to questions when asked.

Xie Lian has grasped the fact that he’s a man of few words to begin with, only speaking about things that genuinely excite him, but…

“…So, you’ve really never seen Yin Yu since his banishment from the

Heavens?" He questions, feeling sorry for making the general carry all of the crates of garments on his own—but he insisted.

Even if the circumstances of Quan Yizhen's relationship with his Shixiong were… *very* different, Xie Lian couldn't help but feel…guilt, hearing how pained the martial god was, seeing an illusion of him.

Remembering how Mu Qing and Feng Xin argued over looking for *him* .

It wasn't like Xie Lian intentionally hid himself all those years.

(Well, after the incident with the circus, and the whole…goat debacle, he did hide for a few years—but not many, and he wasn't hiding from the *Heavens* , just…the authorities of Yong'an and Xuli.)

But at the very least, he knows he should have told Feng Xin that he was *alright* . He—

'I didn't promise to protect you until it got hard.'

Xie Lian swallows thickly.

'I promised to protect you forever.'

But it was that burden, that obligation that Xie Lian was trying to *protect* Feng Xin from. And Mu Qing…

Well.

The last *real* conversation they had, where Xie Lian came even remotely close to being honest…

Ended with Mu Qing in tears.

Before, his friends had to sacrifice too much for him, and now…

Now, Xie Lian doesn't know if he's only bad memories, or a subject of guilt for them both, but…

He can certainly tell that what Quan Yizhen feels for Yin Yu is very different from that.

"…I did see him once."

Quan Yizhen pauses, slowly turning to look at Xie Lian with a slightly closer inspection.

“Actually, he was dressed like you.”

“…Oh?” Xie Lian blinks, a little surprise. “Well, plenty of cultivators wear—”

“No, I mean exactly like you.”

“…Exactly?”

“Even down to the hair.”

Quan Yizhen balances the crate on one arm, reaching over to push a loose piece of hair behind Xie Lian’s hair for emphasis.

The prince doesn’t mind—it’s clear that Quan Yizhen doesn’t mean any harm by it, but it’s a good thing Lang Ying wasn’t—

…

Xie Lian stops walking.

…Why would it have mattered if Lang Ying saw that?

Why is he even worrying about—?

“And Nan Yang hit him.”

Xie Lian whips his head around, shocked. “…He did?!”

That sounds *nothing* like—

“I saw it.” Quan Yizhen confirms, his expression smooth, but his eyes…

Have this strange, heated look, recalling that day.

Not quite angry. If Xie Lian could actually *see* the look on his face, he really wouldn’t know what to make of it.

“So…what’d you do about it?”

“Threw him through the side of a building.”

“Oh, well…”

“It was a hospital.”

Xie Lian deflates slightly, the sheer image that conjures up making him feel a little faint.

“…I see.”

He doesn’t know what makes him feel worse, imagining Feng Xin’s reaction to that, or…

“We’re here.”

Arriving on the steps of the Palace of Ling Wen.

The doors open immediately, which doesn’t particularly surprise him.

Nor does the fact that, while this hall is usually bustling with deputy civil gods—it’s notably quiet.

Ling Wen glances up from a desk in the center of the main hall, a mountain of scrolls behind her.

“…Your highness,” Her smile is tight, even if her tone is friendly. “I see that you made it here safely—I’m glad. But…” She glances over the crates in Quan Yizhen’s arms as he sets them down, beginning to unpack them. “It seems as though one of the garments has slipped away.”

Xie Lian forces himself to smile, even if his heart isn’t in it. “…Is that so?”

“Yes,” Ling Wen frowns, scanning over the piles of clothing. “Should I have my people go looking for it, or—?”

“No.” Xie Lian sighs, rubbing the back of his neck. “That won’t be necessary.”

“I don’t understand what you—?”

“Ling Wen Zhen Jun.”

She stiffens with surprise.

(Though maybe not as surprised as she should be.)

Ever since the prince’s return to the Heavens, she’s worked closer with him than anyone—and he’s rarely ever used formal titles with her.

Her quizzical smile slowly fades, even if she still hasn’t set down her pen.

"Your highness, the crown prince." She replies coolly.

"I didn't just forget one item," Xie Lian explains softly. "Ten garments are missing."

Ninety, instead of one hundred.

"…My mistake, apologies."

"It's unlike you to mistake a detail like that," Xie Lian crosses his arms.

"It's been a long day," Ling Wen shrugs, mimicking the gesture. "Mistakes slip through the cracks."

"But you were certain that one of them was missing," Xie Lian presses, raising an eyebrow.

"…I'm sorry for not quite grasping that it was such a large number of missing items." Ling Wen's tone turns icy. "But I'm not sure I like what you're implying, your highness. Now, is this little game over, or are you going to insult me further?"

"No," Xie Lian shakes his head, reaching into his own sleeves, pulling out the final 'missing' items. "I would never want to waste Ling Wen Zhen Jun's time. Here's the rest."

Ling Wen stares down at the pile on her desk, her expression slowly turning more and more grim.

"Is there a problem?" Xie Lian questions calmly, his hands still braced against Ling Wen's desk. And when she doesn't reply, he sighs.

"I don't enjoy this any more than you do, but it would be easier for both of us if we dropped the pretenses, Ling Wen."

"…Tch."

Ling Wen clicks her tongue, resting her chin on her hand, her expression sour.

"I really can't imagine you enjoying this less than me, but the sentiment, however superficial, is somewhat appreciated."

It's the opposite of superficial, but Xie Lian can't blame her for seeing it that way.

“You’ve been nothing but kind and helpful to me since I arrived here,” Xie Lian replies quietly. “I very much wanted to be wrong. Which is why I don’t understand how you could have done this.”

Ling Wen sits back in her seat, the back legs of her chair creaking slightly as she leans back, then forward again.

She isn’t blind to the way Quan Yizhen is watching her. Not openly aggressive, but with the persistent stare of a guard dog on high alert.

“…Let’s be clear, your highness.” She arches one manicured eyebrow. “You don’t want to know how. You want to know *why* . And without an actual explanation or evidence, I’m not inclined to tell you.”

Ling Wen has always been obstinate.

When she was mortal, people loathed that.

Her superiors. The men who desired her.

More than anyone else, her mother.

"So, if you have an accusation, I suggest you make it."

She raises her chin, refusing to hang her head, and Xie Lian...

He doesn't seem angry, or frustrated with her stubbornness.

He just...

He looks *disappointed* , which is surprisingly difficult to bear.

"Alright, that's fair." He pulls out a chair, taking a seat on the other side of Ling Wen's desk.

As if this is nothing more than a simple meeting.

"I can see how you hid it so well under normal circumstances."

Xie Lian's tone is gentle, and...

"But you've been under so much strain, you started making mistakes. Once I had a suspicion, I put the rest together from there."

...He's being *kind* , which she can't stand.

"Mistakes?"

"On average, you are the least likely to interject or contradict the emperor during a meeting," Xie Lian recalls. "But when I was given this assignment, you protested three times."

"Because I was worried that a friend was being overworked," Ling Wen offers, frowning.

Xie Lian smiles, shaking his head.

"I would believe that coming from Feng Xin or San Lang, but Ling Wen...you're too pragmatic for that."

The civil goddess grimaces.

"With Mount Tonglu open, it's common sense for the emperor to use everyone available."

Not to mention the fact that Pei Ming is far more overworked than Xie Lian, and his assignment was much more difficult.

If Ling Wen wouldn't speak out for her closest friend, why would she speak out for him?

Because it was self motivated.

"And while that only struck me as odd...You made another mistake."

The corners of Ling Wen's mouth tighten, as though she has a bad taste caught on her tongue.

"I don't blame you—the other officials you work with all have decent to good luck," Xie Lian reasons.

"Most of them take it for granted when there's a lucky coincidence, because things like that happen to them all the time. But my luck..."

Ling Wen rests her hand against her forehead, grasping where she went wrong.

"...Is terrible," she mutters, her brow pinched.

So, sending the Half-Maquillage woman to Puqi Shrine...

...Was a critical mistake.

Because a key piece of evidence, one that led him to the Brocade Immortal *all too easily* , was dropped right into his lap.

"So, when she appeared—it was by some form of intervention."

"That could have been anyone."

"Most of the other gods had already left by the time Jun Wu gave me my assignment," Xie Lian points out gently. "There's a limited number of people who even knew I had been given this case."

"Doesn't Crimson Rain always know what you're doing?" Ling Wen's eyes brighten with possibility. "And isn't he always trying to assist you? It's not out of the realm of possibility that he would have sent her."

"I considered that," Xie Lian admits. "If it was San Lang, he would have handled that situation very differently."

First, he *never* would have willingly placed Xie Lian in a situation where he had to touch wares like that.

Second, he can’t imagine the stress it would have caused the Ghost King if he had watched Xie Lian trying on such items to test and see if they were the Brocade Immortal.

"...I know it wasn't him," Xie Lian concludes. "But I do know a god who was unaccounted for in Ghost City recently. A rather powerful one."

When Pei Ming came to ask Hua Cheng for answers after Shi Wudu's death, he didn't come alone. But Ling Wen was nowhere to be seen.

She had 'business' in Ghost City. Something so important, she was willing to allow Pei to confront Hua Cheng on his own.

And even if *Xie Lian* knows that Hua Cheng wouldn't have harmed the general, Ling Wen doesn't have the same kind of faith in the Ghost King as he does.

Implying that whatever she was doing—for whatever reason she was doing it—

It was / *important* ./

"...That's quite a bit of circumstantial evidence," Ling Wen points out dryly. "I was getting a facial. Shi Qingxuan spoke highly of them from their last visit."

Xie Lian can't imagine that they did, and he can't imagine Ling Wen taking the time for self care during a crisis, but—

"It *was* purely circumstantial, until we arrived in the warehouse." Xie Lian shakes his head. "Then, it became very obvious."

He can feel Ling Wen's scowl from across the table, and he leans forward.

"I know you were probably protesting with the emperor because of my history working with fabric," Xie Lian continues, "And I can't blame you. That was part of it. But you know what gave you away?"

Xie Lian taps his finger across the desk, silently ordering Ruoye to unwind, lightly slithering around the perimeter of the desk.

Ling Wen stares at the device, her eyebrows raising. "...Your spiritual device was able to detect—?"

"No. It's nothing Ruoye did." Xie Lian shakes his head. "You couldn't have known, but Ruoye was forged under similar circumstances to the Brocade Immortal."

Ling Wen's eyes snap open wide, glancing from Xie Lian's face, back to the bandage wriggling around on her desk.

She had always *assumed* .

Every martial god owns and operates some sort of device from the emperor. She had been made aware of the fact that Xie Lian hadn't possessed Ruoye during his first ascension, so she always assumed that the device was gifted to him—as a tool to protect himself in exile.

And *that* , she presumed, was the reason that he was able to operate it without spiritual power. But...

"...Excuse me?"

"Ruoye was born from resentment," Xie Lian explains calmly. "Created through death and suffering."

It was soaked in his blood when Bai Wuxiang held him down.

His mother and father had the life squeezed out of them, white silk wrapped around their necks.

And when Xie Lian tried to follow them...

That's when Ruoye was born.

"Ruoye is not a spiritual tool." Xie Lian can't see, but eerily, he maintains eye contact with her just fine.

Ruoye is a demon. A conscious entity.

"Which is why I knew, the moment the Brocade Immortal took on the appearance of Yin Yu, that it was being controlled by you."

Ling Wen squints, fighting the urge to squirm or look away—even if Xie Lian would never know her reaction.

"By me?"

"It wouldn't have been able to operate independently." Xie Lian shakes his head. "Not to that extent. And it didn't try to fool me, knowing I was blind. Or Lang Ying, knowing he was weak. It attempted to distract *Qi Ying* , the only person present who posed a threat."

Meaning the person who was controlling the Brocade Immortal was someone who knew exactly who they were, what their strengths and weaknesses were, and not only did they know about Quan Yizhen's history and attachment to Yin Yu–they knew what the exiled god looked like.

"...I've seen Ruoye move on its own before," Ling Wen counters with a frown. "And I've seen it perform illusionary spells—"

"Ruoye was forged from three souls, not one." Xie Lian corrects her calmly. "Comparatively, the Brocade Immortal is actually rather weak."

Xie Lian can feel Ling Wen stiffen at that, and he leans his elbow on her desk, resting his chin against his hand.

"Does that bother you, Ling Wen Zhen Jun?"

She stares down at the white, snake-like creature, her lips curled. "Is it going to tourniquet your enemies to death?"

Xie Lian's smile is faint, and it holds no mirth.

"Something like that. It's bound to my soul, you see. It's impacted by the shackles, too."

(And it was still able to string up Qi Rong, Ke Mo, and bind Xuan Ji.)

"Without them, Ruoye's strength would be similar to..." Xie Lian hums, thinking it over. "E'Ming, I think. It's hard to estimate." Then, he smiles, laughing with sheepish humility. "But San Lang is far more adept in wielding E'Ming, to be sure..."

Even if he could be *nicer* to the scimitar.

(Ling Wen looks vaguely nauseous.)

He didn't actually wield Ruoye in his fight with Jun Wu before his second banishment—he was too new with the weapon, too wounded by its origins.

But when his soul was in Shi Qingxuan's body, he was able to estimate that, from consuming his blood alone....

Ruoye probably only operates at one tenth of its actual strength at the moment.

(The blood consumption is just another point of similarity that implies it's of the same type as the Brocade Immortal.)

"And, even more importantly, entities like that take qualities from the souls they were forged from." Xie Lian muses, reaching down to rub his fingertip over Ruoye affectionately, making the bandage squirm with delight. "And the soul that forged the Brocade Immortal was..."

Famously *unintelligent* .

"...Not the sort that would create a weapon that would manipulate and deceive on its own."

Ruoye is conscious and aware, just like the Brocade Immortal—but it's *intelligence* comes from Xie Lian.

It's gentle, caring side came from his mother.

And it's protective, stubborn nature— *that* came from Xie Lian's father.

Ruoye can be cruel, too. Violent.

(Because Xie Lian can be violent, and cruel.)

"And it made many other strategic choices last night." Xie Lian continues, even if Ling Wen is no longer arguing.

"It disguised itself based on information *you* would have had," Xie

Lian's shackles bear down on her, like an angry, burning mark of guilt —even if he himself isn't angry, the—

The shackle feels like a terrifying *reminder* of what might be coming.

"I can see spiritual aura and cursed energy on *objects* too," Xie Lian points out, and Ling Wen bites back the urge to swear. "You thought it only came from gods and ghosts. I never told you otherwise."

No, he didn't. It never came up, and—

God/ *damnit* ./

"The person operating the Brocade Immortal didn't know that either. So, it tried to change its shape and texture to trick me," Xie Lian raises an eyebrow.

"It would have done that for anyone, wouldn't it—?"

"But never its color." Xie Lian concludes calmly. "Because it had been operated by someone who knew I was blind."

"Anyone who was observing could have seen—"

"I wore a hood the entire time," Xie Lian shakes his head. "I hid being blind from an entire court for five years. It did that because you already knew I was blind."

"...And how would you even know if it changed color?!" Ling Wen snaps, finally reaching the end of her patience.

"Dye."

"I—what?"

"Dye changes the texture in thread." Xie Lian doesn't miss a beat, staring her down. "A mortal probably wouldn't be able to tell the difference."

But Xie Lian can.

It took him *centuries* to learn the different levels in roughness that came from a certain level of color saturation. For his fingertips to become sensitive enough to feel the difference between hues.

In the beginning, there was no need for him to learn.

When he got his first loom, there was a boy sitting beside him, holding the threads for him while he worked, helping him keep track of which was which, but—

But Xie Lian has been weaving alone for so, so long now.

And he knows the difference.

"But, if I'm wrong, there is one way you could prove it." Xie Lian leans back from the desk as Ling Wen crosses her arms, raising an eyebrow. "You were looking down on us when I called you, yes?"

"I usually do when someone calls me in the Communication Array." She admits.

"The robe that Ruoye had bound when I called you," Xie Lian murmurs, twisting a lock of hair around his finger. "What color was it?"

"..."

Ling Wen's silence makes his heart sink with one final confirmation.

She can't tell him, because she doesn't know.

Xie Lian can't actually *see* Ruoye, but he most commonly wears it around his neck.

Remembering *exactly* how it felt, hanging from it.

Ling Wen couldn't tell him what disguise the Brocade Immortal was wearing—she only sees its *true* form.

A torn, blood soaked robe.

She can't tell him what disguise it wore, because it *can't* disguise itself from her.

In the same way that, just like Xie Lian, she can control a demon without direct contact with it.

Because Ling Wen *created* the Brocade Immortal.

"..." Ling Wen presses her palm against her forehead, letting out a sigh so long and heavy, her entire body seems to sag. "I knew it would probably end like this, when the emperor assigned you the Brocade Immortal Case. But...I thought I'd have more time than this."

Slowly, she glances up at Xie Lian between her fingers.

"...But I believe that you never wanted it to come to this," She admits. "For what it's worth–I've never thought ill of you, your highness."

Xie Lian's smile is slightly strained.

"I could say the same about you."

He certainly never wanted it to come to this. And the moment he began to suspect Ling Wen...

He *badly* wanted to be wrong.

"...Once this gets back to the emperor, I'm finished." She concludes quietly. "Be it exile, or whatever else."

Xie Lian doesn't argue.

“…You made your accusation, and you showed your evidence.” Ling Wen murmurs, her voice even. “I’ll tell you what you want to know, but…Given everything, could I ask you for one thing?”

“What is it?”

“Bai Jing.” Ling Wen pauses. “…The Brocade Immortal, I mean.”

Xie Lian stares, surprised. “Is that his name?”

“Well, most people called him Xiao Bai, but…” The civil goddess shakes her head. “I would like to see it one last time. I only need one day—I’ll remain under your supervision. Then, I’ll turn myself in to the emperor.”

“…” Xie Lian thinks it over. “I don’t have the Brocade—I mean, Bai Jing—with me. If I take you there, I’ll have to bind you.”

Ling Wen places her wrists on the table, “Very well.”

The prince rubs his chin, unsure. “…And you give your word that you’ll do as we’ve agreed?”

Ling Wen holds her palms face up, her tone grave.

“I swear on my honor as a god, your highness. And once this is done, we can have no debts or ill will between us.”

Finally Xie Lian snaps his fingers, and Ruoye flicks to attention, binding her wrists.

“Then it’s a deal.”

Chirp!

Some headaches are worse than others.

Chirp!

On a base level, any headache is just pressure, building in your skull. But sometimes, it’s grinding—like needles digging in just beneath your eye sockets, ramming upwards.

Chirp!

Jun Wu has always *loathed* birds.

He curls up, knees tucked in, hands pressed against either side of his head, waiting for the ache to go away.

If he can just sleep a little longer, it’ll stop on its own.

That’s right.

Chirp!

If he can just sleep…a little longer…

Chirp, Chir—!

“QUIET!”

He sits up with a snarl, a ball of energy flaring in his hand, but—

An endless blanket of stars is what greets him through the window.

No sunrise. No birds.

Just the quiet of the night.

So why did he hear…?

The god groans, pressing the heel of his palm against his temple.

Until he hears soft, familiar laughter.

Like an echo.

“…You really still sleep on the floor, don’t you?”

The emperor doesn’t reply, hunched over on the ground.

“You gave me such a scare on our wedding night…”

He can hear the smile on her voice.

“…When I woke up in bed alone, I thought you’d gotten cold feet. I was ready to call the guards when I got up, and saw you sleeping on the floor…”

He doesn’t look behind him. Doesn’t want to see her face right now.

He doesn’t think he could stomach it.

“You aren’t real.”

His nails scratch divots onto the floor, eyes glaring into the darkness outside.

“You’re dead.”

(You left me.)

“…” His wife flops back on the bed, dark curls spreading out around her. “I’m not,” she agrees. “But does that really make a difference to something like you?”

Not someone.

Some *thing* .

“…Aren’t you tired?” She whispers, staring at the ceiling. “I’m so, *so* tired.”

Yes.

But he can’t *sleep* .

There's too many damn birds—

"Oh!" She sits up with an excited gasp. "Why don't we go visit my father, in the south?"

"Stop it."

"Remember the lake I used to go to when I was a girl? You took me there on our honeymoon—oh, do you think we could bring San Lang—?"

"STOP IT!"

He hunched forward, clutching his head.

It hurts.

(It really, *really* hurts.)

"Don't yell at her."

Hearing that voice—

It's already set his teeth on edge.

"This isn't her fault."

Jun Wu doesn't have to look up at the figure standing in front of him.

Over him.

Doesn't have to see white hair and deep, blazing blue eyes to feel their judgment.

"You aren't real, either."

"And I'm not dead," his Guoshi agrees, kneeling down in front of him. "But you know why we're here, don't you?"

Jun Wu won't look at him.

He *won't.*

His wife throws one arm over her face, letting out a pained sound.

"That boy was so young…what were you thinking?"

Jun Wu won't look at her, either.

"He was older than I was."

"That's not true," she frowns. "You were a grown man, with a wife and children—"

"I'm not talking about that." His fingers tug at his hair, almost painfully.

His Guoshi's eyes never leave him.

It's suffocating.

"It doesn't matter how old you were," he quietly reminds the emperor. "Or how unfair it was. Or how badly you think we treated you."

Jun Wu flinches.

An ancient deity. One who has towered over the earth for two thousand years.

And still, he flinches.

"You have to let that child go."

He's not a *child* anymore.

"Hasn't it been enough?"

"That wasn't me," Jun Wu mutters, almost distracted, as though this is all a mere nuisance to him.

(And it *is* .)

God, he wants to sleep.

"I didn't do any of that, that was all…"

"…Bai Wuxiang?" His wife sits up now, her tone suddenly cold.

"You're not a snake, you know."

He hears her footsteps as she slips out of bed, padding across the floor.

"No matter how many times you shed your skin…"

Fingers grasp the back of his head, yanking it to the side.

Forcing him to look at the fourth person in the room.

The one who is *always* there, watching him from the corner.

Half smiling, half crying.

“You can’t change who you *really* are.”

No. No—

“ENOUGH!”

He shouts, but no one hears.

His head pounds.

And the birds still sing.

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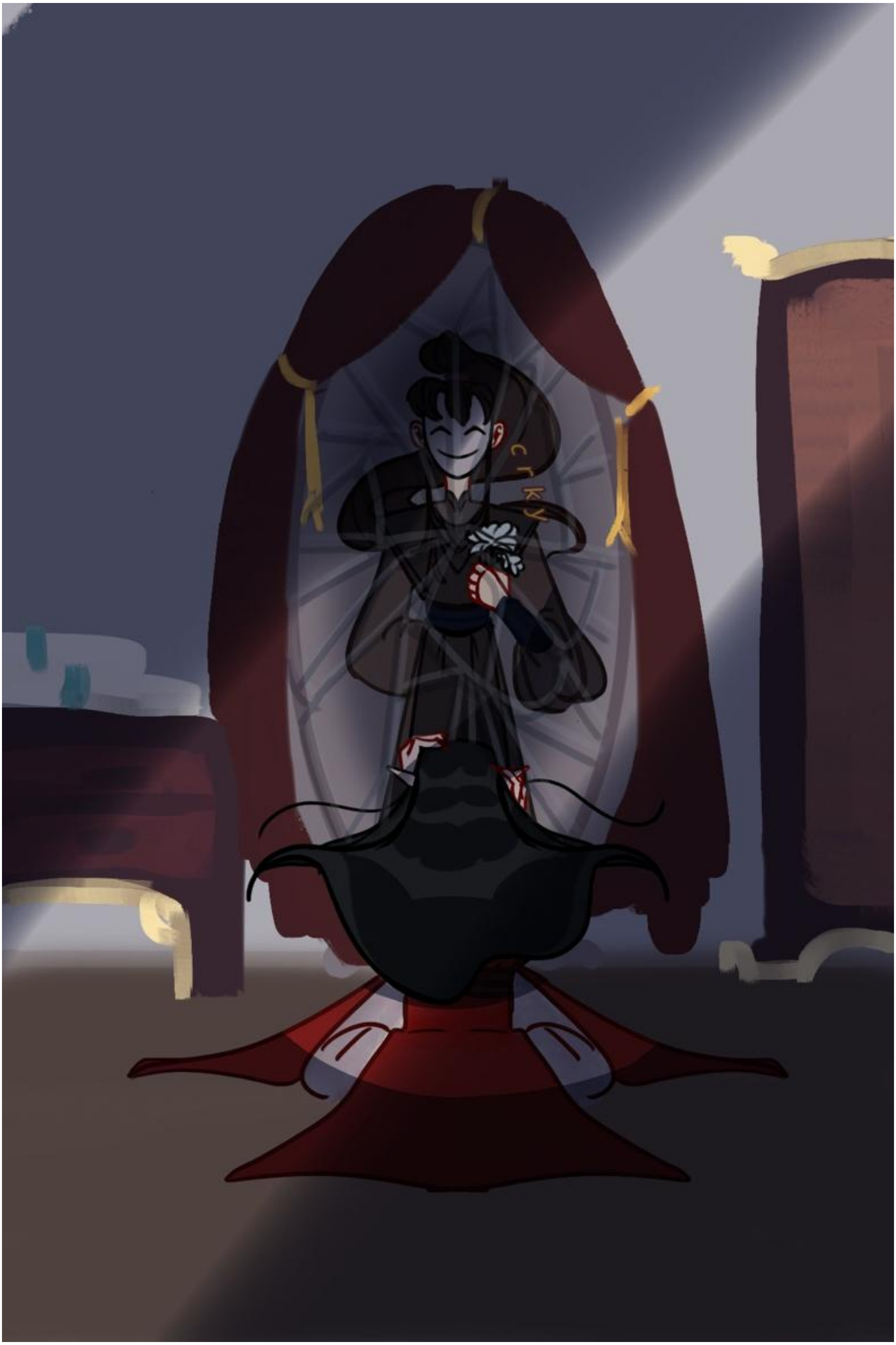

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Chapter End Notes

thanks to abyss for their amazing artwork, and allowing me to share it!

It's Such a Simple Thing to be Happy

Chapter Summary

When they approach Puqi Shrine, Xie Lian can hear the soft rustling of a broom, sweeping off the front porch.

"…Lang Ying? You're doing chores again?"

His eyebrows raise.

What a dutiful child.

Ling Wen looks the shrine over, her expression blank.

"How…quaint."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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"…Lang Ying? You're doing chores again?"

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What a dutiful child.

Ling Wen looks the shrine over, her expression blank.

"How…quaint."

"...Thank you," Xie Lian smiles warmly. "San Lang and Ren Song have been a big help with fixing things up."

"I'm sure..." Ling Wen agrees, following Xie Lian inside, taking a seat at the table. "Where should we begin?"

Xie Lian holds up a finger. "First—I have to make dinner."

Quan Yizhen stiffens slightly from the memory of his last encounter with Xie Lian's cooking, and sensing his wariness, Xie Lian waves him off.

"I have offerings from the villagers the two of you can have if you would rather have that, but Lang Ying hasn't eaten since yesterday."

Xie Lian slips his bamboo hat from his shoulders, hanging it on the hook by the door as he rolls up his sleeves, calling over his shoulder.

"Lang Ying! You've done enough outside, why don't you come help me with the food?"

The child sets the broom down, returning to his side.

Behind them, Quan Yizhen drops down in the chair beside Ling Wen, his arms crossed over his chest, eyes never leaving her face.

If it bothers the civil goddess, she never says so.

"Here," Xie Lian slides a wood block and knife over to Lang Ying. "You can chop these." He hands the boy a couple of onions, while he sets himself to slicing up a head of lettuce.

Lang Ying dutifully obeys, his movements quick and precise, and as they move side by side, Xie Lian speaks up.

"We've had quite a few people visit lately." The ghost hums in agreement, not looking up. "Does Lang Ying mind?"

He gets a soft grunt in response.

"Too noisy. They bother dianxia."

"Ah..." Xie Lian tilts his head. "Which one do you think is the noisiest?"

"The green one," Lang Ying replies immediately.

"Mmm...and which one is the strongest?"

His answer is just as quick.

"The red one."

The prince bites back a smile. "And the most intelligent?"

"The red one," Lang Ying repeats, staring a hole into his cutting block.

"The richest?"

“The red one.”

“I can’t argue with you there...” Xie Lian sighs, lifting one hand to tap his chin. “...And which one is the best looking?”

His response is instant, but firm.

“You.”

Ba-bump.

The prince stares, then lets out a startled laugh. “Besides me!”

“...” Lang Ying looks back down at his block, his knife moving faster. “The red one.”

“Mmmm...” Xie Lian looks away, smiling. “I think so too. San Lang is very good look —”

“Handsome.”

The hard edge to Lang Ying’s voice throws him slightly off kilter.

“...Huh?”

“Handsome is a better word.” Lang Ying mutters, his knuckles knife where they grip the knife.

“You think so?”

“Yes.”

“I see—”

“Does dianxia think so?”

“Oh...” Xie Lian thinks about it. “There are so many words you could use—”

“That he’s handsome.”

Oh .

“I...Well...” Xie Lian clears his throat, “Yes.”

“Yes?”

“He’s definitely the best looking person I’ve met in a long time—”

Thud!

"...Lang Ying?!"

The boy lifts his head from where he slammed it against the countertop, picking bits of lettuce out of his hair.

"...I slipped."

...On what?!

Lang Ying goes back to cutting, not speaking on it anymore—and Xie Lian eventually clears his throat.

"...You like the red one a lot, don't you?"

"En."

"I like him too."

His knife quickens, cutting with more aggression. "Should we invite him over more often?"

"Yes!"

"...Okay," Xie Lian agrees. "But he's busy resting right now, so we shouldn't bother him."

Lang Ying screws up his mouth with annoyance, eyes flashing.

"Oh, and there's no need to call him the red one," Xie Lian shrugs, finishing with his cutting, pushing the lettuce into a pot.

"He's your Hua Cheng gege," he explains lightly, turning around before he can notice the way Lang Ying grips the handle of the knife so tightly, it's reduced to splinter.

He...said...He's never heard him say…

"...You've never called him that before," Lang Ying mumbles faintly.

"...Hua Cheng?" Xie Lian repeats, his eyes wide. "He prefers it when I call him San Lang."

And Xie Lian likes it better, too.

Not because he doesn't like Hua Cheng's name—he does, he thought it was poetic the first time he heard it.

Maybe it's a selfish way to think, but…

No one else calls him San Lang.

Is it horrible that Xie Lian likes that?

"...There's nothing left," Quan Yizhen speaks up, staring at Lang Ying's chopping block. The onions are just...pulverized into a liquid, now. Certainly unusable. "Your knife work is pretty bad..."

"That's okay," Xie Lian shakes his head, gesturing for Lang Ying to follow him. "We're done with most of the cooking anyway. Why don't you come and help me with this?"

Lang Ying trails after him, sending Quan Yizhen an annoyed look.

"Lang Ying, how's your handwriting?"

"..." The child goes still, and Xie Lian smiles, looking up at him expectantly. "...mediocre..."

Gears turn silently in his head, watching as the prince offers him a piece of paper, along with a brush.

"I just realized we don't have an establishment plaque." Xie Lian explains. "Do you think you could make one for me?"

"..." Lang Ying reaches out, picking up the brush, moving at a snail's pace as he reaches towards the page, clearly trying to work out something in his head, but—

His hand freezes, and Xie Lian knows what he's remembering.

The prince's hand, brushing over a certain *tattoo* ...

"...Gege..."

Xie Lian cracks the widest smile, finally hearing *Hua Cheng's* voice, rather than Lang Ying's.

The boy hangs his head, just as—

Xie Lian falls back, clutching his middle as he lets out a full-bellied laugh.

"Gege!"

"T...this is how San Lang rests?" Xie Lian sputters, rolling back and forth. "Y-you've really been taking it easy!"

"Gege tricked me!"

Xie Lian sits up, wiping his eyes as the ghost king retreats onto the porch, still giggling as he follows after him.

"Come now, San Lang—you really weren't trying that hard to be subtle towards the end—!"

"No!" Hua Cheng shakes his head, completely certain. "I was completely in character. Gege used his skills of deduction to force it out of me..."

"Force?!" Xie Lian's ribs ache from laughter. "Shameless!"

Just then, in his hurry to catch up with the calamity, his foot catches on the lip of one of the stairs, sending him lurching forward—

Only to land comfortably in Hua Cheng's arms, the ghost king sitting back on the ground.

And Xie Lian won't think about it until later, but—

He didn't even attempt to brace himself this time.

(Almost as if, if only subconsciously, he knew that someone was going to catch him.)

He sits up in Hua Cheng's arms as the ghost king lets him go, adjusting his hair.

"...Isn't gege angry with me?"

He's in his younger form right now, a teenager of maybe sixteen or seventeen years old, but he still feels strong as he helps the god sit up.

And...oddly familiar.

Comforting.

"Mmm..." Xie Lian swallows down the last of his snickering. "...Were you really resting?"

Hua Cheng nods sharply, his voice completely sincere; “Yes.”

Xie Lian thinks that over, then nods.

“Then I’m not angry.”

The ghost king lets out a low sigh of relief, and the prince continues, “San Lang is always welcome—wherever I am.”

The ghost king’s expression freezes as he stops to stare at him, his eyes round—just as Xie Lian turns his head away, still slightly entangled with Hua Cheng, sitting up between the calamity’s legs, facing away from him.

“Also, San Lang...”

“...Yes?”

“You don’t have to use tricks if you want to hug me,” the prince points out quietly, and though he can’t see it—

The tips of Hua Cheng’s ears turn bright red.

“You can just hug me.”

“...I know dianxia doesn’t like having people that close,” the calamity mutters, looking away.

Says the man who was *just* using the premise of the Brocade Immortal to steal an embrace from him.

Or the one who asked for a *kiss* in exchange for a gambling debt.

But paradoxically, he sounds earnest—and Xie Lian turns around, facing him. “It's alright if it’s San Lang.”

Xie Lian generally *doesn’t* like touching other people that much. He will—often as a form of comfort or affection. But small things. Like a pat on the arm, or a one armed squeeze of the shoulders.

But when it’s Hua Cheng—

The prince leans forward, pulling him into a gentle hug

When it’s Hua Cheng, it’s alright.

(And really, compared to what happened between them in the forge—

a hug is nothing.)

“...” The ghost king is quiet for a moment, eyes round, his lips trembling.

Xie Lian has his face pressed against his shoulder—and he can actually feel the way Hua Cheng’s fingers ball up against the ground, tearing at the grass.

“...San Lang?”

His breaths are suddenly noticeable and quick.

“...Are you al—? San Lang—did you just get smaller?!”

"No," Hua Cheng mutters, but he does *sound* a little higher in pitch, and instead of being around Xie Lian's height sitting down, he's slightly shorter now. Then, when Xie Lian pinches his cheek, he flails slightly, his face turning pink. "Gege...!"

"Sorry, sorry!"

Xie Lian leans back with a small laugh, reaching up to hide it behind his sleeve.

"..." Hua Cheng reaches up to rub his cheek, and while his tone is slightly sulking—he's smiling. "I really didn't think gege would be so happy that I ignored his request."

"Well, San Lang didn't ignore me, you already said you were resting," Xie Lian points out, realizing he's been smiling so widely for the last few minutes that his cheeks are actually sore from it.

Aching from the giddy pleasure of realizing someone actually never *left* .

"...Please forget the entire thing ever happened," Hua Cheng mumbles, sounding extra pitiful, only to cry out in dismay when Xie Lian solemnly replies;

"Absolutely not."

"Gege!"

His laughter drifts across the air as he flops back against the grass, hair pooled around him.

The sunlight falls across him just *so* , and Hua Cheng falls silent, a palpable ache in his expression.

But not a bad one.

He can't remember the last time he saw his god so...

"You're really..." He trails off, his voice slightly hoarse.

Xie Lian's smile softens as he throws one arm over his eyes, catching his breath, the wind teasing through his hair. It should feel cold given the time of year, but...

He's never been so warm.

"Really..."

The words fall out of him without Xie Lian meaning to say them;

"...Only after having met you, did I rediscover that it's such a simple thing to be happy..."

A long time ago, Xie Lian promised that he would be kinder to himself, and...he failed.

But when he's with Hua Cheng, it's so *easy* to make room for more than just sadness.

That last time he could laugh so much and so easily, that...

That was with Hong'er.

From when he was trying to make the prince laugh, and when he was just...

Xie Lian bites back a bittersweet smile, remembering how excited he was, shooting his first rabbit with a bow.

'Gege, look! Did you see me—?'

And of course, Xie Lian *couldn't* , but the way Hong'er faltered in realization...

That was the first time Xie Lian could actually laugh about his cursed shackles, finding joy in something that once brought him such despair.

And with everything that's happened—and everything that will happen—maybe it shouldn't be so easy for Xie Lian to feel happy right now.

But Hua Cheng makes it so...easy.

Hua Cheng stares down at him, silent, blinking slowly, as it dawns on Xie Lian that he said that out loud.

"..." Xie Lian clears his throat, sitting up on his elbows. "What did you do with the real Lang Ying, by the way? Where is he?"

"Back in Ghost City," Hua Cheng answers mildly, reaching over to pluck a blade of grass from Xie Lian's hair. "No harm done."

"Ah, good..."

"Your highness?" Ling Wen speaks up from inside the shrine, having been silent up until now--but the sudden reminder of her presence makes Xie Lian's cheeks grow hot.

"...Yes?"

"I'm afraid that whatever you were attempting to make has started to burn."

"...Oh!"

It's a slightly disorganized rush to rise to his feet, brushing the grass off of him as he goes back inside, the ghost king trailing behind him.

"Ah, Crimson Rain." Ling Wen muses, her chin resting on her hand as she watches the youth following Xie Lian like a little shadow.

"What a surprise."

Her tone is a little dry—but not openly hostile, the way most officials are when they see Hua Cheng.

As such, Xie Lian accepts that as better than average.

Hua Cheng spares the civil god a sharp look from the corner of his eye, but says nothing more.

Once he's ensured that the shrine isn't about to burn down from an ill fated attempt at stew, he leaves the remains to simmer (hopefully until it congeals into something edible), then returns to sit across from

Ling Wen.

"So," The prince tilts his head. "You got to see Bai Jing."

Even if the Brocade Immortal is sitting across the room, it's still within her line of sight.

"...Yes," She agrees, bowing her head. "Thank you for humoring me, even if you might not understand."

"It wasn't a hard request to grant," Xie Lian shrugs.

"But," Ling Wen sits back, crossing her ankles beneath the table. "Given what you told me about Ruoye, you must have found the story of the Brocade Immortal particularly disturbing."

Hua Cheng's eyes snap to Xie Lian's face, which remains largely impassive, smiling calmly.

"It was...disconcerting," he agrees, the bandage wiggling subtly around Ling Wen's wrists. "But it also provided no context."

And it becomes even more bizarre, listening to Ling Wen speak about Bai Jing. Not with loathing, or sadism, just...

Nostalgia.

Maybe even...warmth.

"...Yes," Ling Wen agrees faintly. "I suppose context is what makes or breaks any story, isn't it, your highness?"

Anything can seem like a kindness or a cruelty from the outside looking in—if you don't know the circumstances.

The intentions behind even an abhorrent act can change the shade of a person's guilt.

'Dianxia,' Hua Cheng speaks up in Xie Lian's private communication array, his chair tilted towards the prince. *'Be careful. Ling Wen is ruthless and cunning. She's not to be trusted.'*

'San Lang...' Xie Lian frowns, thinking. *'I know that she's done horrible things, but so have I. She deserves the chance to explain herself. Then, the whole matter will be behind us.'*

Hua Cheng frowns, but says nothing more.

Ling Wen takes a slow, deep breath.

"You know," She starts, folding her hands on top of the table. "Despite what my social behavior might indicate, I've always strongly disliked the male gender as a whole."

Quan Yizhen pauses in the middle of chewing his Mantou, realizing that applies to him as well.

Hua Cheng sends Xie Lian a pointed look, and even if Xie Lian can't see it, he can certainly feel it.

"…Well, that's…unique—"

"Not particularly." She speaks over him, her voice cold. "It's not unique to feel that way, if you're a woman. It's unique to have agency." She turns her head, staring out the window. "…Actually, I think the only man I didn't hate as a child, other than my father, was you."

Xie Lian stiffens with surprise, and Ling Wen watches the afternoon sun with a cold expression.

"You forget, I'm not much younger than you."

She was appointed as a deputy official shortly before the destruction of thirty three heavenly officials by Hua Cheng—and that was early into Xie Lian's second banishment.

"My father went to your temples when he was a boy. He spoke of those times fondly," Ling Wen recalls.

"But by the time I was born, you were…"

"Being cursed as a god of misfortune," Xie Lian smiles awkwardly. "I remember."

"Yes—but I've never really cared for fixating on luck one way or another. It didn't matter to me." Ling Wen shrugs. "The reason I didn't hate you, was because day in and day out, I would go door to door, helping people trying on shoes," she explains the memory in a business-like tone, with little fondness for that time. "And every day, men told me how nice I looked on my knees."

"…Looking down on you," Xie Lian murmurs, his eyes brightening with understanding.

Ling Wen's smile turns genuine, if not sharp. "Exactly."

And by that time—Xie Lian's statues were always shown to be kneeling.

He was the only man who was ever at eye level with her.

"And no matter how skilled I was, or how hard I worked, my greatest value in the eyes of the people around me was through my potential as a wife and mother." She glares, drumming her fingers heavily against the table's surface. "Can you even imagine what that's like?"

"…When you're born a prince, having a son is the most important task you'll ever have," Xie Lian points out quietly. "But that's not the same as what you experienced."

"But you had the ability to *choose* whether or not you wanted to marry, or have children."

Xie Lian shrugs, not arguing.

His situation was a little more nuanced. He was allowed to leave to train on Mount Taicang, yes, even if it devastated his parents.

But back then—Xie Lian couldn't have married whom he wanted, or had children with them.

Still, he sees her point.

Ling Wen's fingers bunch up slightly on top of the table, her mouth twisted into a tight frown.

"It didn't matter how much talent I had, or how much hard work I did. My life had no meaning—no value—on its own."

If she wanted to gain accolades, she did so by entering contests anonymously. Only to have her awards stripped when her identity was revealed, or in one case, to face imprisonment.

The first woman she ever loved married a man who came to Ling Wen asking for help writing letters.

Letters that she crafted with flourish, watching him reap the affections she had so carefully sewn. And watching still, the disappointment in her childhood friend's eyes when her new husband couldn't make her smile with his voice the way he did with his pen.

Like a certain calamity who came after her, she too took the state civil exams. Over, and over, and over again—

And she didn't pass until she paid a man to turn her test sheets in for her.

Her mother's only response was quiet exasperation.

And such disappointment.

In the fact that she hadn't had a son. Or at the very least, a daughter who smiled more.

A young lady who spoke at the right times, and wanted the right things.

"I was promoted to the middle court of the Heavens as a matter of mere pride and pity," She mutters.

A way of appeasing Jing Wen's wounded ego, if nothing else.

"And when I was in the middle court—even if I deserved to be there—I was treated like little more than a waitress, or a handmaiden." Her voice is sour from bitterness.

She might have been just as skilled with a pen as Xie Lian was with a sword. But *she* couldn't ascend at seventeen, much less become the second highest god in her chosen field.

"It took me twice as long to reach where I am now than it would have for any man."

And if Ling Wen still has to appear in the form of a *god* to gain any respect. She even likes her male form to some extent, enjoys the way it makes her feel, the power behind it, but—

She *loathes* the fact that it's the only face she can wear to gain respect.

Or the fact that she couldn't get where she was fairly. That she had no choice but to claw, cheat, and steal—just to get the recognition that was rightfully her own.

"…And then, I looked up and realized I was already as far as I could go, and you know something?"

Her smile is anything but amused.

“When you spend your life sitting behind a desk, you know what people do?”

Hua Cheng responds before Xie Lian can—

“Look down on you.”

Not so different from when she was selling shoes.

And still, with a man looking down on her.

One who uses her as little more than an effective, favorite tool.

“So, if you want to know WHY I wanted to steal it back…” The civil goddess shrugs, watching the golden tint of the sun, coming in over the trees. “It should be clear.”

Maybe so.

“That answers why you stole it back,” Xie Lian agrees. “But why create it to begin with? What did this Bai Jing do to offend you?”

Ling Wen’s expression becomes…complex.

“For the most part, it wasn’t really about him.”

That’s gruesome to consider.

“Have you ever seen an animal in a cage, your highness? Before your first banishment.”

Xie Lian thinks it over, fiddling with a longer piece of his hair, slowly winding it around his finger.

“We kept hounds in the palace of Xianle. Cats, too.”

“A wild animal, I mean.”

“…A king from a neighboring kingdom gave the crown a tiger for my tenth birthday,” Xie Lian recalls, squinting.

“You didn’t enjoy it, did you?” The civil goddess questions, just a hair too knowing.

“…I set it free after three days. It nearly ate a footman.”

Hua Cheng bites back a smile, eyeing the way Xie Lian’s hair looks, lightly curled around his finger—only to look away when he catches Ling Wen watching him.

“When I was in the middle court…I held so much resentment towards Xuli,” Ling Wen explains carefully.

“I felt like I had been robbed of my chances to make a name for myself in my mortal life—abused and taken advantage of by the system around me, and I wanted to take revenge by….weakening the country that had been unfair to me.”

“And you did that with the Brocade Immortal?”

"...Not initially," She shakes her head. "At first, it was small acts of sabotage. A lost communication between diplomats here, a seduced princess there. I wasn't alone, either...Even Pei helped me burn a few temples--here and there."

She's surprised by the way Xie Lian reacts.

His back straightens, eyebrows pulled together.

“Pei helped you.”

“Yes.”

“And this was shortly after my second banishment?”

“…Yes?”

Xie Lian’s fingers tighten against the table top. “Did you know that he was grieving, back then?”

Hua Cheng doesn’t outwardly respond, but he watches Xie Lian from the corner of his eye, curious.

“…He never spoke about it, but I was aware of the fact that he was going through emotional difficulties.”

“And you asked him to help you?”

“I explained what I was going to do, and he offered his help,” Ling Wen corrects him.

(Though, perhaps, maybe she only mentioned it to Pei Ming because he *would* have wanted to break something, back then.)

"Gods go through rebellious phases, Your highness. You know that." Ling Wen shrugs. "And men of action, like him…they become destructive when angry. I'm sure he would feel better if he could burn all of the Heavens down right now."

Hua Cheng's eyebrows rose sharply, and Xie Lian frowns.

"What do you mean?"

"That he benefits from closure."

Xie Lian can't say his own past attempts at 'closure' have been much better…

Far worse, actually.

"All I can say is that he held a grudge against the wealthy, ruling class of Xuli for centuries. He was happy to help me."

Which was why it was so surprising to her that, of all people, he fell in love with the heir to one of the wealthiest merchant families in the country.

But life is complicated in that sense.

"Still…it wasn't enough," she frowns. "That was when I noticed Bai Jing."

A famous general—though not for his intelligence.

Purely for his ability in battle. Nothing more, and nothing less.

"He was given rank and wealth by the leaders of Xuli, but…" Her mouth twists into a grimace. "He was mocked."

A joke.

A dog beloved for the sharpness of his bite, then thrown inside a cage and poked and prodded at when there were no rabbits left to hunt.

"At first, I thought I could make him turn against his country with a little kindness, and…it worked," Ling Wen explains slowly. "The stories always make it seem like it was some great act of seduction… but really, the smallest act of kindness, and he…"

He would have burned all of Xuli to the ground for her.

Finally, Hua Cheng speaks, twirling a set of chopsticks between his fingers.

“I feel sorry for the poor bastard,” it’s almost comical, hearing him speak like that with such a youthful voice—actually—

Did he get smaller again? He couldn’t sound older than fourteen, now…

“Though I’m sure a person like you wouldn’t understand.”

Ling Wen sends him a sharp look. "A person like me?"

Hua Cheng leans back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest. "A person who thinks the greatest form of suffering in life is having their intelligence go unappreciated."

The air grows tense, and Xie Lian's smile turns awkward. "San Lang—"

"I'm sure you've never had that problem," Ling Wen glares. "The moment you were born, people probably thought you were special. That everything came easily to you. You think I care if you look down on me?"

Hua Cheng's chopsticks go still, and his smile turns lopsided and sly--even if there's absolutely no amusement in his eyes.

"I think you care if *anyone* looks down on you, Nangong Jie."

The mere mention of her mortal name, drawled with such audacity, sets her teeth on edge.

She's very proud. Has a great sense of entitlement to being treated with a certain air of respect.

It makes sense to him that she and Shi Wudu were such good friends.

"Wasn't that the entire point of that speech you made?" Hua Cheng raises an eyebrow.

"Not your best work, by the way. Very rambling. I've read better essays from you."

The mention of the word *essay* makes her go slightly pale in the cheeks, and his smile is all too knowing.

"And let me be clear," his eye settles on her, and he might look young now, but...

Still, something about his gaze makes her blood run cold.

"Nothing has ever been *easy* for me."

He wouldn't be sitting before her now, most powerful among the ghost realm, if life had been kind.

"The difference is, I don't leave room for self pity."

The brief moments when he's allowed himself to feel it were his weakest. The moments when he failed.

"Tch." Ling Wen rolls her eyes, her expression openly resentful, finding no reason to pose niceties when the only person present she *does* want on her side, Xie Lian, can't see.

"No matter how hard things were for you, you don't know what it's like to have *everything* you do automatically discredited because—!"

"You had me on that point," Hua Cheng shakes his head, holding up a finger. "Do you know when you lost me?"

He tilts his head to the side, giving her a slow look of contempt. "When you turned your attention to getting 'revenge' on Xuli, who do you think actually suffered from that?"

Lin Wen falls silent, her mouth pressing into a thin line.

"There are worse things to be than the daughter of a shoemaker," Hua Cheng points out coldly. "When you cause a war, who dies first?"

Normally, even though Hua Cheng feels contempt for other Heavenly Officials, he doesn't pick fights with them around Xie Lian.

But now...something seems to have gotten directly under his skin.

"When you stop gold from flowing into a kingdom, who is going to starve first?"

The answer to both is the same;

The poor.

"You burn down a few temples, and a god won't notice. You know who will?"

The mortals who use them to take shelter. Who go there to make their troubles heard.

"You talk about how society as a whole mistreated you, but the only ones who suffered your 'revenge' were its most vulnerable."

"Oh, spare me the self righteous hypocrisy," Ling Wen sneers.

"The *last* person who should be lecturing about burning temples is you. How many did you set on fire that night? Hundreds? Thousands?"

"Ten."

His response is so cool and crisp, she almost doesn't know what he means—

"It was ten thousand."

Even Xie Lian chokes, because—

That was how many temples he had at the *height* of his power.

And Hua Cheng...reduced that many to ash in the span of one night?

"And I could do the same to you, right now."

He says the words casually, not in a threatening way.

Merely stating a fact. That Ling Wen, while she is a powerful god, doesn't even have half that number.

Hua Cheng would eradicate her existence with only moderate effort.

"Do you know, aside from the obvious reason, why I'm not going to?"

He spins the chopstick round and round between his fingers, staring her down, while Xie Lian tilts his head.

...What is the obvious reason?

"Because there is *nothing* you are capable of doing that could offend me in the way that they did."

His tone almost makes Ling Wen sound insignificant, comparatively. And Xie Lian can't help but wonder...

Just what could those thirty three officials have done to him that was so horrible?

"But since you want to speak of hypocrisy, that's by me."

Hua Cheng leans forward, smirking--but there's absolutely no mirth in his expression. "When I deal with my enemies, I don't find a martial god to burn their temples for me. A grieving one, apparently," He gestures to Xie Lian, who feels somewhat shell shocked by the conversation.

"I also don't use my difficult upbringing as justification for causing harm. I just take that criticism on the chin. That makes me many things, but not a hypocrite." He sets his chopsticks down with a sharp *thud* .

"And your attempts to make your life sound so miserable aren't particularly compelling when this is *all* leading up to a story of you cutting his limbs off and leaving him in a bloody sack."

Ling Wen recoils, her lips parted, and Xie Lian presses his fist against his mouth.

"...He's really got you there," the prince points out faintly.

"Fine." Ling Wen closes her eyes, locking her jaw, and her voice grows cold. "I am a hypocrite. And while what I did to Bai Jing was gruesome, and you won't ever understand it—he wanted me to. There was no trick."

"He agreed to cut off his limbs and eventually be decapitated, all so his spirit could eternally haunt what has to be the *tackiest* robe I have ever seen?" Hua Cheng tone is dry, and Ling Wen is equally flat when she replies;

"I never claimed to be a seamstress."

"Well thank heavens you drew the line at false advertisement," he replies, his tone absolutely dripping with sarcasm.

"You can say whatever you want about me, think whatever you want—but now that you've felt Bai Jing's spirit yourself, does he hold any resentment towards me?"

“…”

Xie Lian tilts his head in Hua Cheng's direction, shrugging helplessly.

"She's got you there, San Lang."

Everything Hua Cheng said was true—and yet.

Xie Lian can't feel one ounce of rage or resentment towards Ling Wen from the Brocade Immortal at all.

"…But," the god shakes his head. "Just because Bai Jing *would* have been willing to do anything for you, doesn't mean you should have taken it to such lengths."

After all, Xie Lian too has known someone that would have done absolutely anything for him, without limits.

And when he tries to picture what Hong'er would have done in that situation, or Wu Ming—

He swallows down nausea, shaking his head.

"…It was cruel," Ling Wen agrees. "And selfish. I won't say that it wasn't. I'm that kind of person. I always have been."

Which is why it's always confused her, the way she tends to draw in people who are just the opposite.

She's self motivated, spiteful, and angry.

So why would her best friends have been so fiercely loyal, and dedicated?

Why would the crown prince, so infamously selfless, have held such a high opinion of her up until now?

And why would…

Ling Wen squeezes her eyes shut, trying so hard to forget star studded eyes and quiet, knowing smiles.

(Why would she look at me like that?)

"If I had to do it again today, I don't think I could," she admits, looking down at the Brocade Immortal with a distant gaze. "After I was finished with Xuli, I made sure Bai Jing was found by the emperor and locked away. I haven't tried to use it again until now."

Yes, but that makes Xie Lian wonder—

Why *did* she choose now, of all times, to try to get her hands on the brocade immortal once more?

“You—”

“I wasn’t from Xuli.” It’s been so long since Quan Yizhen spoke, Xie LIan almost forgot he was there.

“…Where were you from?” The prince questions, curious, surprised when Quan Yizhen and Hua Cheng reply at the same time;

“Yong’an.”

All roads always seem to lead back to there, don’t they?

“I didn’t have parents, so I don’t know if they were rich—but I didn’t have any money.”

“…You were an orphan?” Xie Lian questions, surprised. The status of a person’s birth doesn’t impact their ability to ascend, but circumstances can make things…difficult.

He’s not sure if he’s met an orphan who became a martial god before.

“I don’t know if it counts.”

“You don’t know—?”

“My parents weren’t dead,” Quan Yizhen clarifies. “They just didn’t want me.”

He doesn’t sound particularly sad about it, only matter of fact.

“…I really couldn’t have helped that Yin Yu decided to steal—” she starts, then stops.

Upon seeing the sharp, hostile look in the general's eyes—she gives up on attempting to defend herself from *that* particular charge, shaking her head with a sigh.

"Then I apologize, Qi Ying, for the way my actions impacted you. It was never my intention."

There's a brief pause, then, the martial god nods—easily appeased.

"Okay."

He glances around, catching sight of the pot in the corner.

"...Your highness?"

Xie Lian lifts his head with a start. "Yes?"

"Why did the stew turn into meatballs?"

"..." The god pointedly clears his throat, looking at Ling Wen. "Well, with everything you've said, I can't deny the situation is complicated, but—"

Quan Yizhen, however, doesn't want to let the subject go.

"Why did the stew turn into meatballs?"

Xie Lian turns back to him, his lips parted into a bright, if not irritated smile. “When I saw that the stew had gotten a little bit too…solidified, I molded it into balls instead.”

Quan Yizhen stares at the pot.

“…You can do that?” He whispers, amazed.

“Well…”

"Of course you can."

Now, Xie Lian finally notices something...off, about Hua Cheng's voice. His form has clearly gotten younger again, but—

Something about it sounds vaguely...familiar.

Hua Cheng slides out of his seat, walking over to pluck a meatball from the pot.

After dropping it into his mouth for a moment, chewing as if he’s savoring some fine delicacy, he smiles.

“The flavor is very light, gege. Well done.”

In spite of everything, Xie Lian can’t help but smile a bit.

“…Really?” Quan Yizhen questions, watching very curiously.

“Well—“

“Really,” Hua Cheng intones calmly, reaching for seconds.

“…” Xie Lian hears the screeching of Quan Yizhen’s chair as he gets up to investigate. “…General Qi Ying, you really shouldn’t—!”

Thud!

Hua Cheng stares at the martial god’s limp form on the floor.

“…He didn’t even swallow it,” he comments, half amused, half condescending, poking at the martial god’s head with his toe.

Xie Lian groans, hurrying over to Quan Yizhen’s side, using a set of chopsticks to pluck the meatball out of the general’s mouth, setting it aside.

"Qi Ying? Qi Ying?!" He questions, fanning the god's face with his hand. "San Lang, get him a glass of water?"

The ghost king bites back a laugh, going to do as he's told.

From her seat, Ling Wen watches.

"That's an interesting form you've taken on, Crimson Rain."

She fiddles with the hem of her sleeve, making eye contact with Hua Cheng as he returns to Xie Lian's side, handing him a cup of water.

"Rather...youthful. Is there a particular reason for that?"

Hua Cheng's gaze turns snide, but Xie Lian feels himself prick with concern.

It IS pretty odd for Hua Cheng to take a form like this. He's pretended to be a teenager before, yes, but never...quite this young.

"If there was, do you think I'd tell you?" He drawls, annoyed.

"San Lang..."

"Apologies, gege." It's said as an aside, but...

Xie Lian winces, pressing a hand against the side of his head.

...Why does it sound so familiar? And why—?

“I don't know, there have been rumors spreading around the realms these past few days. I'm assuming his highness hasn't heard, but I'm sure you're aware."

"What..." Xie Lian shakes his head, rubbing at his ear. "What rumors?"

"That the opening of Mount Tonglu has forced him to take on a weaker form in order to avoid losing control of himself..."

(When she says 'losing control,' Xie Lian's cheeks grow flushed.)

"...And with the rumors of Ren Song's recent injury, and Blackwater's disappearance..."

(Not to mention the fact that the emperor has placed a kill order on him.)

"Apparently, the entire ghost realm is in disarray."

"...Only two of those things are relevant." Hua Cheng looks up at her with a narrowed gaze, his eyes narrowed sharply. "Are you going to bet on which one is wrong? You don't seem like much of a gambler to me."

"I'm not," Ling Wen muses, sitting back in his chair, knees spread.

Xie Lian perks up, surprised.

...When did Ling Wen switch into his male form?

"But I've always been good at making an educated guess," he smirks, finishing off a bite of the mantou Xie Lian gave him and Quan Yizhen earlier. "And someone has spread rumors of your...infirmity far and wide."

Ling Wen is a tall woman, but he's an even larger man—and staring at Hua Cheng, in his far more youthful form, his thoughts are very clear.

'Who is looking down on who, now?'

"You have quite a few enemies, if I recall."

Quan Yizhen groans, slowly coming to.

Xie Lian lifts his head, suddenly concerned for Hua Cheng's safety. "Ling Wen, you didn't—?"

He can't say more before Quan Yizhen rolls over and throws up, just barely managing to snatch a wash basin in time to place it in front of his face.

"If I'm in this form to keep myself from losing control, just what do you think would happen to you if I changed back?" Hua Cheng sneers.

He's never bared his fangs in front of Xie Lian before, even if the prince can't see.

Now, he's simply beyond caring.

"Something horrific," Ling Wen agrees sagely. "How lucky am I, that you wouldn't dare risk losing your control here?"

Hua Cheng's jaws snap together with an irritated click.

"...San Lang," Xie Lian says suddenly. "If she's telling the truth, you should hide somewhere."

Ling Wen smirks, staring him down, knowing full well...

Crimson Rain won't leave the Crown Prince's side. Not while Ling Wen is still here, and the Brocade Immortal hasn't been dealt with.

He's stuck, effectively.

"And as far as those three options..."

Ling Wen taps his chin. "Blackwater's situation is public knowledge. The only options that are false would be my statement about your situation, or that about Ren Song's. That's a fifty-fifty bet."

The Civil God smirks.

"I'll take those chances."

Xie Lian starts to stand up, suddenly finding this conversation far more distressing than it is informative.

"I think you've had enough time with Bai Jing," he mutters. "Time to go to the Grand Martial Hall, yes?"

Ling Wen doesn't answer—he doesn't have to.

Because now—

Xie Lian can hear people outside...

A *lot* of people. From the sound of their footsteps--probably at least fifty.

And with the commotion, he can hear one of the farmers in the village ask—

"What's with the hurry?"

"Yeah, you folks aren't from around here!"

Then, just as Xie Lian straightens up to deal with the matter, he hears —

"Are you people even *aware* that you have a ghost in your midst?!"

"...A ghost?" One of the women gasps, shocked. "Where?!"

Hua Cheng sends Ling Wen a loathsome look.

"Gege, this is no good."

He takes a step back. "I'll lead them off, so you can—"

"No."

Xie Lian's voice is so firm, it startles him.

"There's no other option, dianxia. You wait here while I—"

"San Lang, if you take a step out that door, don't you ever come back."

The prince has never quite heard him so distressed as he does now, crying out;

"Gege!"

Xie Lian brushes off his robes.

"You make sure Qi Ying drinks another glass of water, and feed him some Mantou—that helped last time."

"But—!"

"I'll handle this, San Lang."

He moves to go outside, and just as he does, Quan Yizhen slurs, "Why...don't you just put on the robes...you used last night? That way...they won't...recognize..."

Xie Lian doesn't have the heart to explain to him that the robes were never enchanted to begin with.

"That's a great idea, Qi Ying. Drink some more water, okay?"

He steps out the door, shutting it behind him—then smiles warmly, placing every ounce of charm he still possesses into his expression.

"Welcome sirs, how may I assist you?"

"Daozhang..."

One of the villagers frowns, looking back and forth between Xie Lian, and the group of cultivators who are standing before Puqi Shrine.

"Do you know these people?"

"Can't say that I do," Xie Lian shakes his head. "But I'm happy to make their acquaintance."

"They're..." The farmer clears his throat, lowering his voice. "They're saying there's a ghost here..."

"It can't be blamed!" One of the cultivators crows, his voice high and haughty. "Clearly he was taking advantage of a poor, blind priest! Befitting such a foul creature!"

"Hmmm..." Xie Lian reaches down, winding a lock of hair around his finger. With his chin tilted toward the ground, he glances up through his lashes, trying to get a grasp of how many cultivators there are without exposing his shackle, and...

It's quite a few.

It's not easy to tell, not with how many auras are blending and blurring together—but his estimate from before, fifty, seems to have been conservative.

"...Yes," he agrees with a smile. "There's always been a ghost here."

The farmers freeze, jaws dropping.

"...Pardon?"

"Me."

The lot of them stare, uncertain as they take in the sight of a blind, white robed cultivator, saying the words as confidently as anything.

Then, he leans against the doorframe in a far more languid, relaxed pose, crossing his arms over his chest.

A slow smirk spreads across his face, and when his voice comes out, it's in a confident drawl.

"You worthless pieces of trash wouldn't dare challenge me on any other day, but the second you hear I'm weakened, you come running? Pathetic."

"You..." One of the cultivators stares. "You're...Crimson Rain Sought Flower?"

"But he's not even in red!"

"Unlike you lowlifes, I like to change things up every once in a while."

Xie Lian throws his hands up, then slowly claps in a show of sarcasm so impressive, Ling Wen almost sheds a tear from the beauty of the performance.

"And now you're all here to fight me. Very brave, very brave...Which one of you wants to go first?"

Before, they seemed very confident, and now...

None of them seem so sure.

"It would be clever, disguising himself as a blind priest...None of us would ever consider that..."

"...But if he were, why would he just declare himself the moment we arrived?"

"Because I was expecting something a little tougher than you," Xie Lian snorts. "But this should be fun. Are you going to make a nice little line for me, or should I take you all at once? Doesn't really matter to me."

"...If that's true, then who's the kid in red?"

Now, there are a lot of other things Xie Lian could have said, but here, he runs into an age-old problem.

He’s not that good of a liar.

He can if it’s someone he despises, or if he’s had time to think up a plan, like he did the other night.

Or, he can imitate people he knows well.

That was a skill he picked up in that coffin, after a few decades went by. So starved for company, he would make up conversations with himself and Feng Xin, or Mu Qing. Sometimes Hong’er, or his parents.

But improvising a lie…

That’s where he struggles.

So, out of what would have probably been countless other plausible explanations, he replies—

“That’s my son.”

There’s more shocked murmuring, and Hua Cheng’s face couldn’t be any less amused.

(Whereas before, it was the opposite.)

“…Crimson Rain has a son?!”

“Since when?!”

“Well, can’t you tell?” Xie Lian questions with a shrug. “Not for very long. Isn’t he cute?”

He almost winces at the last line, knowing Hua Cheng wouldn’t say that, but—

San Lang *is* cute like this, really. Who wouldn’t agree?

“…And who is the mother?!” One of the cultivators glares. “If it was a mortal woman, the child wouldn’t look so normal!”

Xie Lian doesn’t foresee this going well, but he’s already in the hole, so—

“A Heavenly Official, obviously.”

…He may as well dig deeper.

"As if any Heavenly Official would have anything to do with you!" One of the cultivators screeches, horrified by the idea.

"Oh, you'd be surprised," Xie Lian lifts his hand, tilting his head down, pretending to examine his nails, and…

(Hiding the blush on his face.)

"Well," One of the others says, "Crimson Rain is known for spurning anyone who attempts to seduce him. Is it possible he's been married this entire time?"

…Is he really known for that?

"Hua Cheng, with a wife?!"

"Not necessarily a wife," Xie Lian mutters under his breath

Then, feeling the stares of everyone on him, he clears his throat with a sigh, feeling slightly miserable. "Of course—unlike the rest of you miserable lowlifes, I've been married for quite some time."

"To a heavenly official?!"

"That's right," Xie Lian agrees, solemnly.

"Which one?!"

"Well…" He sniffs, picking at his nails a little more aggressively. "Beautiful. A real princess. Not to mention intelligent, kind, and hardworking."

He rattles off every word he can recall Hua Cheng saying about his 'beloved,' treasured person, but…

His voice sounds slightly *irritated* , rather than affectionate.

He's startled when a hand wraps around his own, forcing him to stop picking at his fingers until they bleed.

"That's enough," Hua Cheng's voice is gentle, but—

Xie Lian sighs, his brow creased.

"I told you to stay inside, San Lang."

The calamity hangs his head, seeming fearful that Xie Lian will act on his threat from before—even more pitiful now, when his form is small enough to be that of an eleven year old.

"…Wait, I know who the wife is!"

One of the cultivators cries out, gasping with realization. "I heard the rumors in my temple the other day!"

"What?!"

"There's a god Crimson Rain has been traveling with very frequently recently—"

Oh.

"—A god?! But then how would they have a—?!"

"A god who was seen in a *female* form in Ghost City! I heard it from someone in the Yu clan myself!"

Oh *no* .

"What was someone like that doing in Ghost City?!"

"I don't know, but I'm telling you, it's the crown pri—!"

"ENOUGH!" A voice rings out, resounding.

Xie Lian pauses, confused, just as Hua Cheng grasps the hem of his robes, pressing his face into Xie Lian's side with an annoyed groan.

"Anyone but him…"

What? Is it a foe that even Hua Cheng is weary of? But—?

The moment he speaks, however, Xie Lian understands.

"I, the greatest among our temple, with my HEAVEN'S EYE, can settle this!" The Cultivator booms. A tall, slightly rounded man, with a shockingly majestic beard, points his finger at Xie Lian. "That man is NO GHOST KING! He barely has ANY essence of evil!"

His voice is exuberant to the point of being grating.

"Then who—?"

"BUT!" The cultivator strokes his beard, turning to face his comrades with a dramatic flair. “He does have MORE essence of evil than a mortal should! He’s clearly been…fraternizing…”

Xie Lian can’t feel all of the blood in his body rushing into his face, all at once.

“Fraternizing?!”

“Well, it’s all over his mouth!”

Beside him, Hua Cheng goes rather still.

“And his—!”

“DOES IT REALLY MATTER?!” Xie Lian speaks over both of them, feeling rather frantic.

Before they can say or do anything else, however, Xie Lian noticing something…decisively concerning.

Ruoye has returned, wrapping itself back around his throat.

But if Ruoye is here, then he isn’t…

Quan Yizhen sits up, finally coming to, and…

He stares, stunned.

“…Wow.”

Standing before him—not in a soaked, bloody robe, but rather gleaming, impressive armor—

Is Ling Wen.

Looking far more imposing in this moment than any martial god.

“…Ling Wen,” Xie Lian mutters, turning his head. “You aren’t planning on breaking your word, are you?”

“That’s right,” Ling Wen replies calmly. “I’m breaking my word.”

“You—!”

“I’m a liar.” The civil god shrugs. “Not to mention a thief. And a hypocrite. I’ve always been all of these things, and I’ve always been a terrible friend. And this…”

He stares at the disappointment in Xie Lian's expression, hardening his heart to it. "This isn't even close to the worst thing I've done to a friend."

The prince knows, listening to Ling Wen, that he should be hurt. He should be angry with him. And yet…

He feels…sorry for him

Because it's been a while since he heard someone sound so completely miserable.

"So," Ling Wen shrugs, turning to face the opposite wall. "I suppose this is where we part ways, your highness."

"Ling Wen…" Xie Lian takes a step forward. "What are you going to —?"

BOOM!

The blow is so forceful, so stunning, that Quan Yizhen's eyes sparkle, impressed. Even Xie Lian, who can't actually see it, feels a little awestruck, until…

He realizes he heard nothing like the wall shattering, or anything of the sort.

Ling Wen stumbles back, shocked, shaking out his fist, and Xie Lian…

"…Balsa Wood…" he mutters under his breath, eyes widening.

"What?!"

And Xie Lian can't help but let out a surprised, happy laugh.

"The walls aren't made from balsa wood anymore—they're OAK!"

"What's balsa—?!" Ling Wen starts, irritated, only to cut himself off with a growl.

Xie Lian is a little surprised that the walls were able to withstand that kind of blow, but, then again—

The wood was created by a forest demon, so it's bound to have abnormal qualities.

"You know what—fine," Ling Wen mutters, and Xie Lian can't see what he's doing, only hears the sudden rush of movement, and feels Hua Cheng's hand snatch his wrist as he suddenly yanks him away from the doorway.

"San—?"

CRASH!

Something large and heavy is thrown through the door, tumbling down the steps—and after a moment, Xie Lian realizes what it is.

"...QI YING?!"

Quan Yizhen groans, mildly concussed as he sits up, hair all over. "I'm okay!"

Honestly, it woke him up more than anything.

Xie Lian grimaces, a little more bothered than he should be about the door, only for Hua Cheng to notice, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"I'll make you another one, later."

(In turn, that comforts him more than it should.)

And of course, Ling Wen has taken the chance to bolt.

“…Qi Ying, can you move?” When the martial god nods in affirmative, Xie Lian points in the direction where Ling Wen just took off. “Go after Ling Wen—you can’t lose him, understand?!”

He nods, rumbling to his feet with the force of an angry bear.

Once he takes off after him, Xie Lian blows out an exasperated breath, turning back to the others.

“Well, as you can see, we’ve got a lot going on around here at the moment, so if you don’t mind—!”

“As a matter of fact, I *do* mind!”

The one who was screaming about Xie Lian having the “essence of evil” in…areas before, the one with ‘Heaven’s Eye,’ warbles on, beard trembling as he speaks.

“It is a *grave* thing to lie about a calamity young man, GRAVE!”

Xie Lian is older than nearly all of them combined, but—

“The rumors were TRUE!” The cultivator, whom Xie Lian has just chosen to dub as ‘Heaven’s Eye,’ in his mind, points at Hua Cheng, eyes wide, beard blowing magnificently in the breeze. “He’s taken the form of a child!”

“Well,” Xie Lian takes a step in front of him, “Let’s not be hasty—”

“I see the essence of evil ALL OVER HIM! He is EMANATING IT! That’s probably how it—!”

“San Lang,” Xie Lian mumbles out of the corner of his mouth, his voice low.

“…Yes, gege?”

“I think they’re hungry.”

He says this, but his voice sounds more pointed than hospitable. “Why don’t you feed them the leftovers?”

Xie Lian would do it himself—but with so many targets around, he doesn’t trust his ability to aim based on sound alone.

Hua Cheng stares up at him for a moment, then a slow smile spreads across his face as he turns on his heel, hurrying inside.

“Certainly, gege.”

“Where is he—?”

“He’ll be back in just a moment,” Xie Lian calms the crowd, holding up his hands.

“But before it comes to violence, I suggest you all take your leave. I would really rather avoid having to harm any of you.”

(Truly, with how many of them there are, Xie Lian would have to deal with them in a serious manner—in which case, he might accidentally hurt someone.)

But his words of caution don’t seem to land on Heaven’s Eye quite the way he had hoped.

“I—!” His beard *trembles* with rage. “A youngster like you DARES to threaten me?! Just what temple do you train under?! Who is your master?! What god do you pray to?! It’s UNACCEPTABLE!”

“Look, daozhang,” Xie Lian shakes his head, not wanting to be rude, but feeling his patience for the situation reaching its limits. “You—”

“A cultivator, defending a devil like HUA CHENGZHU?! It’s DISGRACEFUL! And for what?! You couldn’t even call him a PERSON!”

Xie Lian’s eyebrow twitches as the door to the shrine opens once again, Hua Cheng stepping out with the stew pot in tow. Scaldingly hot, but he easily carries it with his bare hands.

“WHAT KIND OF CULTIVATOR DO YOU THINK YOU ARE, DEFENDING THAT BEAST—?!”

Xie Lian has heard Hua Cheng listen to many insults, but he only ever seems to react…

…When criticism of him is used to smear Xie Lian.

And now, beside him, he senses the Ghost King shrink—however subtle the movement might be.

“IT’S AN ABSOLUTE—!”

BAM!

Before he can finish screaming his insults, 'Heaven's Eye' is sent flying back so quickly, his disciples can't even catch him, not until he slams into a tree a few yards away.

Xie Lian shakes out his fist, a dark pallor shifting over his expression.

"You ask who I am?"

The group of cultivators all whip around to look at him, a seemingly blind, helpless priest.

"LISTEN WELL! I AM HIS HIGHNESS THE CROWN PRINCE!"

But when he speaks now, his voice thunders over the entire valley, roaring like a tempest.

"YOU RIOTOUS RASCALS, BOW DOWN BEFORE ME!"

A few of the cultivators actually do drop down to their knees, not even realizing what they've done until their companions pull them up.

"What are you doing?!"

"I-I didn't even realize..."

"I AM OLDER THAN ALL OF YOU COMBINED. I HAVE CROSSED MORE BRIDGES THAN ALL OF THE ROADS YOU HAVE WALKED."

His voice has a ringing, echoing quality to it, as though he speaks with a hundred voices, rather than just the one.

"I DO NOT WORSHIP GODS!"

"I AM GOD!"

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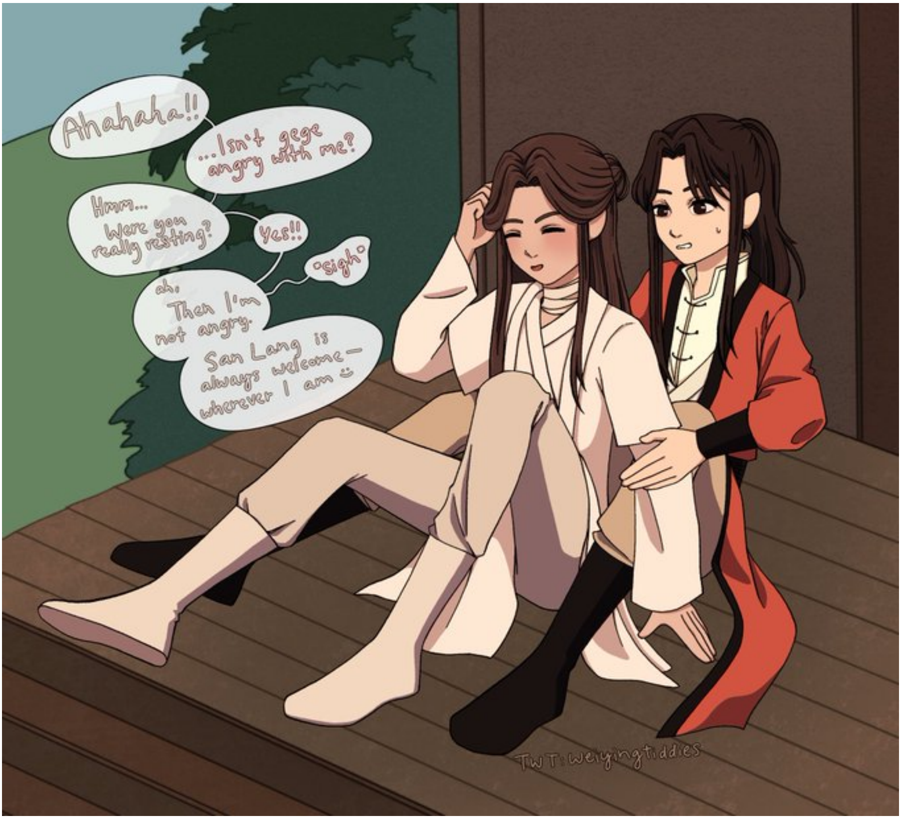
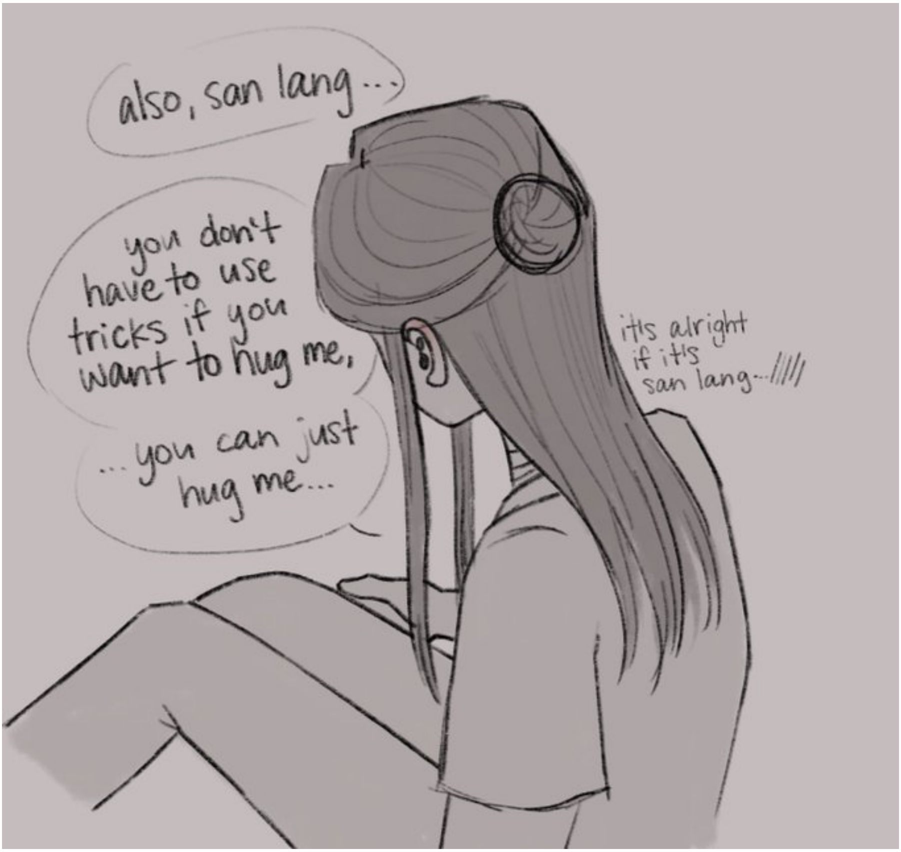

Ahahaha!!
...Isn't gege angry with me?
Hmm... Were you really resting?
Yes!!
sigh
ah, Then I'm not angry.
San Lang is always welcome— wherever I am ☺
TWT: weiyingtiddies


also, san lang...
you don't have to use tricks if you want to hug me,
...you can just hug me...
it's alright if it's san lang...////

CREDIT: ASH

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Chapter End Notes

> Thank you to ash and olivieira for their beautiful artwork, and allowing me to share it!
>
> xoxo, Evie

Don't Ask Me

Chapter Summary

> "That was a pretty good impression of me by the way, gege."
>
> "..." Xie Lian stops, going red all the way from the back of his neck, to the tips of his ears. "San Lang, could you just...forget all of that?"
>
> "No," Hua Cheng rarely denies him, but now he does so eagerly, mimicking the sage tone Xie Lian used before, when he caught him pretending to be Lang Ying. "I'm gonna remember this forever."

The crowd falls completely silent listening to his speech, which would have sounded utterly ridiculous coming from anyone else, but somehow...

The delivery seems so...believable?

Their jaws drop in unison, gawking.

"...HUH???"

Of course, this was the moment he was waiting for.

"San Lang?"

It takes the ghost king a moment to reply, and when he does—his voice sounds even younger, slightly breathless.

"...Huh?"

Xie Lian pauses, blinking slowly. "...I think they're ready for their leftovers."

He can't see their expressions, but he'd be shocked if they weren't all gaping by now–that's *why* he said all of those ridiculous things.

Startling out of his daze, the ghost king leaps into action.

This form is limiting to some extent, but his hands still move so fast, they nearly blur as he uses his chopsticks to lift the leftover "meatballs" from the pot, hurling them with deadly accuracy into the waiting mouths of the crowd around them.

At first, they don't even realize what's hit them, but when they do—all of the cultivators around them drop like flies, landing on the ground with heavy thuds, clutching their mouths.

"WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?!"

"WE'VE BEEN HAD!"

"They're the LEGENDARY INCORRUPTIBLE CHASTITY PELLETS!" Xie Lian declared. "Extremely poisonous! If you don't ingest eighty two cups of water in the next twenty four hours, they'll explode in your stomachs!"

"OI! IS IT REALLY THAT DANGEROUS?!"

"YOU'RE KIDDING!"

Luckily for Xie Lian, they look and taste just about as poisonous as what he's claiming.

"...By the way, will everyone please discount everything I just said? I'm actually just a local weaver!"

"You SNEAKY LITTLE—!"

"WE HAVE TO FIND SOME WATER!"

Xie Lian presses a hand to his chest, feeling nothing but relief, until one of them cries—

"Don't worry, REINFORCEMENTS WILL BE HERE BEFORE LONG!"

To which the prince's face promptly falls.

...There's even more of them?!

"...San Lang, we should go—hold onto me, okay?"

Hua Cheng hesitates, but doesn't have the chance to say much more until he's scooped up into the prince's arms—and Xie Lian is so surprised by his size, he has to pause.

Before, he was the size of a boy in his early teenage years, but now...

He's small enough to easily rest on Xie Lian's hip, arms locked firmly around the prince's neck—in a way that feels undeniably familiar, but...

Why on earth has he ended up like this?

Still, Xie Lian has no time to contemplate that, taking off.

Hua Cheng frowns up at him, glancing down at the road ahead—and in spite of everything that Xie Lian has endured over the last eight centuries, and his clear capability—

The Ghost King seems terribly vexed by the idea that he might trip over something.

"Gege, I can walk, let me help!"

"Don't worry," Xie Lian smiles, patting his back. "I won't drop you–and even if I trip over something, Ruoye can help."

That doesn't seem to ease any of the tension from the calamity's form, so Xie Lian adds—

"But if San Lang wants to be useful, he can keep an eye out for me and let me know if something is coming, okay?"

"..." The ghost king nods, grunting quietly in agreement.

With him mollified, Xie Lian runs as far and as fast as he can, using his free hand to touch his temple, activating the communication array.

'Ling Wen, something's happened—!'

Of course, it's a reflex, but the moment he realizes what he's done, he grows pale.

'...I know.'

'...'

Xie Lian doesn't know whether to laugh, or cry.

'...So sorry to bother you,' He mumbles quickly, cutting off the private array with her, before opening the general array within the heavens.

'EVERYONE, LISTEN! LING WEN HAS STOLEN THE BROCADE IMMORTAL AND FLED!'

But when Xie Lian tries to call out within the General Communication Array...even speaking as loudly as he can...

There's chaos all around.

'WE'RE BEING OVERRUN!'

'WHERE'S MING GUANG?!'

'THE EMPEROR SENT HIM WEST!'

'WEST?! SOMETHING JUST RIPPED THROUGH THE ENTIRE BLOCKADE!'

But more than any of that, one voice strikes him with an emotion he wasn't expecting to feel;

Fear.

'MU QING! WHY AREN'T YOU—?'

Feng Xin's voice.

'HAS ANYONE SEEN XUAN ZHEN?!'

Filled with panic.

'Feng Xin!'

'Your...your highness? Did you say something before?'

'It doesn't matter,' Xie Lian answers quickly. *'What's happened with Mu Qing? Is he alright?'*

'He...ah...I've lost track of him,' Feng Xin replies slowly, having to raise his voice to be heard over the chaos. *'I'm working on it. Are you safe?'*

'Um...yes.'

...dianxia...'

'I'm really alright!' Xie Lian assures him. *'I've got San Lang with me.'*

Even if the ghost king wasn't reduced to his current state, that wouldn't bring the general any comfort.

'...Look,' he can practically hear the frown in Feng Xin's voice. *'Things are getting out of hand—everywhere. If you're finished with your*

assignment, you should return to the heavens immediately.'

Xie Lian shakes his head. *'I can't do that—I have business to attend to down here. And—what do you mean, you lost track of Mu Qing?'*

'It's—it's all fine, your highness, I'll explain it to you later,' Feng Xin replies quickly. *'I'll find him. Where are you going, anyway?'*

'Well...' Xie Lian trails off, unsure. He took off running away from the village without much of a plan other than getting Hua Cheng away.

When his pace becomes slightly more uncertain, reaching where he knows a fork in the road should be—Hua Cheng tugs at his sleeve, his voice ringing with certainty.

"Left, gege."

Xie Lian obeys first, and asks after. "Why left?"

"We need to keep moving towards the West."

...West?

"Are you sure?" Xie Lian questions, hugging one arm firmly around Hua Cheng's back as he heads in that direction. "Isn't that towards Mount Tonglu? Will that make things harder for you—?"

"I'll be fine, gege," the ghost king assures him. "Do you trust me?"

"Always."

He didn't mean to say it like that, the words came out without much thought--but it's hard to feel that sheepish when Hua Cheng is...well...

Like this.

Hua Cheng stares up at him for a moment, then replies;

"We have an advantage if we go West."

...An advantage?

'...Feng Xin, before I answer, I want you to promise me something.'

'...What is it? Is something wrong? Did he do something to you—?'

'San Lang wouldn't do anything like that,' Xie Lian cuts him off firmly.

'But he's in a weakened state right now. If I tell you where we're going—you swear you won't let the other martial gods know?'

'...'

The silence is deafening, and Xie Lian's jaw locks stubbornly.

'I'll get myself banished again if you do.'

'Dianxia—!'

'I'm being serious.'

Feng Xin sounds utterly torn, and Xie Lian can practically hear him grinding his teeth with frustration. *'Your highness, you're asking me to...'*

'I'm sorry, but I can't compromise on this, Feng Xin.'

'...Fine.'

'You swear?'

'You have my word, your highness.'

It sounds like he has to spit the words out between his teeth—but that's enough for Xie Lian.

'We're going West.'

'W—?! HAVE YOU LOST YOUR MIND?! DID YOU NOT JUST HEAR WHAT EVERYONE WAS SAYING?!'

His voice is so loud in the array, Xie Lian actually winces.

It wouldn't bother him normally. But for some reason now, his head...

'There is a GAPING hole in the Western Blockade. Jun Wu assigned FOUR martial gods to the region while Qi Ying was with you, and something RIPPED RIGHT THROUGH IT!'

'I did hear that,' Xie Lian acknowledges.

'AND YOU'RE GOING ANYWAY?!'

'San Lang said we have an advantage in that direction,' Xie Lian pauses, thinking. *'Whatever tore through the blockade might not be on our side, but it may be on his.'*

'So, a Ghost King tells you to charge straight into danger and you just GO?!'

'Yes,' Xie Lian replies immediately.

'...WHY?!'

'San Lang has never given me a reason not to trust him.' Xie Lian explains calmly. *'I would do the same thing if it were you telling me to go.'*

He means that as a compliment, but it doesn't seem to bring Feng Xin much comfort.

'...I'll be fine,' Xie Lian assures him again. *'You focus on figuring out where Mu Qing is. We can all talk more after that, okay?'*

'...Alright,' Feng Xin agrees—sounding horribly reluctant, but he doesn't exactly have a choice. *'But if you need help...'*

'I'll ask for it.'

Feng Xin sighs—clearly not convinced, or even a little bit comforted by Xie Lian's reply, but...

He does need to find Mu Qing.

'Fine. I'll be checking in. If you don't answer—'

'I understand, Feng Xin—don't worry!'

(Xie Lian says it, knowing that's exactly what he'll do.)

They cut off communication shortly after that, and Xie Lian isn't sure how long they've been running by the time he stops—but it must have been miles.

He sets Hua Cheng down carefully, bending over to catch his breath.

"Dianxia..."

Xie Lian winces, shaking his head.

"Don't worry, San Lang—it's just been a little while since I ran that much, and..." He rubs at his ear, fighting the urge to wince again. "I don't know what's..."

"What's what?" The ghost king frowns, stepping closer as he looks up at him with concern.

"...I'm sure it's not San Lang's fault, it's probably something wrong with me, but..." Xie Lian rubs a hand against his temple. "Ever since your body got like this, for some reason, your voice sounds..."

Warped. Sharp in his ears. Xie Lian doesn't understand why, but...

"..." Hua Cheng's lips turn down into a sharp frown, and his expression darkens, but his eyes...

The pain in them is so sharp, if Xie Lian could see it—he probably wouldn't be able to see it.

"...Is this better, gege?"

Xie Lian stops, lifting his head.

"...Yes," he agrees, frowning just as much as Hua Cheng is, thoughts straining with confusion. "But you don't sound like you."

Before, even if listening to him brought an unnatural form of discomfort—if he listened through that, he still sounded like Hua Cheng. And...something...familiar.

Hua Cheng tugs at his sleeve, guiding him to sit on a log from a fallen tree. "Rest here for a minute," he murmurs. "They aren't anywhere near us."

He sounds oddly...forlorn, so the prince agrees without protest.

"I'll be right back."

Xie Lian looks around in the direction of the sound of his retreating footsteps, his worries piqued. "San Lang, you shouldn't wander when you're like this—"

"I'm not going far, gege—don't worry."

Xie Lian folds his arms, listening closely.

To Hua Cheng's credit, he doesn't go very far at all—just down the hill off the side of the road, rummaging around in the trees and the leaves for a moment, and Xie Lian can't understand what for until he returns, dropping something in his hand.

An...orange?

"There's a grove at the bottom of the hill," Hua Cheng explains quietly, sitting on the log beside him, picking at the peel of one in his hand.

He grabbed a small pile for Xie Lian, but knows the prince would make a fuss if he didn't take one for himself.

"...Thank you, San Lang," Xie Lian smiles gratefully, feeling around for the rind, only to find that Hua Cheng has already peeled it for him.

Even now, his smile softens.

"But...how did you know there was a grove?"

Hua Cheng stares at the road ahead, eyes distant.

"I've been here before."

It's been so long, he was almost certain the grove would be gone, but...

Some things have a way of outlasting the touch of time, in spite of all odds.

"You have?"

"Mmm," he hums, chewing on a bite. "With my mother."

Xie Lian stops in the middle of chewing, his eyes widening. "...You mean Zhao Beitong?"

A soft, tired snort escapes the ghost king's lips.

"No. I mean my birth mother."

The prince has never heard Hua Cheng speak of her—not even once.

"She brought you here?"

"When we left Xuli," he agrees, fiddling with another piece between his fingertips, the juice leaving his skin slightly sticky. "We walked the entire way, so we'd stop and rest in places like this."

That almost sounds nice, but...

"Walked the entire way to...where?"

"..."

Hua Cheng's feet curl inward, heels digging against the side of the log as his body hunches over, hair obscuring his face.

"...San Lang—?"

"Please don't ask me."

Xie Lian stops, his mouth parted with shock.

Hua Cheng...

His voice is trembling, and it's so *small* .

"I hate lying," he whispers hoarsely, his eyes stinging. "So please don't ask me."

He can say anything to anyone without thinking of it. But—

Not him.

It hurts more, lying to him, than tasting blood, feeling his soul rip in protest when he tries to tell the truth.

"...Why would you have to lie?" Xie Lian reaches out, touching his shoulder—and that's when he feels that...

Hua Cheng is shaking.

Like something is physically *hurting* him.

And Xie Lian can really only think of two prior occasions when he's acted like this.

"...Can you tell me why you left Xuli?"

Xie Lian knows he shouldn't ask anymore. Normally, the moment he saw that Hua Cheng was upset by the questions, he would have stopped, but—

There's been a knot in his stomach, since he was pulled from the Bridal Sedan on Mount Yu Jun.

And every time something like this happens, it grows tighter. Constricting until he can barely stand it anymore.

"...There was a man who wanted to hurt her," Hua Cheng explains quietly, his voice even now, but muted. "She was trying to get away from him, I think."

Then, after a moment—he hangs his head.

"...But...there was something I didn't notice until recently," he admits, sounding somewhat sheepish. Which is better than the pain and distress from before—but unusual, coming from him.

"What is it?"

"...That golden belt that Lan Chang had..."

Xie Lian perks up with surprise, not having expected to hear about her, of all people.

"What about it?"

"...My mother had one like that," Hua Cheng mutters, staring down at his feet. "Not exactly like that, but it was definitely..."

She refused to sell it, too. No matter how bad things got.

He always had food to eat, even if she went without. He never went without a roof over his head, even if there wasn't room for her.

But that belt, which was apparently so valuable...

She kept it until her death.

"...You don't..." Xie Lian pauses, thinking it over. "You don't think...?"

"We shouldn't wait around for too long," Hua Cheng mutters, slipping off of the log. "Those pieces of trash were pretty determined."

Xie Lian sighs, disappointed to change the subject, but...

He sounds less miserable than he did before, so Xie Lian will take—

"That was a pretty good impression of me by the way, gege."

"..." Xie Lian stops, going red all the way from the back of his neck, to the tips of his ears. "San Lang, could you just...forget all of that?"

"No," Hua Cheng rarely denies him, but now he does so eagerly, mimicking the sage tone Xie Lian used before, when he caught him pretending to be Lang Ying. "I'm gonna remember this forever."

"San Lang!"

"Dianxia was so intimidating!"

"...You're so insincere!"

Now it's Hua Cheng's turn to laugh, high and childlike as they continue in the direction Hua Cheng set out for them. Not quite as fast as before, but at a pace where they should still keep ahead.

There's just one problem.

And it *is* a problem, even if Hua Cheng protests.

His clothes don't quite fit him properly—and even though he insists he could just use magic to fix it, Xie Lian refuses.

In this state, he shouldn't be wasting any of his energy when he doesn't have to.

"I'm sorry San Lang, I'd normally make something for you myself, but..."

Given that they're on the run, it really can't be helped.

"It's no problem..." Hua Cheng mutters, sounding mildly...bothered. "You shouldn't have to do this for me in the first place."

Xie Lian pauses in the middle of going through different robes at a stall, looking up.

"...I like being able to do this sort of thing for you, San Lang."

"Well, I don't," the ghost king mumbles, his hands balled up into fists. "Everyone else already asks too much of dianxia. I don't want to be another thing he has to worry about—"

"Hey, hey..."

Xie Lian reaches down, ruffling his fingers through the ghost king's hair.

“San Lang helps me all the time. Do you ever resent doing that?”

“No,” he answers immediately. “But that's different—!”

“I'm not so sure,” Xie Lian shakes his head. “And either way, I'm glad

I got to see you like this." The ghost king squirms when Xie Lian reaches out to pinch his cheek, but doesn't push him away. "It's cute!"

"…" Hus Cheng grumbles under his breath, looking away. "I didn't know dianxia enjoyed children so much."

Xie Lian laughs at that, shaking his head.

"You know, when I was younger, I was actually pretty terrible with them."

Hua Cheng lets out a disbelieving snort, and the prince protests.

"It's true! I always wanted to have my own children someday…but that was a distant someday."

When he speaks about it, his tone is warm, aching with nostalgia. "I think the closest I ever got was pretending Feng Xin and I were parents to a puppy together."

Hua Cheng can't help but scowl at the mention of the former guard, but it doesn't reach his voice.

"I've seen dianxia with children before—he's always been kind and attentive."

"Yes, I'm like that now," Xie Lian agrees. "But…" he laughs faintly, shaking his head. "I used to be such a brat San Lang, really—I'm almost glad you didn't know me back then."

If only he could see the utterly *baffled* expression on Hua Cheng's face, it's almost priceless.

"…You? A brat?"

"I was an only child—and a prince at that. Nearly everyone I had ever been around—it was their job to look after me." Xie Lian explains. "The only friend I had that was younger than me was Mu Qing—and his job was looking after me, too. I had no idea how to deal with children. For the most part, Qi Rong was my only experience, and he…" Xie Lian makes a face. "Gave me a bad impression."

That wasn't to say that he was universally bad with children. Xie Lian could do well in small doses, or if it was oriented around a task.

Like attending a festival with Mu Qing's sister for her birthday. Admittedly, she wasn't a small child—but Xie Lian was also playing a role.

Taizi Dianxia was kind, patient, and generous—so of course he would be selfless and gentle with children.

(Even if Xie Lian himself had been somewhat immature, he could pretend not to be.)

“Back then, there was really only one child that I genuinely enjoyed being around.”

Xie Lian pulls a set of robes from the stand, holding them up to Hua Cheng’s shoulders to compare sizes, reaching down to feel for the hem and make sure that it isn’t too long.

“Though I didn’t get to spend much time with him until he was older.”

Hua Cheng stares at the pained nostalgia in Xie Lian’s eyes, his heart aching in response.

“Which child?”

“I’ve told you about him before,” the prince murmurs, reaching for a set of boots. “The one who took care of me, after I…” Then he stops, a soft laugh escaping him. “But that shows how selfish I was back then, doesn’t it? He was just a child, and he was the one always looking after me…”

His Hong’er never did anything less.

Hua Cheng watches him silently, his expression…complicated.

Xie Lian, unaware, adds something very offhandedly;

“Actually, it was spending so much time around him that made me wish I could have a family of my own one day. I gave up on that when I was a child, but he…” The prince shrugs. “He made me reconsider many things.”

And of course—Hua Cheng’s expression turns into a scowl, because he interprets the words in a very different way than how Xie Lian means them.

That Hong’er was such a kind, dutiful child; it made Xie Lian want one just *like* him.

(Which isn't what the god meant—not at all.)

"…Then why haven't you?"

Xie Lian looks up in the middle of comparing boots, feeling each set with his hands. "What do you mean?"

"In the last eight hundred years…" Hua Cheng trails off, fighting to keep any emotion out of his voice other than curiosity.

To his surprise, Xie Lian laughs.

"I haven't exactly had a stable environment to offer," the god reminds him, chuckling.

Really, when you can't go more than a year without whatever dwelling you're living in collapsing—that's no place for a child.

"And even if that wasn't the case, there was never anyone to have them…with," Xie Lian concludes.

Before, he always assumed his attraction to men had closed that door forever. Though now, after the things he's seen…

"Besides, there was really only ever one person I considered that sort of thing with," Xie Lian smiles anxiously, waving that off. "And never that seriously. Even if I had, it wouldn't be an option anymore."

He feels around in his pockets for change to pay for the robes, but…

Hua Cheng slaps a good foil down on the counter, with such a gravity and seriousness, all in the body of a small child, that it makes the prince cover his mouth to hide his laughter.

And while Hua Cheng changes into the new clothes in a booth behind the stall, he adds;

"Besides, I've gotten to help children like Banyue, that was more than I thought I'd ever get to have—and it's plenty for me."

When Hua Cheng steps back out, he frowns, bending over to fiddle with something, and Xie Lian senses a flash of magic.

"San Lang, you shouldn't use your powers when you're—"

Clink, clink!

There's a soft jingle as silver bells and chains appear, settling around his boots—and Xie Lian can't help a fond smile.

He's always insistent on that detail, isn't he?

"But what if things were different?"

Xie Lian pauses, confused.

"What do you mean?"

"If your situation was different, and the person you wanted them with was…still an option," Hua Cheng mutters, watching Xie Lian's face, still wrangling his own emotions.

"Would that make you happy, gege?"

The prince is surprised by the question, but…

Hua Cheng was so earnest about asking, so he takes the question seriously.

"…No," he admits honestly. "I don't think I would want that anymore."

He hangs his head for a moment, taking a steadying breath.

"I don't think I could handle outliving my children."

Just watching the pain in Pei's eyes, mourning for a son that he never even knew…

Xie Lian knows he could survive that. He's lived through so much pain, but—

That's one that he doesn't want to put himself in the position to feel.

He already has enough grief to live with.

"…I understand, dianxia." Something about Hua Cheng's tone startles him.

The profound sorrow in his voice.

…Has he—?

"When you did think about having them, did you ever imagine details?”

“…Details?”

“How many, boys or girls,” Hua Cheng explains, fiddling with his sleeve. “That sort of thing.”

“Oh.” Xie Lian blinks, thinking. “Well, you can’t control whether you have sons or daughters, I think I would be happy with either.”

But he always imagined himself with both, in all honesty.

“And…three.”

Hua Cheng raises an eyebrow.

“Gege sounds very firm about that detail.”

“Well,” Xie Lian’s face feels a little warm, even if he has no idea why. “I wished I had siblings growing up. And I’ve always thought…”

“Thought what?”

“Good things come in threes,” Xie Lian mumbles, feeling silly and superstitious.

And now, wanting to push the attention off of himself, he asks;

“What about you, San Lang?”

“Me?”

“You have someone that’s precious to you,” Xie Lian explains. “Have you ever thought about that sort of thing with them?”

“…No,” the ghost king answers honestly. “I’ve never thought much past…”

The daunting task of his affections being known; and the far more impossible chance that they would be returned.

“…But if they wanted them, then so would I. I just…”

He trails off, hesitant—and for once, Xie Lian feels keenly aware of what he’s thinking.

‘Have you ever loved something so much, there wasn’t room in your heart for anything else?'

"San Lang…" Xie Lian reaches over, finding Hua Cheng's hand and squeezing it tightly. "You'd be good at it."

When the ghost king doesn't respond; he gently adds—

"You already are."

Hua Cheng's brow furrows, and maybe he knows what Xie Lian is talking about, but he doesn't seem willing to acknowledge it—

"Dianxia?"

"Yes?"

The question he asks isn't one that surprises him—not at first.

"The person you imagined doing that sort of thing with…"

In fact, Xie Lian was bracing himself for it, his stomach lurching with anxiety, but—

"…Was it General Nan Yang?"

The prince chokes, nearly falling over.

"I—what?!" Xie Lian gasps, his mind reeling. "What would make you think—?"

Because of what Xie Lian said about the puppy?! But that was when he was eight years old! He—!

"You're sure you saw it over here?"

The sound of a vaguely familiar voice makes them both stop, tense.

"Of COURSE I did!" Another booms in response, and Hua Cheng scowls.

He can practically feel that beard's presence a mile away, like a bad omen.

"My Heaven's Eye can track an evil spirit for HUNDREDS of miles!"

Xie Lian bites back a swear.

They caught up already?!

"…" he straightens up quickly, reaching over to snatch up another item of clothing, "We'll be taking this, too!"

The shopkeeper doesn't protest—that gold foil was more than enough payment, but—

Hua Cheng barely has enough time to priest before he's snatched up.

The two disappear into the changing stall just as Heaven's Eye approaches, flanked by two other cultivators.

"I'm telling you, the trail of the essence of evil leads here!"

"Sirs," the shopkeeper warns them, holding up a hand as they approach the stall. "There's already someone—!"

Heaven's Eye pays him no mind; yanking the curtain back—and…

What greets him is the side of a pale, smooth shoulder, a dress slipping down just *so* as a young woman tries it on, only to yank it back up with a scandalized shriek when she hears the curtain open.

Heaven's Eye lets out a choked sound of apology, scrambling backwards.

"I—I'm so sorry miss, we didn't realize—!"

CRACK!

The slap that rings across his face is so forceful, his beard nearly whips all the way around his neck.

"PERVERTS! SOMEONE, HELP!"

Hearing the cry, several of the men from the village rush over, tangling the three cultivators in a mess, struggling to explain themselves.

"We weren't—!"

"We were only trying to—!"

"There's a—!"

Xie Lian takes the chance to take off again, H—

Hua Cheng clutched in his arms.

The stall owner throws his hands up in dismay, struggling to stop the displays from being knocked over in the tussle.

“WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU PEOPLE?!”

Xie Lian glances back over his shoulder, apologetic.

“EVERYTHING IS WRONG, I’M SORRY!”

He holds Hua Cheng with one arm, lifting his skirts with the other as he charges ahead, leaving the others behind in a cloud of dust.

One of the cultivators is punched so hard, he sends the entire display of dresses crashing down, and the shopkeeper cries out in anger.

“WHY THE FUCK DO I EVEN BOTHER?!”

The sounds of his rage fade, as well as that of the brawl as Xie Lian charges away from the village—even farther and further than he did that last time, persistently heading west under Hua Cheng’s direction.

When he eventually does stop, he’s even more breathless than he was before, setting Hua Cheng down as he clutches his ribs, steadying himself.

The ghost king grasps his shoulders, vexed. “Your highness, breathe slower, you’ll hurt yourself.”

“…” Xie Lian bites back a laugh.

Even in this form, he still speaks so seriously.

“I’m alright, San Lang, I just forget this body has its limits at times,” he explains, shaking his head.

But even the prince knows that he needs rest, and at this rate he’ll worry San Lang sick

“…Why don’t we stop to rest? Is there a—?”

“There’s an inn just ahead,” Hua Cheng confirms.

“Let’s stop there, then,” Xie Lian mutters, his voice still a little weak and labored.

“…Alright,” Hua Cheng agrees. “We shouldn’t have to wait long.”

Rather than explain what he means, he tugs Xie Lian along.

When they step inside—it's oddly quiet, despite being the time of day that guests should be arriving.

"Excuse me?" Xie Lian calls out, holding Hua Cheng's hand. "We'd like to book a room for the night."

"Ah! A guest!" A few employees come out from the back eagerly.

"Welcome miss—!" They start, adjusting when they see the newcomer has a child with them.

Can't be an unmarried woman, then.

"Mada…!" They begin again in perfect unison, but when they see Xie Lian's face, which, while lovely, is clearly that of a man's, they…

"…Sir?"

The prince smiles pleasantly. "Hello, could we get a room for the night?"

"I…" the attendants stop, looking at each other. "Yes!"

"Of course!"

He sighs with relief, happy to be led to a table. "I really wasn't expecting to find a place to stay, so far out here…"

"And we rarely find guests out here!" The attendant agrees eagerly, handing them both menus. "A pleasant surprise for both of us!"

"Yes…" Xie Lian agrees cheerfully as they walk away, and when they do, Hua Cheng speaks up next to his ear.

"Gege…it would seem that we've stumbled upon a corrupt establishment run by ghosts."

Xie Lian hides his face behind his menu, feeling mildly ridiculous.

(After all, he can't even read it.)

"Yes, I've noticed…"

The average mortal wouldn't—but the stench of blood is powerful.

And even if not for that—the entire place is covered in a dark, pungent aura.

Death, it seems, is common here.

It's too bad, though—because Xie Lian actually was rather hungry.

"…Excuse me," he sets his menu down, speaking to one of the attendants.

"We're going to go on up to our room. Could you bring our food to us there?"

"Certainly, young master! Certainly!"

Their manners are a little overwater and clumsy, though Xie Lian supposes that is to be expected.

"And if anyone comes around asking for someone matching our descriptions…tell them you didn't see us?"

"Ah, but of course!"

"Completely discreet, sir!"

Xie Lian huffs out a sigh of relief, reaching for Hua Cheng's hand as they head upstairs.

This isn't his first time in an establishment like this, and while Xie Lian assumes they'll be following standard corrupt hotel practices—

(Poisoning, robbing them, and consuming their flesh.)

—The accommodations are surprisingly comfortable.

Xie Lian flops down tiredly, the mattress soft under his back.

"You can sleep for a little while, gege. I'll wake you if anything happens."

"Mmm…" Xie Lian hums, closing his eyes—smiling when he feels Hua Cheng place something in his hand.

Another orange.

"Thank you, San Lang." He raises a slice to his mouth, taking a bite.

He was such a picky eater when he was young—but he always loved oranges.

“…Were you and your mother close?”

Hua Cheng sits on the side of the bed.

“…I don’t know. She was my only relative.”

No grandparents, aunts, uncles, or cousins.

“…My mother was my favorite person in the world when I was little,” Xie Lian recalls with a soft smile. “And your father?”

Hua Cheng’s snort is surprisingly bitter.

“I was always curious—but he was long gone by the time I was born.”

He can still remember everything his mother said.

That his father was a soldier, and that they had loved each other.

And when Hua Cheng asked him where he was, she would always say that he still had a war to fight.

She hadn’t wanted Hong’er near any of it.

That’s hard, sometimes.

Knowing how she would have felt, if she had known that Hong’er became a soldier anyway.

“…But you think he was the one who gave her that golden belt, don’t you?”

Hua Cheng is silent, but…

Ever since that day, he’s felt more and more certain of it.

“Whatever happened to it, by the way?”

If he still has it, then maybe, when all of this is over, he could take a look at it and figure out…

“It stayed with her, when she died.” Hua Cheng explains quietly. “I didn’t take it.”

The belt was so important to her, it…

It felt wrong, even if Hong'er had known back then that it was worth some money. It was more likely someone would have just stolen it from him anyway if he had tried to sell it, he was such a scrawny kid.

Xie Lian wants to ask more.

He wants to ask where his mother is buried. What she looked like. Her name. He knows if he did, Hua Cheng would try to answer him.

Try being the operative word.

'Please don't ask me.'

Hua Cheng's shoulders are slightly hunched, hands gripping the edge of the bed tightly.

'I hate lying. So please don't ask me.'

Xie Lian frowns, turning his cheek against the pillow.

He doesn't have to ask him right now. It's not as though they don't have plenty of time. And Xie Lian…

He's exhausted.

But as he lays down, the pillow pressing against his cheek, eyelids growing heavy—one question is on his mind. Half formed, even as he drifts off.

"And why would you think…Feng Xin and I would…"

Hua Cheng watches the prince sleep, his expression smoothing out.

"…" The ghost king reaches out, carefully pushing a few locks of hair from his face.

'Because you wanted him, back then.'

He saw.

That day.

Sometimes, it's easier to forget—especially when they're together, and everything else seems so far away.

It's easy to forget now, during moments like this.

In this body, it almost feels like being in one of the Crown Prince's temples again. Taking shelter from the rain. Always looking up at that heart stoppingly beautiful face, carved from stone.

Never daring to want anything.

Now that face is closer than ever. Living. Breathing. Not a dream, but the real thing.

And he can only think of one time when those eyes looked at him the way that he always wanted.

One time when that selfish, aching hunger felt even a little bit sated.

On Mount Tonglu.

When 'Xie Lian' saw Hua Cheng's hallucination of him with Feng Xin, and said—

'That's you.'

'Not me.'

It wasn't real.

He knows that. It was only an illusion—however kindly Zhao Beitong might have intended it. A sweet dream to lull him to sleep so that he could be devoured.

'I always would have been yours.'

He can't even blame her for it. He did the same to her later, leaving her in a garden with Mei Nianqing, and her sons.

And it somehow seems more meaningful, that she had Xie Lian—an echo of him—tell Hua Cheng that back then.

'I know that you are not mine...'

Because that was what the man she loved said to her. The most honest expression of affection that she could think of.

'But I have always been yours.'

Hua Cheng's fingers linger on Xie Lian's cheek, even with his hair already pushed back.

He's far away in sleep. The ghost king knows.

For many nights, before the prince knew he was there, Hong'er would wait until he was deep in sleep before leaving food, or blankets—never daring to wake him.

"...I know you've never loved me," he admits quietly, infuriated by the smaller size of his hand. The youth in his voice.

"Not in the way that I love you."

Forcibly reminded of how weak he once was.

How inadequate.

He pulls his hand back, looking away.

"This lowly one is weak sometimes, forgive me."

Still.

'What about you?'

His hands are balled up tightly in his lap—and they tremble.

Remembering how Xie Lian had asked Hua Cheng if he had thought about it.

Having that kind of future with the person he was in love with.

Hua Cheng told him the truth.

He's never dared think about the future in that much detail. Not when everything else seemed so impossible.

It still does now, and yet...

Just because he never dared, that doesn't mean he's never had...involuntary responses.

Like how, when he found out about Shi Qingxuan's condition...

A good man probably would have felt sympathy for her situation. Or maybe even remorse, given his decision not to intervene.

But he's a selfish man. He always has been.

And all Hua Cheng felt was...jealousy.

He didn't understand it back then. He still doesn't now, not really.

But now, when he closes his eyes and tries to imagine it...

Three, huh?

Would they look like him?

He reaches back behind him—finding Xie Lian's hand, stretched out loosely in front of him, squeezing gently.

Not that it matters. Because, out of a million other reasons, Xie Lian already said that he didn't want them anymore, but...

It couldn't hurt imagining, could it?

A Past that Haunts You

Chapter Summary

> "What?" A voice questions dryly. "You aren't gonna scream? Tell me to get the fuck out?"
>
> Xie Lian grows still, lips parted with shock.
>
> ...Mu Qing?

Chapter Notes

> ! CONTENT WARNING !
>
> This chapter contains heavy implications of past childhood sexual abuse. It is not explicitly said or depicted, but heavily implied. Please read with caution.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A few hours later, Xie Lian is woken by a gentle shake of his shoulder.

“Gege?”

“San Lang…”

He sits up groggily, his hair slightly askew as he reaches out for him, letting out a small sigh when he feels the boy’s shoulder.

“What is it?”

Hua Cheng doesn’t have to answer before it becomes abundantly clear.

“BATHROOM!”

Voices ring out from downstairs loudly.

“BRING US SOME WATER, TOO!”

“Right away, kind sirs, right away!” The servants reply excitedly. “Could we interest you in a meal, as well?”

Xie Lian winces, listening as the cultivators heartily agree.

“Those chastity pellets were no joke!” One of them groans pitifully.

“Yes, but the cure is effective,” one of the others replies solemnly. “This monk has only had thirty seven cups of water, and he feels better already.”

(Xie Lian doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry.)

“How did they find us already?” He whispers, vexed by the ability behind that Heaven’s Eye.

How is he going to deal with that without being forced to harm the priest?

“Don’t worry, gege,” Hua Cheng drawls, kicking his feet lazily as he eavesdrops on the conversation below.

“Everything will be fine soon, we just have to wait.”

…Wait on what?

Now that they’ve ordered their food, the real conversations begin.

“So—why are all of you after Hua Chengzhu, anyway?”

Xie Lian had wondered the same thing—and now, each of them explains.

For one, it was that a local pig had turned into a wrathful spirit, slaughtering the family of a local butcher.

And when Hua Cheng gave the beast shelter in ghost city, he said—

‘If you slaughter the family of a pig, don’t cry for mercy when he does the same to you.’

Another has a story with similar details, but it was a rooster, rather than a pig.

For the man who cried pitifully over the chastity pellets, it was that his shixiong had been tricked and drained dry by a ghost concubine that Hua Cheng gave sanctuary in Ghost city as well, welcoming another wayward soul within its walls.

Xie Lian almost feels pity for the man in the story, until another monk questions it, adding that the cultivator in question had been known for harassing women.

Another had been raised in a once prominent sect, but…

The official they worshiped was one of the thirty three.

No matter how many temples they built, Hua Cheng burnt them down. They fell from power over the centuries—all because of the ghost king and his grudge.

“And what about you, esteemed senior?” One of them asks Heaven’s Eye. “How did Crimson Rain wrong you?”

Heaven’s Eye leans back in his seat, beard quivering with emotion.

“It’s hard sometimes for me to even talk about it, but…”

Hua Cheng rolls his eyes.

“We’ve been rivals since I was a teenager.”

Gasps echo through the room, and Xie Lian sits up straighter, curious.

“Rivals?!”

“In love, of course.”

…Xie Lian chokes.

It’s hard, imagining a monk like him as a lovestruck teenager, but it happens to everyone, doesn’t it?

But how could he have been rivals with *Hua Cheng* of all people?

“You fought him over a woman?”

“Our Senior is amazing!”

Hua Cheng glances toward Xie Lian, unable to let that one stand.

"It's a misunderstanding," the Ghost King mutters under his breath.

"But he sounds so certain," Xie Lian muses, fiddling with the ends of his hair. "It must be quite an interesting story."

Oh, and it *is* .

"It was a DARK AND STORMY NIGHT!" Heaven's Eye's voice booms through the inn, flaring with dramatics. "Just like this one!"

Xie Lian bites back a snort when one of the disciples whispers to the other.

"But...it's not storming?"

"Why did he dim the candles?"

(For effect, obviously.)

"I was but a new devotee in my temple, sweeping the floor in the worship hall—when I heard a knock at the door. And when I opened it, I..." He trails off, clutching his chest, his voice trembling. "She was the most beautiful girl I had *ever* seen, then, *and* now!"

Several of his fellow disciples gasp, impressed by their senior's steadfast affections.

It's true love!

It must be!

"With hair black as a raven's wing, and eyes that burned me like a flame!" He presses the back of his hand over his eyes. "In an instant, I was bewitched!"

Hua Cheng rolls his eyes even harder this time, looking vaguely disgusted.

"I allowed her to take shelter within my temple for the night, and over the weeks that followed—she was the most charming, intelligent person I had ever met. And her sense of humor, ah!" Heaven's Eye clutches both hands to his chest, still love struck as he remembers it. "I haven't laughed like that since I parted with her company!"

"But how did Hua Cheng become mixed into the matter?!"

"Ah...it was a tragedy, truly, that of star crossed lovers..." The senior cultivator sniffs, his eyes wet from the memory. "You see, when I asked her to marry me—I was willing to abandon my cultivation, to leave everything for her—but she said that we could not be together, because she owed a great debt..."

"But senior..." One of the disciples frowns. "Why would you have been forced to abandon your sect for marrying a woman? Your sect doesn't mandate abstinence."

"No, you're quite right," Heaven's Eye agrees somberly. "But my sweet little plum blossom was not a normal girl—she was a ghost."

That draws even more surprise—and to Xie Lian's surprise, instead of being scandalized, the other cultivators are impressed.

"And our senior loved her anyway?!"

"Such powerful emotion!"

"What a righteous man!"

"Yes, yes, our love was true and pure, but..." Heaven's Eye grits his teeth, his gaze burning with anger from the memory. "She refused to marry me–because she owed the lord of ghost city a great debt, and was unwilling to place my life at risk..."

One of the disciples bursts into tears.

"What a brave, honorable girl!"

"She was! She still is, wherever he's keeping her!" Heaven's Eye cries. "She confessed to me that was why she had come to my temple—looking to steal one of our treasures, and use it to pay off her debt. But when she came to know me...she couldn't bring herself to do it."

Even Xie Lian turns to Hua Cheng, biting back a smile as he raises his eyebrows. "That does sound like a romantic story, San Lang."

The ghost king makes a small gagging noise, shaking his head. "He's absolutely delusional, none of it happened that way."

"...How do you know?"

"And I must confess to you my brothers, I committed a grave sin," Heaven's Eye bows his head, his beard nearly dipping into his glass of wine. "I broke into our sanctuary, and stole the item for her myself."

"What?!"

"You did?!"

"I have long since been punished—but yes." He sighs, grabbing a napkin to dab at his eye. "That was actually how I gained my supernatural abilities."

One of the youngest disciples leans forward, his mouth gaping in shock. "Truly?!"

"Yes," Heaven's Eye nods, his tone grave. "The jar had been sealed by the Heavenly Emperor himself, and could only be broken by someone of my bloodline, that of the priest it had originally been gifted to. When I opened it, a portion of his spiritual power entered my body, through here." He points to his forehead.

"But what could have been sealed inside that was so important?!"

Dangerous enough to be sealed by the emperor, and valuable enough to pay a debt to a ghost king.

"Ah, an ancient beast, one older than the emperor himself," Heaven's Eye strokes his beard, remembering.

"Swallowed by ash in the original eruption of Mount Tonglu, he roamed the forests of the West for centuries, slaughtering any men who dared to cut them down. He was becoming a danger, and so the emperor helped my ancestors seal him, and use his energies for their cultivation."

Xie Lian can't help but frown at that, feeling pity for the creature. He understands why Jun Wu would want to stop it from harming mortals, but...

Trapping it for all eternity, using it as nothing more than a power source for mortal cultivators?

That feels cruel.

Then, Heaven's Eye names the beast, and Xie Lian freezes.

"The Giant Panda Spirit, Sen Dian."

His jaw drops, trying to wonder if it's only a coincidence, but that seems impossible—

"She took the creature to Ghost City, but..." Heaven's Eye lets out a sorrowful moan. "She never returned to me!"

One of the disciples pats his arm as the older man dries his tears, choking out, "I went to Ghost City myself to demand Hua Cheng release her, but he refused me! Even though the panda was clearly living there! That was when I knew!" He sobs.

"He wanted my sweet little plum blossom ALL TO HIMSELF!" He shakes his head vehemently. "But I will FREE HER! I've thought of nothing else for the last hundred years!"

Xie Lian looks to Hua Cheng again, and the ghost king grumbles.

"He hasn't ascended, but he's cultivated to the point where his body doesn't age. Unfortunately."

Unfortunately? Xie Lian has to admit, the man is irritating—and rude—but he doesn't seem all that—!

"My poor Shuo—one day I'll find her, and bring her home again!"

Xie Lian claps a hand over his mouth, if only to hold back shocked laughter—and Hua Cheng sounds like he couldn't be any more annoyed.

"You see what I mean?" He grumbles.

They—They certainly aren't rivals in *'love,'* no, Hua Cheng was right about that.

Just then, they're spared when the attendants start to bring them dinner, but...

Xie Lian can't help but bite his lip, stomach churning with worry.

The food is almost certainly poisoned. If he doesn't warn them, they'll—

"Is this supposed to be some sort of JOKE?!"

The prince lets out a soft sigh of relief, wondering if Heaven's Eye was skilled enough to notice the threat—

"Look how GREASY this is! Absolutely FILTHY!"

"O-Our apologies, sir!"

"And is this a HAIR?!"

"F-from the pig, daozhang!"

"WHAT PIG HAS HAIR THIS LONG?!"

"Take it back! What a DISGRACE, you expect anyone to PAY FOR THIS?!"

"We'll remake it my lord, right away!"

"Apologies, apologies!"

Xie Lian rubs his forehead, relieved the men aren't eating it, but...

"And by the way, have you seen a woman and child passing through?"

Xie Lian sighs, relieved that they already agreed not to—

"Yes," One of the attendants agrees, carrying the dishes back toward the kitchen. "There's actually a woman and child staying in one of the rooms upstairs!"

Xie Lian's face falls into his hands with dismay.

Maybe he was the foolish one, expecting a murderous ghostly inn attendant to keep their word.

Actually, saying that out loud in his head—he actually does feel utterly ridiculous for having any expectations.

At least when they have to flee again, he can warn them about the...

But, rather than storming into their room, they burst into the bedchamber next door, only to be met with angry shrieking in response.

"JUST WHAT DO YOU FUCKERS THINK YOU'RE DOING, STORMING IN ON A GIRL IN THE BATH?!"

Now, Xie Lian's eyebrows shoot up with surprise.

Lan Chang?

She's staying here as well? But—

"W-WE'RE SORRY MA'AM!"

"There's no need to shout, how were we supposed to know you were in the bath?!"

"I could've told you assholes IF YOU FUCKIN' KNOCKED! NOW GET OUT!"

"Have you seen—?!"

"I SAID GET THE FUCK OUT!" She shrieks.

They retreat just as quickly as they came, slamming the door shut behind them, and if Lan Chang is here...

Xie Lian grimaces, knowing what else must be with her.

But when he moves to get out of bed and go to her, hopefully to make sure her son is contained, he—

He hears Lan Chang gasp, water sloshing in the tub as she shrinks away from something in shock.

"What?" A voice questions dryly. "You aren't gonna scream? Tell me to get the fuck out?"

Xie Lian grows still, lips parted with shock.

...Mu Qing?

Well—-to be more accurate, that's the voice he uses when he poses as Fu Yao—but Lan Chang...seems familiar with him.

"How did you find me here?!"

"Who can say," the god drawls, his voice dripping with contempt. "It was probably the reports of three women dying in the area."

Lan Chang flinches, shrinking lower underneath the bathwater, to which he provides a contemptuous laugh, shaking his head.

"Oh, sweetheart—if I was ever going to be tempted to look at a woman, she'd have to have a lot more to offer than you."

Even Xie Lian winces.

Mu Qing has never been particularly kind with his words—but—

That was cruel, even for him.

Lan Chang slips out of the tub, fumbling for a robe as she dries herself off, glaring.

"Why did you come here then, huh? You on the run?" She looks him up and down.

"Is that what you think?"

"If you weren't, I can't imagine why you'd sneak in here in that disguise," Lan Chang mutters, pulling her hair up into a clip. "But I guess I owe you one after that, so if you wanna work something out, I can talk to—"

"...Work something out?" Mu Qing's voice is like ice. "Who are you going to talk to, exactly? Hua Cheng? The one you lied to and stole from? Or Qi Rong? And either way—the fact that you think I came here to work something out with you..."

His fists actually *shake* from anger, nails biting his palms.

"I figured no one else was talking to you at the moment," Lan Chang shrugs, crossing her arms. "You aren't exactly good at keeping people on your side—and you and the others were the one going on and on about that fancy lie detector sword. So did I put you in any real danger?"

Mu Qing stares at her, his jaw slightly slack.

"…You really have no clue what you fucking did, did you?" He whispers, discovering that, once he reaches a certain level of anger, he actually becomes nauseous.

That's something he didn't know about himself before.

"…Forced you to confess to murdering some wife beater no one cared about?" Lan Chang rolls her eyes, turning away from him as she actually dresses herself properly. "That was one of your better moments, it's not like I forced you to slander yourself—!"

"No."

Mu Qing covers his mouth, swallowing down the urge to vomit.

"…No, that wasn't what you did."

In the room next door, Xie Lian finds himself squirming with discomfort, knowing that he's overhearing something that he shouldn't—while Hua Cheng reclines lazily, listening.

"You accused me—knowing what EVERYONE would assume—and you know what? You're right. I'm not like Feng Xin, Ming Guang, Qi Ying—I'm not even like the crown prince. You know why?"

His jaw aches.

"People have ALWAYS wanted a reason to write me off—this shit is going to stick."

"But they said that sword—?"

"You think it fucking matters?" Mu Qing almost wants to laugh. "You know better than that."

People who are born to serve others—people born to rule don't like it when you overcome that.

Because it was nice, having someone below them.

"But even if…" Mu Qing presses a palm against his forehead.

Even if what Lan Chang believed was true, it—

It would still make what she did selfish and cruel.

But…

"…You think that was *ever* something that I wanted to talk about?" He glares, his voice trembling.

"We've all done things we're not proud of," Lan Chang glares. "Some of us aren't lucky enough to be able to sweep it under the rug for eight centuries before it comes out. *Some* of us have to be humiliated and looked down on EVERY FUCKING DAY!" She wraps her arms around herself tightly. "So, I'm *sorry* if you had to look bad for ONCE, and you had to tell everyone about your little deal with the—!"

She turns around, filled with vengeful anger, ready to shake her fist in his face, but—

Something about Mu Qing's expression makes her stop.

Makes her take a step back.

"You think it was a deal?" Mu Qing asks, his voice steady—but not calm.

No, it's miles away from calm.

"Are you actually that stupid, or are you so pig headed that you never gave it that much thought?"

Mu Qing always assumed she knew.

From the way she reacted to him, all of those years ago, hinting at the fact that she was aware of what he had done.

Her family was high up enough for her to be a possible concubine to the crown prince, and her father...

He was one of the very few members of palace security that had been involved in cleaning up what happened that night.

Little mess, no fuss. Men like that don't talk.

Except, perhaps, to their wives.

Or eldest daughters.

Unfortunately for Mu Qing, it's a small fucking world.

"Since you think you know enough of what's going going on to fuck around with other people's lives, let me de-mystify it for you." Mu Qing takes a step closer.

His hands are in his pockets—because he knows if he takes them out—he might hit her.

"Do you think, if the King of Xianle wanted to assassinate his brother-in-law, he'd hire a scrawny twelve year old who happened to work in the house? How stupid are you?"

Xie Lian grows pale and silent, his shoulders stiffening, and Hua Cheng's gaze suddenly cuts over to him.

"What other reason would you have to—?" Lan Chang stops, her eyes growing wide, and Mu Qing's tone grows quiet.

Xie Lian wishes it was quieter, so he couldn't hear.

Maybe because it feels like a violation—or maybe, because he feels so...

"I wanted to for a long time. Because I already tried every other fucking thing," Mu Qing's nails dig into his palms so sharply, he feels his skin break. "I asked for help. I told the people that were supposed to protect me—and there was nothing they could do."

Maybe there's pleasure to be found in the slow dawning horror in her eyes, but Mu Qing doesn't feel it.

"And...I guess I just figured out how to live with it," he shrugs, sounding vaguely disgusted with himself. "I told myself that was better than people calling me a liar."

He takes another step forward, his mouth so tight at the corners, his entire face contorts from it.

"But you know what I couldn't live with?"

Lan Chang reaches back to brace herself against the dresser, her fingers trembling.

"I didn't—"

"My little sister," He explains flatly. "Suyin. She was years younger than me. And she asked me if I had to do 'extra chores' for the lord of the house, too."

Lan Chang claps a hand over her mouth, her eyes growing impossibly wide.

"I don't care if that makes me a shitty person." Mu Qing swallows hard, and even if his eyes sting, and his nose feels oddly pinched—his voice stays even.

No matter how many years go by. No matter how strong he gets. How many things he's done.

He can't talk about this without tears in his eyes—even if they don't fall.

"I didn't think about it. I grabbed a knife from the kitchen. I went to his room that night. Then I cut his throat, and I watched him die."

He even covered his mouth, as he had done to Mu Qing so many times, to make sure he couldn't scream out for help with his dying breaths.

"I didn't have a plan. I figured I was going to get executed." Mu Qing shrugs, recalling those moments with a near clinical level of precision. "I didn't even try to hide the knife. I just sat in the kitchen and waited for someone to find me."

Eventually, one of the guards did.

But somehow, Mu Qing got lucky.

It was one of the guards who knew his mother well. One who was fond of him, who had only ever known him to be a quiet, hardworking child.

"When the palace guards interrogated me, I confessed. But I didn't want to tell them why."

Their faces are only a few inches apart now.

"I was happy to get hanged, rather than talk about it. What do you think would make a twelve year old feel that way?"

"I didn't..." Lan Chang swallows hard, every inch of bravado draining from her voice. "I really..."

"Then, someone remembered what I had said before," Mu Qing's voice has been even up until now, but...

It breaks.

"They didn't listen to me the first time—but after that, they had a doctor look at me. And you know what?" He shakes his head.

"The only thing they could do after that was kill me, or cover the whole thing up."

Obviously, they decided to do the latter.

"The king didn't put me in the palace because we made a deal," Mu Qing shakes his head, almost laughing at the thought, his voice broken and wet.

"He put me there because if anyone found out what happened to me, what happened to a *lot* of other people—it would've been the biggest scandal the royal family had ever experienced."

Xie Lian places a hand over his mouth, sitting perfectly still.

He hasn't taken a breath in at least two minutes—and Hua Cheng is sitting up now, no longer lazy or uncaring, watching Xie Lian with a hesitant, worried expression.

Watching the guilt sink in across the prince's face.

Thinking about the things he didn't *ask* .

'Is someone hurting you, Mu Qing?'

"So, if you think that's 'getting away with it' for eight centuries, or sweeping it under the rug, then..." He leans in, speaking the words while glaring directly into her wide, horrified gaze.

"Fuck. You."

Each word is acidic.

"And up until extremely recently, being examined by that doctor was probably the most humiliating moment of my life." Mu Qing doesn't pull back, doesn't get out of her space. He turns his mere presence into something with a heavy weight, crushing her with it.

"But when I got to the Heavens, and I was interrogated, do you really think they just heard me say, 'Oh, I did murder someone, just not THAT person,' and then they fucking dropped it?"

"I—!"

"They made me say who. They made me say why."

Lan Chang tries to break eye contact, and Mu Qing's hand snaps up, catching her in a harsh grip by the chin.

"Ah, ah," he shakes his head, eyes flashing at her. "You're gonna look me in the eye while I tell you exactly how you fucked up."

A tear slips down his cheek, but his snarl is so vicious, she flinches from him—even if she can't get away.

And Mu Qing doesn't stutter.

Not now. Even if that means he's talking slower than he normally would, spitting out each word with venom.

"They made me say what he did to me. How many times. Where. How *I* fucking felt." His eyes are dark, but they burn, his shoulders trembling as he recalls each question.

Not all thirty three. But enough for Lan Chang to shed tears of her own, squirming and shaking her head.

"And the worst part is, I can't even say I didn't deserve it," he almost laughs.

Really. It's almost fucking funny.

He betrayed someone's secrets once, too.

He hurt his friend, and then left him to suffer like that, too.

"But not from *you* ."

Because he never *hurt* her.

"I didn't know it was like that, I—"

"THEN YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE FUCKING SAID ANYTHING!" Mu Qing roars, shoving her back against the dresser once, hard, before stalking away from her, running his fingers through his hair, breathing hard. "SO WHY THE FUCK DID YOU?!"

"BECAUSE YOU—!" Lan Chang glares, tears streaming down her cheeks. "YOU ALWAYS HAD THE ONE THING I WANTED, AND WHEN I SAW YOU WITH CUO CUO, SAYING YOU COULD TAKE CARE OF HIM, AND I COULDN'T—IT MADE ME FEEL SO FUCKING *UNNECESSARY!"*

Mu Qing whips his head around to stare at her.

"...What the fuck are you talking about?"

Before she can answer, Cuo Cuo, as if summoned by the mention of his name, drops from the rafters with his fangs extended.

Prepared for that eventual outcome, Mu Qing catches him, sending spiritual power through his palms.

In an instant, he has a fussy, babbling child in his arms, tugging at his hair and whining.

"I—just—" Lan Chang looks at the two of them, pressing her hands against her temples. "The ONLY thing I've held on for all this time—was because he NEEDED me—and LOOK!"

She sobs, and the sound is so gut wrenching—Xie Lian's heart aches, even if Mu Qing's gaze remains cold and unsympathetic.

"H-He doesn't need me! He needs the person who—his—the person I—" Lan Chang hangs her head, shaking from head to toe.

"And I know I've been a horrible mother to him!" she weeps, hugging herself tightly. "I-I tried my best, but—I didn't ask you for help, b-because I knew—you would take him away from me! And in the forest, I..."

Now, she seems to fall apart, sobbing openly.

"I know it's better for him, I know y-you were trying to h-help him, but I..." She wipes at her eyes, the last of her makeup, half washed away by the bath, smearing off against her sleeve. "I was almost h-happy with him s-staying the way he was, because then, I..."

Because then, she was still needed.

And Mu Qing—

In some far away sense of knowing, he's aware of the fact that her death, what happened to her and Cuo Cuo, wrapped them both in such a deep trauma—it can meddle with reason.

Still, he can't find any pity. Not when he...

When he feels the ghost of pain in his ribs.

When he remembers the way Jun Wu pushed his hair behind his ear, almost tender, gentle as he asked him–

'How did it make you feel?'

Mu Qing could have gone a lifetime–could have gone a *thousand* lifetimes–without reliving that.

He turns away from her, letting Cuo Cuo play with the longer pieces of his hair as he bounces the child in his arms, and Lan Chang composes herself, kneeling on the floor, wiping at her eyes.

"I...Is this what you came here f-for?" She mutters, hanging her head.

Mu Qing rests his chin on top of Cuo Cuo's head, oddly silent after all of that.

It's interesting.

The spirit is eight centuries old, just like the rest of them, but—

It still has that smell that most newborn babies do. Sweet. Calming.

In spite of all cold hearted, uncaring appearances, Mu Qing has always enjoyed babies.

Maybe not when they're big enough to speak coherently and show off their shitty little personalities, but babies are nice.

And they have soft hair.

He closes his eyes, letting out a breath.

"No, I came here because I'm still deciding what I want to do with you," he mutters, sounding a bit more serene now.

"...I understand if you plan on taking me back—"

"No," Mu Qing shakes his head, breathing slowly through his nose, trying to get his chest to relax.

"No, we're way past that."

Cuo Cuo mumbles incoherently, whining until the martial god gives him his hand, and Mu Qing obliges.

"I'm deciding whether or not I'm going to disperse you." He says the words calmly, even as Lan Chang shrinks away with fear. "I'm on the fence."

Xie Lian squirms, conflicted.

He can't exactly stand by if that's really what Mu Qing plans to do—even if it sounds like Lan Chang might deserve it—

But he can't intervene without making it clear what he overheard, and...

He doesn't know if Mu Qing could bear it.

"See, that's not even the tip of the iceberg of what happened to me back there," Mu Qing explains, his tone suddenly light and cheerful as he bounces Cuo Cuo, making funny faces as the baby looks up at him.

"And I am definitely, *absolutely not* fucking okay right now."

If he wasn't focusing on how angry he is with her, he would probably still be trembling right now.

If he hadn't come here to scream in her face, he would probably still be hiding under his desk right now, crying like a little kid.

"Whatever I decide, it won't be good for you."

Mu Qing logically knows he shouldn't decide right now. That it's more complicated, because of who she is.

Because of who Cuo Cuo is.

But honestly, after everything she put him through—

She deserves to feel terrified, if only for a few minutes.

Xie Lian is still squirming with discomfort, with Hua Cheng watching him, struggling to figure out what he needs to hear.

"...Gege—"

Just as he starts to speak, they both fall silent—listening to another familiar voice, this time coming from downstairs.

From the kitchen, to be more specific.

"What the hell is taking so long?! They should already be dead by now! This ancestor is STARVING!"

"W-we're sorry sir, but they—they sent the food back!"

"HA?! They think they're TOO GOOD FOR THE FOOD HERE?!"

There's the rattling of pots and pans as Qi Rong bustles about the kitchen. "That's IT! I'LL MAKE THEM A PROPER MEAL MYSELF, THEN THEY WON'T DARE TO TURN IT DOWN!"

Xie Lian groans, his face falling into his hands—and the reaction leaves Hua Cheng curious.

"What is it, gege?"

"...Honestly, I don't understand it, but..." Xie Lian groans between his fingers, mildly disgusted with the fact that he has to admit it. "...Qi Rong is actually a really good cook."

Hua Cheng's eyebrows raise. "Really?"

"He always has been," Xie Lian wipes a hand down his face

"I think it's because the people who worked in the kitchens were the only ones who could stand him when we were kids, but...he has a talent."

So, if he does cook for the cultivators—they're definitely going to eat it.

Which leaves him pressured to intervene either way.

To stop the martial god from killing the ghost upstairs, or to stop the ghosts from killing the humans downstairs, it's—

It's a rotten situation, no matter how you look at it.

But before Xie Lian stands up, Hua Cheng grasps his hand, holding him steady.

"Don't worry, gege."

The ghost king reassures him gently. "You don't have to do anything, it'll be alright."

Xie Lian frowns, shaking his head. "San Lang, I appreciate it, but in this form—"

"I'm not going to do anything either, we just have to wait."

He waits for an explanation, curious, but...

Hua Cheng doesn't add anything more to it—even if he sounds certain.

So, Xie Lian...waits.

Anxiously, biting his thumbnail as he waits to see if Mu Qing makes a violent move against Lan Chang, and listens as Qi Rong bustles about in the kitchen...

By the time the re-made dishes are being served, Xie Lian is absolutely squirming, fighting back the urge to hurry downstairs and warn them not to eat it, but—

"Dinner is se—!"

BAM!

The doors to the Inn fly open, rattling against the walls from the force.

A new patron steps inside, shaking out his hair as he passes over the threshold.

"Say, say..." He drawls, casting his eyes around the room. "Anyone got a room for the night? My feet are killin' me."

The attendants stop, glancing at each other nervously.

"A-Ah..." They look at each other, nervous and uncertain. "We...we've actually already sold all of our rooms for the night."

"That so?" The newcomer drawls, leaning over to examine the plates set out across the table, jet black waves slipping over his shoulder.

"How about a meal then?" He lifts up an order of 'chicken feet,' examining it curiously as the cultivator seated beside him protests. "But is there a vegetarian option?"

He glances up at the attendants, fangs gleaming as he smiles.

"I don't eat humans."

That causes a stir about the table as the mortals start examining their dishes a little more closely, gasping with horror and disgust.

"THAT EXPLAINS THE HAIR FROM BEFORE!"

"I knew those feet were a little too long!"

"I almost put it in my mouth...!"

The attendants quiver, and the young man standing before them smiles even wider.

Sharply handsome, dressed in black robes, with dark hair pulled up into a high ponytail, earrings tinkling lightly in his ears when he turns his head.

"You can't spare a meal for me?"

As he says this, his eyes change—one flashing a vivid, emerald shade of green.

The other scorching and flickering, like a forest set aflame.

"My poor assistant is starving."

Just then, Xie Lian hears someone outside squawk with indignation.

"Who the FUCK are you calling—?!"

Lang Qianqiu.

The prince's heart leaps hopefully.

It's Ren Song!

"...Shouldn't we help him?" Xie Lian whispers, turning to Hua Cheng. "There are so many cultivators in that group, and some of them are—"

"Don't worry," Hua Cheng shakes his head. "He'll be fine."

"Ugh," Lang Qianqiu wrinkles his nose, stepping in behind him—clearly noticing the stench of blood that Xie Lian did when he arrived, but he's far less subtle about his reaction. "Why the fuck to ghosts do shit like this, anyway? It's so disgusting!"

"Ghosts?!"

Ren Song ignores the cries of the cultivators, sending Lang Qianqiu an annoyed look over his shoulder.

"Oi!" He barks, his lip pulling back over his teeth. "Most ghosts don't do that! Qi Rong is just fuckin' gross, and he's trying to copy He Xuan."

"Qi Rong?!"

"Blackwater?!"

"How is he copying Blackwater?" Lang Qianqiu frowns, leaning down next to Heaven's Eye, who seems too shocked to move, poking at a plate with faint curiosity and disgust.

"He Xuan-ge gained power in the beginning by eating other ghosts," Ren Song shrugs. "You can gain some resentment from eating the flesh of murder victims, or defenseless ghost fires, which is how Qi Rong has gotten by this far, but..."

Ren Song snatches out with his hand suddenly, catching one of the attendants by the throat as he lets out a surprised yelp.

The ghost twitches and squirms in his grasp as Shuo's fingernails puncture its skin, draining the resentment from its form until, eventually, there's only a ghost fire flickering in his palm.

"He can't do this," Ren Song concludes, tossing the ghost fire down his throat.

It certainly puts an entirely new perspective on all of the times Lang Qianqiu witnessed Shuo look at Hua Cheng with round, pleading eyes, saying—

'Gege, can I eat him?'

"T-THAT'S AUTUMN TWILIGHT SHROUDING FORESTS!" One of the cultivators finally recognizes him, leaping up.

"IF HE'S HERE, THEN CRIMSON RAIN MUST BE NEARBY! THE RUMORS SAY HE'S WEAK RIGHT NOW, SO THIS IS OUR CHANCE—!"

One of them hurls a talisman at him, the yellow paper landing against his sleeve.

Lang Qianqiu scratches the back of his head, annoyed.

"Does he seem weak to you?"

Ren Song glances down at the talisman, his eyes narrowing—

And the cultivators shrink back with terror as the paper crumbles to ash.

"I WAS weaker," He agrees. "Then I ate just about every ghost on the way here."

All of the man-killing ghosts, anyway—those are fair game.

Xie Lian stiffens from upstairs, realizing—

The thing that ripped through the Western blockade—

Was that *Shuo?*

"Alright boys," He sighs, rolling his shoulders and cracking his knuckles. "I'm not here for you, so why don't you stay out of the way?" He jerks a thumb back towards Lang Qianqiu. "It makes things a little less awkward for Golden Boy over here."

Lang Qianqiu sends him an annoyed glance. "Would you cut it out?"

Just then, Heaven's Eye seems to take notice of him, pointing in the prince's direction.

"WHAT'S A HEAVENLY OFFICIAL DOING WITH A GHOST?!"

Lang Qianqiu rubs his ear, annoyed with all of the screaming. "What, so you didn't notice all of the other gods and ghosts here, but you noticed me?!"

"Aw," Ren Song smiles over at him. "Someone *finally* noticed you!"

Lang Qianqiu's lips twitch at the corners, moving up just a hair before he replies, "Besides you?"

Heaven's Eye glances back and forth between the two, his jaw hanging open.

"Sire—are you FRATERNIZING?!"

"Frater—?" Lang Qianqiu frowns. "What does that mean?"

"You're just—COMFORTABLE TRAVELING IN THE COMPANY OF A GHOST?!"

"First of all, you should be asking me that," Ren Song grumbles, hands on his hips. "He's the one following me around, since he's shit at tracking ghosts. Second—we've developed a nice little system. Observe."

He clears his throat, "Hey, asshole! I'm about to commit a sin!"

To which the cultivators look at Lang Qianqiu, who probably would have screamed something about being scandalized a few months before, but now—

He rolls his eyes, then turns around, covering his ears.

Shuo reaches down, grabbing two cultivators and slamming their heads together, then dropping them to the ground, unconscious.

"Hear no evil, see no evil, right?" He wipes his hands off, looking around. "Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to have a word with the chef."

Before any of them can respond, Ren Song flicks his wrist, and the doors to the kitchen fly wide open.

Lang Qianqiu glances over his shoulder, making a sound of vague disgust as the cultivators cry out with horror.

"Calm down," the forest demon rolls his eyes. "So squeamish."

And who can blame them, when the kitchen looks more like a slaughterhouse, littered with blood and body parts—and standing in the middle of it is none other than Qi Rong, a kitchen knife in one hand, wearing a blood spattered apron.

“Y-Y-YOU FUCKER! HOW DID YOU CATCH UP?!”

He glances back and forth between the demon, and Lang Qianqiu, flailing with anger and confusion.

“This ancestor set things up PERFECTLY! YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO KILL EACH OTHER!”

“Oh,” Ren Song rolls his eyes, crossing his arms. “Shut the fuck up, you lazy piece of shit.”

The cultivators look around, seeming unsure of what to make of the situation—or of how to react.

"You didn't set anything up. You took advantage of an opportunity to escape, that was it."

And really, he had been banking on the fact that Lang Qianqiu would have killed Ren Song.

He was the one in a fragile, weakened state when it happened. Qi Rong had probably assumed that the martial god would have taken the opportunity to get rid of him.

Up until that night, Ren Song might have assumed Lang Qianqiu would have done the same thing.

"...Sir," one of the cultivators mumbles, glancing back at Heaven's Eye. "If Qi Rong and Ren Song are both here, don't you think we should try to...?"

Ren Song looks them over, turning to Lang Qianqiu.

"You take the ghosts, I take the humans?"

"...Seems fair."

As a martial god, he can't attack mortals, after all.

Ren Song has no such hang ups.

They pass one another as Lang Qianqiu heads to the kitchen, Qi Rong scrambling away, while Ren Song returns to the dining room, the other cultivators closing in.

From there, the brawl begins, with Ren Song calling over at some point for Lang Qianqiu to 'save him some snacks for later,' and while the martial god seems a little disgusted by the request, he acknowledges it, until—

"WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON DOWN HERE?!"

Xie Lian sighs, slipping off of the bed as he hears 'Fu Yao' stomp down the stairs, Lan Chang gripped with one arm, holding a child on his hip with the other.

"...Fu Yao?" Lang Qianqiu blinks, holding two of the 'inn keepers' by the scruffs of their necks. "What are you doing here?!"

"I should be asking you the same thing!" The 'Deputy God' glares, looking around. He was too focused on Lang Chang before, but now seems to grasp the entirety of the situation. "And why are you running around with Hua Cheng's ki—?"

BOOM!/

The side of the inn bursts open as two cultivators are sent hurling through the wall, sprawling outside on the grass as Ren Song whips around to glare at him, raising an eyebrow.

"His *what?"*

"We're working together," Lang Qianqiu clarifies, subduing the ghosts in his grip. "Temporarily! Over the Qi Rong thing!" He adds quickly when Fu Yao raises an eyebrow.

Ren Song glances past both of them, his eyes settling on the woman in Fu Yao's grip.

"Lan Chang? You alright?"

The female ghost looks at him, then at Fu Yao, who seems to silently dare her with his gaze to make another accusation towards him—and she hangs her head.

"Everything's fine," she mutters, her tone pinched with shame. "Just some personal business."

With her, that could mean a good many things, so Ren Song shrugs it off, turning back to attacking the human cultivators.

"Hey—!" Fu Yao starts again, stepping towards him, when Xie Lian suddenly hurries down the steps.

"F-Fu Yao!" He cries out, making the martial god go still

"What are you doing here?" The prince questions, his tone that of surprise as he holds Hua Cheng's hand, allowing the Ghost King to keep him steered clear of the brawl. "Does Mu Qing know you've descended?"

"..." Fu Yao stares, eyes narrow. "...Not exactly. What about you?"

"Oh, I'm just helping San Lang," Xie Lian explains lightly, moving to stand in front of the ghost king, who doesn't seem to particularly enjoy that, but doesn't protest. "This group of cultivators was sent after him by..."

Then, as if on cue, Qi Rong begins to screech.

"WHAT GOOD ARE YOU USELESS CULTIVATORS ANYWAY?! STOP FOCUSING ON STUPID REN SONG, THE KID IN RED IS CRIMSON RAIN SOUGHT—ACK!"

He was dodging Lang Qianqiu's blows before, but in an instant he's suddenly frozen, a kitchen knife rammed down his mouth.

Lang Qianqiu barely managed to stagger back and out of the way when Xie Lian sprung forward, holding both hands up to ensure he doesn't accidentally hit his former master.

"G-Guoshi?!"

Xie Lian nods faintly in acknowledgement, focusing on his cousin.

"What was that?"

Qi Rong is frozen, wide eyed. The blade of the knife hasn't wounded him seriously, but if he tries to speak—he'll slice his tongue open against it, blood dripping from the corners of his mouth.

With that fire put out, Xie Lian opens a private communication array.

'Feng Xin?'

Given everything, he wouldn't have been surprised if the martial god took a moment to answer, but--

'Your highness?'

He lets out a low sigh of relief.

'...Why exactly were you so worried about finding Mu Qing? You said you would tell me later, but...'

Now, there's a much longer delay—and Xie Lian can practically feel Feng Xin wrestling with exactly what to say, but...

'When Mu Qing and I were patrolling the Southern Blockade, he...came across Lan Chang...who accused him of being her and her child's killer.'

Xie Lian gathered that much from the conversation he overheard, but he doesn't say anything about that, listening as Feng Xin flounders through the events as he knows them.

'I know what you're probably thinking, but I didn't believe it, and I told the others they were crazy for going along with it—'

'I know, Feng Xin.' Xie Lian replies gently, reassuring him. 'I know you wouldn't believe that about Mu Qing.'

He's known them both a *long* time.

Feng Xin's version of caring often comes off as anger. Xie Lian understands that—recognizes it for what it is. Mu Qing, however...

He takes it at face value.

But Xie Lian knows.

Feng Xin might resent him—Mu Qing might drive him crazy—

But Feng Xin cares about him.

'But she said there was a scar on Mu Qing's arm that matched the fetal spirit's teeth, and Mu Qing...I don't know, your highness—he went ballistic. Trying to strangle her, saying he had killed someone, but...that it had been a member of the royal family.'

Xie Lian's mouth presses into a grim line, and he's so distracted, he nearly slices Qi Rong's mouth open accidentally.

(Which really wouldn't be that much of a shame.)

'You mean my uncle.'

'Yeah...' Feng Xin mutters, too absorbed with worry to wonder how he guessed that.

'I figured there was probably an explanation for it, but if I let him run off...everyone would have assumed he was guilty.'

Xie Lian can't blame him for thinking that—but after what Mu Qing said...

He feels a little sick.

'And the situation has been cleared up now?'

'The emperor acquitted him of the accusations, ' Feng Xin agrees. *'He ordered him to rest in his palace, but he disappeared almost immediately after that.'*

'...I see,' Xie Lian digs the knife in just a hair deeper.

'By the way—where are you, your highness?'

'Oh...' The prince trails off, 'Just staying in an inn for the night to rest, I should be fine, but—'

(Now, there's more commotion coming from outside.)

'...I should go.'

'Your highness? Wai—!'

He cuts off the line.

Just as he does, he yanks the knife out of Qi Rong's mouth, just in time for Lang Qianqiu to join in, binding the ghost with talismans as Xie Lian marches toward the front of the Inn, Hua Cheng following behind.

That's when he hears a faint roar.

Several cultivators crash down to the ground, pinned down by massive paws, cringing away from the snarling jaws of a...

...Giant...Panda?

Standing just to the side, having barely escaped the attack, Heaven's

Eye points with a rattling gasp.

"T-THAT'S! SEN DIAN!"

He whips around, glaring at Hua Cheng, who seems perfectly comfortable watching the unfolding disaster from Xie Lian's side, holding his hand.

"Are you HAPPY, YOU BASTARD?! FIRST YOU STEAL THE LOVE OF MY LIFE, THEN YOU ATTACK MY DISCIPLES WITH MY OWN ANCESTRAL BIRTHRIGHT?!"

"...Yin Rong?"

Heaven's Eye stops in the middle of his cries of outrage, turning around to stare at Ren Song, who has also paused in the middle of throwing one of the cultivators, holding him over his head, mouth agape.

"...How do you know my name, demon?!"

Ren Song looks over at Hua Cheng, then back to Heav—'Yin Rong,' his mouth still hanging open.

"You got...old," he mumbles, which probably should have been obvious to begin with, but— "Wait, you're still alive?!"

"Of course I'm still alive! Is this some sort of trick?!"

"..." Ren Song tosses the cultivator in his arms to the side, slamming him against a nearby tree, spinning around.

"YOU LITTLE—!"

But when Ren Song faces him again, the senior cultivator freezes, gaping at...

A young woman.

With hair black as a raven's wing, eyes burning like twin flames.

Lang Qianqiu makes his way out of the pile of rubble where the in once stood, just in time to stare at the forest demon's new look, his expression mildly shocked and flushed, when—

"...SHUO?!"

Before he really even has a chance to react, or ask what's going on—the large, majestically bearded cultivator marches across the grass, snatching Shuo's hand up in his, clutching it tightly.

"M-My plum blossom! Is it really you?!"

Lang Qianqiu gawks, dropping Qi Rong.

"Plum Blossom?!"

And of all of the reactions he could have expected—

Shuo looks away, covering her face with one hand, a little sheepish.

"...That's...quite a beard..."

Hua Cheng makes a gagging sound, rolling his eyes.

Xie Lian feels as though he could be knocked over with a feather.

"Wait," he mumbles quietly, bending over so he can speak next to Hua Cheng's ear. "It was mutual?!"

"No," Hua Cheng disagrees flatly, watching the two with faint disgust. "More like a momentary lapse in sanity."

"What's going on?!" Lan Qianqiu glares, seeming far more irritated than he normally does in Ren Song's presence, and Xie Lian scratches the back of his neck.

"Um...Shuo was...This man's...first love, it seems."

"Huh?!"

"You've been Ren Song all this time?!"

"Yeah..." Shuo glances at him from the corner of her eye, then looks away again, her hair hiding her face. "Sorry?"

She peeks at him again, startled to find him staring at her, wide eyed and earnest.

"I should have recognized you right away! Your intensity, your spirit!"

He leans closer to her, looking her in the face. "You're just as beautiful as the day we met, my darling!"

The other cultivators (along with Hua Cheng, Lang Qianqiu, Mu Qing, and Qi Rong), stare in shock in confusion, but—

Xie Lian actually thinks it's rather sweet.

Odd, but sweet.

Shuo actually lets out a strained, nervous giggle—then stops herself, clearing her throat.

"Well, you got old, but..." She slowly looks back at him, her eyes softening when she looks into his.

Those are the same.

"I really do like the beard."

"...What the fuck is happening..." Lang Qianqiu mumbles faintly, looking as though he's in the middle of a waking nightmare. Xie Lian almost explains it to him all over again, but—

The question seemed rhetorical, this time.

However, Hua Cheng actually answers.

"That's how Shuo reacts when anyone flirts with them," he mutters irritably. "They aren't exactly accustomed to it."

Xie Lian can see his point in part. It's obvious how self conscious Shuo is about being seen as a child, despite their spirit maturing past that point.

The prince can imagine Shuo probably doesn't get a lot of interest in a romantic sense—and for someone eight centuries old (who, unlike Xie Lian, has no vows of chastity to keep) that must be...a sore point.

But there does seem to be genuine warmth between the two.

"...Have you really been trying to kill Hua Chengzhu all this time?" Shuo questions, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear, looking up at H—Yin Rong through her eye lashes. "For me?"

"...Why the fuck do you sound flattered?" Hua Cheng mutters, offended.

"I wouldn't let him keep us apart forever!" Yin Rong shakes his head vehemently, beard whipping around. "I know he doesn't love you, dearest, not in the way that I—!"

Shuo cuts him off, raising a hand. "...Love me?"

Her old flame stares back at her, eyes wide.

"That's why he kept me away from you! Because he wanted you all to himself!"

"Hah?!" Shuo gawks, pulling back, vaguely disgusted. "No way! Hua Chengzhu rescued me when I was a little kid, I've lived with him in Ghost City ever since! That would be GROSS!"

Not to mention the fact that he's already spoken for—but, unlike Hua Cheng, Shuo has the sense not to bring that up in front of the crown prince.

"So," Lang Qianqiu speaks up again, distinctly irritated. "He's like your fath—!"

Shuo and Hua Cheng interrupt at the same time.

"He's like a guardian!"

"—More like a ward, really.”

"..."

"..."

"..."

Heaven's Eye looks from Shuo, to Hua Cheng, then back to Shuo, his gaze shocked and horrified.

"...I see I've committed a great wrong," he mutters, shaking his head.

"Well—"

"All this time, I've been insulting him, when HE WAS THE ONE I SHOULD HAVE ASKED FOR YOUR HAND IN MARRIAGE!" He turns to Hua Cheng, bowing deeply in apology. "I have INSULTED YOU GRAVELY, SIR!"

Hua Cheng makes a face, holding Xie Lian's sleeve, and Shuo chokes.

"Marriage?!"

"Of course! I couldn't have made my intentions more clear!"

"Yin Rong!" Shuo pulls her hand back, shaking her head. "We had fun, and I'm sorry for lying to you—but I was in it for the panda!"

Behind her, Dian Dian rumbles, nuzzling the back of her head.

"The...panda...?"

"I mean," she reaches up, patting his cheek gently—and now, Lang Qianqiu is the one gagging, "I liked you, but we only knew each other for three weeks!"

"...It was three weeks?" Xie Lian mumbles under his breath, and Hua Cheng nods, his tone dry.

"Momentary lapse in sanity."

"Besides, I asked Hua Chengzhu about having a relationship with you when I got back to Ghost City—and he said I wasn't allowed, so..." She shrugs, as though that means there's really nothing more to discuss.

"But...!"

Before he can say anything more, Ren Song reaches up, pressing her fingertips against the side of his head—what seems like a tender gesture until his eyes roll back into his head, and she sets him down gently on the ground.

When Shuo straightens, his normal form has returned.

"...So, he's not your father, but he has to give you permission to be romantically involved with someone?" Lang Qianqiu rolls his eyes, crossing his arms.

"Would you shut up?" Ren Song grumbles, tossing his hair over his shoulder. "I was going through a phase!"

"A phase?! You would've been over six hundred years old by then!"

"Yeah, and my brother had *just* been dispersed, and I wasn't thinking clearly!" The forest demon grumbles. "It was nice getting the attention, but I didn't want to marry the guy just to mess around with him."

Sure, he'd hoped to at least get his first kiss out of the entire thing—but nothing ventured, nothing gained.

"Hua Chengzhu was just looking out for me."

It could be worse.

"I can't believe your ex looks like someone's grandfather..."

"He's not my ex!" Shuo glares. "And he was actually VERY good looking when he was a teenager!"

"...Well," Fu Yao speaks up, "This has been fucking fascinating, but we should go."

He starts to walk away with Lan Chang in tow, when Hua Cheng speaks up.

"Whose child is that?"

"..." Fu Yao stops in mid step, glaring at him over his shoulder. "None of your fucking business."

"...Does this have something to do with what Lan Chang said about Mu Qing?"

Ren Song has returned to Hua Cheng's by now, sitting on the grass next to his feet.

Fu Yao doesn't answer Xie Lian's question, staring straight ahead, and the forest demon glances up at Hua Cheng, speaking into their private array curiously.

'Gege, who's the junior official?'

The ghost king glances down at him, distracted.

'It's Xuan Zhen in disguise.'

Shuo stiffens, glancing back and forth between the two curiously.

'Does the prince know?'

'Yes.'

'He's just pretending that he doesn't know?'

'Exactly.'

"I know you must be upset that she lied about your general," Xie Lian cautions. "But you shouldn't do anything rash."

Still, Fu Yao doesn't answer, and doesn't make any sign of turning around, so...

The prince sighs.

"Alright, if you're going to leave and take her with you, can I ask you for one thing before you go? I'm sorry to be a bother, but..."

Now, when Fu Yao hesitates, he seizes the chance. "Qi Rong abducted a young boy and was traveling with him—he probably needs to be examined. Could you take a look...?"

He can't see Fu Yao's expression, but Hua Cheng can—

And he seems genuinely torn.

"...Where is the kid?"

"He's right here," Lang Qianqiu replies, dropping Qi Rong into a crumpled pile on the ground as he turns around, lifting the boy in his arms. "He seems pretty dehydrated...and he's burning up."

Fu Yao looks over at the boy, the muscles in his jaw working.

"...I can't."

Xie Lian's eyebrows raise in surprise, and while he doesn't immediately react, Lang Qianqiu seems mildly outraged.

"What do you mean, you can't?! You're one of Xuan Zhen's deputies, aren't you? You can handle a fever!"

"I'll send another deputy to help the boy." Fu Yao mutters.

“But I don’t have enough hands to examine him right now.”

“What’s that supposed to—?”

“I mean literally!” Fu Yao snaps, and Hua Cheng watches him a little closer, eyeing the child in his arms.

“…You can’t put him down, can you?”

Fu Yao shoots a glare in his direction.

"Is that really any of your business, brat?!"

Hua Cheng crosses his arms. "You tell me, *Deputy General.*"

"…"

Xie Lian frowns, taking a step forward. "Fu Yao, what's going o—?"

BOOM!

There's a flash of golden light, and Xie Lian groans quietly.

What now?

But when he sees that familiar aura—he doesn't know why, but—

Xie Lian gets the distinct feeling that the situation is about to become more complicated.

"…Feng Xin? What are you doing here?"

"You cut off communication in the middle of a dangerous area?"

The martial god steps forward as the light fades, glancing around those assembled, more than surprised by a few of them, but—

When he sees "Fu Yao," his expression cracks into one of relief.

"Mu-I mean, Fu Yao—the hell were you thinking, sneaking off like that?!"

'…Wait,' Shuo looks at Hua Cheng again. 'He knows it's Xuan Zhen too?'

'Yes. Mu Qing knows that he knows.'

'But he doesn't know that Xie Lian knows?'

'Precisely.'

'But basically everyone who matters knows that it's Mu Qing?'

'Yes.'

Shuo's eye twitches.

'Then why bother?!'

Hua Cheng stopped asking a long time ago when it comes to those three—but he generally assumes it has something to do with the fact that Xie Lian, in all of his wonders and wisdom, has idiotic friends.

“Sneaking off?!” Fu Yao scoffs. “I wasn’t a prisoner!”

“The emperor ordered you to remain in your palace!”

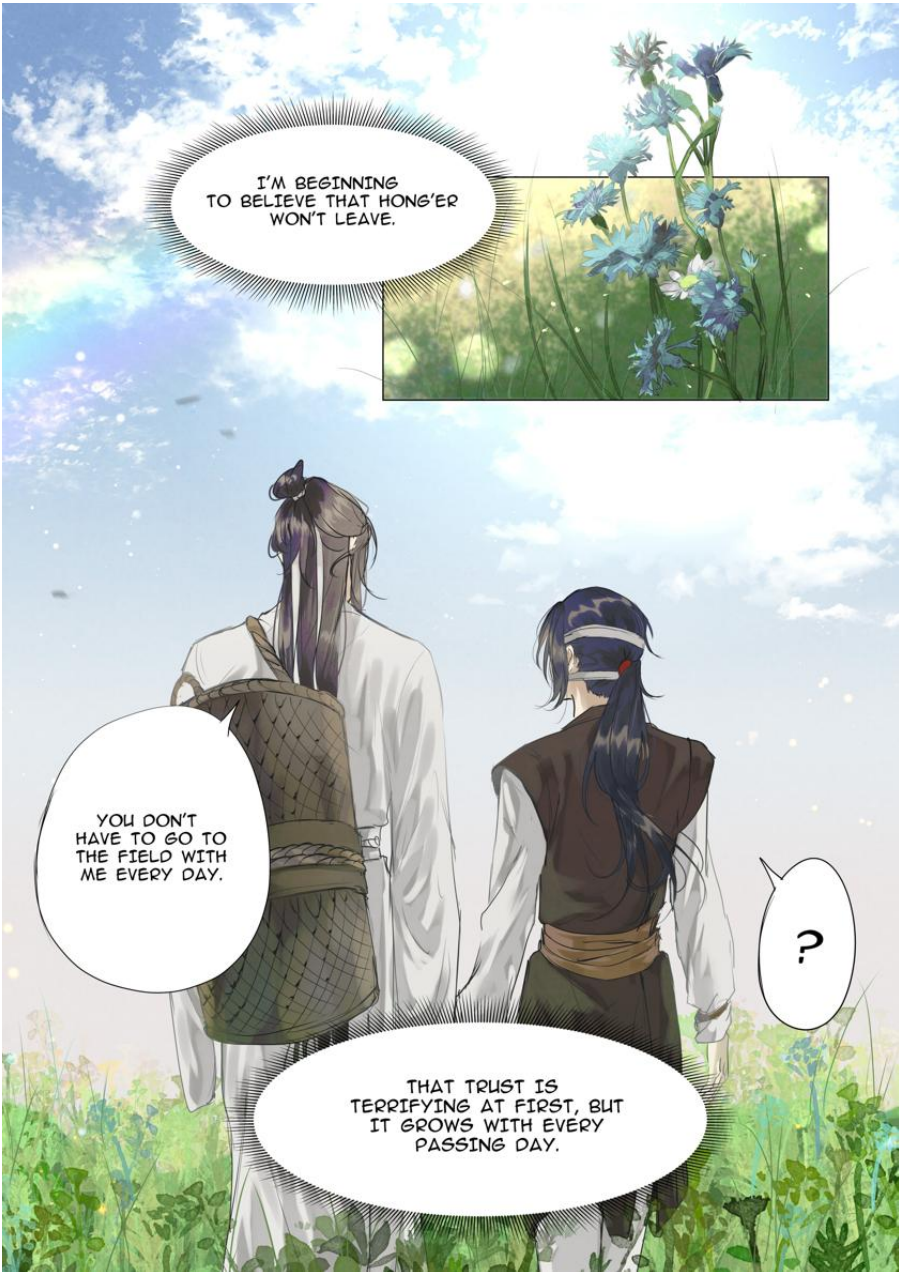
“My general, not me,” he glares, silently daring Feng Xin to contradict him.

Which he doesn’t—not because he wasn’t prepared to drag him off, no—

But because now he’s focused on something else entirely.

“…Who’s the kid?”

UPDATE ON THE NO PATHS ARE BOUND COMIC:

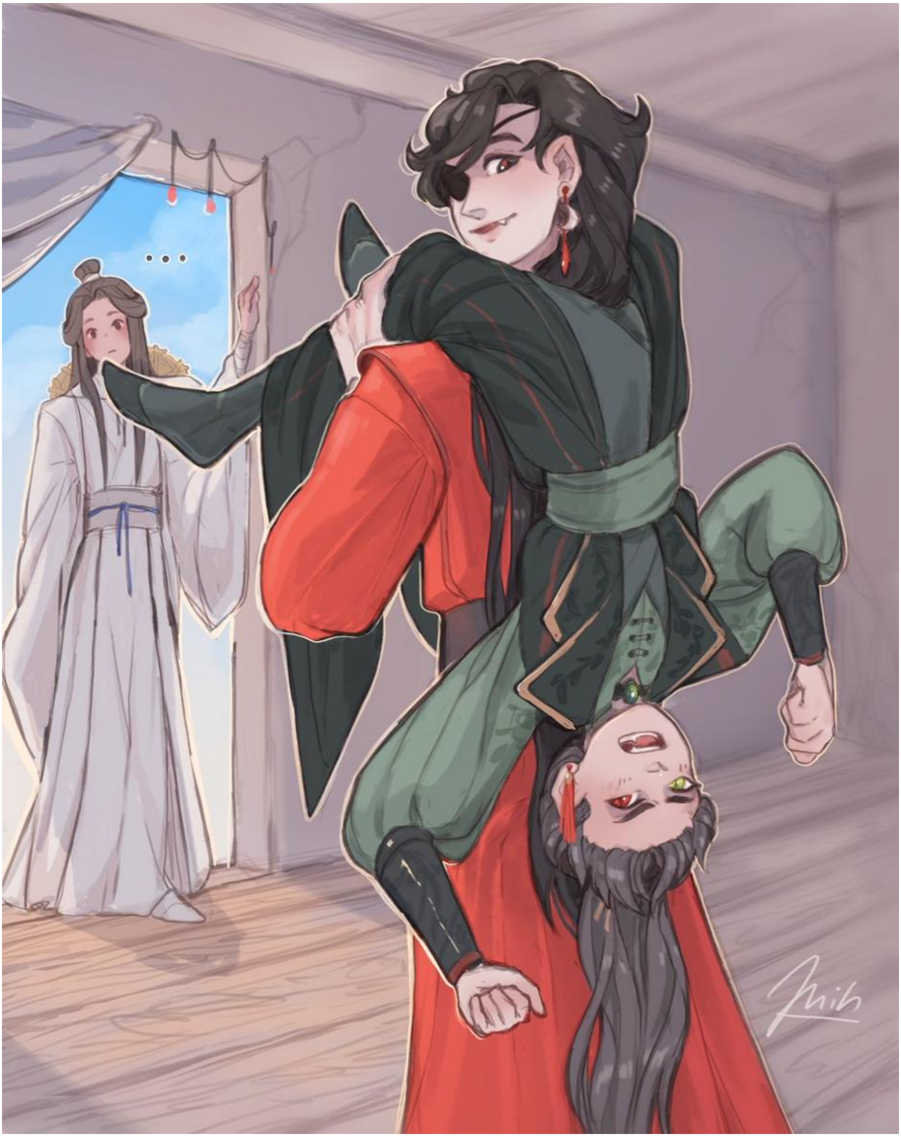

I'M BEGINNING TO BELIEVE THAT HONG'ER WON'T LEAVE.
YOU DON'T HAVE TO GO TO THE FIELD WITH ME EVERY DAY.
?
THAT TRUST IS TERRIFYING AT FIRST, BUT IT GROWS WITH EVERY PASSING DAY.

Imaginary Canvas has uploaded the second chapter of the comic adaptation of No Paths Are Bound! You can read it here ! Please support them for their amazing work, it's truly been an honor, and such an enjoyable experience to work with them! They're an incredible artist, and a wonderful person! This chapter covers

events from the first half of chapter two. In order to keep up with future updates to the comic, look out for further information on their twitter!

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

Crimson Rain and his Ward



CREDIT: JUIH

"Aw, Someone finally noticed you!"

"Besides you?"

CREDIT: **LAURA**

Chapter End Notes

> thank you so much to Juih and Laura for their beautiful artwork, and for allowing me to share it! And thank you so much to all of you for your continued support of this story!
>
> xoxo, Evie

Choosing the Paths You Walk

Chapter Summary

> "After EVERYTHING you know, you think Mu Qing ever wanted to be in the middle of that shit?!"
>
> Xie Lian falls silent, his stomach sinking.
>
> Oh.
>
> Mu Qing—
>
> "All he ever tried to do was his job, and everyone was always blaming him for everything, using him, lying to him, acting like they didn't WANT him around—and then they got mad at him for LEAVING!"
>
> Mu Qing is in pain.

Mu Qing falls silent, looking from the child in his arms, who is now slightly calmer than before, cheek smushed up against Mu Qing's arm, to Lan Chang, who seems caught between emotions, the greatest of them anxiety—

Back to Feng Xin.

“…My general's.”

Now, everyone stares.

"...He doesn't look like Xuan Zhen at all," Lang Qianqiu comments, shocked, to which the 'deputy official' glares, hitching the boy a little higher on his hip.

"Yeah, well, he takes after his mother!" He barks, fighting not to sound vaguely disgusted.

"...And why do you have Xuan Zhen's son and Lan Chang?" Hua Cheng questions, tilting his head to the side.

"Can't a guy multitask?!" Fu Yao growls with a glare.

"What the fuck are you going on about?" Nan Yang scowls. "You—your general—Mu Qing doesn't have a son!"

"You don't know that!" Fu Yao snaps, taking a step back. "Maybe just mind your own—!"

"Yeah, actually I DO know that," Feng Xin steps forward in response. "His cultivation method wouldn't allow it!"

And sure, there's the possibility that he COULD have broken the rules at some point—but if he had—

Well, it seems less likely that he would spook and bolt every single time they—

"Yeah, well—maybe he went and changed methods without saying anything! He's a private person!"

"You—!" Feng Xin grits his teeth, unable to say more without bringing Mu Qing's identity—or their private affairs—out into the open. "Just tell me what's going on!"

"I already—!"

"...Ain't that Jian Lan?!"

Qi Rong's voice comes out of nowhere, and Feng Xin freezes.

The ghost is sitting up now from where Lang Qianqiu tossed him on the ground before, rubbing the side of his head as he glances over Fu Yao's shoulder, smirking and snickering as he takes in her expression.

"WELL I'LL BE DAMNED, IT REALLY FUCKIN' IS!"

Fu Yao's expression twitches. "I don't know who you're—!"

But before he can laugh it off, the female ghost yanks out of his grip, marching over to grab Qi Rong by the collar, shaking him violently.

"WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU TALKIN' ABOUT?! SHUT UP!"

"Jian Lan..." Xie Lian mutters under his breath, trying to understand why that name sounds...vaguely familiar...

"THAT'S NOT MY FUCKIN' NAME! WHO THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU'RE TALKING TO, YOU STUPID PIECE OF SHIT?!"

Qi Rong grins up at her, teeth gleaming in the moonlight.

"WELL LOOK AT YOU!" He cackles, looking from the boy in Mu Qing's arms, then at Feng Xin, and he—

He just throws his head back, laughing even harder.

"AHAHAHA! WHAT A MESS! WHAT A FUCKIN' MESS!"

He's briefly cut off when Lan Chang punches him, slapping him over and over.

"SHUT UP, SHUT UP, SHUT UP!!" She snarls, her face twisted with rage. "YOU STUPID, UGLY LITTLE TOAD! THAT'S NOT MY NAME! I HAVEN'T GONE BY THAT IN CENTURIES!"

The child in Mu Qing's arms whines, reaching for her in distress, and the martial god shushes him, trying to—

"Mama!"

Aaaand there it goes.

Mu Qing presses a hand against his forehead, swearing, all while Feng Xin stands there, looking like he's been kicked in the head, and Qi Rong—

Even as he's half throttled by Jian Lan, he keeps laughing.

"LOOK HERE, MY DEAR COUSIN HAS BEEN *CUCKED!"*

Now, Xie Lian chokes, turning his head in Qi Rong's direction. "What?!"

He—he's never—how could he have been—?

"DON'T LISTEN TO A WORD THIS PIECE OF TRASH SAYS!"

"Maybe they wouldn't have, if you hadn't reacted like a CRAZY BITCH!" Mu Qing snaps, trembling with frustration. "GOD I hate you *SO FUCKING MUCH!"*

"Yeah?!" Jian Lan whips around to glare at him. "WELL IT'S FUCKING MUTUAL, ASSHOLE!"

"YOU'RE SO LUCKY I CAN'T PUT THIS KID DOWN RIGHT NOW, OR I SWEAR TO FUCKING GOD—!"

"HAHAHAHAHA!"

There's so much shouting, Xie Lian can't make sense of it.

"JIAN LAN HERE WAS SUPPOSED TO BE A CONCUBINE IN THE ROYAL COURT OF XIANLE!" Qi Rong cackles. "But she was so plain, my cousin doesn't even remember her name! And she went and got knocked up by HIS BEST FRIEND, THEN GOT HERSELF MURDERED! HA! WHAT A STUPID SLUT! SUCH TRASH!"

Xie Lian presses a hand against the side of his head, seeming to grasp the gravity of the situation at the same time as Feng Xin.

"...You..." He stares at Jian Lan, open mouthed. "...You told me you were getting married. I thought...you were doing well..."

She screws up her mouth, looking up at him with wide, angry eyes.

Without all of the makeup she had painted on before—which now, it seems pretty clear was an attempt at a disguise—she's a surprisingly elegant woman with soft, delicate features.

Wrinkles here and there, but...

"...YOU MOTHERFUCKER!" She snaps, dropping Qi Rong as she launches herself forward, slamming her fists against his chest. "WHAT ELSE WAS I SUPPOSED TO SAY AFTER ALL THAT?!"

...After all of…what?

Mu Qing looks away sharply, still bouncing the arguing couple's child on his hip.

Feng Xin lets her hit him for a few moments, too shocked to respond, before he eventually catches her by the wrists, glancing between her and Fu Yao.

"You...your general...knew about this? The entire time?"

Fu Yao won't look at him, glaring in the opposite direction.

He looks back at Jian Lan, who is still stubbornly trying to get away from him. "And why didn't you say something sooner?! I would have —!"

"What?! Claimed him? Raised him?!" Jian Lan glares up at him. "You can only stand to look at him now, when he's like this!"

"I don't..." He stares, the wheels in his head turning faster and faster as he looks around, taking it all in—and—

He look firmly away from Cuo Cuo—refusing to address that now, because—

He isn't going to take *that* in while he's angry, not when...

"...That was why you pulled that stunt back there?"

He isn't speaking to anyone else now, just—

Just Jian Lan, who once again seems to want to break away, but Feng Xin has her in a firm grip.

"Because that is *fucked up,"* he mutters, shaking his head.

"You KNOW why I—!"

"That was MY fault, not HIS! If you're gonna be pissed off and try to ruin someone's life, ruin MINE!"

"Oh? So you know?" Fu Yao whips his head around finally, glaring at them both. "The reason she hates m—my general so much?! If so, it'd be nice if you could CLUE EVERYONE IN!"

Feng Xin sends him an angry look—though really, it's not at him, or even *about* him, more so just silently bemoaning the entire situation, when—

"BECAUSE THE DUMBASS WAS IN LOVE WITH HIM WHILE WE WERE TOGETHER!" Jian Lan snarls, making both men go completely still.

Xie Lian feels as though he could fall over from shock—not necessarily by that fact, which he'd never completely considered before, but it's not that outlandish—more by the fact that Jian Lan just came out and said it.

(Shuo eagerly watches the entire thing like a stage play.)

He looks to Hua Cheng, eager to ask him more about what's going on in the communication array, but...

The look on the ghost king's face makes him fall silent—confused, and...

Worried.

The first person to speak, unsurprisingly, is Fu Yao—his voice dripping with disdain.

"...Are you fucking stupid?" He mutters flatly, eyes scorching with anger. "You put him through *all of that* shit, because you thought Feng Xin was in love with HIM?!"

Feng Xin is more than familiar with what it looks like when *that* temper snaps, and he holds up a hand.

"Mu—Fu Yao, don't start—"

"You're trying to tell me that you think, eight centuries ago, HE was in love with *MY* GENERAL?!" Mu Qing snaps, fighting the urge to set the child aside and throttle them both. Instead, he points to—

"THE CROWN PRINCE WAS RIGHT THERE!"

Xie Lian makes a small choking noise, color building up in his cheeks, holding both hands up frantically, remembering Hua Cheng's question from earlier.

'Was that person Feng Xin?'

Why does everyone keep assuming that?!

"Don't bring me into this—!"

Mu Qing responds with such ferocity, it startles him.

"You have ALWAYS been a part of this, STOP ACTING LIKE YOU'RE NOT!"

Xie Lian freezes, too shocked to respond—but Hua Cheng isn't—baring his teeth in Mu Qing's direction.

"Watch your fucking tone."

Mu Qing shakes his head vehemently, swallowing hard.

"You're all so...so fucking..." He doesn't say a word about what Xie Lian felt—even if he knows.

He doesn't have the right to speak on that ever again—no matter how upset he is.

If Xie Lian hurts him—Mu Qing deserves it.

Feng Xin, however…

That's a different story.

"You're probably right, Feng Xin probably WAS interested in someone else when he was sleeping with you, because he's ALWAYS been pining after Xie Lian! That's not fucking new!"

Feng Xin jumps, his ears turning red.

"THAT'S NOT—!"

"And YOU!" Mu Qing points to Jian Lan, his anger from upstairs all but reignited. "You did this, you put him through ALL OF THAT over a *MAN?!"*

"IT'S A LITTLE LESS PETTY WHEN HE'S THE FATHER OF MY CHILD!" Jian Lan glares. "And I–!"

"You're fucking PATHETIC!" Mu Qing screams.

His voice is hoarse, and now, when Feng Xin really looks at him—

He notices, even in his disguise as Fu Yao—

Mu Qing looks *awful* .

Pale, drawn, exhausted—jumping and reacting sharply to every little thing.

Like back during the civil war—but way, way worse.

"I'm SO sorry that a rich, spoiled little girl like you was *so* threatened by a servant. Your life got a little hard after the war? What, so that gives you the right to treat someone like that because you *think* your boyfriend had feelings for him?! FUCK *OFF!"*

"Fu Yao..." Xie Lian raises a hand, trying to use as gentle of a tone as he possibly can. "Maybe you shouldn't talk like that in front of a baby..."

But Mu Qing isn't listening to him.

"After EVERYTHING you know, you think Mu Qing *ever* wanted to be in the middle of that shit?!"

Xie Lian falls silent, his stomach sinking.

Oh.

Mu Qing—

"All he ever tried to do was his *job* , and everyone was always blaming him for everything, using him, lying to him, acting like they didn't WANT him around—and then they got mad at him for *LEAVING!"*

Mu Qing is in *pain.*

And Xie Lian wants to tell him that it isn't true.

That it *hurt* , hearing Feng Xin tell him that Mu Qing had left, but—

'I was GLAD when they told me you left!'

'It was a RELIEF!'

Xie Lian can't forget what he said before.

If he tried to tell Mu Qing he didn't mean any of that now—

He knows his friend wouldn't believe him.

Mu Qing has never been the trusting type, and now—

Xie Lian really, *really* finds himself beginning to understand why.

"And he did some fucked up shit back then, but he was a TEENAGER, so I don't know WHAT your excuse is now!" His voice breaks, and he cuts himself off, turning around sharply. "But you had *NO* FUCKING RIGHT!"

Cuo Cuo looks up at him with a frown, eyes wide.

Mu Qing's spiritual power has been lulling him into an induced state of calm, in spite of all of the chaos, but—

He reaches up, putting one small, pudgy palm against Mu Qing's chin.

"No!" He can't really say much more than that, but his expression is a little more clear.

'No crying.'

Mu Qing won't turn around to face the others, not when he has tears in his eyes.

He's already shed tears in front of Xie Lian and Feng Xin before, and he was like that before, upstairs, but—

He refuses to let anyone else see him like this.

"...I know we might have started in different places in life," Jian Lan glares, not bothering to use the fake accent now, with her real identity out in the open. "But for the last eight hundred years, I've been—"

"It really doesn't matter," Mu Qing cuts her off. "I don't care if you've spent all this time rolling around in the dirt with everyone else. Because the MINUTE you had a chance to use the privilege you *used* to have to hurt someone—you *did* , and you fucking *enjoyed* it." He shakes his head. "You haven't changed."

"I...I already said—I *never* would have done any of that if I had known everything," Jian Lan agrees, hanging her head with shame. "But I—!"

"What are you two talking about?" Feng Xin finally speaks up, tearing his gaze from the back of 'Fu Yao's' head. "What didn't she know?"

Mu Qing doesn't answer him—and Jian Lan bites her lip, unsure. "I—"

"It isn't her place to say."

Xie Lian's tone is completely different from before—which was mortified, and a bit nervous.

Now, he sounds...

Remarkably cold, but firm.

"She's done quite enough."

The female ghost falls silent, eyes downcast, her lips trembling. "Your highness, I—"

"You know, I think it should really speak volumes that my cousin hasn't had a word to say," Xie Lian speaks over her. "And given everything, I think he was aware of what Mu Qing did."

Jian Lian falls silent, looking at Qi Rong, who—

Is remarkably quiet on the subject of Mu Qing.

As a matter of fact, he won't even look at Fu Yao's back, his eyes cast away in discomfort. Implying—

That he *did* know.

It seems...like he knew *all* of it.

Xie Lian doesn't say any more—and he doesn't have to, because he's already leveled the greatest insult he's capable of.

That even *Qi Rong* , foul and loathsome as he is, hadn't crossed that particular line.

Jian Lan can't seem to even muster a response, pale with shame.

Because—

Qi Rong hasn't said a word about Mu Qing this entire time. He's insulted nearly everyone else, but—

Not Mu Qing.

And even now, after Xie Lian has invoked his name, which would normally excite him enough to start ranting—

He says nothing.

"...Well," Fu Yao sniffs, clearing his throat. "Now that we've sorted all of that out," he turns around, setting Cuo Cuo on his feet on the ground, letting him go and stepping away. "You can deal with your own fucking problems. Hopefully he doesn't kill anyone else. I'm *done."*

Feng Xin takes a step after him, torn. Because in spite of the complexity of the situation—

He isn't alright. Something—

Something is *wrong* .

He can sense that, and Xie Lian KNOWS that, after hearing—

'I am absolutely NOT okay right now.'

But it's not possible to go after him, not when the toddler that was once happily cooing in his arms shifts, turning into a small, scaled, angry creature, launching itself with sharp, gleaming fangs extended.

"CUO CUO, DON'T BITE!"

In midst of the newfound chaos, Mu Qing stops beside Lang Qianqiu, who seems too stunned by the entire encounter to respond, bending over to press his palm against Guzi's forehead briefly, his hand glowing with power.

"He should be fine. Make sure he drinks more water."

Lang Qianqiu nods, unsure of what to say, or how to respond—but before he can ask or say anything more, the 'deputy god' walks away, disappearing in a flash of light.

"...Ren Song," Xie Lian says, listening to Feng Xin and Jian Lan struggling, "Do you think you could—?"

Shuo glances over at him, rising to his feet.

"Yeah, yeah, no problem," he mutters, walking over, catching and holding Cuo Cuo by the scruff of the neck, letting him flail and shriek for a moment before passing him to Jian Lan, where he seems to become a little more docile.

And once that's taken care of—Xie Lian takes a deep breath, letting go of Hua Cheng's hand.

"Feng Xin?"

The martial god looks over at him, slightly dazed, clearly distressed by the entire situation.

"We need to talk."

Behind him, Hua Cheng looks away—his arms crossed.

Xie Lian and Feng Xin both walk away from the group, stopping at the edge of the forest, and when Feng Xin speaks, he has the sense to do it in Xie Lian's private communication array.

'...Did you know, your highness?'

'About the child?' Xie Lian replies, startled. *'I didn't.'*

Feng Xin sighs shakily, almost relieved that at least *one* person in the situation wasn't hiding something from him. *'Do you have any idea what they were talking about?'*

'...I overheard some things while I was in the Inn,' the Prince admits. *'But it's not my place to say.'*

Back in front of the Inn, Ren Song kneels down to check on Guzi, and while he does, Lang Qianqiu comments, sounding mildly stunned—

"Fu Yao really is a loyal deputy, sticking up for Xuan Zhen so passionately like that...I had no idea he and the general were so close."

Ren Song opens his mouth, his brow furrowed—then closes it, reaching over to pat the martial god on the knee.

"You learn new things every day, big guy."

"...Why do I get the feeling that you're making fun of me?”

The ghost doesn't explain, ruffling Guzi's hair.

Back with Feng Xin and Xie Lian, the conversation is, well...

'...And look, your highness,' the former guard mutters, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. *'About what Fu Yao said, it's...'*

Xie Lian turns his head away, and both of them are slightly red in the facel.

'It's okay,' the prince mutters, *'he was upset, and there's been a lot—'*

'It was true.'

Xie Lian goes still, his heart actually skipping a beat from the shock. And if he was seventeen, he probably would have felt giddy right about now, but...

He isn't seventeen anymore.

'When we were kids, I mean. I obviously...I mean, I'll always care about you, but—'

Xie Lian lets out a relieved sigh he didn't know he was holding, pressing a hand against his chest.

'It's alright, Feng Xin.' He reaches out, feeling around so he can pat him on the shoulder. *'...I felt the same way for a little while, before my ascension,'* Xie Lian admits. *'And I'll always care about you too—but after that, when I fell in love for the first time...it was a completely different feeling.'*

Feng Xin stares at him, his eyes growing round.

Of course, it's a little shocking to learn that your first childhood infatuation returned your affections—but that isn't the part of the admission that caught his attention the most. No, it—

'When I fell in love for the first time...it was a completely different feeling.'

It...

It *is* a completely different feeling, isn't it?

'...Was what Jian Lan said true?' Xie Lian questions gently, his hand still resting on Feng Xin's shoulder. *'I understand if you'd rather not–'*

'Yeah,' the martial god admits, swallowing hard. *'I mean—she has every reason to think it is,'* he modifies his statement, clearing his throat, his face as red as it could possibly be. *'I...God, this is such a fucking...'*

'Mess?'

Feng Xin hangs his head helplessly, exhausted.

'Look...' The prince sighs, thinking. *'Mu Qing is going to want space—whether either of us like it or not. You should take Jian Lan and Cuo Cuo back to the Heavens for now.'*

Even if both of them hate this, and they're both worried—if Mu Qing wants space, he's going to get it—no matter what they do to try and talk to him.

Feng Xin wishes he was wrong, but—

Obviously, he isn't. And with the new knowledge he has regarding Cuo Cuo's identity...

Not only do he and Jian Lan need to talk—but if he left him here in the mortal realm, and someone else got hurt...that would be on Feng Xin's hands.

He's...his father, after all.

(God, he hasn't even *begun* to process that.)

The two don't speak as they walk back to the others—and Jian Lan doesn't protest when Feng Xin places a hand on her shoulder, leading her away in stony silence.

Then he stops, looking back.

At the kid in red, standing next to Xie Lian now—and maybe, he wouldn't have guessed who the ghost king was before, but...

The look he gives Feng Xin now sends chills down the martial god's spine, just as he and Jian Lan ascend once more, disappearing in a flash.

"..." Xie Lian sits down with a groan, pressing his face in his hands, feeling Hua Cheng pat his back gently.

Before, the situation was so chaotic—but now, the only ones left are him, Shuo, Hua Cheng, and Lang Qianqiu...

"Where did Qi Rong go?" He mumbles, exasperated.

"Hmm?" Ren Song looks over. "Oh, he snuck off while you and Nan Yang were talking. But we know where he's going now, don't worry."

Xie Lian doesn't look up, not particularly comforted—until Hua Cheng explains,

"I placed a butterfly on him, your highness. We know where he is."

"...I just figured Ren Song would go after him if he ran off," Xie Lian mumbles.

"Oh, no," Shuo shakes his head. "Until gege here gets big again, I'm sticking with him. You two are the reason I showed up here—humiliating that asshole was just a bonus. But..." He glances over at Lang Qianqiu, raising an eyebrow. "Why didn't YOU go after him?"

The Crown Prince of Yong'an pauses, his shoulders hunching with surprise. "I...wanted to make sure Guzi was alright!" He mutters, pointing at the sleeping child irritably.

"Besides, my best way of keeping up with him is if I stick with you. Anything else is just a waste of time and effort."

Hua Cheng looks him up and down irritably, but Xie Lian seems to accept that explanation.

"God," Shuo groans, wiping his hands down his face. "That makes it sound like I'm gonna be stuck with you long term..."

He turns around, stalking back towards the rubble of the inn.

"What are you doing?"

"Dianxia and gege are sitting still for the moment, and I don't want A-Rong sleeping out in the cold," he shrugs.

"A- *A-Rong?!"* Lang Qianqiu sputters, following after him. "You mean that freak with the tattoo on his forehead?!"

"It's not a tattoo, it's a *heavenly seal!"*

"Whatever! It's weird that you call him that, his beard almost touches his chest!"

"You're just *jealous!"*

Lang Qianqiu reacts a little more violently than Ren Song was expecting, flailing his arms about before pointing at him sharply, his ears turning red. "Why the HELL would *I* be *JEALOUS?!"*

The demon stops, staring at him like he's lost his mind.

"Because you can't grow a beard?"

"..." The martial god slowly shrinks down, his hackles no longer raised as he looks away, clearing his throat. "Yes I can."

"I'm sure."

"I used to have a mustache, y'know."

Mentioning that doesn't have the intended effect, making Ren Song *cackle* , hunching over.

"You totally fucking WOULD!" He snickers, pressing one palm against the ground—and when he does, the broken shards of wood all around begin to reassemble, knitting back together, roots deepening as a new structure takes shape.

Lang Qianqiu glares, tapping his foot.

And with the loud groaning and crackling of the wood all around them—along with the fact that his guoshi and the ghost king seem enraptured with one another over thirty feet away, he mutters—

"Why is Hua Cheng in that form?"

"He's not weak, if that's what you're wondering."

"No, I already figured that much out," Lang Qianqiu agrees, shaking his head. "I just don't get why he'd choose to appear that way."

"...The more powerful you are, the more Mount Tonglu affects you," Ren Song shrugs. "I'm a little off, but Hua Chengzhu..." He shakes his head. "If he doesn't keep his powers sealed away for a little longer, then he won't be able to control his impulses. And that could get dangerous fast."

"...But you can control yourself?" Lang Qianqiu leans against the newly constructed wall, rubbing the side of his neck.

"..." Shuo gives him a sharp look out of the corner of his eye, raising an eyebrow. "Yeah. Why?" When Lang Qianqiu remains silent, he sighs. "Look, I know I freaked out that night, but that was just the immediate aftermath—"

"You tried to kiss me."

Obviously, the demon wasn't prepared to hear that—which leads to his knees briefly buckling, sending him tilting forward until he smacks his forehead against the newly built wall with a quiet yelp.

"I— *what?!"*

"After you stopped crying and everything. I didn't let you, but—"

"No, no—nonononono," Shuo turns around to face him, holding a finger up, a red spot forming on his forehead. "You--you're confused," he shakes his head. "I was probably just trying to EAT you, I wouldn't—!"

"No," Lang Qianqiu shakes his head. "That's what you tried to do at first, so I know what that looks like—and that definitely wasn't what you were doing."

"I..." Shuo stares at him, his mouth hanging open, his face growing more and more flushed by the second. "And why are you saying something now?!"

Lang Qianqiu tilts his head to the side with a shrug. "I don't know. Maybe I wanted to make sure you had yourself under control, I don't wanna awaken anymore of your *underlying urges* —OOF!"

He hunches over with a grunt when the demon socks him in the gut.

"The only 'underlying urges' I have towards you are VIOLENT!" He snarls, the flush on his face only getting worse when, in spite of the fact that he's still clutching his ribs with pain, Lang Qianqiu has the nerve to smirk up at him.

"Didn't seem that way to me, 'plum blossom.'"

"..." Shuo's eyes narrow sharply, and his tone gets low—dangerous. "Call me that again, and I'll tell Hua Chengzhu you tried to take advantage of me while I was in a vulnerable state."

That makes the martial god grow pale. "But I *didn't—!"*

"Yeah, well," Shuo shrugs, looming over him, hands on his hips. "I might have an *underlying urge* to tell a few lies every now and then. Who knows what's gonna happen if I lose control?"

The two glare at one another—and, well, they've been doing that since the very beginning, but...

(There might be something else behind those glares now.)

(Something with a little more...heated, underneath it all.)

Across the clearing, Xie Lian hasn't moved, still holding his head in his hands, all while Hua Cheng's hand rubs against his back, silent, but comforting.

In spite of it all, the prince can't help but smile.

It's just like what he did to soothe Hua Cheng in Qi Rong's lair.

It's a small thing—but the return of the gesture after this much time has passed—

It feels nice.

"...I'm sorry you had to see all of that, San Lang," Xie Lian mutters, pressing his face against his knees. "I'm sure it must have seemed pretty ridiculous."

"No," Hua Cheng corrects him gently. "His highness's companions are always ridiculous, but that isn't gege's fault."

"Oh..." Xie Lian sighs, his shoulders slumping. "I'm not so sure about that."

"I am," the ghost king shakes his head. "Their mistakes aren't your own."

"...Maybe," Xie Lian agrees. "But that doesn't mean I haven't made mistakes. I mean, you heard...everything Mu Qing said back there," he mumbles, his voice wracked with guilt. "I...San Lang, I never asked him about—about any of it—"

"You didn't know," he points out gently.

"...Shouldn't I have?" Xie Lian whispers, the true weight of it settling so heavily upon him.

"You were a child yourself, dianxia," it feels strange, having Hua Cheng reassure him like this when his form is that of a child himself, but... "What could you have done, if you knew?"

Xie Lian shrugs, knowing there really isn't a proper answer to that question.

“…And I gave Feng Xin a golden belt back then,” he mutters. “During my first banishment. I—I should have known, but I was so focused on my own pain back then, I…I should have…”

Hua Cheng falls silent for a moment, looking away—but after taking a slow, silent breath, he asks—

“Should have done what?”

“Asked him about his own problems?” Xie Lian laughs, but there’s no amusement in it. “I was supposed to be his friend, but everything was always…”

Everything was always about him. And Feng Xin—

He might be clumsy, when it comes to understanding emotions. Overly blunt—insensitive at times.

But he has always, without fail, been there for Xie Lian.

“Maybe if I hadn’t been so self centered, Feng Xin and Mu Qing would be…”

“…” Hua Cheng sits down beside him, looking up at the stars overhead, the moon sinking deeper in the sky. “They’ve had eight centuries to work it out on their own, gege. You can’t bear the blame for that.”

“…You think?” Xie Lian mumbles, tired.

Hua Cheng nods, reaching up to push a stray lock of hair behind the God’s ear. “If they felt that way about one another, and went all this time without saying so…then maybe that’s for the best.”

Xie Lian lets out a surprised snort, lifting his head. “Is it that easy?”

“It should be,” Hua Cheng murmurs, eyes never leaving his face.

“…I don’t know,” Xie Lian shrugs, turning his head away from him. “Sometimes—saying what you feel can be harder than you think. It’s not up to you to decide if the road is easy to walk.”

The ghost king falls silent for a moment, thinking that over.

“You’re right, but…” He watches the way Xie Lian’s hair slips over his shoulder. How the moonlight makes his skin almost seem to glow.

“Even if the path is difficult, I choose whether or not to walk it.”

There’s such certainty in his voice, even in this state, it nearly steals Xie Lian’s breath.

“…Even if someone tries to take that choice away from you?” He whispers.

“Even then,” Hua Cheng agrees. “Because whether or not I fight back—that’s still up to me.”

He reaches over, placing his fingertips on Xie Lian’s knee for the briefest moment before pulling them back.

“And if it were up to me…”

Xie Lian can’t meet Hua Cheng’s gaze, but he always seems to feel the weight of it anyway.

“I would tell that person exactly how I feel.”

That person.

That special, brave, kind, hard working, beloved someone.

Beautiful, and—

“I would tell them every chance I got,” Hua Cheng continues, leaving

Xie Lian silently hanging on every word. “I’d tell them until they got sick of hearing it.”

Xie Lian swallows hard, and when he speaks again, his voice is slightly unsteady.

“Why risk that?” He mumbles hoarsely.

“Because,” Hua Cheng explains, his voice even, “that way, every moment of every day—he’d know that he was loved.”

Xie Lian’s fingers drift down to his knee, where Hua Cheng’s fingertips lingered before, and—

“That he’s always been loved.”

He finds a flower there. Small, delicate.

And Xie Lian couldn’t tell you how he knows, but—

The petals are white.

Xie Lian’s fingers tighten around the stem of the flower for a moment, his eyes wide.

‘He’s always been loved.’

For a moment, his mind flashes back to that night in Puqi Shrine, after they returned from Banyue.

How Hua Cheng tucked a flower in his hair, back then.

For a moment, he doesn’t speak—and his lips tremble.

‘This servant was happy to be useful to him.’

The words echo in his mind suddenly and clearly, and he almost flinches.

Hua Cheng’s gaze has never left his face.

“Dianxia—?”

He doesn’t get the chance to complete that sentence before arms wrap around him, pulling him into the prince’s lap and hugging him tightly.

For a moment, Hua Cheng is frozen, too shocked to respond.

“That…that’s beautiful, San Lang,” Xie Lian mumbles, his voice wobbly.

“I…” the prince swallows thickly, pressing his face into the ghost king’s hair. “I really hope you get to tell that person, someday.”

“…” After a moment, Hua Cheng turns around in his arms, wrapping his own around Xie Lian’s neck, returning the embrace.

“I will, I promise.”

Xie Lian doesn’t say anything more, holding him tight, holding him close—like he can’t bear the thought of letting him go anytime soon.

Eventually, he mumbles—

“I’ll be sad when San Lang goes back to normal.”

The ghost king doesn’t pull back, but he raises an eyebrow.

“Hmm?”

Xie Lian presses his face a little closer against Hua Cheng’s hair, explaining—

“It won’t be so easy to hold you like this when you’re big again.”

“…”

Up until now, he’s been vaguely irritated and sheepish in response to Xie Lian being enamored by this form, but…

He smiles, his arms tightening around the god—and he parrots Xie Lian’s words from before.

“Dianxia doesn’t need excuses to hold me.”

The prince opens his eyes, startled as Hua Cheng holds him closer.

“He can just hold me.”

Xie Lian doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

Eventually, he does the latter—laughing wetly, his arms right around Hua Cheng’s waist. “As usual, San Lang is right…”

It’s almost comical when Hua Cheng nods solemnly in this shape, stroking the prince's hair—

But suddenly, he stiffens, his form going completely rigid.

Xie Lian doesn't know what to make of it at first, but he's immediately on alert, glancing around until he sees a familiar aura a few feet away.

Across the clearing, Shuo and Lang Qianqiu are suddenly yanked inside the newly built inn by an unseen force, the door slamming shut.

Xie Lian leaps to his feet without hesitation, yanking Hua Cheng behind him, but—

A calm voice interrupts him, immediately setting the prince at ease.

"Don't be afraid. Tea, Xianle?"

A Suicide Mission

Chapter Summary

> "...If the gathering of ghosts can't be stopped, is there another remedy to the situation?" Xie Lian questions slowly, tossing the question round and round in his head.
>
> "There is," Jun Wu agrees, "but—"
>
> "It's more like suicide—if you aren't already dead, that is."

Chapter Notes

> CONTENT WARNINGS FOR THIS CHAPTER: mentioned sexual assault

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Xie Lian freezes, acutely aware of how this looks.

After all, they're currently surrounded by over a hundred unconscious mortal cultivators, and Xie Lian was just sitting in the road, happy as a clam, holding a ghost king—

It…doesn't look *good* .

“I can explain—”

“No need,” Jun Wu shakes his head. “I was observing.”

Despite appearing out in the open in the middle of a desolate road, a table and chairs have been conjured—where the emperor is sitting comfortably, pouring a steaming cup of tea from a conveniently placed pot.

“My lord…” Xie Lian swallows hard, “You've…descended?”

“You left with Ling Wen, then sent that message about the brocade immortal and didn't return,” Jun Wu explains calmly. “I came to make sure that you were alright.”

…Right.

Xie Lian did do that.

His chest sinks as he rises to his feet.

"I'm sorry—the situation was urgent."

Jun Wu shakes his head, showing no ill will over the matter. "I understand—come, why don't you sit?"

Xie Lian begins to walk over, and Hua Cheng is left where he sits on the ground, staring a hole into the side of Jun Wu's head, until something steals his attention.

A communication array that has remained unusually silent sparks to life, and a voice, one he thought he wouldn't hear for far longer than this, speaks up;

'The emperor has descended?'

Hua Cheng remains still, his face betraying no sign of what's going on.

'Who told you that?'

'Shuo.'

…Of course he did.

Very few people have access to their private communication arrays, and when he saw the emperor, the demon would have wanted to alert backup.

And for Hua Cheng, there's only one being that *could* be useful assistance—

Another ghost king.

'He isn't here to fight me,' Hua Cheng replies flatly, watching as Xie Lian takes a seat beside the emperor, thanking him for the cup of tea that had been offered. *'He's probably just about to send dianxia on another fool's errand. What are you doing? Where the hell did you go?'*

'I'm working on a problem,' Blackwater answers shortly. *'That doesn't matter right now. The upper court is in chaos. Ling Wen cut all of the major communication arrays when she defected, and no one knows where Ming Guang is—'*

'I thought you were done reporting on the Heavens?'

Who could possibly be keeping him updated on all of this now, anyway?

'I am—just listen. Do you think I would bother with calling you now if it wasn't important?'

No. Hua Cheng doesn't have an argument there.

He Xuan doesn't communicate frivolously—especially not now.

'What?'

'I'm going to tell you something that is going to make you want to react,' He Xuan cautions him, *'but you can't.'*

'That's not particularly comforting,' Hua Cheng mutters.

'And I can't tell you how I know.'

'Even better.'

'Don't leave the emperor and the crown prince alone.'

Hua Cheng's eyebrow twitches, his gaze focused on the two.

'I wasn't planning on it.'

'He's going to try to get the prince alone at some point. And I know you don't like interfering with his highness's wishes—but even if it upsets him, you absolutely can't let that happen.'

Even if it—?

Hua Cheng doesn't disagree with the notion, even if it's slightly more aggressive than what he would normally do, but—

'…Why?'

He can tell there's more to it, something sinister—

But nothing could have prepared him for He Xuan's reply.

'Because he's a rapist.'

Hua Cheng's pupils shrink, his gaze narrowing in on the horrifically minuscule distance between Xie Lian and the emperor.

'And he's fixated on the prince.'

And He Xuan was right.

It takes every *ounce* of Hua Cheng's control to hold back a reaction.

'…Was it you?' The question is calm, but only on the surface—and He Xuan's reply is quick.

'No.'

'But you're certain?'

He Xuan's voice leaves no room for doubt, ringing with certainty.

'Absolutely positive.'

And He Xuan can't tell him *how* he knows.

But the fact that he's only telling Hua Cheng now—that means that he didn't know before.

Given what happened to his sister and fiancé—Hua Cheng doesn't think he could have stomached working under Jun Wu for very long if he knew.

Which leaves a short list of possibilities.

And even if Hua Cheng was the one to tell him—when it comes to Jun Wu, Xie Lian wouldn't listen blindly.

He idolizes the man—practically views him as a second father.

'You're gonna lay low?'

'For now,' He Xuan agrees. *'But don't worry—I'll keep up my end of the bargain.'*

Hua Cheng rises to his feet.

'I'll be working with our Guoshi until then.'

The line of communication is cut.

Creeeeeaaaak.

Jun Wu and Xie Lian fall silent, their conversation cut off when a chair is pulled back.

Hua Cheng drags a chair away from the table, pulling it around until he drops it down between the emperor and the prince, climbing up and taking a seat, making himself comfortable.

Jun Wu’s eyes never leave him, his expression…odd.

Locked in on Hua Cheng’s younger form.

“…Crimson Rain,” he mutters, staring him down. “That’s a new look.”

“…Isn’t it?” Xie Lian laughs awkwardly, thrown off by the sudden change in atmosphere. “Doesn’t he look just like my…”

“Son?” Jun Wu finishes Xie Lian’s sentence, his voice faint.

“…Exactly.”

…How did Jun Wu know what he was going to say?

After a moment the emperor seems to shake himself out of his stupor, smiling at Hua Cheng calmly.

“I’m afraid this is a conversation between myself and Xianle.”

Thud!

Thud!

Hua Cheng kicks both feet up on the table, tea cups rattling as he leans back in his chair, crossing his arms,

“Everyone knows your upper court is in disarray,” he drawls, eyes baring down on the emperor. “No need to save face.”

Jun Wu’s smile grows thin.

“…I suppose not.”

He looks over at Xie Lian, who has taken to sipping his tea in silence, eyes downcast.

“…I’m sure you’ve already realized, but it’s too late to stop ghosts from flooding the fields of Mount Tonglu before the gates shut—the blockade has failed.”

Xie Lian bows his head, his lips curving downward.

"I'm sorry that the plan was a failure, your majesty.”

"Don't be," Jun Wu shakes his head, sipping from his cup. "You were one of the few that actually succeeded in your assignment."

Xie Lian doesn't know if you could actually call revealing Ling Wen as a traitor, then allowing her to escape with the Brocade Immortal because he was more preoccupied with protecting Hua Cheng as 'Success,' but—

He doesn't regret prioritizing the calamity, so he doesn't argue.

"...If the gathering of ghosts can't be stopped, is there another remedy to the situation?" Xie Lian questions slowly, tossing the question round and round in his head.

"There is," Jun Wu agrees, "but—”

"It's more like suicide—if you aren't already dead, that is."

Hua Cheng interrupts him coldly, his gaze sharp.

Jun Wu stares at him for a moment, then sighs. "Yes. Unless it was absolutely necessary, I wouldn't have wanted to take this step."

Xie Lian's stomach sinks. "...You don't mean...?"

"I've already sent Ming Guang ahead of me," Jun Wu explains, grim. "But that's a temporary solution. A martial god is going to need to infiltrate the gathering of ghosts, and be sealed within the Kiln to eliminate anything else that gets inside."

Hua Cheng raises an eyebrow.

"You sent Ming Guang?" He questions, his tone slightly incredulous, prompting Xie Lian to look at him.

"Is that a bad thing, San Lang?"

"He has more enemies in the Ghost Realm than any other god—as you'd expect, from the one always doing the Heavens' dirty work."

Nan Yang is beloved by mortals for how often he descends—and Ming Guang is hated by Ghosts for the same reason.

“Sending him would not have been my first choice if there had been another option.” Jun Wu sighs, shaking his head—his tone filled with worry.

“Anyone with the nerve to come up with something that dangerous should go themselves,” Hua Cheng counters frostily, and Jun Wu… doesn’t argue.

“I have every intention.”

Xie Lian jolts with shock. “Your majesty, you don’t mean—?”

“Xianle—you’ll have to return to the heavens and take over my duties while I go to Mount Tonglu.”

And that—

That places Hua Cheng in a position where he has highly limited options.

After what he just heard…

The Heavenly Capital is the most dangerous place for Xie Lian to be.

Hua Cheng might have been able to steal Xie Lian away once—but no one was expecting him when he pulled that.

And within Jun Wu’s domain, the emperor is very nearly omnipotent.

So, Hua Cheng can’t allow Xie Lian to return—not alone.

“But your majesty…” The prince sputters. “No one would listen to me!”

“They’ll have to learn to,” Jun Wu shrugs. “I won’t be around forever. Even if this situation hadn’t come, something else would have—there’s a natural beginning and end to things.”

“But I…” Xie Lian swallows hard, shaking his head.

It’s selfish, but also telling, that his first thought was—

‘If I take the emperor’s role, how would I get to see San Lang?’

“…I’m not even the most qualified!” He cries, shaking his head. “Ming Guang should be next in line, not me!”

“Ming Guang is already in Mount Tonglu.” Jun Wu shakes his head. “And if you were a little more aware of Pei’s personal history, you would know that he would refuse the role even more stubbornly than you. He loathes power.”

He thrives on responsibility—but refuses to be in a position where he has no one to answer to.

He isn't like Xie Lian, who was born with thousands praising and blessing his name, with the innate knowledge that the sun and moon could rise and set by his word.

No.

Xianle has always been the most worthy successor, just…

Stubborn, and childish.

A slow learner, for sure.

"…Besides," Jun Wu starts to reach over, but when Hua Cheng doesn't lift his boots from the table between them, he's forced to settle for refilling Xie Lian's cup of tea, instead of patting his arm.

"You aren't a child anymore, Xianle. You're more capable than you realize."

The prince reaches for his cup somberly, and Jun Wu adds—

"Besides, once you outgrow those shackles, the rest of the Heavenly Court will see exactly what I have seen."

Xie Lian bites his lip, not saying a word—and when Hua Cheng speaks, his voice is like ice.

"…Outgrow?"

Jun Wu glances over to meet his gaze, and his eyes flash.

"Oh my," he murmurs, eyebrows raised. "I suppose Xianle hasn't explained—I apologize, you both seemed so close, I assumed—"

"It never came up," Xie Lian replies quietly, and something about his voice—

It makes Hua Cheng feel a little sick.

"We'll discuss it later."

Xie Lian's voice is steady, serene more often than not, but right now…

He sounds *meek*.

"…All of that aside," Jun Wu presses on. "There's no one else who can go."

Hua Cheng glares at the night sky coldly.

"No. It's not the best option." He looks back down, his eyes hardened with resolve. "You don't belong in Mount Tonglu," the calamity drawls, looking Jun Wu over. "She'll chew you up and spit you out."

The sudden use of pronouns for the landmark seems to catch him off guard.

"You think there's someone more qualified?"

"I think," Hua Cheng taps his heel against the table lazily, carelessly scratching the wood, "the last time you encountered a Ghost King in your own territory, he nearly took you out."

That reminder actually *does* seem to bother him.

"We could go to Ghost City right now and test how you'd fare," Hua Cheng's eyes slide over Jun Wu, distinctly unimpressed. "But that would just be boring."

"San Lang…"

"Then what would you suggest, Crimson Rain?" Jun Wu cuts him off, staring Hua Cheng down.

"I don't have a suggestion," Hua Cheng shakes his head. "As far as I'm concerned, this discussion has nothing to do with the Heavens."

"…I'm afraid I don't follow."

Even if Xie Lian can't see the way the two are staring each other down—the tension is palpable.

"What am I?"

Jun Wu's mouth doesn't move—but his eyes flash.

Still, his tone is calm when he replies—

"A Ghost."

Hua Cheng's gaze gleams right back at him, his lips quirking up into a lopsided grin, one fang gleaming.

“A Ghost *what?”*

Jun Wu stares—and his jaw twitches.

“…King.”

“Good…” The calamity smirks. “Dianxia can come along if the Heavens would like to keep an eye on things—but the next Ghost King—and whether or not there will be one at all—isn’t your problem.”

Xie Lian doesn’t speak, but—

…Things are about to get complicated, aren’t they?

"Gege!" A voice cries out in the street, "Look at me! Did you see?"

A teenage boy with cropped hair and broad shoulders looks down, smiling when the little girl sits up, hair askew, having just perfected the act of half-finishing a cartwheel.

"I did! Show me again!"

She grins even wider, nodding eagerly as she goes to flop back in her hands again, making a grandiose, sideways jump—one that her brother applauds, setting aside his tools so he can laugh and cheer her on.

"Looks like someone's an acrobat!"

From a nearby terrace, it's easy to watch them, and imagine happier times.

Running into her brother's office to show off a new trick, breathlessly beaming up at him, crying out—

'Ge! Did you see—?'

"It still takes getting used to," Xiong Li comments, leaning against the railing beside her.

Shi Qingxuan averts her eyes from the siblings below, fiddling with her sleeve restlessly.

"What does?"

"Seeing children playing in the streets of Gusu." He explains quietly.

"When I was little, we were beaten by the palace guards for running in the streets."

Shi Qingxuan winces at the notion, sending him a horrified look. "Why?"

Xiong Li sits against the railing, hair blowing in the breeze. "We had to save our energy and be well behaved livestock."

"...Are you gonna tell that cultivation partner of yours that I skipped out on meditating?" She mumbles, resting her elbows against the edge of the terrace with a sigh, watching the city below.

"Oh, he already knows," Xiong Li hums, a picture of tranquility.

"Huh—?"

The sound of a few notes rattling off of a guqin nearly makes her jump out of her skin, suddenly alerting her to the fact that her master is sitting a few feet away, lounging in the afternoon sun.

If you can call it lounging—he's sitting with perfect posture.

"...I really hate it when you sneak up on me like that," Shi Qingxuan mumbles with a groan, sagging against her elbows.

"Lan An doesn't sneak," Xiong Li smiles, "he just doesn't announce himself either."

And for a man who walks silently, it has the same effect as sneaking.

"..." Shi Qingxuan looks back over her shoulder, where her teacher is sitting on the ceramic tile floor of the terrace, robes pooled around him as he lazily plucks out a tune on his guqin. "...You're not going to yell at me for not finishing my meditation?"

"No."

It’s the fact that he genuinely seems to mean that, that bothers her. Like he didn’t expect her to have much focus to begin with—

“Meditation can help guide your focus and sharpen it,” Lan An murmurs, plucking out a soft melody. “But it cannot be its source.”

“…What does that mean?”

“Meditation requires a base level of self discipline,” Xiong Li shrugs, realizing that must sound like an insult, “No offense, but—”

“No,” Shi Qingxuan sighs, fighting the urge to fall into despair. “You’re both right. I don’t have any of that.”

Her eyes drift down to the pair of siblings below once more, half nostalgic, half sorrowful.

“…You should have seen my brother though,” she mutters. “He always made this sort of thing look easy.”

Even back when they were mortals—he was a picture of discipline and hard work.

“…It’s always a little easier to be tough when you don’t have a choice,” Xiong Li shrugs. “But you aren’t as hopeless as you make yourself out to be.”

Shi Qingxuan isn’t without talent. She knows that. But social skills and an aptitude for mathematics doesn’t help her *now* .

“…Maybe,” She mutters. “But being four centuries old and needing teenagers to teach me what I should have known in order to ascend in the first place—”

Shi Qingxuan stops, hanging her head.

“Maybe I deserved to be knocked down a few pegs, but it doesn’t feel great, you know?”

“…I don’t know about deserved,” Xiong Li shrugs, “but I think your perception of yourself is a bit skewed.”

Shi Qingxuan doesn’t look up, not in the mood to beg for reassurance—but he continues anyway, drumming his fingers against the railing.

“You lost everything, found out everyone you cared about was lying to you, and now you’re facing almost certain death.”

Well—never mind, that isn’t reassurance at all.

“Any normal person would have lost their mind—or just given up. But not you. You’re still trying.”

"…" Shi Qingxuan stares at her hand, fingers pale and small, wrapped tightly against the terrace railing. "If it wasn't for the baby, I might have."

She doesn't think doing the bare minimum as a mother makes her particularly strong or impressive:

She still hasn't started to show—but the signs are becoming more noticeable.

Fatigue, nausea, tenderness and swelling in the chest.

"…I don't think that you won't have," Xiong Li shakes his head.

"You've been surrounded by gods and calamities your entire life. That would make anyone feel a little average. But compared to normal people…" He reaches over, patting her arm. "You're actually pretty strong:"

Shi Qingxuan snorts, shaking her head.

"I'm silly, ignorant, irresponsible, I don't take anything seriously, I'm a coward, and I let everyone fight my battles for me," she mutters, sounding uncharacteristically bitter.

"You seem to be taking things pretty seriously now." When she doesn't respond, Xiong Li sighs.

He looks over to Lan An for help—and it's clear that his partner is listening, but he never offers what he actually thinks.

Which is typical.

It's not that he doesn't understand, or doesn't care—

He just believes in letting people work things out on their own.

But feelings of worthlessness and self loathing don't go away when left alone—they fester.

"…I'm silly," Xiong Li squeezes her shoulder. "I cry all the time. I get scared of things. Lan An has had to bail me out of trouble more times than I could count. Do you think I'm weak?"

"…No," Shi Qingxuan concedes.

She's been knocked on her ass too many times in the training ring by the blunt edge of a sword to think that.

“But you love this city. Everyone told me about what you did before you ascended. I could never—”

“Even if it didn’t work out—you didn’t hesitate to throw your immortality away to protect your brother,” Xiong Li interrupts her quietly. “Does that make you any less brave than me?”

“…” Shi Qingxuan looks away, and he straightens up.

“Come with me.”

He takes her by the wrist, pulling her away from the terrace over the central square.

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.”

He tugs her through the palace insistently, over her protests of being tired and wanting dinner, dragging her through the streets of Gusu.

Wherever they go, people seem to greet him—smiling eagerly, waving, asking after him and his partner.

The Prince of Gusu is beloved—and for the first time in centuries, Shi Qingxuan goes unnoticed, fading into the background.

Then, they reach a set of steps.

“You know, when I was a kid—the curse Wen Jiao put on the city made everyone think that every temple that wasn’t his was a cursed place,” Xiong Li explains, climbing up the temple stairs. “We never dared to go inside of them until a few months ago—but when we did…”

He reaches back, taking Shi Qingxuan’s hand as he pulls her inside.

“It was like learning there was a whole other world out there.”

Shi Qingxuan stops, her lips trembling when she sees the establishment plaque.

A temple of wind and water.

“…No, no,” she mutters, stepping back, “I shouldn’t…I shouldn’t be here…I…”

“It’s okay,” Xiong Li assures her, “You have every right.”

…Then why doesn’t it feel like it?

“I’m not the wind master anymore,” Shi Qingxuan whispers, shaking her head.

“And?”

Xiong Li gently leads her into the temple hall.

“Something tells me the new water master won’t mind.”

Shi Qingxuan falls silent, unsure of what to say.

Whether he cast himself out or not—it’s He Xuan’s rightful title now, but…

It feels strange—almost wrong—to be thinking that now, standing before a divine statue of her brother.

Looking up into a familiar face, heart aching, wishing lips hewn from stone could spring to life—

And tell her what she should do now.

Will they tear all his statues down?

Or will they depict him kneeling, like Xie Lian?

Shi Qingxuan doesn’t think she could bear that, remembering her brother’s pride.

Will the world forget him, and curse him?

Is her fate to fade away and leave behind a cruel reminder of their own past—a wealthy, motherless child?

Or will she survive, left to wander as one of his last believers until the end of her days, struggling to explain to her son what kind of man his uncle truly was?

In either scenario, she feels…hopeless.

Xiong Li looks around at the temple walls—and the murals painted there

“Everywhere you look, there are stories of Lord Shi Qingxuan standing up for the weak. Advocating for truth—casting out the wicked.” Xiong Li murmurs, and for the first time, Shi Qingxuan dares to look at her own statue.

“Switched fates or not—the mortal realm adores you.”

“Adored.” Shi Qingxuan corrects quietly.

Huh.

She stares up at her own face.

This just so happens to be a temple where she’s worshiped as a man. That’s rare.

A temple for the Shi Brothers—proud, illustrious, and strong.

Shi Qingxuan never thought that a day would come when she would miss her male form so badly.

If she had to be trapped in one body—she supposes she’d rather be in this one.

When she was a child, she always resented the body she was growing into.

Felt sick at the sound of her deepening voice. Desperately wished she wouldn’t grow any taller. Refused to look in the mirror when she was undressed, not wanting to see what was between her legs.

At the time, Shi Qingxuan told herself that it was the fear talking.

Because the Shi family had one son, and a daughter.

If someone had found out who ‘Mingxia’ truly was, she would have been in danger—even if she hadn’t understood what that danger was back then.

She couldn’t really blame her brother’s dislike and confusion of her using a female form when she became a god—she didn’t understand it either.

Femininity had been a disguise she wore to escape a monster. Why did she use it still, once she was free?

She’s studied enough over the years to understand how mind, body, and soul are connected.

To know that souls are not simple things—that they exist in various shapes and parts, some heavenly and spiritual, others more material.

Those pieces determine everything about you. The person you’ll be, and the people that you’ll love.

For so long, Shi Qingxuan couldn’t help but feel like her soul was in the wrong body. That the shell encasing her spiritual being wasn’t the right shape.

And when she was Lady Wind Master Shi Qingxuan—she didn't feel wrong, or conflicted, or confused—

She only felt beautiful.

And Shi Qingxuan knew she couldn't take that form all the time—that no matter what she did, her original form was that of a man, but...

The longer she was a god, the longer she had that power—the more and more things felt...blurred, in her mind.

And when she had given up that godhood—she wasn't even afraid of dying.

She was afraid that her body would change back.

And that she'd be stuck in a form that felt wrong—but this time, permanently.

But now—

This is the longest she's ever been in her female form. And she's starting to realize...

While this is the form she prefers—it's hard, not being able to change.

And to her shock, she *misses* the way her other form looks. The way it feels.

Looking up at that stone effigy of herself, she aches for the freedom that comes with self determination.

Xiong Li watches her, watching the statue.

"...That's still you," he reminds her softly.

"You're still the person who did those things. You're still the person they built this temple for centuries ago."

"A fraud."

"A *person."* Xiong Li shakes his head. "Someone kind and generous. Someone who fought for the weak. That has nothing to do with your fate."

It sounds so simple, but hearing it—it makes her pause, finally breaking eye contact with the statue, really hearing what he's saying.

"...You really think that?" She mutters. "All my life—whether it was my brother, or He Xuan...I was always just..."

Shi Qingxuan stops in front of one of the murals, watching herself, descending from the heavens to rescue a group of mortals.

"...Part of a game I didn't even know I was playing."

"Maybe," Xiong Li agrees. "But what you do from here on out is up to you—no one else."

He stops beside her, looking up at the same mural. "You were how old when your brother switched your fate? Just a teenager, right?" He stares up at the fading, painted faces. "You don't know what you would have been capable of on your own. Not until you try."

“…” Shi Qingxuan offers a tired, unsure smile. “I don’t think I’ll ever catch up to Lan An, though.”

“Ah,” Xiong Li smiles, waving that off. “Don’t kick yourself over it—no one can.”

“And I don’t think I’ll ever be much of a swordswoman, either.” She admits.

Xiong Li doesn’t argue—because really, while she’s shown promise in other areas…Swords clearly aren’t for her.

His eyes drift to the altar where, above and behind each devine statue, rests a fan.

One marked with the character for Shui, the other Feng.

“Who says you have to?”

She’s a little scandalized when he walks over, plucking them off of the wall.

“You can fight with these, you know.” He pauses, holding a ceremonial fan in each hand. “Well, not *exactly* these—but they’re good for practice.”

“…Should you even be touching those?”

Xiong Li throws his head back with a laugh. “You tell me.”

Technically speaking—they’re still technically for her and her brother, so…

“…You can really use them like that?”

It’s a little awkward—she’s been using a fan for centuries, but never more than waving it around.

"Sure," Xiong Li agrees, "your martial arts aren't bad--and you've got a natural grace to you." He snaps one fan open, moving with them so artfully, Shi Qingxuan can't bring herself to look away. "See?"

"...Where did you learn how to do that?"

"Xie Laoshi, actually."

Xiong Li glances back at her with a smile. "Though he meant it as more of an artistic thing at the time. He's an incredible danger, you know."

"...I didn't," Shi Qingxuan murmurs, feeling almost jealous that she didn't get to see it.

Xie Lian always moves with a natural sense of grace and confidence—one that doesn't really match someone with such a self deprecating demeanor.

A faint echo of the person that he used to be.

"You would almost think that his feet didn't touch the ground, watching him."

Xiong Li tosses one fan over, leaving Shi Qingxuan scrambling to catch it.

"So, what's it going to be? Maybe we can find your 'focus' like this."

She looks down at the ceremonial tool, her fingertips gripping at the handle, staring at the word 'Feng' painted across the front.

Who she is. What she does.

It's all up to *her* , now.

Shi Qingxuan glances back over her shoulder, looking at her brother's face one more time.

'I love you, meimei.'

Her lips press together into a thin line, eyes determined.

She grips the fan tightly.

"...Show me."

Chapter End Notes

> Happy Chapter 100 everyone!! thank you so much for all of your support, and sticking with the story for this long! I really appreciate it!!
>
> xoxo, Evie

The Gates of Mount Tonglu

Chapter Summary

> The illusion of the mountain before them shimmers and disappears, revealing—
>
> A wide, open basin of fields and hills—framed in by broad, craggy mountain peaks.
>
> Heavy fighting at the edges, fewer and fewer further in.
>
> And there, almost impossible to see in the distance, not without the sharp, unnatural gaze of a child long since slaughtered, is a peak higher than all the others. Bearing down over the land like an ugly reminder.
>
> A burning, jagged scar.
>
> The forge of calamities.
>
> Mount Tonglu.

The road to Mount Tonglu is long—hard. With no access to the general communication array, or to travel arrays, everything has to be done on foot.

Xie Lian is accustomed to the walking—but he feels sorry for Hua Cheng, saddled with shorter legs at the moment.

There are some periods when he's willing to allow Xie Lian to carry him—but never for very long, and after one ill fated ride on Shuo shoulders, he opts to walk on his own, simply walking in double time compared to the others.

At some point Shuo stops, lifting his chin.

When he sniffs the air, his eyes narrow. "...We're getting close."

Lang Qianqiu sends him a curious look, raising an eyebrow. "How can you tell? I don't smell anything."

Xie Lian breathes in himself, curious. "...Resentment," he mutters.

The air reeks of it.

"But..." Lang Qianqiu peers into the distance, eyes narrowed. "I don't see anything."

"You won't," Hua Cheng agrees from Xie Lian's side, his eyes fixed on the horizon. "Just because you're close to the gates doesn't mean you're anywhere near Mount Tonglu itself."

"When people talk about it, they only ever speak of the Kiln," Xie Lian muses, holding Hua Cheng's hand as they continue to move forward down the road.

"Right," the ghost king agrees, squeezing his fingers amicably. "But the area within the gates is similar in size to Xianle."

"...An entire country?" Lang Qianqiu squints into the distance. "That seems like such a waste of space."

Shuo barks out a laugh, shaking his head. "You wouldn't want to live there, trust me."

The martial god frowns, curious, and Hua Cheng sighs.

"The land is cursed."

The acrid taste on Xie Lian's tongue is enough to warn him of that.

"Because of the resentment coming from the Kiln, or—?"

"No," Hua Cheng shakes his head. "The land surrounding the Kiln is what taints it—not the other way around. It's been that way for thousands of years."

And as to why—that reason is as good as anyone's guess.

Even in Zhao Beitong's memories, Hua Cheng never found the answer to that. Meaning the source is so old, it's likely been lost to time.

"And we have to just...kill every single ghost once the gates are shut—?"

"No," Hua Cheng shakes his head, and Shuo's silence feels almost pointed in comparison. "Think of a Calamity as something like a gemstone," he explains, tossing a ruby back and forth between his fingers as though it's little more than a worthless marble.

"Or a blade," he tosses the ruby in the air once more, and this time it lands in his hand as a gleaming dagger with serrated edges, gleaming dangerously under the sun. "Formed through heat and pressure."

Shuo remains silent, his palm pressed against his choker, deep in thought.

"It might take the weight of an entire mountain to form a diamond—but that doesn't mean every single rock is crushed in the process. The same goes for the Kiln. At the outer edges of the gates of Tonglu you'll find the weaker ghosts—cannon fodder."

"Like me." Lang Qianqiu turns his head sharply, finding Shuo offering a sarcastic smile."Eight hundred years ago, anyway. It's not so abnormal to find the ghosts of children just inside the gates."

Xie Lian frowns, feeling a sudden rush of concern.

"You were there when Hua Cheng...?"

"Well," Shuo's eyes drift over to the calamity. "Sort of."

It's not so easy, remembering that now.

Not because of the pain, or the fear he felt in that forest—he's already told Lang Qianqiu about that, even if it was more of an outburst of anger.

No.

Hua Cheng knows why, even he doesn't say so—knowing that it's likely better if the matter goes unacknowledged.

It hurts more, because the last time Shuo was here—he was with Bao and Yanlin.

"...The closer to the Kiln you get, the more powerful the ghosts are."

“Who were the most powerful ghosts last time?” Lang Qianqiu questions, curious.

“You mean with Blackwater?” Shuo shrugs. “No idea, I wasn’t there.”

Hua Cheng hasn’t been overly aggressive to Lang Qianqiu during the journey—but he *has* been remarkably cold.

Even now he sends him a sharp, uncaring glance before replying, “The gathering of ghosts in Blackwater’s case wasn’t particularly large compared to mine—so the only two particular ghosts that remained were him, as well as myself.”

“…You were there?” Xie Lian frowns.

“But isn’t the line, ‘Only one Supreme from the Kiln Shall emerge?’“

“Yes,” Hua Cheng agrees. “But there are exceptions.”

The prince waits for more of an explanation, but when one doesn’t come, he allows the subject to drop.

“…Are your feet still alright?”

The ghost king squeezes his hand in reassurance, "They're fine, but...does gege just want an excuse to carry me again?"

Xie Lian laughs sheepishly, scratching his neck. "Well, that's..."

Shuo stops once again when they come to a bend in the road, looking back—

"We're here!"

Lang Qianqiu stretches up behind him, scanning the hills. "...I don't see any gates or anything like—wait, is that the mountain?!"

He gawks, staring up at the sky in shock. A formation of that size—how are they only seeing it now?!

"No," Hua Cheng rolls his eyes. "That *is* the gate."

Lang Qianqiu frowns, looking back up at it in confusion.

There's a huge line of ghosts, each and every one of them staring with dismay, crowding forward and rushing together to reach what looks like a large, craggy rock face.

"Have they already closed?!"

"Just shut up and watch," Shuo grumbles, crossing his arms.

Xie Lian starts to follow them as they make their way towards the line of ghosts, but Hua Cheng stops him, tugging at his sleeve.

"What is it, San Lang?"

"Your scent."

Xie Lian almost feels self conscious for a moment—after all, he washed himself in the river the day before, but they've done quite a bit of walking since then. "Oh, should I—?"

"You smell like a Heavenly Official," Hua Cheng explains patiently. "The hordes will notice."

"Ah," Xie Lian sighs, relieved that it's something as harmless as that. "What should I—?"

He stops when Hua Cheng pulls him down firmly, gripping Xie Lian by the shoulders as he presses their foreheads together.

"There," he murmurs after a moment, letting him go. "All better."

"..." The prince smiles thankfully, but can't help but remember what Heaven's Eye said before, when they first approached Puqi Shrine.

About how he had the 'essence of evil' on his lips, and his...

"Thank you, San Lang."

From ahead, Lang Qianqiu looks at Shuo, expectant.

"..." Shuo slaps him on the back, heading on towards the line. "Good luck, hope you don't get eaten."

"Huh?! You're not gonna help me?!"

"No one ASKED you to come! Go away!"

"Don't be such a brat, just make me smell like you!"

"No! Ask Hua Chengzhu to help you!"

Lang Qianqiu dares one look in Hua Cheng's direction, then glances at Xie Lian, knowing if he asks his Guoshi for help, he could probably get Hua Cheng to...

The ghost king follows his gaze, surmising the martial god's plan, and his eyes flash.

"...I'll help you, General Tai Hua," he offers sweetly, leaving Xie Lian none the wiser.

What he can't see, however, is that the ghost king has his fangs fully extended, and both of his eyes are burning a bride shade of—

Lang Qianqiu turns away, solemn.

"EH?!" Shuo cries out, legs flailing when he's suddenly embraced from behind, lifted off the ground. "What the hell?! You—DON'T PUT YOUR FACE THERE!"

"How else am I supposed to get it?! Stop yelling, you'll make a scene!"

"YOU ALREADY GOT ENOUGH! THAT'S ENOUGH!"

"If you didn't want to be picked up, you would have stopped him," Hua Cheng grumbles under his breath as they carry on—and Xie Lian can't help but smile a little, whispering next to his ear.

"Maybe he wanted to save face."

Normally, Hua Cheng's answering growl of annoyance would be intimidating—but Xie Lian can't help but let out a soft laugh at how adorable it sounds, leading to whining in his private communication array.

'Gege...'

'I'm sorry San Lang, I'm really sorry—you're just so cute!'

This doesn't seem to soothe the ghost king at all, leaving him grumbling.

'Well, I won't be like this for much longer.'

Xie Lian makes a soft sound of disappointment in the back of his throat, and somehow, that manages to make Hua Cheng look even more depressed.

The prince understands why Hua Cheng would want to be back in his normal form as soon as possible. It must be a wound on the pride to be seen like this—and even if it wasn't, this is no place for a child, even if it's just an eight hundred year old ghost in a child's body.

It almost felt like a joke when they initially set off, having Hua Cheng's assistant come and fetch Guzi to take him back to ghost city, leaving Hua Cheng, who looked the same age, behind to go fight a horde of ghosts and demons.

'I understand, I understand…' Xie Lian sighs, trying not to sound too pitiful.

But then he notices something else, drawing his attention away.

“…Shuo, where did Lang Qianqiu go?”

The forest demon shrugs, and Xie Lian hears the telltale sign of something wooden rattling around in his pocket.

“Who can say?”

“…”

The prince presses a hand to his forehead, exasperated.

“I thought San Lang said you couldn’t use that spell anymore?”

“There are always exceptions,” Hua Cheng repeats his sentiment from before, not seeming bothered that Shuo took a lead out of his book at all.

“It’s for the best, gege—this part is going to require a bit of tact.”

(Something that General Tai Hua infamously lacks.)

And, in part, it may have also been motivated by the fact that now, Hua Cheng is the only one who can see the way Shuo’s cheeks have suddenly turned an angry shade of pink.

Still, it’s enough of an explanation to halt Xie Lian’s scolding.

Ahead, they can hear arguing.

"What do you mean, you can't walk around it?! The base can't possibly be that wide!"

"I'm telling you!" Another ghost grumbles, his arms crossed. "We walked around the foot of the mountain for three days before turning back!"

"Can't we climb it?!"

Just as one of them asks, a spirit in the shape of a large bird comes crashing down from the sky, wings twitching with exhaustion as it hits the ground with a dull */hud!*

...It's too high to even climb?!

Xie Lian frowns. "...You're sure we aren't too late?"

Hua Cheng nods, standing near the crowds, but not close enough for them to be in the middle of it.

"Just wait a few moments gege, we'll be able to keep moving soon."

Just as he says that, one of the ghosts grumbles—

"Hey—is it just me, or do I smell a Heavenly Official?!"

Xie Lian can't help but stiffen up, even if no one is looking at him—not yet—wondering how they could have noticed so quickly.

Hua Cheng just protected Xie Lian with his own scent, and even after his antics with Shuo, Lang Qianqiu was turned into a Daruma Doll, so...

How?!

"Gege," Hua Cheng speaks to him quietly. "Someone is trying to stir up trouble—they haven't noticed anything yet, so best not to react for now."

Xie Lian nods, still firmly holding onto his hand as the ghosts argue among themselves.

"What should we do?"

"Is it an ambush?!"

"Look," One of the ghosts, a gangly, thin faced man, speaks up above the others. "It should be simple—we're all in a truce not to fight one another until we get through the gates anyway—so strip your masks and armor, and speak your titles. Then, we can sort out the fake!"

Several of the other ghosts cry out with agreement, "That seems like the easiest way to test it!"

Xie Lian can't really tell how that proves much of anything, but says nothing as the ghosts around them begin stripping off their cloaks and masks.

"Since it was my idea, I'll go first! I'm Demon of the Swift Executioner's Blade! My master was the royal executioner of Xuli! There ain't another blade that's snapped as many necks as me!"

Xie Lian supposes he shouldn't be surprised by how morbid that is.

And as they go down the line, every single one of them seems to--despite none of them being that impressive--have names that involve overt adjectives.

Like the 'terrifying' or the 'bloodthirsty,' 'destroyer of bloodlines,' stuff like that—until...

They reach their group.

"...And what about you?" The 'Demon of the Swift Executioner's Blade' takes a step forward, looking Ren Song over with an evaluating eye.

He's switched into a less intimidating shape—that of a young man with plain, brown hair and hazel eyes.

"Shuo," He replies flatly.

That causes a mild stir of confusion, because compared to the other names—

"That just sounds FAKE!" One of the ghosts grumbles, looking him over. "Are you even strong enough to be here?!"

His lower lip juts out. "What do you mean, it sounds fake?"

"It's...it's just a name!"

"...Yeah," Shuo agrees, glancing around the group. "Only important ghosts have titles, and I don't see any around here."

Xie Lian expected as much, but feels almost sorry for the group as he senses countless egos being punctured.

"Oh," his eyes grow round. "Are we just making stuff up based on what we do best?" He glances around the group, then takes a deep breath, pressing his thumb against his chest.

"Then I'm Shuo, the Castrator!"

...Xie Lian doesn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"...What?"

Shuo is one of the very few ghosts to actually possess a true title—why isn't he identifying himself?

(Little does Xie Lian know, Shuo and Hua Cheng shared a quick look before he spoke in the first place.)

"Yep," the teenager confirms with a grin. "See..."

He reaches to one of the straps on his thighs, and Xie Lian has always been aware of the fact that he carried daggers there, but he's never bothered to unsheathe them in the prince's presence before.

"I take this, and I—"

Several nearby ghosts cringe in discomfort.

"No need to explain! Really!"

"—cut off the important bits, then, I fuse their souls with it and put them in these," he lifts a small wooden doll out of his pocket, red and orange, with angry eyebrows—and the men stare with horror. "Cute, right?"

"Y...you mean that's a—?!"

Shuo bobs his head eagerly. "Yeah! And if I touch someone with it," his eyes drift down, staring directly at a very specific area on one of the ghosts across from him. "It absorbs your resentment, and makes you...smaller."

Suddenly, everyone seems eager to give him a wide berth.

"...W..what's the red panda for?" Someone stammers.

It would seem that Qi Qi has chosen this moment to make himself known, poking his head out from the back of Shuo's cloak before settling on his right shoulder.

The demon smiles, eyes glinting.

"He eats the leftovers."

The red panda opens its mouth, screeching softly, as if in agreement—and the others cringe away, quickly removing their attentions from him, instead turning to...

Xie Lian.

"And what about you?" One of them sniffs, eager to move on. "Your essence of evil is pretty weak."

"Oh," Xie Lian smiles, having had time during Shuo's...explanation to brainstorm a cover for himself. "I'm a puppet master."

Puppet Masters aren't exactly as common as they used to be, but still a well known type of ghost—typically having a weaker essence of evil.

"Huh?" The demon blade glances around, his eyes narrowed suspiciously. "I don't even see a puppet anywhere around here! How can you say that?!"

"Sure there is," Xie Lian smiles, reaching down to scoop Hua Cheng up and into his arms. "See?"

"...That's a puppet?" One of the men steps closer. "No way, it looks too real!"

"Are you kidding?" A female ghost shakes her head. "He's way too pretty to be real! What kind of child has eyelashes that long? He must be made out of human skin!"

Actually, it seems to catch the attention of many ghosts standing nearby. "Say, gege...do you make other puppets like this?"

"I want one JUST like it! Do you take commissions?”

"Can you make mine a little bigger—?"

"Sorry, sorry," Xie Lian smiles, shaking his head.

"All of my puppets are one of a kind!" He hugs Hua Cheng a little closer, stroking the boy's hair when one of the women tries to touch him. "And his temper's no good, so I wouldn't touch him if I were you."

Hua Cheng's eyebrows raise, and the ghosts 'oooh' and 'ahh' in response.

“He’s so lifelike!”

“…Wait a minute…” The Executioner’s blade glares, looking back and forth between Xie Lian and Hua Cheng. “There’s something off about that puppet master.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“His essence of evil—it’s off.”

"…Ain't that because he's a puppet master? They've got weak auras anyway!"

"Yeah, but his essence of evil is only on the surface!" The blade spirit glares, eyeing Xie Lian a little more closely. "Almost like he's been dyed with it."

"I don't know…can you really tell?"

"There's an easy way to test it out," he lifts a yellow talisman from his pocket, making the other ghosts around gasp and cringe away with shock.

"What the hell?! Why do you have one of those?!"

"IS HE THE OFFICIAL?!"

"Would you calm down?!" He glares.

"I was the first one who noticed—why would I bring it up if I was the one faking?!"

He has a point there, placating the other ghosts, and Xie Lian frowns, hugging Hua Cheng a little closer.

The blade spirit isn't a complete idiot like the others, is he?

"I killed a group of cultivators on my way here," he continues, holding the talisman up for everyone to see. "I stole this off of them to pick off low level spirits. Watch."

He presses the talisman against his forehead, and when he does—it bursts into flame.

But, rather than harming him—it simply crumbles to ash, leaving only a faint scorch mark behind.

Similar to how Shuo's body reacted when the cultivators tried to attack him back at the inn.

"It's too weak to actually harm you, but if you're a fake…we'll be able to tell."

Xie Lian senses the talisman being held out to him, his expression hidden by the rim of his bamboo hat, hanging low.

'…Gege,' Shuo speaks up, watching the Blade Spirit cautiously. *'Let me*

take them out.'

The ghost king remains calm, chin resting on Xie Lian's shoulder.

'Have you made a decision?'

Shuo grimaces, and when he doesn't respond—Hua Cheng makes the choice for him.

'No.'

'But—'

'No.'

Xie Lian reaches out when Hua Cheng says nothing to stop him, pressing the talisman against his forehead without hesitation.

It does exactly what it did before—bursting into flames and crumbling into ash upon contact.

But this time, no scorch mark is left behind—proving the demon blade was right.

The "puppet master's" essence of evil *was* only on the surface.

"…That proves—!"

"Nothing."

Everyone stops when Hua Cheng speaks—his voice far too deep, too haughty to be that of a mere child—or a puppet, for that matter.

"I can't believe you all bought that," the ghost king snickers, surveying the group.

"…What are you talking about?!"

Hua Cheng smirks, raising a hand up to stroke Xie Lian's cheek, thumb tracing over his jaw—and with a simple snap of his fingers, the prince moves woodenly, setting him down on the ground.

"This pretty little thing is my creation, not the other way around."

The ghosts don't know how to react to hearing a small child (visually, anyhow) call a perfectly normal sized grown man a 'pretty little thing,' but—

“…You’re the real puppet master?!”

Hua Cheng’s grin turns crooked and sly.

“Of course I am, you stupid pieces of trash.”

He twists his fingers—and at the same time, after speaking in their private array, Xie Lian obediently drops to his knees beside him, Hua Cheng reaching up to pet his hair.

“Why would I make a puppet so small?” He sneers, shaking his head. “He’s much more suitable.”

No one bothers to argue with him there, but…

Now the female ghosts are doing a very different kind of fawning than before.

“Oh, I REALLY want one just like him!”

“He’s a little skinny—couldn’t you have put a little meat on his bones, Mr. Puppet Master?!”

“Oh, I don’t know…” One of them smiles, reaching for Xie Lian’s shoulder. “You never know what kind of body might be beneath those robes…”

But before she can touch him, Hua Cheng’s fingers snatch her by the wrist.

And while he might look small, he squeezes until it cracks.

“He wasn’t lying before,” the boy explains thinly, letting the woman go as she shrinks away, clutching her arm to her chest.

“My temper is bad.”

“O-Over something like a puppet?!”

He spares them one cold, disinterested look.

“Why would I let anyone touch something I love?”

Shuo stiffens, looking sharply in their direction—but Hua Cheng doesn't seem particularly phased, and Xie Lian forces himself to bite back laughter.

He's really getting into the role, isn't he?

"Yes," Xie Lian agrees solemnly, shaking his head. "Master gets very angry when anyone else tries to touch me."

The use of 'master,' makes Shuo nearly slap his hand against his forehead, and after a brief pause, Hua Cheng nods, his fingers tightening in Xie Lian's hair possessively.

The prince's expression briefly falters.

"...I know a way we can check the puppet to make sure he's telling the truth," the demon blade stares Hua Cheng down. "If you stab them, they don't bleed. Why don't we take a—?"

In an instant, the very air changes around them, growing frigidly cold.

All sounds of life cease.

And while no one else around can quite understand what happened—Xie Lian sees it clearly.

All around them, the air is burning crimson—Hua Cheng's aura bearing down on the crowd of ghosts, so powerful on its own that it's nearly enough to suffocate them.

(Shuo rolls his eyes)

"Oh?" Hua Cheng smiles, and just as quickly as the terror began, it stops—with the air suddenly going back to normal. "You want to try it? See what happens."

It's a threat that doesn't even attempt to be subtle.

"Gege, get behind me."

Normally, Xie Lian wouldn't listen—but under the guise of master and puppet he obeys, moving to crouch behind the ghost king, murmuring—

"Yes, master."

The ghost king opens his mouth to respond, but—

"Say..." The executioner's blade looks behind the two. "That one didn't flinch."

When nearly everyone else on the field nearly keeled over with shock, one ghost standing in the background was completely unaffected.

"You—take off your cloak. What's your title?"

The figure obeys—lifting his hood to reveal a perfectly average face.

Very obviously a fake.

"Oi, did you hear what we said?! Show yourself, not that—!"

Everyone freezes in the middle of their accusations when they hear a sharp, pained cry, and—

A flash of Heavenly light.

Suddenly, the Executioner's blade drops to his knees, bleeding.

"W-What?!"

"Where did that come from?!"

In the blitz of the panic, everyone looking around and trying to see who did it, Shuo raises an eyebrow, eyeing the wound in the demon spirit's side.

"Looks like it was someone using a sword, so...ah. Basically any of you."

One of them fumbles around in the blade spirit's pack, pulling out another handful of talismans. "...Just how many cultivators did you kill?!"

"I don't know!" He groans. "Twenty? Maybe more?"

"Well—look, he's got a shit ton of these talismans. Let's test everyone!"

Some of the weaker ghosts have to be talked into it, worried that the talismans will be enough to rip them into shreds, but after countless reassurances, all of the ghosts pair off, pressing talismans to each other's foreheads.

Shuo watches the scene unfold, frowning.

'Gege...'

'No.'

'There are a LOT of ghosts here,' Shuo protests, watching as the ghosts begin to stare around at one another when nothing happens, tugging at the talismans on their foreheads.

"Why aren't they working?!"

"MINE WON'T COME OFF!"

'If you don't let me take him out now...'

'Have you made a decision?'

Shuo grits his teeth, hanging his head—and Hua Cheng shrugs, unbothered.

'I'm curious about something—let him go for now.'

'But—!

'It might be more difficult, but you can deal with him later if we need to.'

Then, he says something that gives Shuo no more room for argument.

'Or I will.'

Despite being a fearsome force within the realm of the dead—Hua Cheng *rarely* takes to the field himself.

And even when he does, it's rarely a fight at all.

But that tone...

'...Yes, sir.'

Xie Lian senses that something is going on as well—though maybe not as vividly as the other two, looking around suspiciously, and then...

There—

He stops, staring at a familiar aura not so far away from the rest of them.

...There really is another god here.

"You—?"

BOOM!

The rattle is sudden enough to make Xie Lian sway on his knees, only to be held in place because—

Hua Cheng is still gripping his hair.

That...

BOOM!

BOOM!

BOOM!

BOOM!

"Are you alright, gege?"

"...En."

All around them are withering piles of smoke.

"I really can't even say it was that good of a trap," Shuo grumbles, kicking at a pile of ashes. "They were just morons."

And the fools remaining—those who weren't quick enough to use their talismans—are now running for the hills, screaming at the top of their lungs.

"IT WAS A TRICK! WE WERE SUPPOSED TO HAVE A TRUCE!"

"HA!" The man who was standing there before, gangly and thin faced, suddenly looks a bit less *gaunt* than he did before.

Taller, broader—with a malicious sneer.

"WHO WOULD MAKE A TRUCE WITH YOU WEAKLINGS?!"

He barks out more laughter, cackling as he takes in the destruction around him—

And absorbing the power of hundreds of ghosts, all the while.

His gaze turns to the group remaining, eyes narrowed with hunger, but...

The boy with the red panda on his shoulder stares him down.

Not speaking, his posture relaxed, but...with his hand resting on the hilt of the dagger strapped to his leg, silently begging the question—

'Wanna try it? '

But he doesn't—no.

He's already taken out all of the weaklings at the edges of the gates.

Now, he moves inward.

Shuo watches him run ahead, all while the illusion of the mountain before them shimmers and disappears, revealing—

A wide, open basin of fields and hills—framed in by broad, craggy mountain peaks.

Heavy fighting at the edges, fewer and fewer further in.

And there, almost impossible to see in the distance, not without the sharp, unnatural gaze of a child long since slaughtered, is a peak higher than all the others. Bearing down over the land like an ugly reminder.

A burning, jagged scar.

The forge of calamities.

Mount Tonglu.

Xie Lian reaches up to press a hand against his temple, wincing.

Hua Cheng lets go of his hair, his hand moving to cup the back of his neck. "Gege? Are you alright?"

"...Yes," the prince mutters, rising to his feet. "The shackle in my eyes is just...it's fine."

Hua Cheng frowns, not wanting to leave it at that, but...

"...Ming Guang," Xie Lian turns his head, looking toward the man who was standing behind them before.

The one with the 'plain' face.

"The emperor mentioned that he sent you here—how were you able to hide so well?"

In an instant, the general shows his true face—dark, wild hair pulled back from his face—violet eyes gleaming under the stormy skies bearing down from above.

But there's no joy in them. No gleaming air of amusement that they had before.

His armor is streaked with blood.

Not his own.

The scar above his left eye seems more noticeable than ever—and rather than answer, he reaches for a canteen at his hip, handing it over to the prince.

Xie Lian opens it, taking a sniff—then pales.

Demon's blood.

"...You were drinking this?"

"Gets the evil essence on ya, inside and out," Pei Ming shrugs, taking it back. "I can purge it later. No harm done."

"..." Even Hua Cheng sends the general a look that is almost within the realm of concern, but Xie Lian—

He's visibly worried.

"It's risky."

Xie Lian's been pushing down the thoughts for weeks now, knowing that when you verbalize something like that, you might actually speak it into existence, but—

Emotional control is a key aspect of cultivation. Controlled through meditation and other means of discipline.

Xie Lian doesn't think Pei is necessarily out of control at the moment, but—

He also knows that, during his first banishment, before the events of Lang-er Bay...even if he hadn't recognized it at the time...

He had been in the early stages of what was likely qi deviation.

It was miraculous that he lasted as long as he did, through everything that he did—Xie Lian doesn't think he can claim any form of mental strength got him through it, no—

It was probably the cursed shackle.

Xie Lian still wonders, if he lost them now, if he would...

He also wonders if Wu Ming had known.

If that was why the ghost had been so careful with him. So gentle, and kind.

Knowing how fragile Xie Lian was, even if he had been too blind to his own brokenness to see it at the time.

But Pei Ming...is clearly unwell.

And Qi Deviation—despite what many who haven't trained in cultivation believe—isn't an instantaneous process.

It's a slow decline—only burning brightly at the very end, when it's nearly impossible to stop it.

But...

When Xie Lian eyes his aura—it seems stable.

For now.

"...Better question is why you two are here," Pei mutters, looking Xie Lian and Hua Cheng over, his eye lingering particularly long on the ghost king.

Eyeing his hair, the shape of his face—almost like something is tugging at his mind.

"Though I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that the emperor sent you," he continues, his gaze settling fully on Xie Lian. "I don't doubt your skill—but he had no business sending you here, your highness. You should turn around now, while the gates are still open."

"He didn't send dianxia," Hua Cheng speaks up, arms crossed over his chest. "I allowed his highness to come with me, but I came to deal with the Kiln myself."

Pei Ming's eyes drift to the teenager standing beside them, who seems to be giving the general the same look over.

Then, after a moment, he smiles, waving at him.

"I'm just looking after Hua Chengzhu while he's small."

"Why is he like that, exactly?" Pei questions, sending Hua Cheng a brief, confused glance.

Xie Lian rubs the back of his neck with a shrug. "He won't be for much longer..."

Hua Cheng can't help but hold back an annoyed stare when the prince sounds deeply disappointed by that fact, but—

"WELL, WELL, WELL!" A voice booms throughout the valley. Familiar, though...

Xie Lian thought he had already left.

"IF IT ISN'T THE FIERCE AND MIGHTY GENERAL!"

Pei Ming doesn't rise to the bait, tilting his head and raising an eyebrow.

"Shouldn't a desperate little demon like you be fleeing toward the Kiln for more beasts to swallow?" He questions flatly, drawing his blade. "Or would you rather end your journey here?"

"...Ming Guang," Xie Lian speaks up again, pressing a hand against the general's arm. "Maybe you shouldn't leap into this fight without thinking—that creature's aura is deceptively strong—"

"First of all, your highness—I don't think I've mentioned it to you before, but I prefer to be called by my mortal name by friends," Pei corrects him calmly, and before Xie Lian can feel pleased by being referred to as the general's friend, he adds;

"Second, you should be a little more worried about your little red friend right now."

Xie Lian turns to Hua Cheng, immediately stricken. "San Lang?!"

"I..." When the ghost king answers, his voice is noticeably strained. "I'm sorry for the timing, gege, but I..."

Xie Lian drops to his knees beside him, hands on Hua Cheng's shoulders.

"Shuo—what's wrong with him?!"

"The gates are closing," Shuo explains, stepping between the two of them, Pei Ming, and the blade spirit, his eyes on the horizon. "His true form is going to unseal itself."

But binding his body down into this form wasn't an easy process—and that seal coming undone is equally unpleasant.

Not only that—but it leaves the calamity in a vulnerable state.

"...Okay," the prince mutters, taking a deep breath. "Ruoye!"

The spiritual device unravels from around his neck, immediately forming a protective circle around Hua Cheng. Once that's done, Xie Lian reaches behind him, unsheathing fangxin.

But the moment he does, something else comes whooshing towards him.

"...E'Ming?"

Shuo looks back at them over his shoulder—and he can't help but giggle, clapping a hand over his mouth.

"Oh, that's so cute!"

The deadliest scimitar on earth, and it's smaller than one of his daggers!

"...Thank you for wanting to help," Xie Lian smiles, petting the blade. "But fangxin is better suited for this."

The eye in the hilt of the blade widens from the rejection as it slinks back to Hua Cheng's side, only to be batted away with annoyance.

"Didn't you hear him?! He doesn't want your help, useless trash!"

"Hey, hey..." Xie Lian catches the blade when it flees from its master, trembling with sadness. "I don't think that's true—you're very useful..."

The weapon doesn't seem all that comforted—particularly not when Xie Lian drives E'Ming into the ground before the circle, forming a 'lock.'

Behind them, the demon of the swift executioner's blade circles Pei, watching him with a sharp, hateful eye.

The general, however, doesn't seem particularly impressed.

"Do I know you?"

The demon smirks back at him.

"You haven't recognized me yet? That's typical," he sneers.

“So important now, such a success! Of course you wouldn’t remember!”

Pei Ming’s eye twitches with annoyance as the creature lunges forward to attack, arm transforming into a blade, and he raises his own to block.

CLANG!

The general’s parry was perfect—naturally.

And yet.

Half of the sword flies through the air, burying itself deep in the dirt, and—

Pei sighs, tossing the other half aside, as though part of him expected it.

The demon blade stares for a moment, throwing his head back and cackling.

“I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU’D USE SUCH A TRASH SWORD!”

“…Pei,” Xie Lian mutters, startled. “Was it really able to break your spiritual device that easily?”

“Huh?” The general looks back at him, shaking his head. “Oh—that wasn’t a spiritual device.”

“…It wasn’t?”

“Nope,” Pei yawns with a shrug. “That was just a half decent blade I picked up on the way here.”

“Bringing a mortal weapon to Mount Tonglu?” Shuo raises an eyebrow. “Ballsy.”

“…Well,” Xie Lian clears his throat, pushing past his own curiosity.

"It's probably time to use your actual blade."

"…That was my actual blade," Pei Ming explains. "I didn't bring another."

"…"

"…You didn't bring one of your spiritual devices?!"

Pei Ming's answer almost feels like insanity.

"I've never forged one."

Shuo gawks at him, and even Xie Lian's jaw drops.

"…You've…done all of this…" Xie Lian mutters, feeling a little winded, "Without ever having a spiritual device?"

The strongest among any god aside from the emperor—

And he fights without an *actual* weapon?

Even Xie Lian has Ruoye and Fangxin.

Taking into account just how many missions Jun Wu has sent him on in the last decade alone—

Xie Lian finds himself quietly astounded.

"I borrowed Shui-Xiong's sword sometimes, if things were a little too serious," Pei recalls quietly. "But otherwise, no."

"But why—?"

The demon blade attacks again—and this time, Pei Ming blocks him with his forearm, allowing the blow to be absorbed by his armor.

But he finds that each time he blocks, the demon seems to absorb it with ease, constantly launching into its next strike. Almost…

Almost like it already knows exactly what to expect.

"YOU DON'T KNOW WHO YOUR OWN SENIOR IS, DO YOU, KID?!"

Xie Lian pauses—unable to recall the last time in the last eight centuries that someone called him that.

And now, Pei's eyes flash with understanding.

This isn’t just a petty grievance, or some demon he’s offended in the past.

This—

“HAVEN’T YOU EVER HEARD OF THE GENERAL WHO SNAPPED HIS SWORD?!”

This is *personal.*

Pei Ming peers at the demon, eyebrows raised in recognition.

“…Ming’Guang?”

Xie Lian pauses, confused. "...But aren't you Ming Guang?"

Normally, this is where Hua Cheng would pipe up with an explanation—he's always so helpful in that way—but now he's silent, his face twisted with discomfort as he sits within the protection array, meditating.

He turns his head in Shuo's direction, and the teenager shrugs. "I know I look super smart and everything, but studying Heavenly Officials was never my thing."

But it IS Hua Cheng's 'thing,' apparently?

Pei Ming glances back at them both, irritated.

"Ming'guang was my sword."

Xie Lian frowns, thinking. "But you just said you never had—?"

"A sacred blade given to me by the King of Xuli when I was first appointed as a general," Pei Ming mutters, staring Ming'guang down. "That's why we saw that flash of Heavenly Light before."

"...It is?"

Xie Lian stares, blindly in his direction, surprised—and a little sheepish. "...I assumed you took advantage of that moment to attack him."

"Your highness—I know we've not spoken much until recently, but we've known of each other your entire life." Pei Ming raises an eyebrow. "Have you ever known me to be the type of man that uses sneak attacks?"

"...No..." Xie Lian mumbles, feeling a little silly.

"The moment I snapped Ming'guang in half, I ascended." Pei Ming continues his explanation, looking back at his former weapon.

"You couldn't erase the stain of Heavenly Light from it after that, even if it's been reduced to this state."

Ming'guang cackles, shaking his head. "REDUCED?! I'm more now than I EVER could have been at the side of a weak, SPINELESS coward like YOU!"

It's quite a flurry of insults being leveled at the general—but none of them seem to particularly bother Pei Ming.

"But that makes him an old demon—older than you, your highness. He won't be easy to deal with. Especially not with both of your spiritual devices occupied."

"Well," Shuo speaks up, his eyes never leaving Ming'guang, like a cat watching a bug skittering across a wall. "Something tells me he's going to try and take out the defense array before gege wakes up, at which point..."

Shuo would interfere—which is better than nothing.

"...Why would he go after him?"

"A demon of that level definitely figured out who he was after Hua Chengzhu pulled that little stunt when someone suggested stabbing you," Shuo mutters. "Remember how quickly he refocused his attention?"

...He did.

"That thing might hate General Pei—but it isn't here to settle a score." Shuo jerks his head back in the direction of Mount Tonglu. "The way to make it to the Kiln is to consume other high level ghosts. Devouring Hua Cheng when he's in this state would be the ultimate prize."

Xie Lian's eyes flash at the mention of that, taking one protective step back inside the defense array.

If it was this dangerous for Hua Cheng, then why did he come—?

The answer is obvious, but Xie Lian doesn't dare put more thought into it right now.

"Oh, don't worry," The demon blade smirks. "I don't plan on wasting anything. I'll make a meal out of the rest of you, too."

As he speaks, both of his hands transform into blades—and in a flash, he's attacking Pei Ming again.

Each blow landing with shattering force.

Pei Ming is handling it about how Xie Lian would expect from a martial god of his caliber, blocking each blow with his vambraces—but without a means of attack, that posture can't last for—

"IT'S YOU!" The group falls silent and still as a voice booms over the plains.

Unfamiliar to most, but Xie Lian groans, wiping a hand down his face.

Of course—HE would show up.

"BANYUE'S LITTLE UNDERLING!" The newcomer roars, charging down the hill, his club raised. "YOU CAME A LONG WAY JUST TO DIE, LITTLE UNDERLING!"

...General Ke Mo.

"...Your highness, who is that?”

"Trouble," Xie Lian mutters, trying to think of what to do.

It's already complicated enough, dealing with the demon blade. Ke Mo isn't much trouble on his own. But together...

"HEY! BIG GUY!" The blade spirit calls over. "YOU UNDERSTAND ME?"

He's been crying out in the language of the Crescent Moon Kingdom so far, which only Xie Lian is proficient in—but he understands the modern tongue, enough to nod in acknowledgement.

Ming'guang points his thumb towards the group before them, jerking his head in that direction.

"You wanna kill them? Cause that's what I'm trying to do. Why don't we just team up and get the job done faster?"

Ke Mo stares him down, thinking, and Xie Lian panics, lifting his head to shout—

"PEI SU! BANYUE!"

When he does, Ke Mo goes rigid.

"DON'T COME BACK HERE!"

"...Those two are here?!" The general whips his head around, scanning the area. "SHOW YOURSELVES, YOU GRIMY COWARDS!"

"HEY!" Ming'guang snaps, staring Xie Lian down. "I don't know what he said—but he's speaking your language on purpose! He's probably trying to trick you!"

That seems to snap Ke Mo out of it, much to Xie Lian's dismay.

"...you THINK YOU CAN TRICK ME THAT EASILY?!" The general glares, charging back towards them.

"I almost did," Xie Lian mutters under his breath—and Pei Ming glares at the two adversaries, thinking.

"...Kid," Shuo glances up, looking in his direction. "You think you can handle the big one?"

Shuo's eyes return to Ke Mo, sizing him up. "Yeah. But he's not the one going after—"

"I'll keep that old rusty sword of mine away from your gege if you take care of him. Deal?"

That seems to draw a scream of indignation from Ming'guang, his eyes burning as he charges toward the general, blades raised.

"WHO ARE YOU CALLING AN OLD, RUSTY SWORD YOU WEAK, PATHETIC OLD MAN?!"

The two glance toward one another—and Shuo gives him a brief nod.

Then, they both spring into action—with Shuo charging Ke Mo, and Pei Ming setting his sights on his old weapon.

Ke Mo doesn't seem to know what to think when he sees the small youth approaching—and then, his appearance starts to change, shifting back to his true form.

Taller—though still dwarfed by the general—with darker hair, and mismatched eyes, gleaming up at him with bloodlust.

"...YOU THINK I'M AFRAID OF YOU, DEMON?!"

Just before they clash, Ren Song drops down to the ground—skidding across the dirt between Ke Mo's legs, kicking up dust—rolling onto his feet behind him.

"No," Ren Song replies calmly, landing one palm strike against Ke Mo's back. "You don't look that smart."

The strike looks like something as simple as patting the general on the back—but it sends him flying with so much force that, when he lands on a nearby boulder formation, the entire thing shatters into a pile of rubble.

Pei Ming isn't particularly shocked—not when this is coming from the ward of the most powerful ghost in the realm of the dead, anyhow.

Besides, he has his own problems to deal with.

CLANG!

Sparks fly between his vambrace and the edge of ming'guang, their faces closer now.

"I'm surprised you had time to come all the way here," Ming'guang sneers. "I thought you'd be busy, now that your little band has broken up."

Finally, he manages to draw a flash of anger from the general, getting shoved back.

"You don't know what you're talking about."

The demon blade's eyes glint with vindictiveness. "Don't I, don't I? You think there's anything better for us to do, stuck in your shadow? All we get to do day in, and day out, is listen to tales of the three tumors and their GREATNESS! But it looks like you haven't changed, hm?"

He cackles when Pei Ming shoves him back, not deterred in the least. "The honorable General Ming Guang, always befriending traitors and watching them die. Ah, well—Ling Wen Zhen Jun still breathes, but for how long?"

"Pei!" Xie Lian calls after them. "He's just trying to provoke you, don't—!" He cuts himself off briefly, catching Hua Cheng when his body starts to convulse. "Don't LISTEN TO HIM!"

He can't say more than that, his attention returning to the ghost king —his forehead scorching to the touch.

"San Lang?!"

He looks around frantically, trying to find something off in his aura--but all he can see is an intense ball of light where Hua Cheng's chest must be, pulsing and crackling like a spark on the verge of explosion.

"Can you hear me? Is there something I can do? Hold on!"

Away from them, ming'guang smirks, going for Pei Ming's ankles with his next strike, crowing in sarcastic delight when the general black flips out of range. "Still light on your feet, huh? But really, tell me—how did it feel, when you saw your old friend Shi Wudu get cut down?"

Pei remains deathly silent, his eyes growing colder and colder with every word the demon speaks.

"So honorable, so SUPERIOR, you love it, don't you? ALWAYS BEING THE LAST MAN STANDING?! I—!"

He lets out a strangled cry, then falls silent—fingers gripping him by the throat.

He kicks and flails, but before he can turn his lips into blades to attack —Pei Ming rams his hand into the demon's rib cage, running him straight through with his bare fist.

"You might know all of my moves," the general explains calmly, watching as Ming'guang spits blood.

"But I know exactly where to break you."

He already did it once.

He yanks his hand back out—and when he does, Ming'guang's form collapses to the ground in two separate pieces, writhing and howling with indignation.

"YOU STUPID FUCKING BASTARD!" He howls. "WHAT ARE YOU EVEN DOING HERE ANYWAY?! SENT HERE BY JUN WU LIKE A DAMN DOG?!" He glances at Ren Song, who is currently crawling all over Ke Mo like a small, rabid animal, all while the general flails, trying to pull him off. "You don't even see how ironic it is, do you?!"

Pei Ming turns away, dragging his upper half by the hair, pressing his foot against Ming'guang's chest to hold him still.

"You just traded in one corrupt, lazy, sadistic old man for another!" Ming'guang sneers, blood spewing from his teeth when he speaks, but he carries on.

"And now, what's your plan?! To throw your lot in with Crimson Rain and Autumn Twilight?! You know why they're here, don't you?!"

Even as Ren Song takes a bite out of Ke Mo's shoulder, he grimaces.

"The last time Mount Tonglu opened—Hua Cheng SELECTED Blackwater!"

Xie Lian lifts his chin, listening a little more closely.

"He could have killed him and taken the power for himself—but he let Blackwater live, and the two have been allies EVER SINCE!"

Which, of course, takes on a completely separate meaning for Pei than it does for Xie Lian.

Because of what Blackwater would go on to *do.*

"HE'S BROUGHT REN SONG HERE TO DO THE SAME THING! YOU REALLY WANT THERE TO BE *THREE* GHOST KINGS IN LEAGUE WITH ONE ANOTHER?!"

Pei Ming stares down at his old blade, unfeeling—and Xie Lian looks to Shuo, conflicted.

...If that was their plan, he feels like one of them would have told him, but—

Shuo? A calamity?

That shouldn't be shocking to consider. After Blackwater and Hua Cheng, he's said to be the strongest. But...is that how the entire ghost realm sees him?

The next in line?

Pei looks from Shuo, to Hua Cheng—then to Xie Lian, remembering what Jun Wu told him.

That Hua Cheng would, at some point, try to drag the prince to the

Kiln. And that he was so frightened of that, he wanted Pei Ming to eliminate the ghost king before that happened.

Could it be that his plan was to bring Xie Lian there as food for *Ren Song?* Or were the two planning to spare the possible energy to be gained?

IF that was true, IF Pei Ming believed it—

The best moment to eliminate Hua Cheng would be here, when he can't defend himself.

But that comes with a hefty cost.

He'd have to kill Ren Song first. Doable, but—

The demon has such a youthful look to him—and Pei Ming loathes harming children.

But after that would come the miserable work.

Xie Lian.

Pei Ming would have to hurt him—badly.

And that would be a far more difficult fight. Pei Ming would eventually get the upper hand, but...

There's no honor in doing that to someone wearing three cursed shackles. No humanity in forcing him to listen as Pei Ming slaughters a dear friend afterwards.

It would be cruel.

So cruel, it almost—

It almost feels like it's sadistic by *design* , in a way so familiar, Pei Ming can nearly wrap his mind around the answer—but it won't come to him.

"...Your highness." Xie Lian's arms tighten around Hua Cheng protectively.

"Yes?"

"I am going to ask you a question only once—and trust that you'll answer me with complete honesty," he mutters, digging the heel of his boot into Ming'guang's chest.

"...What is it?"

"Would Crimson Rain, under any possible circumstances, harm you?"

Xie Lian falls silent.

Confused as to why Pei Ming would ask him that now, when Hua Cheng really isn't capable of harming anyone, but...

"No," he shakes his head firmly. "If he ever did, it would only be to protect me from greater harm—but San Lang would never be my enemy."

The utter certainty in his voice is difficult to argue with. And...

That level of faith in another person is rare.

Pei knows that better than most.

"...Then you should trust him first, going forward," the martial god mutters. "These are complicated times that we're living in."

Because if Pei Ming had to choose which one of them to trust—

He would place Xie Lian's judgment of Crimson Rain's character over the emperor's, simple as that.

That isn't to say that he trusts Hua Cheng—actually—he thinks Ming'guang is probably correct.

Ren Song becoming the next calamity probably IS the best possible outcome for Hua Cheng from a strategic standpoint—even if it makes Pei Ming pity the demon.

Clearly fiercely loyal to Crimson Rain—but Pei doubts the bond goes both ways, given Hua Cheng's cold, detached demeanor.

Still—from the kid's behavior before—

He isn't bad.

So, even if it benefits Crimson Rain, it isn't a nightmare scenario.

It could certainly be worse.

"…HEY!" Ren Song barks, legs wrapped around Ke MO's head, squeezing until his skull cracks. "THE BOTTOM HALF CAN MOVE!"

Just as he says this, Xie Lian senses something coming flying towards them—aiming to displace Fangxin, which would unlock the entire array, leaving them defenseless.

Xie Lian launches himself forward, bracing the sword, and with no other choice—

"E'MING!"

CLANG!

Ming'Guang pauses, mouth gaping with shock.

"…Did…did that tiny little knife just BLOCK ME!"

Xie Lian lets out a trembling sigh of relief. "Well done, E'Ming!"

Pei Ming watches the blade—and then his eyes flash with recognition.

"…REN SONG!" He shouts.

"WHAT?!"

"SWITCH OPPONENTS WITH ME!"

"Huh?!" He looks up from where he's crawling over Ke Mo's back, claws extended. "Why?"

"You have blades, and he doesn't know your moves—I need someone to slow him down while I figure something out."

"Pah!" the demon grunts, shoving Ke Mo aside. "Just say it's TOO HARD!" He grumbles, slipping both daggers from their holsters—using one to pin the upper half of Ming'Guang to the ground by his throat, and the other to go after his lower half.

"TIME TO LIVE UP TO MY TITLE!"

'Shuo, the…'

The demon blade screams.

On the other side of the field, Pei Ming slams into Ke Mo head on, throwing him into a wrestling headlock.

“Your highness!” He calls out through gritted teeth, landing on the ground with the general roaring and struggling in his grip.

“Yes?!”

“When you complimented E’Ming just now, he got bigger!” Pei explains, rolling around with Ke Mo in the dirt, unable to decipher the string of obscenities coming out of his mouth. “TRY DOING IT AGAIN!”

“Huh?! Ah…” Xie Lian looks around. “…E’Ming?”

The blade immediately flies into his outstretched palm, and…it does feel a little bigger.

“…” the prince clears his throat. “You—you’re amazing! There’s no other scimitar as dangerous or deadly as you!”

The blade vibrates, its eye lolling around in its socket from joy.

And, just as Pei predicted…

E’Ming grows noticeably larger in his grip.

“And beautiful!” Xie Lian cries out, desperate. “And strong! I feel so safe when E’Ming is with me!”

The weapon is still growing larger, but not fast enough.

“…KISS IT!”

Xie Lian pales.

“HUH?!”

Shuo glances back at them, still locked in combat with Ming’Guang, gritting his teeth,

‘Have you made a decision?’

And for a brief moment—

He looks fearful.

But the forest demon swallows that down, boots digging into the dirt as he leaps back.

"HA!" Ming'Guang snickers, finally managing to dislodge the dagger from his throat. "I should've known Hua Cheng's brat was—!"

When he sees Shuo's eyes, he stops.

Particularly the right one, which burns so brightly, it casts shadows on the ground.

"W…what are you d—?"

Before he can finish his question, Ren Song slams his dagger down—but not into Ming'Guang.

Rather, into the earth below.

And when he does—the ground begins to rattle and rumble in protest. Dirt spewing, rock crumbling and shifting, as…

Roots spring forth.

Pei can't risk letting go of Ke Mo to see what's happening, and Xie Lian—

He just sees a sudden burst of resentment, like—

Something is no longer being held back.

Oaks bursting from the earth, forming a tight circle around the two demons, sealing them in.

An—

An array.

Once the branches weave together, there's no way in—and no way out.

And when Ming'Guang looks up, hateful eyes bear down on him like a forest set aflame.

"You think you're the next ghost king?"

His voice takes on a sharp, echoing quality.

"Make me bow, then."

Ming'Guang bares his teeth, scrambling to put both halves of himself together, to fight, but—

That's when he hears it.

The whispers echoing through the leaves as it gets darker, darker, and darker still—

"Murderer…"

"Traitor…"

"Oath breaker…"

"S…SHUT UP!" He screams.

Ren Song's claws extend as he seems to slice through the very air itself—rays of sunlight cutting horizontally through the leaves, providing the only source of light—a cold breeze rattling through.

Autumn twilight shrouding forests.

"Keeping secrets, are we?"

"NO—!"

CREAK!

The boughs and trunks of the trees around them rattle and shift—and before the demon blade can struggle to free himself—

The scene around him changes.

To a place long lost to time—

One that only exists within memory.

For a moment of comedic relief, here is a small animatic of the "Plum Blossom" being flattered that Heaven's Eye wanted to kill Hua Cheng for him. Thanks to Syl for the adorable artwork!

The General who Broke his Sword

Chapter Summary

> "A god? Me?" He snorts at the idea, shaking his head. "HELL no, who wants that?"
>
> Rong Guang nearly falls off of his horse, gripping the reins tighter as he stares at his friend in shock. "...You don't?!"
>
> "Nope!" Pei shakes his head emphatically. "Sounds miserable."
>
> They round the corner, and he explains, "If I ended up being a god, the only reason I wouldn't turn it down would be if I had nothing left for me down here."

Chapter Notes

> CONTENT WARNINGS FOR THIS CHAPTER:
>
> canon compliant violence / references to suicide, the death of a child

It's early autumn, leaves gently falling through the air.

Two teenagers move within a sparring ring, swords artfully clashing against one another—but with one clearly showing the upper hand.

Taller, broader—but also more nimble.

And when he sweeps the legs out from under his friend, he lets out a loud, carefree laugh.

"That makes it fourteen to nothing!"

He pulls off his helmet, revealing a mess of tangled dark curls and vividly violet eyes, but—

No scar.

"No fair Pei-Xiong!" The smaller teenager cries. "Your arms are longer than mine!"

"You expect me to go easy on you, Rong-Xiong?"

Two best friends—one, the son of an officer and a merchant's daughter. The other, the son of a general and a concubine.

One of them cunning and ambitious—while the other seemed straightforward to a fault.

But the latter—he was talented beyond all measure.

Rising through the ranks of the military at astonishing speed—always with his faithful lieutenant at his side, but…

The ever growing star of General Pei Ming only seemed to cast a shadow over his sworn brother, Rong Guang.

"…People think you're gonna ascend, you know."

It's another victory parade—this time, after a successful campaign to take back a string of iron mines in the south.

Flowers rain down as their horses parade through the streets, and the young captain grins, catching a rose thrown his way, winking at a girl in the crowd.

"A god? Me?" He snorts at the idea, shaking his head. "HELL no, who wants that?"

Rong Guang nearly falls off of his horse, gripping the reins tighter as he stares at his friend in shock. "...You don't?!"

"Nope!" Pei shakes his head emphatically. "Sounds miserable."

They round the corner, and he explains, "If I ended up being a god, the only reason I wouldn't turn it down would be if I had nothing left for me down here."

"...Why?" Rong Guang mutters, his brow pinched.

A god is the greatest thing a man could be—who wouldn't want that?

"Because," Pei squeezes his knees, urging his horse to go a little faster. "There are two things that make this life worth living—beautiful women, and battle. If I'm lucky, I'll die young and glorious, with women lining the streets to mourn me for miles and miles!"

"...At least you know what you want," Rong Guang sighs, giving him an exasperated look. "But why would you want to die young?"

"Mmm..." The soldier glances up at the sky.

It's sunny in the city--but with storm clouds on the horizon—not that he minds.

Xuli has always been known for its storms—and Pei Ming has always been reminded of home when he hears the thunder's call, watching a black eagle come soaring down from the sea shores, looking to take shelter in the forests of the mountains ahead.

As sudden as his smile and laughter came, they fade.

"...I've spent my entire life missing my mother," he admits—and the only one who can hear him over the roar of the crowds is his friend.

"I'm no good at mourning. If we all have to go someday—then I'd rather go first."

Pei Ming's life is full of firsts.

The first man from Xuli to become a General before the age of twenty years old.

The first general to ever win so many consecutive battles.

The first mortal man to knowingly bed a goddess—a married one at that.

But when it comes to dying...

...General Pei never does go first.

Burying childhood friends. Comrades. Two sisters, before he turns twenty one.

And so, so many men who marched into battle under his banner.

And when the great General is only twenty two—

He's the first to ever conquer the City of Gusu.

But when he stands on the great, ancient walls of this legendary city of the north—he feels no pride in what he's done.

No glory in this victory.

Not when he can see how far and how wide the blood of his soldiers stains the plains surrounding the city.

"...Are you insane?!"

Rong Guang paces behind him, his own armor stained with blood, just as pale and drawn as his general, but—

Somehow, even more distressed.

"The king offered you his own DAUGHTER in marriage, and you refused?!"

Pei Ming doesn't look away from the ground below.

"Of course."

He says it so simply, like he's explaining something as elementary as the sun setting in the west, and rising in the east. And yet—

Rong Guang cannot understand it.

Because the princess is beautiful, intelligent—well suited to the general in every way.

"...Why?!"

"Because I'm not interested in spending my days in a palace," Pei Ming shrugs, reaching for the flask in his pocket. "And I'm not interested in being anyone's husband. Gods—can you imagine if we had children?"

The general shakes his head, solemn.

"I couldn't do that to them."

"...Do what?" Rong Guang mutters.

They used to have such laughter in their eyes. Smiling and ribbing at one another as they went back and forth with toy swords. Talking about what the world would be like, once they grew into it. The things they would do.

"...Fail them."

But the older they get, the more stark their differences seem to grow.

Rong Guan always assumed his friend's principles were things that would evolve and bend as the naivety of youth changed into the cynicism of adulthood.

And it's true—General Pei did become quite cynical.

Still laughing and smiling, finding joy in watching as his nieces and nephews are born. As Rong Guang becomes more than just his sworn brother, marrying the general's younger sister, having a son of their own.

But war is like a blacksmith's hammer.

It changes you.

Hardens you.

Still. Pei Ming doesn't grow out of his honor, or sense of right and wrong.

He grows *into* it, and the childhood friends, now family through marriage, become men—each develops their own reputation.

If you want to win a battle with dignity and honor—leave it to General Pei.

But if you want to win quickly, and win at all costs—look to his deputy, Lieutenant Rong Guang.

The two always seemed ill suited as friends—and yet, loved and trusted one another like blood brothers.

To the point where, when General Pei was gifted with a sacred sword for his victory in Gusu—he named it Ming'Guang, a hyphenation of their names.

Knowing Rong Guang craved being remembered far more than he ever did—and attaching his name to a famous sword was a guarantee of it

But all things that rise must fall—and while some friendships can last across lifetimes, sometimes more than one—

Others, no matter how fierce the love and loyalty between them might be, will eventually fail.

It was in an act of love for his friend, that Rong Guang broke him.

"...Pei-Xiong?" The deputy stops at the edge of the war tent, his eyes fixed on the back of the general's head, then on the empty bottle beside him.

Pei Ming doesn't answer quickly, eyeing the rolling hills below.

The Kingdom of Yushi.

"She gave me their defense plans."

The scroll sits on his desk—the seal unbroken.

“…” Rong Guang reaches for it—then stops.

Knowing what his friend would say.

“You won’t use it?”

“If I do,” Pei closes his eyes, his jaw clenched. “I’ll be bound to her.”

“…I told you she was a bad idea,” Rong Guang mutters.

“I know.”

“Xuan Ji may be beautiful—but any woman who would eagerly allow her countrymen to be slaughtered for her lover is a coward—!”

“I know.”

“Then why did you get involved with her?!”

He falls silent when Pei looks back at him.

Pale and unshaven, eyes haggard.

“…Do you even know why we’re here?” Pei mutters, looking around. “Or how many days that it’s been since we left home?”

The campaign in Yushi has been longer than the others—and far more blood soaked.

The people are strong—prepared to endure suffering rather than surrender.

That was easier to justify, when they were retaking stolen land in the south. Or dampening the advances of Xianle to the west.

But the rationale for slaughtering farmers in Yushi is unclear—

Other than the desire for cheap crops, even if they’re stolen.

“…Because the king ordered us,” Rong Guang replies quietly, stomach sinking as he takes in the silent conflict in the general's eyes.

Trapped between duty, and decency.

"…What happened to women and glory?" He mutters, trying to pour Pei another glass to lift his spirits.

"…There's no glory in killing farm boys," his friend replies, turning his face back down to the hills below.

And his next words come from a place so hollow, just listening to them aches.

"If that's what wars are—then I don't think I want to fight them anymore."

"…Taking the capital without those plans would mean more bloodshed." Rong Guang points out. "We'll be fighting block to block. The civilian casualties alone…"

He lets out a heavy sigh.

"But there's another way."

Pei Ming looks back at him—hopeful.

"I have a plan."

A plan that seemed merciful, on paper.

Dishonest, maybe—a trick at its core.

But when the lives were weighed on a scale of dishonesty versus carnage—

Trickery won the day.

But it tore at Pei Ming—

To the point where he actually prayed.

Never a particularly spiritual man—but now, he kneels before a divine statue of the heavenly emperor, incense burning.

Listening, as a priest of the great martial temple allows the emperor's wisdom to speak through him.

“We all have our roles to play, General.”

Rong Guang watches from the sidelines, as his friend hangs his head low.

“There are kings, and there are soldiers. Which are you?”

“…A soldier,” he replies, his voice wooden.

But watching him now, for the first time—

Rong Guang sees something so much more.

“We all choose our own destinies in life,” the priest rests a hand upon the general’s head gently. “But it is for kings to give orders—and soldiers to carry them out.”

Pei Ming had been given one order:

To take Yushi. Whatever the cost. That failure would not be an option.

All of it culminating in that day.

That one, horrible day.

Standing on the palace walls, watching and waiting for the cowardly, treasonous King of Yushi to show his face.

While they may have felt sympathy for the people of the land—none was felt for the royal family.

But it was not the king who walked from the palace gates.

No.

The air lays heavy, thick with summer humidity—the distant rumblings of a storm.

And standing before the general and his army—

Is a young lady.

Alone.

Hair loose, with bare feet.

But upon her head lies a crown.

A memory stained with pain and remorse.

Watching as the young Queen stops before Pei Ming, silently falling to her knees, and bowing three times.

And with each lowering of her head, the horrible truth begins to dawn on them.

“WAIT—!”

But it’s far too late.

The blade is drawn across her throat in a flash of resolve—not a moment of hesitation.

Leaving the general holding the dying beauty in his arms, struggling to staunch the blood, cursing as it stains his hands, his armor, his cheeks—

Most soldiers break in the face of death. Growing frightened as it claws closer and closer, grasping at life as they're pulled below the surface, desperate to break free.

They weep. They beg. They call out for their loved ones.

But not the Princess Who Slit Her Throat.

Now, dying in the arms of the man who brought her to this point, her expression is calm. Even as her eyes flutter, and her breaths hitch—she reaches up, pressing her hand against the general's cheek—leaving one bloody palm print behind.

The words she says are lost to time.

General Pei is the only person who knows her last words—and he never shares them.

Not to a single soul.

As she takes her last breaths—it begins to rain, and when the drops land on her cheeks—

She smiles.

Relieved, to know that something will wash the blood away.

She won't be able to clean up the mess herself.

At first, people mistake it for a clap of thunder—but when she draws her final breath, the entire sky explodes with light, and a sudden—

CRASH!

The Rain Master is born.

General Pei doesn't move.

Doesn't leave his spot until the rain soaks him to the bone, washing the blood on him, around him, down to the streets below.

The General keeps his promise, leaving Yushi in peace for three years.

For three long, hard years—when he and his men are forbidden to return to Xuli.

Children are born in their absence. Parents buried. Memories and milestones that they can never take back—that never should have been robbed from them.

They, the greatest children of Xuli.

They, the providers of their kingdom's wealth and power.

They, who made the sacrifice.

Only allowed home when their bitter, bloody work is completed.

Welcomed with the same parades as before. Crowds screaming, flowers thrown from balconies above.

But with no laughter among the men, the way there was before. All of them quietly bonded by shared pain and remorse.

But none of them carry that weight more heavily than their general.

Who still laughs as boisterously as he used to. Drinks and dines as heartily as he did before. Beds women with an avaricious zeal.

But nothing ever seems to reach his eyes anymore.

And his friend...

"Don't bother, Rong Guang. I won't hear any more of it."

"...Have you forgotten everything they did to us?! Everything they put us through?" The deputy glares at him.

Both men have stepped aside from a wedding to argue in the back, turned away from the gathering.

"Do you think that girl would have had to do what she did, if we hadn't been placed in that position?!"

Pei Ming says nothing, facing away from him.

"There will ALWAYS be another war, don't you understand that?! Don't you see what the king is doing?! He wants to invade Xianle!"

"Then that's what he'll do."

Rong Guang recoils, staring at his old friend with shock and disbelief. "...You really have nothing to say about that?"

"Why should I?"

"Because we'll be fighting that war for the rest of our lives! I won't see my children grow up!"

Xianle isn't like their other adversaries. They're wealthy and powerful—with a strong history of Cultivation under the Heavenly Emperor.

Taking one city from them—Gusu—was one of their most costly campaigns. Bloodsoaked.

And the House of Xie is not known to be faint hearted.

An ancient bloodline, ruling the central plains long before Xuli was even a city state—known for producing strong rulers, warriors, and cultivators.

It's said to only be a matter of time before someone from the House of Xie ascends as a god.

And their Crown Prince...is said to be absolutely fearsome.

Already a decorated warrior, known for leading his troops into battle himself—with a secured royal line of two sons.

The family is beloved, powerful—and absurdly wealthy.

Xianle would only fall if it broke from within. An invasion from Xuli would be a fool's errand.

"Have you forgotten everything we went through in Yushi?! Do you have any idea how long a war like that could go on? Pei-Xiong—my SON could fight in this war, your nephew!"

"...A-Kang is only four years old—"

"Yes!" Rong Guang agrees. "And in ten years, he'll be old enough to die for this king, too." He points to his son, sleeping in his mother's lap beside one of the dining tables. "Look at him, and tell me you can live with that!"

"...Rong-xiong," Pei cuts him off, holding up a hand. "Calm down."

"How can you tell me to be—?!"

"The king is old," the general reminds him quietly. "He wants a legacy, and he's making reckless choices. But who can say if he'll even live much longer?"

"That's why we should—!"

"Wait," Pei shakes his head. "That's why we should wait, and give the prince a chance to decide what sort of king he's going to be."

"...Prince Xuli Meng is barely more than an INFANT!" Rong Guang cries, a vein throbbing in his temple.

"He'll be controlled by his mother if the king dies any time soon—and she is JUST as bad as he is!"

It's true—that among all of the King's consorts, Prince Xuli Meng's mother is said to be even more wolfish than her husband.

"He'll have advisors."

"Don't be naive, we're not boys anymore!" Rong Guang snaps, grabbing him by the arm. "Don't say that when you KNOW it won't work that way!"

"Then what should I say?" Pei Ming stares at him, his eyes sharp."That I'll become a traitor? Break my oath? That's what you want from me?"

"Is it treason if we aren't given a choice?!"

"There's always a choice," the general shakes his head, pulling his shoulder out of Rong Guang's grip. "If I suddenly turn tail now, then didn't I have a choice back in Yushi? Or in Gusu?"

His deputy falters, and Pei's hands ball into fists by his sides. "If this path was wrong, then every step I've taken was for nothing. Every life, every wound, every ounce of blood, sweat, and tears that were shed—are you saying they were given in the name of a tyrant?"

Rong Guang doesn't back down, lifting his chin in defiance.

"...Maybe," He admits, his chest aching with sadness when Pei's expression twists with pain, confusion, and...

"Then why do you need me to tell you what to do?! If you believe that, then don't follow him!"

"I'm not following him!" Rong Guang snaps, drawing attention from a few guests from the wedding, watching the men argue in the distance. "I've never followed him!"

"Then what the hell have you been doing all this time?!"

"Following YOU!"

Silence falls between them.

"...I'm going to tell you something now," Pei Ming mutters, closing his eyes. "And I'm only going to tell you once—so hear me clearly."

"Pei-Xiong—"

"I will *never* be a King."

The words seem to hit the deputy with a heavy weight, landing hard.

"I swear on my honor, I will never wear the crown of Xuli," Pei repeats for emphasis, staring him down—with eyes that have always been so unusual, and now, they burn with an almost unnatural force.

"Don't put me in a position where I have to choose between you, and my duty."

He leaves him then, stalking back towards the wedding, his expression stormy—only to have one of his sisters placate him, a hand on his shoulder.

Reminding him that Rong Guang is only upset, given how much time he's missed with the children.

That he's emotional.

That it's likely he didn't mean anything that he said—and he'll soon forget about it.

But that's not true. Rong Guang remembers one thing from that conversation—

And it's to not leave Pei Ming a choice.

The final thread breaks in Spring of the next year.

When Pei Ming is stationed in the royal palace, helping prepare battle plans for an upcoming campaign—and a horrible scream rips through the halls.

Sharp, blood curdling.

And as he and the other guards rush to its source–he hears a panicked cry of a child.

"G-General!"

When they round the corner—

They find Prince Xuli Meng.

A boy of little more than six years old—with a knife buried in his side.

He's curled up on the ground, trembling by the time Pei reaches him.

"SOMEONE GET A DOCTOR!"

"It's alright, it's alright..."

Pei holds the boy in his arms, placing pressure against the wound, but knowing, just from where it is—the moment the knife is removed, he'll bleed out.

A quick death. But—

"You're alright," Pei Ming repeats, holding the child close as the guards flurry about, panic spreading.

"Look at me, look, see?" The prince stares up at him, eyelashes fluttering. "I'm here," he assures the boy, watching with horror as the fear fades from his eyes.

Of course, he's safe.

General *Pei* is here.

"I-It hurts," he whimpers. "I-I..."

"I know, it's alright—"

"What did I do wrong?" The boy croaks, tears in his eyes, slipping down his cheeks—unable to understand.

It's unfathomable to a child so young—

And it's unfathomable to the general, who has seen so much war, and yet...

"Nothing," Pei whispers, his voice turning hoarse.

Xuli Meng was barely old enough to start learning how to read nursery rhymes. His favorite game was feeding the ducks in the royal gardens, and—

His greatest accomplishment had been recently becoming an older brother to the newborn princess.

He had hurt *no one* in this life.

"You didn't do anything," Pei promises the child, holding him closer as his breaths become more pained.

All around them is chaos—trying to find the prince's attacker, the flurry to find someone to help, but—

Even if they make it in time, there's nothing to be done.

"You," Pei Ming squeezes his eyes shut, breathing harshly through his nose to harm himself. "You are being so brave, y'know that? Your m...your mother is going to be so proud—"

"...T...then w-why did they hurt me?" He mumbles, lips pale and trembling, his skin turning blue.

"Who?" Pei questions, trying to be gentle, to keep his own emotions out of his voice. "Who hurt you?"

The name that falls from the child's lips breaks something inside of him.

Knocks him so far off balance, he feels something go tumbling over the edge.

"R...Rong...G-Guang..."

Pei's hands begin to tremble—but his voice doesn't.

"I...I don't know," he mutters, shaking his head. "But I'll get him, okay?" He pushes the prince's hair back from his face. "I promise, I'll get him."

The faith in the prince's eyes makes him sting with heartbreak and failure

Of course, Xuli Meng believes him.

Because he's *General Pei.*

"I...I'm scared," he mumbles, his hand so tragically small, clutching at the front of Pei's armor. "A-Am I g-gonna die?"

Pei stares down at the boy, lips trembling.

"...No," he whispers. "You're gonna be okay."

Xuli Meng lets out a whimper of relief, relaxing in his arms. "M-Mama's coming?"

"That's right," Pei agrees gently, cradling his head when he's too weak to hold it up on his own anymore. "She'll be here soon with the doctor, and they'll make it better. Do I look scared?"

"N...No..."

Pei Ming shushes him over and over, promises him that it'll be alright. Sings the song that his own mother used to sing to him when he was small, and—

When the prince's breaths fade, they aren't trembling with fear anymore.

Almost like he's fallen asleep.

Pei hands him off to the doctors when they come—and by the time he's made it to the great hall, he hears the horrible, grief stricken screams of the boy's mother.

And he—

He's seen so much. *Done* so much, but—

The Great General of Xuli can't stop weeping.

One of his sisters finds him by the palace gates, pressing her hands against his cheeks.

"Oh, gege..."

He holds her tightly, sobbing uncontrollably against her shoulder—the prince's blood still staining his hands.

Just like the Queen of Yushi's blood stained his hands.

Just like the blood of farm boys stained his hands.

Just like the blood of his friends will stain his hands.

How much rain will it take to make all of that wash away?

"I don't want to do this anymore, meimei," he whispers, his voice breaking in countless places.

"I know."

"I'm so tired."

"I know."

"I don't—!"

Pei doesn't want to fight anymore.

That's all he thinks, when he straps Ming'guang to his side—one last time.

When he saddles his horse, and rides for where Rong Guang and the others have gone.

Where it all began.

Gusu.

The Gates open for him like an old friend—and when he rides in—

The troops have the nerve to cheer, seeing the blood on their general's armor.

Assuming that he's riding back from victory over *tyrants.*

Pei Ming doesn't speak, riding to the front of the battalion.

When he dismounts, Rong Guang is there, rushing forward to his side. "Did you deal with the king? You—!"

He stops, when he sees the look on Pei Ming's face--and his own expression falls, filled with disappointment.

"How many of them knew?"

"What are you talking about?"

"How many of them followed you this far because they believed I signed off on this?" Pei Ming presses him, resigned.

"...They knew you would come once you knew what was happening," Rong Guang explains, "All of this—it's been done in your name. The king won't take you back—"

"So..." Pei Ming glances down the rows of soldiers, eyes unreadable. "All of them knew?"

"...Yes," Rong Guang agrees, continuously peering over towards Pei Ming's horse, to the point where the general finally asks—

"Are you looking for something?"

"...Where's Xuli Meng?"

Pei Ming stares at him, not reacting.

"Is that supposed to be a joke?"

"What are you—?"

"Xuli Meng is dead," the general glares, "This blood? It's all his."

Rong Guang takes a step back, visibly startled. "I..."

"He was asking me with his last breaths why YOU hurt him." Pei Ming pokes him in the chest—hard. "So don't talk to me like you didn't fucking KNOW!"

"I-I didn't!" The deputy shakes his head vehemently. "I lured him away from the nursery and left him with two of my men before going on ahead! I thought he'd make a good hostage!"

And slowly, as the two soldiers who were left with the prince come forward—the truth starts to become clear.

The soldiers left behind were young—nervous. And when they tried to pull the boy towards the palace gates, Prince Xuli Meng began to cry.

When they tried to gag him, the boy screamed—and being young, and their only order from Rong Guang being to 'take care of it'—

They panicked.

But everyone can see, as they explain their story—

Pei Ming doesn't believe it.

Who panics and *murders* a little boy?

"...Is there anything else you have to say for yourselves?"

"Pei-xiong," Rong Guang frowns. "I already told you, the child's death was unintentional—but it's already been done. We don't have a choice but to move forward—"

"I made my choice years ago, Rong Guang."

They stare at one another—and Pei Ming's words from before come back, ringing clearly in his mind.

'Don't put me in the position where I have to choose between you, and my duty.'

"...You can't be serious..." He mutters, taking a step away from him. "Don't be stubborn!"

When Pei Ming speaks again—his voice is loud enough to carry through the crowd of soldiers.

"As a sworn officer of the Kingdom of Xuli, it is my duty to enforce the code of conduct among my men. The punishment for treason is death."

A panicked stir echoes throughout the troops, looking at one another in quiet confusion.

W...what is their general saying?

Their general, who has led them through countless battles—laughed with them, broken bread with them, grown up with them?

"...Didn't you hear me?!" Rong Guang steps forward, grabbing him by the arm. "You're already in this, whether you like it or not! If you don't see it through, you'll end up executed!"

"I heard you." The general agrees, pushing his hand away. "I plan on turning myself in."

He looks out among the group—and no matter how angry he is with Rong Guang—

He knows his hands aren't clean of this.

That he should have said something when Rong Guang first started talking like this—months and months ago.

But he hadn't wanted to lose a friend.

"...I have failed in my duty to enforce proper conduct and discipline among my men, leading to mass insubordination," Pei explains woodenly. "The punishment for which is also death."

"...But general—!"

They'll make a public execution out of it, he's sure.

But he's the only one who needs to endure that.

The rest of them—

Ming'guang is unsheathed a final time, gleaming under the sun.

They won't endure that.

And in any other situation, these men wouldn't feel fear.

There are nearly two hundred of them—and only one of him.

But, with great sorrow, and no hesitation—

Pei Ming cuts every single one of them down.

Making the streets of Gusu run red with blood once more—until only two are left standing.

Himself, and Rong Guang.

There's no illusion between the two men over how it's going to end.

"...Be honest with me," Pei Ming mutters, his gaze distant, gripping his sword with blood stained hands. "Did you really think they were going to take that boy hostage? Or did you just think that was an explanation I could live with?"

"You..." Rong Guang laughs in disbelief. "...You just killed all of our friends—and you're...asking me about ONE boy?"

"...They made choices," Pei Ming mutters, shaking his head. "Xuli Meng never had that chance."

"What do you want me to say? That it was his son's future, or mine?" Rong Guang shakes his head.

"Because I'm not sorry for choosing mine."

"...Where do you think this would have gone?" Pei mutters, eyeing the bodies of his fallen comrades around him. "You really thought that, even if I went along, this would have been a bloodless coup d'etat?"

"You can't change ANYTHING without someone getting hurt!" Rong Guang glares, trembling. "You and I BOTH know that!"

"NO!" Pei shakes his head, "It doesn't matter how many people get hurt. NOTHING EVER CHANGES! LOOK WHERE YOU'RE STANDING!"

The citizens of Gusu watch from a distance—cautious, but curious—and frightened by the bloodshed.

"I lost more friends taking this city than I did today," Pei Ming mutters, looking around. "And I honestly don't think it made a single fucking difference."

He doesn't believe that the street vendors on the corner or the children playing in the parks know or care about whether or not they're ruled by a king in Xianle or Xuli.

Their lives are exactly as they were before.

Except for the scars left by war.

Pointless, endless war.

"Maybe, if you had waited—and that child had grown into the tiger you were afraid of, I would have agreed with you. But now he's dead, and the king is already a dying old man." Pei Ming explains hollowly, sword trembling in his grip. "He can't hurt anyone now. You knew that."

Rong Guang shakes his head vehemently. "You're ASSUMING! Old isn't dying—and you're really going to leave the kingdom in the hands of an infant girl?!"

"Should we assassinate the baby next, Rong-Xiong? Or is it too far when she's too young to speak?"

Pei growls, his expression darkening when he remembers those small, terrified eyes, staring up at him, asking—

'What did I do wrong?'

"What about when she takes her first steps, is she a viable political target then? At what point should we assume she's going to kill us all?"

"ONE life!" Rong Guang shakes his head, "Compare that to how many men—!"

"PROFESSIONAL SOLDIERS!" Pei Ming snarls, "Just like you! Who CHOSE this life! No one CHOOSES to be born to certain parents, and you were going to take that little boy hostage?! It's never ONE life!"

The moment Xuli Meng died—it rippled out to countless other lives.

His parents, his sister—children that will never be born, loves that will never be had.

"Maybe, if you had just done this on your *own* , I would have been able to let you go," Pei mutters, his voice breaking.

"But the minute you placed all of this on my shoulders—in my name—you knew that I would have to end it."

Rong Guang had just assumed that Pei Ming would give in, and fight for them. With them.

But how does that make him any different from the King?

Forcing Pei Ming into another war that he never wanted. This time, a civil war—because no matter how beloved, how skilled General Pei might be, there would always be those who would remain loyal to the throne.

Forcing Pei Ming into a role he desperately said he *did not want.*

Regardless of Rong Guang's paranoia--the King of Xuli won't live more than a few more years at most.

The moment their rebellion started, the best way to save lives was for Pei Ming to crush it. And even if it weren't—

Pei Ming can't—and won't—break an oath on a *maybe* .

Maybe, the King of Xuli would have invaded Xianle.

Maybe, Prince Xuli Meng would have been controlled by his mother.

Maybe, the King would have crossed that line—or many others—

But Rong Guang didn't wait for him to CROSS it before attempting to force Pei to turn his back.

"…There was another way," Rong Guang mutters, hand on his own sword. "You stop being such a damn coward, and face who you really are! Think of how much GOOD you could have done, if you just—!"

"I know who I am." Pei Ming steps forward. "I'm sorry you never bothered to see it!"

But when it comes down to it—neither man ever seemed to see things the same way.

Pei Ming, ever self aware, always knowing what and who he wanted—and who he wanted to be.

And Rong Guang, seeing what he *could* be, regardless of what Pei Ming wanted.

Leaving them here.

"I'm not sorry," Rong Guang repeats, lifting his chin, staring Pei Ming down with the eyes of a man on death row.

"I wish that boy hadn't needed to die—but I'm not sorry for trying to do more than maintain the status quo."

"Then you should have used your own name to do it."

Pei Ming’s face is like stone—even if his gaze is wracked with pain.

“You should have believed in yourself, instead of me.”

Because there’s no amount of force that can change a man into something that he isn’t.

Only time does that.

And Rong Guang has run out.

“For what it’s worth—I am sorry, old friend.”

They’ve been sparring since they were boys—and each and every time, Pei has always won.

Their last match is no different.

Rong Guang’s arms are still shorter than his—and Pei Ming is still faster.

His life is the last that Ming’Guang ever takes.

A quick death. Clean, and honorable.

His blood stains the hands of a friend, a brother, and a comrade.

But those hands are covered in the blood of many, many others.

And he gets more peace and dignity in death than most.

The knowledge that his wife and children will be looked after.

That his son won’t have to fight in a rich man’s wars of pride.

General Pei stands among his men, covered in their blood, closing his eyes.

At best, he’ll return to public trial and execution.

At worst, they might take this display of loyalty as reason to do exactly what Rong Guang wanted—placing the general in power.

But a man chooses his own destiny, and Pei Ming…

He stares down at Ming’Guang, struggling to see his own reflection through streaks of blood.

The General doesn’t want to fight anymore.

Doesn’t have the right to carry a blade, when it has been used to cut down every man who fought beside him.

One hand grips the hilt, the other, the scabbard—and with a twist of his hands—

SNAP!

The Sacred Blade Ming’Guang is no more.

The people of Gusu watch from their homes as the general stands among his fallen friends, broken sword in hand—streaked with blood, tears falling silently down his face.

Ready to face judgment—and then, rest.

But…

CRASH!

Some matters of fate are beyond a man’s choice.

And it’s then, on the day that Pei Ming chose to lay down his blade and stop fighting—that he ascended as the greatest god of war in living memory.

Trembling, bathed in golden light—still holding the broken shards of his sword.

A hand lands on his shoulder, gentle.

Welcomed by warm, paternal eyes, patiently guiding him to drop those broken pieces back to the mortal realm below, helping him to his feet.

“You fought well.”

Pei Ming’s heart is in his throat—and breaks, upon hearing his new title.

“Rest now, General Ming Guang.”

The Man in Black

Chapter Summary

Xie Lian doesn’t know whether or not to laugh or cry.

“Why do I need to KISS IT?!”

“Just trust me!”

Xie Lian doesn’t know whether or not to laugh or cry.

“Why do I need to KISS IT?!”

“Just trust me!” Pei Ming hisses, tendons in his neck straining as he keeps Ke Mo in a stranglehold, the general wailing about, ‘not dying for another Pei.’ “INSTINCTS!”

“…My battle instincts are pretty good, and I don’t—”

“It’s a DIFFERENT KIND OF INSTINCT, YOUR HIGHNESS!”

Xie Lian swallows hard, feeling around for the handle of E’Ming again, knowing they don’t have time to argue—and he’s kissed blades before to bless them for battle, but—

This doesn’t feel the same—not at all.

Still…

Xie Lian brings the blade up to his lips, giving it a gentle, sheepish touch with his lips—just above the eye on the hilt.

And he feels it work almost immediately, trembling and growing at a much faster rate.

“I-Is that good enough?!” He shouts back to Pei, unable to get a clear grasp on E’Ming’s length when one of his arms is holding Hua Cheng upright.

“Well—didn’t you sword swallow back in the day?”

“Wh—?”

Hua Cheng jerks violently in his arms, and Pei Ming cries.

“NOTHING!”

He glances between Ke Mo, struggling underneath him—and the newly formed trees, hiding Ren Song and Ming’Guang, glowing ominously.

He raises a hand to point, about to yell instructions to Xie Lian,

“E’MING IS—!”

But the moment he speaks…the scimitar flies into his hand.

“…”

“…”

For a moment, Pei is too shocked to react, making strange, prolonged eye contact with the eye in the blade’s hilt, baffled, but—

In the next, he’s leaping into action—slicing deep into Ke Mo’s side as he rolls to his feet, instantly gaining the upper hand.

“E’Ming went to you?” Xie Lian questions, shocked.

The blade has always been friendly and eager for attention from him—it not so much when it comes to anyone else.

“Yeah, I don’t know!” Pei calls back, flashing behind Ke Mo twice, taking out each knee. “It must be desperate!”

But he’ll be damned if the scimitar isn’t one of the smoothest weapons he’s ever used, moving like a perfect extension of his arm.

In a matter of moments, Ke Mo is left bleeding on the ground, in a similar state to when he was in the Sinner’s Pit—and Pei Ming turns to the array.

“What’s with the—?”

Before he can finish his question, the trees wither and crumble to ash.

CLANG!

Two separate pieces of an old, familiar blade come crashing down, landing on the ground at Pei Ming’s feet—and Ren Song comes walking out of the ashes.

Dragging someone.

Gripping them by the air—and when he drops the man to the ground next to the broken pieces of Pei Ming’s former weapon—

The truth of the situation becomes clear.

“…Rong Guang?” The general mutters, pale with shock.

His former deputy sits up on his knees, scowling.

"I haven't gone by that name in hundreds of years!" He growls, eyes flaring with rage—until Ren Song's boot presses between his shoulderblades, forcing his face into the dirt.

"I thought you might find him familiar," the demon drawls, digging his foot in until he squirms. "Looks like his soul fused with your blade the moment you ascended," he explains, looking from Rong Guang, to the broken pieces of Ming'guang. "I consumed most of his resentment just now and separated them—but that doesn't mean he's harmless."

"..." Pei Ming kneels before his fallen deputy, thinking. "Given how you died, I would have assumed that you would've been resting in peace a long, long time ago," he mutters.

Rong Guang won't look at him.

"You were adamant about being a man without any regrets."

"...Yeah, well what did I know?" Rong Guang snaps, glaring at the dirt, still unable to rise to his feet with Shuo's foot on his back. "I didn't realize I was gonna spend the next 800 years forced to watch you being such a goddamn hypocrite. And—and YOU!"

He twists his head around, glaring up at Ren Song. "What the FUCK did I do to you?!"

"...Besides trying to kill Hua Chengzhu?" The demon raises an eyebrow, digging his foot in even more viciously. "I was Xuli Meng's age when I died—in the exact same way. I know how he felt."

Rong Guang, who has been almost reminiscent of Qi Rong up until then—loudly cursing and swearing at anyone who will listen—falls silent, turning his head away in shame.

"Y...You..." Ke Mo sits up, bleeding all over, pointing at E'Ming with a trembling finger.

The scimitar blinks, trembling and sitting up on the ground—then tilting, as if to say, 'Who, me?'

"YOU'VE MADE A FOOL OF ME FOR THE LAST TIME, YOU CURSED BLADE—!"

But before he can get up and attack—something lands on him from above, rattling and hissing.

…A scorpion snake.

The ensuing screaming and flailing from the general is enough to break up any previous discussion, and from inside the array, Xie Lian hears a familiar voice cry—

"General!"

And for the first time in weeks—Pei Ming's face actually brightens.

"…Junior?"

He abandons Rong Guang in an instant, hurrying to his former deputy, who seems…sheepish about showing himself before Pei Ming.

"I know you probably don't want to see me right now, but I—"

He falls silent when the martial god pulls him into a tight embrace.

"Shut the hell up."

Pei Su swallows hard, biting back tears, his face pressed into the general's shoulder.

"I'm sorry about Lord Water Master."

Of course, he knew about it. Walked in on enough to—

"PEI SU!" Ke Mo snarls, writhing on the ground. "YOU INSULT ME AGAIN BY THROWING A—!"

"It wasn't Pei Su gege who threw the snake!"

Xie Lian turns in the direction of her voice, calling—

"Banyue?"

The ghost runs to his side, throwing her arms around his middle.

“General Hua!”

“YOU?!” Ke Mo seethes, throwing the snake to the side. “HOW DARE YOU DO THAT TO ME, WHEN YOU KNOW I HATE THE SCORPION SNAKES!”

Banyue tucks herself closer against Xie Lian’s side, explaining, “I’m sorry, but ah…I only know how to throw scorpion snakes…”

“General,” Pei Su says, “We brought these.”

He holds up a set of jars.

“That should be enough, right?”

“…It’s plenty.”

Ke Mo struggles at first, but not after he’s knocked out cold by Pei Ming—and Rong Guang snarls and flails—

“WHY THE HELL DOES IT SMELL LIKE PICKLES IN HERE?! YOU—!”

Clack!

The lid snaps shut, and everyone sighs.

"So..." Pei Ming mutters, sending a glance in Pei Su's direction. "She calls you Pei Su gege?"

The deputy coughs, his ears turning slightly pink. "It isn't like that, general."

"After everything you've done for her, I'd certainly hope it was like that—"

"What's wrong with calling someone gege?"

Of all people, Pei Ming wasn't expecting Xie Lian to speak up with THAT comment.

"Nothing!" He shakes his head quickly, holding his hands up. "It's nice! Just not my taste is all, guess I had too many sisters to be into it—"

"...Into what?" Xie Lian tilts his head to the side, confused.

Banyue frowns, offering a similar reaction, and Pei Su looks like he might have a small stroke, standing in front of Pei Ming and waving his arms.

"Don't mind my general! He just talks nonsense sometimes!"

Though, Pei Ming supposes it's all situational. If a certain someone had called him that, he probably...

Then, the mirth falls from his face, and he's not enjoying the conversation quite as much as he was before.

"What are you two doing here, anyway?"

Then, his day gets worse.

"We came following Lord Rain Master," Pei Su explains, holding one jar under each arm. "A group of ghosts abducted farmers from her lands on their way here--she came in pursuit, and we came with her."

"...The Rain Master?" Pei Ming mutters, slightly pale. "She's here?"

"We left her behind when we heard General Hua yelling," Banyue explains. "But yes."

Inside his jar, Rong Guang snickers nastily, and Pei Ming sighs, looking away.

"Did she capture you? Why were you with her?"

"Capture me?" Pei Su blinks, "She saved me."

"...Saved you?"

"I didn't really have anything to do while I was exiled," Pei Su explains. "The emperor has had us on such a strict schedule for so long...I didn't know how to stay still. But I overestimated my strength without my godhood, and after taking on a gang of criminals, I..."

"He was hurt really badly," Banyue speaks up, currently in the middle of allowing Xie Lian to come the brambles out of her hair with his fingers. "Lord Rain Master saved him!"

Hearing that makes the general wince, and Pei Su stares up at him with dismay.

"...Are you disappointed that she saved me?"

"What? No, no...just..." Pei presses a hand against his forehead with a sigh. "We're exposed out here. Your highness—if you can move Hua Cheng, we should probably keep moving."

Wherever the Rain Master is—his debt has grown.

And the Rain Master—

Well, she's in a rare mood.

"MY LORD!" Several of the farmers cry out in relief when they see her coming, the guardian ox's hooves running lightly over the scorched earth as she charges toward them, "You came!"

One of her hands is grasping the ox by the horn, keeping her balance—but with the other, she signs out—

'How many more?'

"...SIX! There are six more, but we can't find them!"

Yushi Huang bows her head, her fingers balling up into a fist—then, she sighs.

'The others are behind me—keep moving and you'll meet up with them. Take shelter until I come for you again.'

With the gates of Tonglu already sealed, her best bet is to group them all together, then protect them from any incoming ghosts until it's over.

And hopefully, that doesn't take as long as the last two times the Kiln opened, otherwise...

There's a high likelihood that she won't have an option other than watching them starve.

'Were there any other ghosts that took you?'

"No! But be careful, my lord! There'a a man in black—he's more powerful than any of the other ghosts we've seen so far!"

'...' The Guardian Ox comes to a halt as she looks back at the farmers, raising an eyebrow. ' *Man in black?'*

"We're going in the opposite direction of him, my lord—but you should stay back! He's already killed many, many ghosts!"

'...Go on ahead,' The Rain Master signs to them firmly. *'I'll find the others.'*

"But—!"

"Go." She speaks aloud, her voice ringing with authority.

The men look at each other, then shrug, doing as their goddess says, continuing on down the path.

The ash that covers the ground here is soft beneath her feet when she swings down—her ox snorting with dismay.

'A-Huang, it isn't safe here.'

She smiles faintly, patting his leg.

'He won't hurt me.'

With that, she sits on the ground, her legs crossed, bamboo hat shielding her from the sun as she quietly awaits the approach of this 'Man in Black.'

And when he comes over the hill—his expression is one of dismay.

"...What are you doing here?!" He mutters, sheathing his blade—blood splattered across his cheeks, his brow perpetually pinched with stress.

'I could ask you the same thing,' Yushi Huang replies calmly—and Ling Wen averts his eyes with shame . *'Is that the Brocade Immortal?'*

"...No offense, but you're the last person I wanted to see at the moment."

'...' Yushi Huang raises an eyebrow, tilting her head to the side as she looks him over. *'Offense taken.'*

It's a departure from her normal, serene, overly kind nature. Enough to make him pause.

"What?"

He expected many things. Probably some sort of moral judgment about what he's done, his betrayal—or anything else, but—

'That was my first time ever doing something like that.'

And it takes Ling Wen a moment to understand what she means.

"I...you mean..." He stares, his mouth twisting with confusion. "...With a...woman? Because I don't want to be someone's—"

Before the word 'experiment' can even come out of his mouth, Yushi Huang replies—

'With anyone.'

To which Ling Wen, known for his flat nature and composure—chokes.

"...Your cultivation method doesn't require that," he mutters, rubbing the back of his neck.

Their size difference is already significant enough when they're both women—but in his male form, Ling Wen isn't much shorter than Hua Cheng.

And with her sitting down, and him standing over her...

It makes him feel like some barbaric brute, accused of violating a princess.

'No, it doesn't.'

"And you expect me to believe that in 900 years, you didn't—?"

'I'm picky.'

...Damn it all, Ling Wen loathes his ego.

"...Then why didn't you say anything when I touched you?"

Yushi Huang raises an eyebrow right back at him, leaning back on the heels of her palms.

'Because I liked it.'

Her overly simple way of phrasing things gets under his skin, always making everything sound so *easy,* when...

"...Well, if I had known, I would have been more sensitive about it," Ling Wen grumbles, "But that has nothing to do with why I don't want to see you here. Haven't you heard about what I've done?"

'The Emperor told me.' Ling Wen stiffens, and Yushi Huang holds up a hand to calm him. *'In my private communication array. I haven't returned to the Heavens since our last conversation. He seemed very intent to make sure I in particular was aware of your defection.'*

"..." Ling Wen watches her with narrowed eyes. "Just how much do you know?"

'You were the one who warned me that the emperor was cleaning out heavenly leadership,' The Rain Master points out. *'I made my own estimates from there of what was going on.'*

"And they made you think coming here was a good idea?!"

'My people were abducted.' Yushi Huang shakes her head, her cheeks faintly dusted with soot from the air. *'Only one group of mortals has ever escaped this place while the Kiln was open. If I didn't come for them, it would have been a death sentence.'*

"I—" Ling Wen stops. "A group of mortals escaped?"

'Yes,' the princess nods, *'eight centuries ago, by the fire master.'*

He frowns at her, shaking his head, reaching forward irritably to wipe the soot from her cheek.

For someone with such a delicate face, she's too comfortable with getting filthy.

"There is no fire master."

Yushi Huang doesn't reply immediately, leaning into Ling Wen's touch.

When she was appointed, eight centuries ago—there had been a lightning master, the most senior, as well as the water and earth masters.

The role of wind master remained empty until Shi Qingxuan's ascension.

But by the time of Xie Lian's second banishment—Yushi Huang was the only elemental master left remaining, and therefore the most senior.

The instant the new fire master was selected, a message was sent to her—as well as another sent shortly after, stating that he defected.

Normally, when a god defects—they eventually fade, and when they do, their role is filled once more.

Or, in cases like Shi Qingxuan and Shi Wudu, who gave up their immortality outright, they can be replaced when a new god ascends.

(Like He Xuan, who immediately succeeded him.)

But, in all of the years since the fire master's defection, he has not faded—and as such, another was never appointed.

Yushi Huang doesn't know why Hua Cheng has chosen to keep that aspect of his history private—but he has, and she won't be the one to expose him.

Instead, she repeats herself:

'If I hadn't come, they almost certainly would Have died.'

They might still die, if she can't find the others and properly shield and feed them until they can escape again.

Ling Wen groans, pulling at his hair slightly as he sits back.

"…You were lured here." He mutters, "Don't you understand that?"

'As the last elemental master aligned with the Heavenly Court, I suppose I do count as a loose end.'

"And you came anyway?!" He glares.

'The motivation doesn't make the reality for my people any different.'

Ling Wen turns away from her, pressing a hand against his forehead, fighting back the urge to offer a lecture about priorities—

Because their philosophies don't line up when it comes to such things, anyway.

In fact—their personal philosophies rarely align.

So, *why?*

Is that really all it takes to break Ling Wen's once ironclad rules of pragmatism and practicality?

A pretty face, and small gestures of kindness? One rushed (if not cathartic) night in his office, and he finds himself withering with concern over a woman he hardly knows?

'You didn't answer my question,' Yushi Huang counters, looking him over.

"What?" He mutters, not turning around—half distracted.

'Why are you here?'

"...That's a much longer conversation," he mutters, pinching the bridge of his nose. "And before you say we have time—no, we don't."

There's a rare, sheepish moment of silence—implying that was exactly what the Rain Master was going to say.

"...The more ghosts I kill, the stronger Bai Jing becomes," he explains flatly. "And I...miscalculated."

'How?'

"I assumed—since I created the Brocade Immortal, I would have complete control if I was the one wearing it." Ling Wen mutters, crossing his arms. "I would have taken more time to test that theory—but I wasn't expecting the Crown Prince to catch on so soon, so I..."

Gambled.

'...And you don't have complete control?' Yushi Huang questions, watching his back.

"...Not if Bai Jing decides to follow his own will," Ling Wen admits, his voice tight. "The karma of the situation isn't lost on me."

'And you can't take it off yourself?'

"No."

Yushi Huang rises to her feet, and Ling Wen stiffens.

"Don't try it."

'If I subdue Bai Jing and take it off of you, then there shouldn't be a problem, should there?'

"...Other than the fact that I would be in the middle of Tonglu, defenseless." Ling Wen replies dryly.

'I would protect you.'

Yushi Huang doesn't see much of an issue at stake. If she neutralizes Bai Jing, she can place Ling Wen with the other farmers—and when that happens, it's a waiting game.

After that, Ling Wen can be hidden within her lands until the situation clears.

Still, she doubts that Ling Wen, who constantly desires to be in the center of things, would be particularly happy with such a plan.

However, the Civil God doesn't seem to have a choice.

"...Bai Jing won't fight you," He mutters.

'What do you mean?'

"He wouldn't fight a woman," Ling Wen explains tiredly, shaking his head. "Regardless of circumstances."

Bai Jing was simple that way--but decent.

'...I see.' Yushi Huang crosses her arms, contemplative.

Well, there's only one way to deal with that, isn't there?

"Would he fight me like this?"

Ling Wen stiffens—not only because Yushi Huang spoke aloud—which in itself is a rarity—but because of the Rain Master's voice.

And when he looks back over his shoulder--his suspicions are confirmed.

A much taller (though still not as tall as him) young man, with deeply tanned skin, long, dark hair—

But the same eyes, shining up at him.

"...Don't," Ling Wen warns, taking a step back. "We don't know how that ends."

Yushi Huang shrugs.

"We'll have to find out."

He draws Yulong, the dark steel of the blade gleaming, pressing a hand against his Ox's leg once more, quietly alerting the beast to prepare for battle.

"I wouldn't be surprised if he wanted to fight me," Yushi Huang continues, lifting his chin. "Given that I'm your lover."

Ling Wen goes rigid, the veins in his temples throbbing as he fights against it, his hand flying to the blade sheathed at his hip.

"What are you doing?!"

"Provoking him."

"I told you—we don't know how this ends—don't be ridiculous!"

"But I didn't lie, Ling Wen Zhen Jun."

Maybe he didn’t, but that actually makes things worse right now…

“I can understand why that bothers him.”

Yushi Huang isn’t necessarily prone to embarrassment, but even he feels his ears growing warm, saying words that, normally, would never leave the Rain Master’s mouth;

He's not a particularly boastful person, which is part of it, nor is he rude, which is another aspect, but—

"If I didn't know what you tasted like, I'd be angry too."

Saying things like that is surprisingly embarrassing, even if he doesn't display that outwardly.

Even Ling Wen looks startled—and—

He can honestly say it's the first time a man has made him blush—even if that's slightly less impressive when the Rain Master is frowning, red behind the ears.

If he was shy, why did he even—?

CLANG!

...Oh. Right.

Bai Jing is no ordinary warrior, attacking with a strength that feels more akin to a wild beast than someone who was once a mortal man —

But Yulong is no ordinary blade, and the Rain Master stands his ground, parrying him solidly, feet sinking into the earth.

"You're not a martial god!" Ling Wen glares as they clash, the Rain Master catching up each and every time—but never quite catching the upper hand.

'And I'm not fighting alone.'

Just as he says that—Ling Wen feels something ram into his back, sending him flying.

Behind him, the Guardian Ox of Yushi snorts, nostrils flaring as its hooves gorge into the earth, charging Ling Wen down. He catches both horns before they can ram into him—but he's trapped that way, laying on the ground, with the Oxen pinning him.

Yushi Huang shifts back into her female form, kneeling down beside the civil god as she feels around for the straps to his armor, scrambling to unbuckle them.

Her eyebrows knit together with frustration.

'I didn't realize there were so many fastenings involved.'

Ling Wen grimaces, arms straining as he prevents himself from getting gored.

Why would she? It's not like farmer's have a lot of experience with armor.

Some sarcastic part of his mind comments—

'If only shui-xiong were here, he would have plenty of experience removing armor.'

It almost makes Ling Wen laugh, until a wave of sadness washes over him—the way it always does.

Why is he thinking about him now?

Something catches his attention just then, however.

The fact that, all around the surface of his skin—Bai Jing has begun to tremble.

With fear.

'He's coming.'

Bai Jing rarely ever has the frame of consciousness to speak—but he does so now, his voice echoing in Ling Wen's mind.

'He's coming.'

Ling Wen strains, looking around—but—

Every other ghost has completely deserted the area.

"Who's coming?!"

Yushi Huang pauses in the middle of tugging at one of the buckles underneath Ling Wen's shoulder plate, frowning.

'What are you talking about?'

Ling Wen has no idea. But—

For Bai Jing to feel fear like that. For the area to have cleared so quickly—

It's something wrong.

No.

Ling Wen's instincts are screaming at him.

Something *evil* .

"...Go," he croaks, fingers squeezing tighter around the ox's horns, Bai Jing becoming frantic. "You need to go, now!"

'Not without you.'

The civil god has always been so composed.

He can't control Bai Jing, who is becoming frantic—and for once, his tone becomes...emotional.

"Goddamn it!" He snaps, arms trembling, sweat forming at his temples, "I'M NOT WORTH BEING SO STUBBORN!"

Just as he says this, a rush of strength takes over him.

He shoves the Ox back, hard, and the moment his hands are free—

Thump!

Ling Wen is frozen for a moment, eyes wide with horror.

The karma of these things—it's never lost on him.

Yushi Huang doesn't cry out, but her face contorts from the pain, holding the wound in her side

Something she could have blocked, had she not been so preoccupied with the fastenings on his armor—but now, blood pools and stains the green silk of her robes.

"I didn't mean—!"

'I know.'

'HE'S COMING!'

The ground rumbles, and Ling Wen's jaw locks.

He's never been a good person.

Even when he wanted to be, because then, this sense of vengeful anger that's always been inside of him might have felt more vindicated.

But he knew.

When Hua Cheng confronted him with that in Puqi Shrine—he knew.

Ling Wen isn't kind. He isn't patient, or gentle.

He doesn't go out of his way for strangers. Or offer words of comfort to people who don't deserve it. He doesn't listen to the words of someone left grieving all alone, mourning a tyrant few would weep for.

Even when Ling Wen lashes out against the unfairness of a society—he isn't heroic.

Hua Cheng was right.

When it was Xuli, he targeted the weak points—weak *people.*

When it was Jun Wu, Ling Wen did the same.

And as someone who has read more books than most would in a thousand lifetimes—

Ling Wen is more than aware of the fact that everything he's ever done culminates in the role of a secondary villain at best.

Merely knowing that grates against his ego.

But more than anything, it baffles him.

Because a character like that—doesn't fall for the *princess* .

"...Take her!"

This time, Ling Wen doesn't speak to the Rain Master, no—

He addresses the Guardian Ox directly, trembling with the effort to hold Bai Jing back.

Yushi Huang sends him a stubborn look, but—

If there's one thing Ling Wen can beat anyone in (except, perhaps, the crown prince) it's being strong willed.

"NOW!"

The Princess of Yushi doesn't get the chance to argue before her deputy scoops her onto his back, taking off.

Towards where the farmers went running off before, likely to reconnect with them, and take shelter—even as his mistress protests—not wanting to leave Ling Wen behind.

It might seem like a sacrifice—but it's more of a gamble, really.

It's too late for both of them to escape.

The thing that's making Bai Jing panic—whatever it is—is close enough now that there's only one choice.

Each of them escaping in different directions--and forcing whatever's coming to pick one.

Guaranteeing at least one person escapes.

Ling Wen knows he's never been a good person.

That he's selfish, ruthless, and cruel.

But—in spite of Bai Jing's clear terror as he flees, and the sound of something approaching him from behind—

He's glad that it chose him.

(Even if that means that he *doesn't* get away.)

Even as such chaos unfolds, as, for the first time in centuries, the continent rattles to life, cracks in age old facades bursting open, revealing what lies beneath—

In the Heavens, the Emperor sags in his throne, relieved.

It’s an act of quiet irony—knowing that, with everything going on in the realms below, he should feel so much more.

Fear. Anger. Shame.

Emotions that have always been present within him, ebbing and flowing in their own natural cycles.

But not right now.

“Your majesty?” One of the deputies of the imperial palace speaks from the doors of the martial hall, cautious.

Eyeing the emperor from a distance, evaluating his state before he speaks.

“…What is it?” Jun Wu murmurs, his head tilted back.

“We…haven’t found Xuan Zhen.”

He says this, expecting a harsh response.

The emperor has been demanding they find the martial god of the south, inquiring after him nearly every other hour.

The deputy bows, bracing himself for a stern reaction, but—

“…That’s alright,” Jun Wu murmurs, looking out the window.

“But where’s—?” He starts, his eyebrows knitting together with confusion but—

Then, he remembers.

“…Sire?”

His expression is still hidden from view—never looking away from the window.

“It’s nothing,” The emperor eventually replies, shaking his head. “It doesn’t matter, now.”

The other feelings will come later—and he’ll remember.

He’ll remember all of it, no matter how hard he’ll try to forget.

But for now, it doesn’t matter where Xuan Zhen, Nan Yang, or any of the others are—

Because Jun Wu’s head doesn’t *hurt* anymore.

And finally—it’s *quiet* .

Not Xuli

Chapter Summary

> “…What’s that?” Pei Ming frowns, looking at the largest building in the settlement, looming over the central square.
>
> Hua Cheng looks at the establishment plaque hanging over the door, eyes narrowing with focus. “…It’s a temple for the Crown Prince of Wuyong.”
>
> “…Their god?” Xie Lian questions, brow quirked with interest. “Can we go inside?”

Xie Lian has to admit—he can’t really think of a stranger group of individuals to be traveling with.

He’s carrying Hua Cheng on his back, the Ghost King’s head slumped against his shoulder, with Shuo and Banyue walking on either side of him—General Pei and Pei Su walking ahead.

And, while they’re being silent right now, Banyue and Pei Su are each holding a jar containing a vengeful spirit respectively, so—

Like he said, it’s an odd gathering of gods and ghosts, all traveling in relative calm—until Pei Ming comes to a halt, kneeling down.

“General?”

Pei Ming inspects the earth for a moment, examining something. “…Something’s not right,” he mutters.

Xie Lian can sense as much—the hairs on the back of his neck standing up.

“Say—Ren Song. We should’ve run into more ghosts by now, correct?”

“…Yeah,” the demon agrees, looking around with a frown. “We’re not that far in—so there should be crowds closer to the gates, but…”

“There was a battle,” Pei concludes, his fingertips brushing over displaced earth. “Judging by these hoof marks—the Rain Master was part of it.”

Xie Lian pauses, confused, and upon noticing his expression, Banyue explains—

“Lord Rain Master has only one deputy—he ascended along with her, and she hasn’t appointed anyone else since.”

“And…it’s an Ox?”

Banyue bobs her head in agreement, walking double time to keep up.

“Back in the Kingdom of Yushi, it was tradition for worshippers in the Temple of Yulong to rub door knockers engraved with different animals upon entering—giving a bit of their essence in exchange for blessings.”

Ahead of them, Pei grimaces at the talk of the fallen kingdom.

"Most people would rub the tiger knocker, or the monkey—but every single day, Lord Yushi Huang would rub the Ox Knocker in greeting. By the time of her death, it was covered in her life essence—and so, it ascended with her."

"...And it was here," Pei concludes, hurrying to wrap *that* conversation up, and Xie Lian frowns.

"Lord Rain Master fought a battle? But there's no sign of her now..."

Just as he says this, Shuo pauses, noticing something else upon the ground.

The barest remnants of a spirit, little more than a fractured skull laying upon the ground.

"...Did you see what happened?" He murmurs, kneeling down beside it.

The spirit rattles and groans, barely able to do more than wriggle back and forth.

"Not...not safe here!"

It moans, eye sockets glowing faintly with energy—in a matter of moments, Shuo expects it'll be reduced to a ghost fire.

"Which way should we go then, friend?"

"Not...Not to the west," it rasps, responding well to the forest demon's gentle tone. "There's a man in black!"

“Man in black?” Shuo questions, his eyes scanning the horizon. “We haven’t seen anyone like that.”

“He killed A THOUSAND GHOSTS single handedly!” The spirit whimpers, and Shuo grimaces.

Better not to deal with it until Hua Cheng has recovered, then.

“East it is, I suppose—”

“NO!” The creature cries, trembling. “EAST IS WORSE!”

Xie Lian frowns, holding Hua Cheng a little tighter against his back.

…Worse?

“That’s where the one in white is!” The spirit sounds even more terrified than before, bones cracking as it speaks. “He killed twice as many!”

...Two thousand ghosts? All done in by one creature?

"Whatever you do, DON'T let him catch you, he's...he's...!"

Before he can say any more, the last of the spirit's will seems to burn out, the skull crumbling into dust.

Only a ghost fire remains, dark and flickering.

Shuo looks to the north, then the south—finding both directions crowded in by sharp, craggy peaks, and he sighs.

"...West it is, then."

Which is closer to the Kiln, anyway.

Like something is guiding them deeper in.

When he glances back over his shoulder—he sees Pei Ming standing at a much further back than he was before—and the demon rolls his eyes, straightening up.

"Scared of a ghost fire, general?"

"Laugh all you want," the god shrugs. "The last time I got close to a ghost in the middle of dispersing—I nearly got myself assassinated."

Xie Lian frowns as the group sets off, remembering that day.

"...The ghost who stabbed you with the God Slayer," he recalls quietly. "Wasn't that in Qinghe?"

"It was," Pei agrees, keeping an eye out as they descend through the hills. "That was my last major assignment before all of this mess, actually."

His injury saw to that, anyway.

"...I wonder how that ghost got his hands on something like that," Xie Lian mutters. "Or why he would attack you."

Pei Ming shrugs, not looking back at the prince, but...

While it obviously felt personal at the time—he doesn't think he was the target. And he doesn't think those cultivators in Qinghe were the real cause of the Ghost's Demise.

The spirit seemed ancient—far more than any other that Pei has ever encountered. And when he saw the general...

He seemed relieved.

As though in that moment, when Deng Shihong realized he could pass the blade on—he was able to let go.

"I don't know," Pei Ming admits.

"But that's not the question that's been bothering me."

In the end, Deng Shihong had made it clear that he wanted to send some sort of message to the emperor—one that was clearly received, and it could have been anything.

Jun Wu has been Emperor for well over a millennia—and has many enemies in the ghost realm.

"...What is it?" Xie Lian murmurs, curious.

And Pei Ming's question gives him pause, sending his mind into a brick wall—because Xie Lian doesn't have an answer.

"...I gave the dagger to Jun Wu when I returned to the Heavens," Pei reminds him, though it isn't necessary—the entire Heavenly Court witnessed it.

"So, how did it end up with Blackwater?"

The very weapon he used to nearly kill the Emperor after his ascension.

And—while Pei Ming struggles, thinking back on the sight of Shi Wudu's body—

It was clear that a blade had been used to kill him—

And Blackwater never wielded such a weapon.

Only that dagger, on that day.

Xie Lian grows quiet, thinking.

The immediate answer, the easy explanation, would be that Blackwater had stolen it while he was disguised as Ming Yi, planning to use it to assassinate Shi Wudu—and he used it to attack Jun Wu in order to cause panic and unrest.

But there are obvious problems.

Xie Lian doesn't doubt that, with how far 'Ming Yi's' ears could reach, that he could have learned of the God Slayer's existence and stolen it.

But in the case of the Brocade Immortal being stolen—Jun Wu noticed immediately.

The Brocade Immortal is dangerous, to be sure—but not in the same way. Only a few could use the device to it's full, most dangerous potential—

Whereas the God Slayer could, in the hands of even someone as weak as a child, be used to kill a God.

And Jun Wu didn't notice?

That seems like almost too much of a stretch of the imagination.

The further they go, Xie Lian pauses—feeling the ground change beneath his feet.

"...Is this a street?" He mutters, shocked.

What would a street be doing here?

"...More like a town," Banyue replies.

A town? In the middle of the fields of Tonglu?

"...Whatever it is, it's shelter," Pei Ming mutters, looking around. "Pei Su has a mortal body right now—he needs to stop and rest. I'm sure that wouldn't hurt Crimson Rain, either."

Xie Lian can't argue with him there.

They make their way into one of the buildings, and while Xie Lian lets Hua Cheng sleep in his lap, Pei Ming sets about finding Pei Su something to eat, having not bothered to bring any provisions for himself.

"...I wasn't expecting big game or anything like that," the general mutters, returning with a slaughtered chicken. "But how could anyone be expected to survive in this place?"

After all, 'chicken' would be a generous way of describing the carcass in his hands.

More like a pile of bones and feathers, with the occasional speck of meat in between.

"...I don't suppose anyone here knows how to cook one of these?" He mutters, surveying the group, eyes settling on Banyue. "What about you?"

Shuo sends him a look. "Why ask her?"

"Well, who else am I gonna ask?" Pei retorts, tossing the chicken down. "There's not exactly a wide variety of options. I already know Pei Su doesn't know how, his highness probably doesn't either—"

"I do," Xie Lian pipes up, lifting his head. "I can tell Banyue what to do."

"No, no—" Shuo holds up his hands, "I don't actually have anything against Pei Su, I'll—"

He notices that Xie Lian is on the verge of looking crestfallen, and instead of outright saying that his food is a risk to public health and safety, he amends;

"...I'll help too."

After scavenging around, he's able to find a pot while Pei Su starts a fire, and Xie Lian shifts Hua Cheng so the ghost king is sleeping against his side, leaving his arms free to remove the chicken's feathers.

Pei Ming can't help but snort.

"We make quite a pair. The chicken killing general and the feather plucking prince," he sighs heavily, sitting down, leaning against the wall across from them.

Xie Lian laughs a little bit with him—in the same self deprecating fashion.

"...I'm sorry Jun Wu sent you here alone," he adds, having handed off the chicken to Shuo, who took it outside to be washed. "It's not exactly a one man job."

Pei shrugs, running his fingers through his hair. "I wasn't particularly worried about it."

He doesn't say that like a man brimming in confidence with his own skills—no.

It's more detached, unfeeling.

"...I'm surprised you agreed to take it on in the first place," Xie lian admits.

Pei Ming snorts again, leaning his head to the side.

It's not as though the Emperor is someone you can actually say no to—but he doubts that Xie Lian has ever even tried it.

"He offered to shorten Pei Su's banishment," he explains quietly, noticing the flash of discomfort in Xie Lian's expression. "Don't blame yourself for that."

The prince looks away.

It's not like he thinks he did the wrong thing, back in Banyue—but if he hadn't, Pei Su never would have been caught, it's that simple.

But, ironically enough—everyone had been worried about General Pei holding it against him back then.

Now, here he is—being the one telling Xie Lian not to worry about it.

"But ever since all of this started," Pei glances around them, then, remembering once again that the prince can read his body language, he adds— "Since Mount Tonglu opened, I mean—I've been wondering..."

He looks Xie Lian over—from his closed eyelids, to the bandages wrapped around his neck, and his boots, knowing what lies beneath.

"...When you ascended this time, why didn't you ask Jun Wu to remove your shackles?"

Xie Lian's expression freezes.

"...I have a question for you, too." He murmurs—opening his eyes, and despite the harsh glow of the cursed shackle in his irises—

Pei Ming can't help but find it beautiful—in a strange, tragic way.

"Why haven't you forged a spiritual weapon in all these years?"

Now, it's the general's turn to go still, and the prince carries on, "I suspect our reasons are probably the same."

And just like that—Pei Ming understands.

"...Fair point, your highness."

Shuo returns shortly after with the chicken, washed and plucked, and with Xie Lian's help, starts instructing Banyue on how to stew it in the pot over the fire.

"There's not much meat—but at the very least, broth is better than nothing."

"Which reminds me—Shuo..." Xie Lian frowns. "Are you just going to keep Lang Qianqiu that way the entire time?"

Pei Ming looks around, startled. "Tai Hua is here?"

Shuo twists his hair around his finger, and Xie Lian sighs, his voice dry.

"...You forgot about him, didn't you?"

"..."

...Xie Lian can see why Hua Cheng told him he couldn't use that spell.

"I'm letting him out, I'm letting him out!" Shuo grumbles, rummaging around in his pockets. "Really, he's fine! Think of it like he got a free nap—!"

Poof!

"A NAP?!"

Oh boy.

"What is WRONG WITH YOU?! I could have helped back there!"

"We were fine, no one needs your help!"

"YOU'RE JUST PISSED BECAUSE I SAID YOU—!"

Shuo holds up his fingers threateningly, and Lang Qianqiu throws his hands up, defensive.

"Do NOT turn me into a DOLL AGAIN!"

Shuo pauses, fingers aloft—then seems to settle for reaching forward and grabbing him by the collar, dragging him outside so they can continue their argument there.

Pei Ming watches the entire exchange, baffled. "They seem...close."

Xie Lian sighs. "They do, don't they?"

The General would normally be eager to ask about that sort of thing—or maybe rib Pei Su a little about risking his life for a girl who can actually cook—

(Or do anything, other than throw scorpion snakes apparently.)

But for some reason, he can't make himself want to.

"...It's funny," he admits, glancing around at the building they've taken shelter in. "In all of the years I've listened to stories about Mount Tonglu, I've never heard about people having lived here."

"You wouldn't have."

Xie Lian didn't realize what a relief it could be, just hearing the sound of someone's voice.

"San Lang?" He turns to the side, feeling the ghost king sit up, stretching his arms over his head.

He sounds older now—feels older too, tho not quite his normal self.

Probably closer to fourteen—still, much older than he was before.

The ghost king lets out a soft yawn, his voice cracking a little as he rolls the kinks and aches out of his shoulders.

"Morning, gege. Hope I wasn't too much of a hindrance."

Xie Lian can't stop smiling—biting back the urge to ruffle his hair or call him cute again, knowing Hua Cheng wouldn't appreciate it—not in front of General Pei Ming, anyway.

"Not at all! How are you feeling?"

"Better, my strength is coming back," Hua Cheng assures him.

Then, he looks back to General Pei, continuing what he was saying before.

"The country that once stood here was destroyed so long ago—there's no one left who remembers it. Even compared to Jun Wu, it's ancient."

"...Really?" Pei raises an eyebrow. "How old is it?"

“More than two thousand years—the only people who would know of it are in the last heavenly dynasty.”

Ah—then he would have to be right.

Jun Wu is the eldest god in the Heavenly Court—and his ascension was around fifteen hundred years before.

A famous general during a warring era—one who deposed the former king, ruling for a few years before ascending himself.

“…If that’s so, why don’t the buildings look older?” Pei questions, glancing out the window.

The city doesn’t look like crumbling ruins—just abandoned.

“It’s sealed like a mausoleum for hundreds of years at a time,” Hua Cheng explains, watching the walls around them. “Only those who have survived the Kiln can come and go as they please.”

"…Trying to keep people out?"

More like keeping someone trapped inside.

A butterfly, pinned to a board.

"Does that mean you can come and go as you please?"

"…Blackwater too," Hua Cheng agrees, not missing the way Pei's eyes flash every time He Xuan is mentioned.

"And how do you know exactly how old this place is?"

Hua Cheng shrugs, nodding toward a shelf behind Pei Ming. "The same way I know anything—I read about it."

Pei frowns, turning to inspect the scrolls sitting there—and when he opens them—

"…What kind of language is this?"

"The mother tongue of the west and central plains." Hua Cheng rises to his feet, walking over to look at the scroll over Pei Ming's shoulder. "Spoken by the people of Wuyong."

"That was the name of this place?"

The calamity hums in agreement, and Xie Lian notices something.

Hua Cheng might be older now, but…

He still doesn't sound like himself. His voice is still altered—and Xie Lian can't help but wonder—

Why did it sound so distorted, before?

'Please don't ask me.'

'I hate lying—so please, don't ask.'

"…And how can you read all of this?" Pei mutters, brow furrowed.

"I spent ten years here, when I became a ghost king," Hua Cheng shrugs. "And I had a teacher."

Actually—it was the first language he knew how to read and write. He didn't learn to read the modern language of the time until he left, under Fai.

Xie Lian would have taught him about such things, back then—like he did many others—but Hong'er had been too ashamed to admit that he didn't know how.

Pei Ming waits for more of an explanation, but when one doesn't come, Xie Lian stands up.

"Well, while Pei Su is resting—why don't we explore the town? I'm curious about this place."

He reaches for Hua Cheng's hand, the ghost king squeezing his gently in agreement.

"Certainly, gege—I'm glad to tell you everything I can."

Pei Ming follows after them, arms crossed, as he can't help but notice —

That isn't the same as saying he'll tell Xie Lian everything that he *knows* .

"…What's that?" Pei Ming frowns, looking at the largest building in the settlement, looming over the central square.

Hua Cheng looks at the establishment plaque hanging over the door, eyes narrowing with focus. "…It's a temple for the Crown Prince of Wuyong."

"…Their god?" Xie Lian questions, brow quirked with interest. "Can we go inside?"

Pei Ming stares at the front doors, feeling…

Uneasy.

"You're sure this place is safe?" He mutters, walking up the steps behind them.

"As safe as it can be," Hua Cheng shrugs, helping Xie Lian step over the threshold. "Everything here is cursed."

That may be true, but…This place feels…

Evil.

Profoundly so.

“…Why is everything black?” Pei stares, cautious to take that final step. “I’ve never seen a temple like it.”

Hua Cheng glances back over his shoulder, his expression grim.

“All of the temples in Wuyong are like this.”

Xie Lian presses his palm against the wall, frowning.

“…It wasn’t originally black,” he leans closer, fingers smoothing over the scorch marks. “This is what happens when you burn marble.”

Xie Lian would know—most of his own temples ended up that way, before they crumbled into ruins.

“…All of the Temples in Wuyong were burned?”

Pei Ming stares up at the ceiling—and now, he can see it.

Blade marks, hacking away at the name that once stood there—rendering the characters unreadable.

To anyone who could understand the language in the first place, anyhow.

“…Actually…”

Xie Lian stops, stricken.

"...I've heard that name before," he mutters, pressing a hand against his temple, memory straining.

Hua Cheng pauses beside him, watching the prince's face. "Which one?"

Xie Lian's reply leaves the general and the calamity silent with shock.

"The Crown Prince of Wuyong."

"...Where?" Pei Ming frowns, recovering sooner than Hua Cheng. "Because I'm older than you are—and, no offense your highness, but you're a little clueless when it comes to matters outside of the mortal realm—"

"My Guoshi," Xie Lian explains, before Hua Cheng can take offense.

"When I was little...he used to tell me about the Crown Prince of Wuyong."

Usually as a means of getting the child to behave. Not that Xie Lian was ever foul tempered—he just had a tendency to wander off, his attention scattered.

(Always chasing butterflies.)

Xie Lian would be sat in his lap, staring longingly out at the palace gardens, all while his Guoshi was trying earnestly to get him to focus on his lessons.

"...And what did he say about him?" Hua Cheng mutters, his arms crossed.

"That...he was the smartest, strongest, most *focused* prince who ever lived," Xie Lian smiles faintly, "I think he was exaggerating to make me focus on my work, though."

He reaches out, pressing his palm against the wall once more.

That wasn't the only thing Mei Nianqing said.

He also said that he was the bravest man that he ever knew.

In an oddly specific, far off way that Xie Lian hadn't put much thought into at the time—children never do, but—

It seemed like he *knew* him.

"...And what did you say when he told you that?"

"...I said I didn't want to be like the Prince of Wuyong—I wanted to be a god," Xie Lian mumbles, rubbing the back of his neck, feeling sheepish.

"..." Pei Ming snorts. "Well, no one can say you don't follow through, your highness."

Xie Lian rolls his eyes, embarrassed, but...

He recalls saying--0

'If the Crown Prince of Wuyong was so amazing, why didn't he become a god, then?'

And Mei Nianqing never gave him an answer.

But clearly, standing here now...it seems like he did.

"Whatever happened to that Guoshi of yours?" Hua Cheng questions, and Xie Lian bites his lip, holding his arm.

"...He disappeared during the Fall of Xianle. Many people did."

But if the story was so ancient—

How did Mei Nianqing know it?

But that's when he notices something else—his palm still pressed flat against the wall.

"...There's something underneath this," he mutters, fingers digging into a thick layer of hardened soot. "San Lang, could you help me—?"

He doesn't even have to finish his request.

Hua Cheng holds up his hand, E'Ming flying into his palm—and when it does, he pauses, raising an eyebrow.

"...Did General Ming Guang touch E'Ming while I was meditating?"

"That's an artful way of saying you were out cold," Pei mutters.

"..." Hua Cheng stares at him sharply, but says nothing—and Xie Lian steps in.

"He did—but it wasn't on purpose," he places a hand on Hua Cheng's shoulder. "We were struggling to deal with Ming'guang and Ke Mo, and when Pei tried to say something to E'Ming, he just..."

Flew straight into the General's hand.

Hua Cheng would expect that sort of thing for Xie Lian, but for a practical stranger, and a Heavenly Official no less.

He sends the blade a warning stare, as if saying that he'll deal with him later, but...

It takes Pei Ming a moment to notice that the ghost king's eyes are burning into him with a cryptic expression—the emotion behind them unreadable.

"...What?"

Clang!

With a silver flash, E'Ming scrapes the hardened ash and soot off the walls, and Hua Cheng looks away.

"Nothing."

Unaware, once the air clears—Xie Lian presses his hand against the wall again, and for a moment—he remembers a very different day.

Standing in the halls of the Palace of Yong'an, wearing robes with trailing sleeves.

A mask on his face.

Tracing a mural portraying his own fall from grace, in a palace built by the people who dragged him down—paid for with gold stolen from his own people.

And instead of Hua Cheng standing beside him back then, it was Wu Ming.

But this isn't Yong'an.

Wu Ming isn't here.

Xie Lian isn't that person anymore.

And this mural...feels very different.

Xie Lian can tell as much by tracing it with his fingertips, Hua Cheng quietly describing it to him.

It's a mural with four levels—the highest being that of the Heavens, pure golden light, standing empty.

At the bottom are crowds and crowds of devoted subjects and believers, their hands lifted in adulation and prayer.

Above them is a group of five, each with distinct faces, glowing with a faint spiritual aura—and Pei can't help but notice the woman standing among them, curious.

"...She's beautiful," he mutters, staring at the unique color of her eyes. "Who are they supposed to be?"

"Perhaps the god's deputies?" Xie Lian offers, tracing the shape of their faces for himself.

"Or guoshi," Hua Cheng mutters under his breath.

And above all of them, stands who could only presumably be the Crown Prince of Wuyong.

Handsome—dressed in white, radiant.

His expression pulled back into a wide, laughing smile.

And if that was all there was to it—the mural wouldn't be that strange—even if it seems oddly new, compared to everything else—

It's what the Crown Prince of Wuyong is standing upon. Not clouds, or earth, but...a person

Dressed in rags—weeping.

The only thing in this glorious, idyllic imagery that feels out of place.

And yet.

When Xie Lian traces the features of his face—then reaches up to touch the Crown Prince of Wuyong's, they're...

Just then, there's a sharp cry outside, then moaning.

Pei Ming is the first one to whip his head around, rushing outside.

"Pei Junior?!"

They find the former deputy general rolled upon his side, clutching his stomach in pain, his pallor turned absolutely green, Banyue rubbing his shoulder, distressed, and Shuo—

He seems a little beside himself, throwing his hands over his head.

"Why THE FUCK would you put a scorpion snake in a PERFECTLY GOOD SOUP?!" He glares at Banyue, who shrinks.

"R...Ren Song gege, you said there wasn't enough meat on the chicken, so I..."

"...You're not even the only one she calls gege?" Pei Ming mutters, rubbing his temples--not even angry anymore, just disappointed.

"If you were worried about that, why not go out and find ANOTHER CHICKEN?! You don't just THROW A SCORPION SNAKE INTO SOMEONE'S DINNER!"

"But..." Banyue looks back and forth between Shuo and Pei Su somberly, her expression torn. "I only know how to throw scorpion snakes."

Shuo levels her with a glare. "I distinctly remember Hua Chengzhu teaching you other things besides THROWING REPTILES!"

"Are they, though?"

Lang Qianqiu frowns, examining the remnants of the scorpion snake in the pot.

Shuo pauses in the middle of screaming at her, looking over at him in confusion.

"What?"

"Well, it's half scorpion, and those are arachnids." Lang Qianqiu explains, poking at the tail with a stick.

"..." Shuo looks over at Xie Lian, dumbfounded. "You mean he's not entirely stupid?"

"...He's not academically hopeless," the prince offers, to which Lang Qianqiu preens as though he's been given some great compliment.

"I don't know if I ever wanted to see this side of him."

Shuo looks back at Pei Su, hands on his hips, "And for fuck's sake, if you watched her put the snake in the pot, why did you EAT IT?!"

Pei Su moans, half curled into a ball, "But...she...she made it..."

Behind Xie Lian, Hua Cheng nods with approval.

Perfectly logical.

Shuo feels like he might pull his hair out, and Xie Lian squints, staring in the direction of the pot, shackles gleaming.

"Did the snake...actually turn into a vengeful spirit?"

Banyue nods glumly, rubbing Pei Su's back.

"Apparently they take that sort of thing personally..."

Pei looks from Shuo, to Banyue, then to Hua Cheng, leaning over to speak next to Xie Lian's ear. "These are supposed to be the most dangerous creatures in the ghost realm?"

"..." The god twiddles his thumb, rocking on his heels. "San Lang and Shuo are, certainly." The general makes a quiet, disbelieving noise, and Xie Lian points out, "Think of how they would feel if they met General Qi Ying."

There's a difference between seeming dangerous and *being* dangerous.

Pei purses his lips, losing any capacity to argue with that. "Fair enough."

"We should keep moving," Hua Cheng murmurs, looking around. "I'm assuming he can't walk." His eyes drift from Pei Su, to Lang Qianqiu. "You—carry him."

"I—what?!" The martial god sputters, "I don't take orders from you, Crimson Rain—and he's Pei's descendant! Why should I—?"

"If something comes up, the general is more useful with his hands free than yours," Hua Cheng cuts him off coldly. "Or do you want to go back in Ren Song's pocket?"

"..." Lang Qianqiu scowls, his pride screaming as he lifts the exiled deputy off of the ground.

However, the moment he does—Pei Su starts crying out in even more agony—to the point where Hua Cheng shakes his head with a heavy sigh.

"Never mind—it looks like we can't move him. You four stay behind—the general and I will investigate the area with dianxia."

Shuo doesn't complain, understanding the thought process behind it—

Banyue and Pei Su are dead weight at the moment—more of a liability if they get ambushed. Leaving them behind--and Shuo and Lang Qianqiu to protect them—is the practical choice for now.

As the three head on, Xie Lian holding Hua Cheng's hand as they walk through the ancient streets, he adds—

"We should stop inside any more temples we find along the way and see if there are more murals like that," He murmurs, thinking.

Knowing—despite the fact that he doesn't particularly want to confront the question *why* —that they hold an important meaning.

"I couldn't agree more, your highness," Hua Cheng murmurs, but...

Pei can see a tension there, between his shoulders.

Curious.

But any strange reactions from the ghost king pale in comparison to the strangeness of this place itself.

A constantly overcast sky—though not from clouds, no—

From the smoke.

Swirling overhead, with no definitive source to it—and the ever present smell of ash.

Pei Ming has been here for days now—and he hasn't seen the sun rise or set.

Just this permanent, angry red glow.

There's a faint noise in his ears, crackling—like how his ears used to ring after a hard battle, but—

It's not that. It's…

He hears a faint, warbled voice. Distorted. Barely even noticeable over the sounds around him.

…His communication array.

And when he makes out one word—a name, really—it makes him stop in his tracks.

'…Pei-Xiong?'

The general raises a hand to his temple, his heart pounding, because—

There really aren't many people who have ever called him that.

'…Hello?'

There's more crackling—jumbled syllables, barely intelligible.

'Ling Wen?!'

That's the only person he can think of who would still call him that. The only one who's still a—

And just as suddenly as it started, the communication array cuts off, falling silent.

Pei Ming hangs his head, fists clenched at his sides.

"General! We found another one!"

"…Great," Pei Ming mutters, arms crossed as he steps into the temple behind them.

This time, it's faster with Xie Lian knowing what he's looking for—but the walls aren't quite the same, with this temple built directly into the mountainside. Half man-made, half cave.

Still burned and hacked at with swords—and with a strange, echoing quality to the sounds of their steps as Xie Lian feels around.

"…San Lang, right here!"

Clang!

E'Ming is quick to flash into action, and when Xie Lian reaches out again…

It's another mural.

Xie Lian struggles to distinguish by touch alone—and after a moment, Hua Cheng snaps his fingers, a small flame appearing in his palm.

Small—but bright enough to light the entire room. The magic looks simple, but displays a natural finesse.

"Good with fire, huh?"

The teenager glances back over his shoulder, dark eyes unnaturally bright in the firelight.

"…I dabble."

And when he turns back to explain the mural to Xie Lian—

Even he pauses to stare, confused.

“Is it…A cliff?” Xie Lian mutters, confused.

It's hard for him to distinguish the different elevations of rock beneath his fingers, where paint has left it slightly raised—but Hua Cheng leans in beside him, quick to explain.

"...It's Mount Tonglu," he mutters, peering closer at the rock face. "The eastern side."

There are two ways of entering the Kiln—one, much slower, is through the base of the mountain, climbing through countless different caverns and chambers until you reach the surface.

The second is near the summit—a nearly endless, winding path—the upper half covered in snow.

This spot is around halfway up—a craggy outcropping, overlooking the valleys below. And he's...

Pei Ming steps a little closer behind them, his eyes narrowed.

"Well, that's morbid."

Xie Lian raises an eyebrow, and Hua Cheng explains—

"Someone's being cast down."

More accurately, someone's being thrown off the side—their expression twisted with terror, and from the look of it...

There's a pile of bones waiting below him.

Previous victims.

"It...looks like it was some sort of execution ground," Hua Cheng frowns.

"..." Xie Lian turns his head toward him. "You didn't react this way to the first mural."

The ghost king nods, his palm pressed against the wall next to Xie Lian's.

"There was nothing about the last mural that confused me."

Pei Ming's eyebrows raise.

"...So you knew what all of that was about?"

Hua Cheng doesn't look back at him, his eyes focused on the wall.

"I saw the story of the Crown Prince of Wuyong in the Kiln, but...there are parts of it I don't remember," His frown deepens, staring at the man falling.

Screaming.

"But there was nothing like this."

"Care to share what you do know?" Pei Ming mutters, rubbing his arms in an effort to get the chill out of them. "It sure would help, since we're on a demented scavenger hunt in his temples."

Hua Cheng sends him an annoyed look, then sighs.

"I saw it through his wife's..." Hua Cheng stops, his lips parted, brow furrowing as something pricks at his memory.

"...his wife's what?"

"Memories," the ghost king mutters, slowly raising his eyes back to the wall.

Pei Ming scratches his chin, thinking.

"How would the Kiln have shown you that?"

"...When you fight someone inside the Kiln," Hua Cheng explains, saying each word cautiously—as though he doesn't know if he'll be able to get them out. "You exchange memories with them."

Just like that, it clicks.

Xie Lian's palm freezes against the wall, flingers slightly shaky—and his eyes widen with shock.

"...You mean Zhao Beitong," he whispers—and when Hua Cheng doesn't disagree, that pretty much confirms it.

Xie Lian hadn't even heard her name before his third ascension—and in the last months, he's been told two stories that seem utterly divorced from one another.

The emperor calling her a calamity—a murderer. The woman who forged her husband, Bai Wuxiang, into a Ghost King.

And Hua Cheng spoke of her...like a second mother. With fondness and respect. Saying that she had been a martial goddess, once—

And that she forged every Ghost King, but not Bai Wuxiang.

If there was a woman in the Kiln with Hua Cheng—it had to be her.

That's not what frightens him.

It's that...if the Prince of Wuyong was her husband, then...

"The Prince of Wuyong..." Xie Lian mutters, his fingers trembling slightly—until he has to cover them with his other hand to make them stop.

Hua Cheng's hand lands on his back, gentle.

"...Is Bai Wuxiang."

For a moment, there's only tense silence—then, Pei Ming lets out a low whistle, rocking back on his heels.

"Well I'll be damned. He's a geezer."

It's not that he's taking it lightly, more so that he's trying to take some tension from Xie Lian, but...

He watches the prince's back—how his shoulders slump in with anxiety and fear, just at the mention of the man's name.

And he wonders, now.

Why a ghost like that—who would have been well over a thousand years old by the Fall of Xianle...

...would target a teenage boy.

Pei Ming stares at Xie Lian's back—and for some reason, he—

He remembers the look on the prince's face, all those years ago—when the Emperor forbade him from descending to help the people of Xianle.

Upset, confused, and—

'What...did I do wrong? '

"...Her memories weren't that different from what the Emperor told you, but..." Hua Cheng's hand tightens on Xie Lian's shoulder—almost imperceptibly. "The Prince of Wuyong was always the one orchestrating events—not her."

It was his fault that their sons died, after all.

In San Lang's case, it was more obvious--but he was the reason Bolin was sent away, and...

While there was never any proof, Hua Cheng never forgot the look on his face, when Zhao Beitong found their first born son's body.

Saddened, but not surprised.

It was *his* fault.

"...He ascended as a god early in their marriage," Hua Cheng recalls quietly. "Then descended to try to help the kingdom when it fell into peril."

(It sounds painfully familiar.)

"And he failed," Xie Lian mutters.

That much is obvious, given where they're standing.

"He did." Hua Cheng agrees quietly. "And when he did—he used his wife's grief to manipulate her into taking revenge on the Heavens. The rest of the story is the same from there. He didn't re-appear again until..."

The fall of Xianle.

"What surprised you about this mural then?"

"...In Zhao Beitong's memories, no one was ever thrown *off* of the Kiln," Hua Cheng mutters, looking at the countless skeletons below.

Into it, yes—when they were desperate to stop the volcano from erupting once more.

"The people of Wuyong never climbed the mountain."

Actually, even before there was a risk of a volcanic eruption—people *never* went near it, or even spoke of it.

It wasn't something Hua Cheng noticed back then, but now, staring at this image...

It feels odd.

And there was one other thing that he didn't understand.

In that last Mural—he understood who the people were. Who the Guoshi and Zhao Beitong were. Who Bai Wuxiang was.

But what he couldn't understand—was why Bai Wuxiang was standing on top of a man with the same *face* .

His first instinct was a brother—due to the way harem politics work in most imperial families, most of them are littered with siblings, but...

Much like the prince he would come to torment countless centuries later, Bai Wuxiang was an only child.

His father had other consorts and concubines besides the Queen of Wuyong—but she was the only one who bore him a child.

A living one, anyway.

After the prince's birth, every single child brought into the world in the Palace of Wuyong was stillborn.

To the point where people began to whisper that the royal family was cursed.

The first child to be born alive after that was Bai Wuxiang's first son, Zhang Wei. And his other two children that followed.

So, no—it couldn't be a brother.

But the resemblance is so *strong* .

"...San Lang?" Xie Lian asks after a moment, reaching back to find his hand from where it's fallen from Xie Lian's shoulder, squeezing it.

"Yes?"

"About the things from the Kiln you said you couldn't remember..." Xie Lian mumbles, lowering his head.

"...Was it that you actually couldn't remember, or because you would have to lie, if you tried to tell us?"

Hua Cheng falls silent, staring at him, lips parted with shock.

"I would never choose to lie to you, gege."

"I know that," Xie Lian agrees quickly, biting his lip.

"But there are some things that you just...can't say, right? Even if you want to?"

There's nothing that Hua Cheng wouldn't tell him, if he had the choice. Hell, he'd be happy to die a third time, if it meant he could just tell him one thing--

"...Yes," he agrees quietly.

And Xie Lian—he's grasping his hand so tightly, but...

His fingers are trembling.

"Ge—?"

"Wait a minute," Xie Lian interrupts, shackles gleaming in the firelight as he looks around. "...Where's General Pei?"

The only aura left in the room is Hua Cheng's—muted, but visible.

Hua Cheng falls silent, his own eyes turning about the room.

"I was right there—and I didn't hear him move," Xie Lian mutters, suspicious.

And there's no way that the general would have disappeared during their discussion about Bai Wuxiang, so...?

But before long, Xie Lian's ears—long since over-sensitive from years without his sight, prick with awareness.

'...Ling Wen?! How the hell did you end up here?!'

The prince stiffens, pressing his ear against the wall, trying to detect where the voice is coming from.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ Ling Wen drawls back at him, still in his male form. ‘I just felt like being tied up!’

‘So do I sometimes, but now’s not the time—!’

‘I was obviously captured and dragged in here,’ he grouses, feeling more than a little awkward.

‘Who was able to overpower you in the Brocade Immortal?’ Pei strains to twist around to look at him, surprised.

‘Not the creature that has us now—it just came across me when I was wounded and took advantage of the situation.’

‘Then…was it you calling me, before?’

‘…What?’

Ling Wen's voice is sharp, baffled—and he huffs with annoyance. 'I didn't even know you were here until you got dropped in with me!'

'Oh.'

'Are you going to help me figure a way out of this, or not?'

There's a pause, and when Pei Ming responds, his voice is clipped.

'I don't think I want to.'

'...What's that supposed to mean?'

'Well. Considering the fact that you decided to steal the Brocade Immortal and turn tail without saying a damn word to me—after everything that's happened? No. I don't feel like figuring it out.'

Ling Wen falls silent, stewing, and Pei just can't let it go.

'Seriously—what the fuck were you thinking, stealing that? You thought you were too smart to get caught?'

'The moment I knew Mount Tonglu was open, I didn't have a choice!' The civil god snaps. 'And if you want to be quiet—that's for the better. Bai Jing REALLY doesn't like you.'

'Doesn't like me?!' Pei Ming protests, appalled. 'But I haven't done anything!'

'He's gotten it in his head that we're lovers.'

'Lovers?! But we've never—!'

'THAT'S ENOUGH, BOTH OF YOU!'

A third voice cries out over the two, and Xie Lian stiffens with shock. It's—

He knows that voice.

And so does Pei, from the sound of it.

'...Jing Wen?' He mutters, audibly pausing to look something over. 'I thought you were dead! How the hell'd you end up in that thing?'

'DON'T CHANGE THE SUBJECT YOU DAMN PHILANDERER!' The fallen civil god sneers.

Xie Lian remembers him faintly. Jing Wen Zhen Jun wsa the head civil god before Ling Wen—the very same head civil god who ruled when Xie Lian ascended for the first time.

'Why have you chased us all the way here?' Ling Wen mutters, almost disinterested in the presence of his former superior. 'I'm surprised you're willing to show your face in front of me again.'

'I—?! ME, unwilling to show my face in front of YOU?!' Jing Wen half shrieks.

'I'm not the one who's done anything to be ASHAMED OF! All I ever did was LIFT YOU UP, and LOOK where it's gotten me!'

'HA!' Ling Wen barks out a sarcastic laugh. 'What was lifting me up, if not some means of satisfying your own ego?!'

'Ego?!' Jing Wen chokes. 'Is that what you think it was?!'

Hua Cheng must be hearing the same thing—and sensing Xie Lian's confusion, so he explains.

"Shortly after gege's second banishment–-there was a festival celebrating all of the Civil Gods of Xuli."

Xie Lian can faintly remember Xianle doing something similar, in times long since past.

"One of the events was an essay contest where anyone could submit anonymously—and they would be displayed in the Temple of Jing Wen, where the people would vote on a winner."

"At the time—Jing Wen thought it would be interesting to descend to the mortal realm and enter the contest himself. In doing so, he wrote a jaunty, sycophantic essay titled 'Ode to Xuli,' praising the people and history of the nation."

A crowd pleaser, Xie Lian is sure.

"But instead of winning—the price went to a critical political essay titled, 'Not Xuli,' dissecting the problems with society at that time."

"...Written by Ling Wen, I'm assuming?" Xie Lian raises an eyebrow, remembering what Hua Cheng had said to Ling Wen in Puqi Shrine.

'I've read better essays from you.'

"Was it quite good?"

Hua Cheng hesitates, thinking back on it.

"I would call it more daring than anything else. Nothing said was overtly insightful or revolutionary—but few people were willing to write against the government at that time."

Xie Lian can imagine why.

While he can't say he paid close attention to the politics of the human world during his banishment—he hadn't even realized there was a war between Yong'an and Banyue before he was drafted into it, for example—that wasn't always the case.

When he had been a crown prince in the mortal realm—understanding the politics of the kingdoms surrounding Xianle had been part of his upbringing...Including Xuli.

The kingdoms on the continent today seem to rise and fall with growing frequency and violence—but during Xie Lian's time, there had been three old powers: Xianle, Xuli, and Yushi.

The latter had been conquered and in decline by the time of his birth.

The kingdom of Xianle was the oldest of the three—and by far the most powerful, and Yushi had deep roots as well, but both crumbled rather quickly to internal and external pressures.

By contrast, the decline of Xuli was far more gradual.

Unlike Xianle and Yushi—Xuli isn't located on a flat, open plain. Its natural geography was such that it would never fall to invasion or external conflict.

Rather, it was centuries of internal strife and growing corruption that rotted the country from the inside out.

Becoming a country ruled by the wealthy merchant classes who ran the port city of Qinghe, before slowly fading from relevance.

But no one would ever dispute that Xuli reached the height of its prominence during the wars of the legendary general, Pei Ming.

Or that its decline began immediately after his ascension.

Born more than a century later, Ling Wen would have been living through the beginning of that decline—witnessing the corruption beginning to eat away at a once great power.

But few dared to speak of it yet—not wanting to speak the truth of Xuli's fate into existence.

So, while Ling Wen's words did not require any particular amount of brilliance—they *did* require audacity, and nerves of steel to put to paper.

"When the government officials of Xuli at that time discovered who had written the essay, they were going to throw Ling Wen in prison for sedition. But—upon hearing this, Jing Wen quickly descended and appointed her as his deputy, saving her from that fate."

And hearing Hua Cheng describe it like that—he does make it sound like a generous move on Jing Wen's part, but...

The argument between the god and his former deputy paints such events in a very different light.

‘You think it was ego?!’ Jing Wen snaps, infuriated. ‘What is it about having YOU as a deputy that would have soothed my ego?!’

‘Because I BEAT you,’ Ling Wen retorts, straining against his bonds. ‘Letting me rot in jail would have made you look like a SORE LOSER!’

‘You know something, you fucking bitch?!’ The civil god hisses. ‘You’ve always had an over inflated sense of self importance! I was a GOD! Do you think anyone would have remembered I lost a silly essay contest a century later?! I saw POTENTIAL in you!’

‘Potential?!’ Ling Wen glares, fighting the urge to laugh like it’s some sort of joke. ‘Is that what you do, when you think one of your deputies shows potential?! Do you have them serve tea, wait tables, deliver gifts?’

‘YES!’ There’s a rattling sound when he shouts in response. ‘That’s EXACTLY what I do! How else are you supposed to learn how to keep up with the others?!’

Ling Wen bites back a snort, his tone turning bitter—and Xie Lian is reminded of when he was in Puqi Shrine before.

Explaining how every man had looked down upon him.

‘You say that like I didn’t watch you favor every other deputy above me! Giving them opportunities to learn and sharpen their skills—while I was always trapped doing your menial work! You think I learned anything from that?!’

‘If you didn’t—then it was a WASTE!’

There’s more rattling as Jing Wen speaks, his voice shaking with frustration. ‘You think it’s enough if you JUST perform as well as the other male deputies?! NO! You have to work TWICE as hard, to be TWICE as good, you—!’

Xie Lian grimaces at that line of reasoning.

But Ling Wen—

‘Would you just shut the FUCK up?!’

Even Pei Ming is a little startled, hearing his friend curse like that.

‘You want to make yourself feel better, and tell yourself you’re enlightened on how DIFFICULT it is to succeed as a woman?!’ Ling Wen hisses. ‘You promote me, then push me twice as hard because you CARE so much, because you know society is unfair, but you’re just so GENEROUS?’

‘I gave you the opportunity, didn’t I?!’

‘It doesn’t MATTER if you understand a system is broken and prejudiced if all you do is ENFORCE IT!’

Ling Wen knows that better than anyone.

The one thing she learned from her old boss—it was how to be performative.

‘You don’t GET to act like giving me a position, then enforcing the SAME biased standards and expecting me to fail is doing me a FAVOR!’

‘And maybe I was right to treat you like that, huh?’ Jing Wen counters with a sneer on his tone. ‘Because you couldn’t succeed on your own—you had to fuck General Pei Ming just to get him to help you BRING ME DOWN SO YOU COULD TAKE MY POSITION—!’

‘HEY, HEY!’ Pei cries. ‘I have NEVER had ANY sort of relationship like that with Ling Wen! That would NEVER happen!’

‘Oh, really?!’ Jing Wen retorts. ‘You expect ME to believe that from YOU of all people?!’

‘…God, why is everything coming back to haunt me NOW of all times,’ the general mutters. ‘Look—we already settled this between us like men centuries ago, and believe it or not I HAVE changed! I don’t get around the way I used to!’

Xie Lian frowns, confused, and Hua Cheng explains it to him quietly, his lips just beside the prince’s ear.

“Pei Ming has always been famous for his romantic affairs—but before his ascension, he was even more well known for a relationship with a goddess. And she was the wife of…”

Jing Wen.

If not for the man’s words, Xie Lian would feel pity for him.

‘We had a duel, fair and square. I spared you when you lost, what more is there to discuss?’

‘You honestly don’t realize that all you did was humiliate me a second time?!’ Jing Wen sputters, infuriated.

(After all—Pei was mortal during said duel, and victorious over a god.)

‘And that doesn’t change the fact that you slept with my deputy, then helped her DEPOSE ME!’

‘I never slept with Ling Wen!’ Pei grumbles, ‘That’s not even a possibility!’

‘You mean to tell me you never tried?! You didn’t find her beautiful?! You fucking LIAR!’

‘Of course she is!’ Pei replies sharply. ‘But she’s a FRIEND! A respected, valuable friend, but nothing more! I find it highly ironic that, as you’ve pointed out, I of ALL people can make that distinction, but you CAN’T!’

‘Because you’re calling it an impossibility!’ Jing Wen laughs with disbelief. ‘As if it’s impossible for a dog like you to contain yourself with ANY woman—and you claim respect?! HA! As if anyone could ever believe that you would EVER change—'

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Ling Wen cuts him off flatly.

‘Don’t I?!’ Jing Wen scoffs. ‘Don’t we all, when it comes to men like him?! You make yourself seem like such a cunning player in this game, but all you had to do was open your legs—!’

‘Pei Ming is keeping quiet on MY behalf, but we have NEVER been lovers.’

‘On YOUR behalf?’ The former civil god laughs again, but finds no mirth in it. ‘If I were you, I’d be insulted by the general saying I’m the only woman in the world he wouldn’t have—a lowly, base, BRUTISH creature like him—!’

‘I have known Pei Ming longer than you—longer than anyone.’ Ling Wen reminds him of that coldly. ‘And I have seen him be a far more loyal, respectful—and compassionate partner than you could ever hope to be.’

Xie Lian finds himself taken aback, hearing Ling Wen—who has never been sentimental—speak of Pei Ming in such a way.

Even General Pei sounds shocked, his voice slightly thick when he replies, ‘Ling Wen, you…’

‘But he’s never been my partner,’ the civil god continues. ‘He never could be.’

‘You expect me to believe—?’

‘Because all my life, I have only been attracted to women.’

There’s a long, shocked silence.

‘You—?!’

‘He doesn’t owe you an explanation to begin with!’ Pei growls—but Ling Wen speaks for himself.

‘And I don’t care what you think about that. I don’t care if you think I slept with people to rise up—because I know the truth.’

Ling Wen’s voice might not be showing or cracking like Jing Wen’s—but he speaks far more firmly, and with conviction.

‘I know that Pei helped me deal with you because he agreed that you, along with Xuli, had become a disgrace.’

The general doesn’t contradict him.

‘I know that I’ve had more women—and pleased them—in my lifetime than you could ever dream of. And I know that even at the HEIGHT of your power, your palace of Jing Wen wouldn’t reach the KNEES of the palace of Ling Wen! So, you tell me—did I really need to work twice as hard?’

Xie Lian covers his mouth with shock, reeling from the force of that statement—but Ling Wen isn’t finished.

‘Or is it just that you have ALWAYS been woefully inadequate, and it KILLED you to know that a WOMAN was more capable than you?’

Jing Wen’s silence is proof enough of the fact that Ling Wen’s words hit home—but he doesn’t leave it there.

‘I bet you thought my seeing you would terrify me with the ‘guilt’ over what I’ve done, but you know what? I’m glad I got to see you like this,’ Ling Wen sneers. ‘Because any doubts I EVER had about my place and whether or not I deserved it disappeared when you reminded me who I replaced—a weak, PATHETIC old man!’

Xie Lian leans back, shaking his head.

“I think we’ve heard enough—San Lang, let’s step in before it goes too far.”

Hua Cheng makes a soft sound under his breath—not necessarily protesting, but not eager to rescue the likes of Ling Wen, either.

(Though Xie Lian isn't exactly sure if Ling Wen is the one they're rescuing.)

"I'll check over here, and you check on the West side."

Of course, Xie Lian can hear Ling Wen clearly through the rock on the back wall of the temple—but sound in mountains can be deceptive, refracting off of uneven surfaces. You might think someone is speaking right next to you, and they're dozens of meters away.

Hua Cheng makes his way to the other side of the temple, a deceptively vast, cavernous space, while Xie Lian feels around against the wall, looking for a weak point in the rock.

His fist pulls back, landing against the granite with a loud—

BOOM!

The rock crumbles beneath his fist—and rather than simply creating a small crater in the wall, it reveals a hollow space beneath, with a gently sloping drop into a separate chamber.

"...Your highness, is that you?!"

Squeezed beside the general, Ling Wen groans.

"He's here?!"

Normally, Xie Lian might feel a little offended by the sentiment—but given their last interaction, he understands.

He drops down into the chamber, expecting to land on a flat floor—but instead, lands on something large and solid, knocking it over with a rattle.

His hip and ribs are definitely bruised from the landing, but he doesn't make a sound, no—

"Would you watch where you're going, you CARELESS SON OF A BITCH?!" Jing Wen screeches, laying on his side on the ground.

Xie Lian sits up quickly, his hair askew.

"I'm sorry!"

He feels around, trying to figure out where the man has fallen in order to help him up.

"I couldn't see where I was going, are you alr—?

He stops, however, when his hand lands against an arm—but one made of stone.

"...Jing Wen Zhen Jun, how did you end up inside a statue?!"

The stone figure rattles underneath him with outrage.

"I didn't have a CHOICE! The bitch used sly tricks and the general's help to wear me down until I was so weak—by the time she came to kill me, there was NOTHING I COULD DO! I had to leap into this statue to hide!"

"..." Xie Lian frowns—not particularly fond of the man's language—but finds that to be one of the least objectionable aspects of the situation.

"Just forget him, your highness—come over here and untie us! Can you follow the sound of my voice?!"

Xie Lian fights the urge to roll his eyes. Pei Ming has seen him operate enough to know that, while Xie Lian is blind, he can still find his way around—but in a situation like his, he supposes it's understandable for the general to forget.

"Yes, I'm coming..."

He makes his way over, reaching out to feel Pei Ming's arm—only to find that he and Ling Wen have been tightly bound together in what feels like scrolls.

Magical, but not particularly strong—Jing Wen must have taken each of them by surprise.

He reaches over his shoulder, unsheathing fangxin, just as Ling Wen peers over him, noticing something.

And when he does, he barks out with laughter, throwing back his head and cackling.

"Oh my GOD, no WONDER YOU'RE SO BITTER!"

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!"

"What?!" Pei Ming strains his neck, trying to see over Xie Lian's shoulder, but he doesn't have the right angle. "What is it?!"

"He's—" Ling Wen wheezes, his face flushed from all of the laughter, "He's trapped in a EUNUCH'S STATUE!"

Xie Lian has barely even started cutting at their bindings, and he can already feel Jing Wen rolling around on the floor, possibly preparing himself to attack the two while they're vulnerable.

"You DARE laugh when this misery is ALL YOUR FAULT?!"

"Now, now..." Xie Lian holds up a hand while the other works at freeing them, using a placating tone. "There are worse things..."

"Like what?!" Jing Wen snaps, utterly infuriated.

"Well—not having one—" Xie Lian starts awkwardly, racking his mind. "It's not so bad!"

"How would you know?!"

"Ah...well, I have one," the prince reasons. "But I never use it, so I may as well not have one, you see?"

And Xie Lian can't say that it's been so bad. The number of occasions he's even felt remotely tempted have been exceedingly rare.

"...Oh really?" Jing Wen glares. "Cut it off, then."

He pauses, his face frozen in an awkward smile. "...What?"

"If it doesn't make a difference to you, then why don't you just CUT IT OFF, HUH?!"

Xie Lian doesn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"Well...um..."

"SEE!" Jing Wen rattles again, this time swaying upright. "You're just PLACATING ME! But my grudge isn't with you, your highness—you know what?! I think I'll cut off MING GUANG'S INSTEAD!"

"WHAT THE FUCK?!" Pei Ming snarls, flailing.

"General, stay still!"

"How can you expect me to stay still, after he said he was gonna—?!"

"I know!" Xie Lian saws at the scrolls a little faster, trying to avoid cutting either one of them. "But even if he did, it would probably grow back, right?"

He's had plenty of limbs regenerate, after all.

"I—?" Pei Ming whips his head around to stare at the prince as their bonds start to loosen, his eyes bugging out of his head. "That doesn't mean I want to experience that to BEGIN WITH—!"

The moment the scrolls grow loose, Ling Wen rolls to his feet, stalking over to Jing Wen.

The statue itself only contains a limited amount of spiritual energy—what he was able to save when he escaped Ling Wen all of those centuries ago—giving him the ability to crawl and rattle across the floor, but not real freedom of movement.

Either way, he doesn't get far.

Ling Wen's boot crushes down on him, pinning between his legs—the place where he's now lacking—glaring down at him with a vicious smirk.

"You really can't stand it, can you?" He tilts his head to the side, his gaze gleaming with contempt. "The idea that I was able to take you down without seduction or 'feminine wiles,' it makes you crazy, doesn't it?"

"..." Jing Wen glares at his former deputy, then at Pei Ming, who is slowly rising to his feet behind them both, rubbing his wrists.

"I suppose the person who deserves the most pity in this situation is Bai Jing, being tricked by a foul, corrupt creature like you! The poor fool probably didn't even realize that you were—!"

Ling Wen interrupts him with a harsh laugh, hands in his pockets.

"You've never seen what Bai Jing does to people who call him a fool, have you?"

"YOU—!"

CRASH!

Ling Wen's boot rises up, then crashes back down in one hard, vicious stomp--breaking the statue hosting Jing Wen's soul into countless pieces.

"...Thank you," Pei Ming mutters, rubbing his ear. "I was starting to get a headache from all of his yelling."

Ling Wen shrugs, staring down at one shard of the statue's face, now limp, his eyes filled with resentment—then kicks it aside.

"If he didn't want to end up like this, he should have worked harder," Ling Wen's tone is wry—even if there's no real amusement in it.

If he has bad karma for his actions—so be it, he's already paying for them.

It won't make a difference.

"...San Lang is somewhere nearby," Xie Lian brushes the dust off of his robes as best as he can, still slightly disheveled from landing on Jing Wen's statue. "We should keep moving if we don't want to—"

He falls silent when Pei Ming suddenly steps in front of him, an arm out.

"Ling Wen," His tone is cautious—warning. "What are you doing?"

The Civil God is silent, arms trembling, his brow knitted with concentration, sweat forming at his temples.

"I...I'm not TRYING to do anything," he spits out between clenched teeth. "I'm..."

His fingers shake, as though he's fighting each movement with all his strength—wrapping around the hilt of his blade.

"...Run..."

"What—?"

He unsheathes the weapon, lashing out with lethal speed—a beautiful strike, one Pei Ming barely dodges.

"I SAID RUN!" Ling Wen snarls.

That's all it takes to send Xie Lian and the General fleeing, the latter pulling Xie Lian by the wrist to make sure the prince doesn't trip over any loose rocks.

"DIDN'T THAT THING JUST HEAR YOU SAY YOU AREN'T ATTRACTED TO MEN?!" Pei shouts back over his shoulder.

"He did!" Ling Wen grimaces, dragging his feet as he stomps forward. "But I think he's in denial?!"

"Oh," Xie Lian turns his head, stumbling along with Pei. "That really doesn't help in the long run, it's better if you just accept—!"

"ARE YOU TRYING TO REASON WITH IT?!"

Well—!"

"I wouldn't try it, your highness!" Ling Wen laments, leaping over a large boulder as he grows closer and closer to them—chasing them through the main temple chamber, down the steps, and into the street below. "He thinks we get along too well! You're a threat, too!"

"...ME?!" Xie Lian cries, shocked. "PLEASE, LEAVE ME OUT OF THIS!"

"Oh, and leave me in it?!" Pei protests, dragging them around the bend in the road, into an abandoned market.

"Well, I'm—Ling Wen may be attracted to women, BUT I'M NOT!" He cries out to Bai Jing.

His attempts to placate the brocade immortal prove ineffective, but it seems to inspire a different question entirely from Pei Ming.

"Well—in that case, Ling Wen is in his male form right now. And you have a female form, your highness. In that scenario..." He ponders.

That makes all three of them stop—Ling Wen touching his chin, Xie Lian rubbing the back of his neck, his other wrist still in Pei Ming's grip, and Pei Ming tilting his head back to think, eyebrows raised.

"I don't know what he looks like," Xie Lian points out hopefully.

"You don't seem like the type to care about looks, your highness." Pei points out, half distracted.

"And my male form is objectively attractive," Ling Wen adds, unhelpful.

"You—you're right," Xie Lian admits, "it's more about emotional compatibility, but that's not—!"

"But in that scenario—Pei, you have a female form."

That admission from Ling Wen makes Xie Lian feel like he could fall over with shock, and Pei Ming shrugs, unbothered.

"Sure—but she isn't your type, is she?"

No—too tall, and retaining too much of his actual personality.

For obvious reasons, Shi Wudu enjoyed that form perfectly well—but it never appealed to Ling Wen. Who prefers shorter, quieter...

"...He's decided that Pei is the greater threat," Ling Wen admits, making the prince sigh with relief while the general cries out in protest.

"But he's still decided to kill both of you," Ling Wen concludes—making them both groan, taking off through the abandoned market stalls, down side streets.

"Couldn't you try a little harder to convince him you like women?! I've seen you with enough of them!"

"I'm TRYING!"

"Does he need details?! What about the time in Yunmeng—!"

"Do NOT bring up Yunmeng!" Ling Wen's ears burn, in spite of it all. "Just—Just GET AWAY and he'll calm down!"

"Don't you think WE'RE trying?!" Pei Ming cries, and Xie Lian interrupts.

"Maybe I should call—!"

Xie Lian takes a step back, and when he does, the heel of his boot catches against something on the ground, the small tug of resistance making his eyes widen.

A trip wire.

"WAIT—!"

"Wh—?!"

WHOOSH!

Before Xie Lian can complete his warning, they're both snatched up.

"HA!" A pair of ghosts poke their heads out from behind a nearby structure, rubbing their hands together eagerly. "We finally caught something!"

The net glows with spiritual power—strong, and tight, forcing Xie Lian and Pei Ming against each other in a close...intimate position

With Xie Lian’s cheek squished against Pei Ming’s chest, their legs intertwined, and the general struggling to keep his hands decisively away from him, struggling against the bonds of the net.

The two spirits who set up the trap snicker, clearly pleased with themselves, until…

They see a man in black staring them down, blade in hand—and their fates are immediately sealed.

“WAIT, WAIT, HAVE MERCY—!”

Ling Wen lunges forward, running one through with his blade, grasping the other by the throat, rapidly absorbing their energy until nothing remains.

Xie Lian is quiet, unsure if he did that to rescue them, or because the brocade immortal is still trying to absorb power from other ghosts, but General Pei is more optimistic.

“GOOD, you’ve gotten control over him—can you help us down?!”

Ling Wen stares up at them, thinking.

“…I could try, but I can’t guarantee that he won’t kill you once I do.”

Xie Lian struggles to lift his head, spitting his own hair out of his mouth, “I really think I should call—!”

“DO NOT!” Pei Ming shouts over him, “Whatever you do, do NOT call Crimson Rain right now!”

“General!” Xie Lian grimaces. “I know you don’t trust San Lang, but he’s really—“

“It’s not that!” Pei Ming shakes his head vehemently, immediately regretting it when the movement brings them closer together. “I know he’ll help you!”

“Then what’s the—?”

“He’ll KILL ME.”

Xie Lian pauses, taken aback. “Why would he do that?”

He can’t deny that Hua Cheng would attack a god, he’s done that before. But he has no ill will towards Pei—so why does the general sound so certain?

“If you don’t know, it’s not my place to tell you,” Pei groans.

Below them, Ling Wen ignites a ghost fire in his palm, gleaming a menacing shade of black.

“I could try shredding the net with this from a distance, so you can run when you get out—but I’ll hit you both in the process.”

Xie Lian and Pei Ming fall silent, thinking it over.

“…Do you know how much damage it’ll do?”

Ling Wen glances down at the fire in his palm with a careless shrug. “I hit Qi Ying with one about this size before—and it left him with a limp, but little more.”

Xie Lian and Pei Ming look at each other.

(Well, Xie Lian looks in Pei’s general direction–but an attempt is made.)

“I could handle that. You?”

“Yes,” the prince agrees immediately, which seems to settle things—until Pei Ming looks down again, seeing that the ghost fire in Ling Wen’s palm has grown exponentially inside, flickering menacingly.

“At this size, though…” Ling Wen shrugs. “I don’t know what it’ll do to you.”

Pei Ming bites back a curse.

“…I’d survive it,” Xie Lian offers, characteristically confident in his durability. “But I don’t think you…”

“…I’m comfortable with dying,” the general mutters, “I just never thought I’d have to choose between such shitty options…”

Hearing him say the words “I’m comfortable with dying”, Xie Lian and Ling Wen both frown, each concerned—

But, as per usual, life doesn’t give the general a choice at all in such matters.

The sky begins to rumble, clouds darkening, and Ling Wen stiffens, looking back.

“…Is that Mount Tonglu?! Is it erupting again?!”

Xie Lian shakes his head, thinking back on what Hua Cheng has told him. “It won’t erupt again until a new supreme emerges!”

“Then what—?”

Something wet lands on Ling Wen’s cheek, slowly dripping down.

His fingertips brush over the substance, curious—

And they come away red.

RIIIIP!

There's a tearing sound as something flashes past them tearing through the net—and while they both come crashing down—

Someone catches Xie Lian.

Strong, broad arms—now familiar.

And in spite of all of the work he's done in the last few weeks to push such feelings down—Xie Lian's heart soars. His fingertips reach up, finding a sharp jawline, and when the ghost king speaks, leaning his cheek into the god's palm—

"I'm back, gege."

It's *his* voice.

Hanging by a Thread

Chapter Summary

Xie Lian can't hold back his smile, grinning from ear to ear.

"...Welcome back, San Lang."

As he speaks, he notices something landing against his hair—though not wet this time, rather soft and light.

Flower petals.

Brilliant red, falling all around them.

Xie Lian can't hold back his smile, grinning from ear to ear.

"...Welcome back, San Lang."

As he speaks, he notices something landing against his hair—though not wet this time, rather soft and light.

Flower petals.

Brilliant red, falling all around them.

Hua Cheng reaches down, brushing them out of the prince's hair, and Xie Lian catches one in his palm, smiling.

"...I didn't realize you could make it rain flowers," he murmurs.

"I haven't before," Hua Cheng admits. "But I'd never let the rain fall on you, your highness."

Behind them, Ling Wen and Pei Ming are absolutely drenched, but Xie Lian hasn't been stained by a single drop.

It's the first time that this world has seen the sky rain with flowers—but not the last.

And the next time it does—the land they fall upon will never be the same.

Xie Lian finds himself leaning forward, not thinking or even realizing what he wants to do—and then Pei Ming speaks, breaking the small spell of silence between them.

"You couldn't have made it rain flowers on the rest of us, too?" He mutters, wiping the blood out of his eyes.

Hua Cheng barely spares him a second glance, his voice perfectly pleasant—but clearly fake.

"No."

Pei sends him an annoyed look, but soon turns his attention to Ling Wen, passed out on the ground. "Did you hurt him?"

"No," the ghost king shakes his head. “Just put him and the Brocade Immortal to sleep for a little while.”

Xie Lian raises an eyebrow as Hua Cheng helps him to his feet, impressed. “You were able to put them both to sleep—just like that?”

The calamity shrugs. “For some reason, Bai Jing didn’t want to fight me.”

Pei Ming can imagine why, but given his prior concern over being slaughtered by Hua Cheng, he keeps his mouth shut.

“Well,” he kneels down beside his friend, reaching for his armor. “While he’s passed out, we ought to try to get this thing off of him.”

He places his hand against one of the latches—then immediately yanks it back with a curse, deep gashes appearing in his palm, blood pouring down his wrist.

“What the hell—?! This thing bites!”

“It won’t let Ling Wen go,” Hua Cheng explains grimly. “Especially not for you.”

Maybe if a woman was trying, the results would be different—but Pei Ming is a perceived threat.

“…I suppose the best thing we can do is carry him back with us as he is,” Xie Lian mutters. “Do you think the Brocade Immortal will remain docile?”

“While I’m around? Probably.” Hua Cheng agrees, watching as Pei Ming lifts Ling Wen over his shoulders. “But we’ll have to see.”

In any case, he keeps Xie Lian close to his side as they walk back towards the town where they left the others—finding Pei Su mostly recovered.

Thanks to Shuo—who, it seems, was able to salvage a good portion of the chicken that remained, creating something passingly edible.

“General!” Pei Su straightens, seeing Pei Ming covered in blood. “Are you alright?!”

“Yeah…” Pei grunts. “Most of it isn’t mine.”

Not particularly comforting, but Pei Su is used to the like from him.

“If you’re feeling better, come and help me with Lord Ling Wen.”

Pei Su moves to do as he asks, and as everyone readies to leave, Xie Lian leans over to Banyue, murmuring—

“The other two are rather quiet.”

“Ren Song gege and General Tai Hua?” Banyue replies, looking over at the two. “They had some sort of argument while you were gone—but I don’t know what was said.”

Whatever it was—it’s left them pointedly ignoring one another.

“…” Xie Lian sighs.

There are moments when those two remind him of Feng Xin and Mu Qing, but—

Well, even they aren't quite *that* bad.

As they continue down the road again, they leave the remnants of the abandoned town, taking a left at the fork, instead of the right leading to the market.

This direction leads them back into the wilderness—if it can even be called as much. The hills are barren, with little more than ferns and the trunks of long dead, petrified trees covering the ground.

But, the further they go, they descend into a valley.

One that seems to narrow the further the walk, with the rocky edges climbing higher and higher, blocking out more and more what little rays the sun brings down.

"General," Banyue speaks up quietly—and for once, not to Xie Lian. "Is your hand alright?"

Pei Ming casts a look in her direction, fighting back the urge to snap with irritation. "...It's fine," he replies curtly. "I don't suppose you know any healing spells?"

Banyue hangs her head. "I only know how to—"

"Throw scorpion snakes," Pei Ming concludes flatly. "Right."

Or turn them into poisonous soups, apparently.

"...Don't take it to heart," Pei Su reassures her, tugging Ling Wen along with one arm pulled around his shoulder. "He doesn't have anything against you personally."

Banyue doesn't lift her head, struggling to believe him.

She may have been far removed from the world for centuries, trapped in the desert with the soldiers she cursed—but she isn't ignorant to the consequences Pei Su's actions to save her have had.

That General Pei Ming blames her for that.

Or, at best—he doesn't think she was worth all of that trouble.

And Banyue can't even argue that she disagrees.

Beside them, Ling Wen jerks awake, feet dragging against the ground, cheek pressed against Pei Su's shoulder.

"Why...?" He slurs, eyes half lidded. "Why are there so many people here? Isn't this Mount Tonglu?"

Pei Ming rolls his eyes with an irritated snort. "It sure is. And we're not the only ones here. Apparently the Rain Master is around somewhere—"

To his surprise, Ling Wen stiffens, suddenly lifting his head.

"Is she alright?" He asks sharply, looking Pei in the eye—his own gaze...uncharacteristically worried. "Have you seen her?"

"...No," Pei answers slowly, staring back at him in confusion. "...Have you? What makes you think that she isn't alright?"

Ling Wen looks away, ashamed.

"I hurt her."

Banyue and Pei Su both turn their heads to stare at him, concerned.

"Or—Bai Jing did," Ling Wen mutters, even if that doesn't feel like it makes a difference. "I wanted to make sure she got away from that thing."

"...What thing?"

Ling Wen grows pale, staring straight ahead as they move forward—only offering one somber explanation. Vague—and still.

"The man in white."

It sends a chill down Pei Ming's spine.

Walking ahead of the others, lightly grasping Hua Cheng's hand—Xie Lian looks up.

"San Lang?"

"Yes, gege?"

"So much happened while you were...indisposed," Xie Lian phrases it delicately, remembering how much the ghost king hated being in that form. "There was so much I wanted to ask..."

"Ask away, then." Hua Cheng squeezes his hand. "I'll try to answer."

"...Before, you mentioned that you were in Tonglu for ten years before you exited the Kiln," Xie Lian frowns. "Is that how long this is going to take?"

He hears a soft chuckle in response as Hua Cheng helps him over a dip in the ground.

"No, that was different."

"How?"

"Normally, the opening of Mount Tonglu is precluded by a profane loss of life," Hua Cheng explains softly. "In my case, it was the fall of Xianle, and the plague that came with it. Resentment swarmed the world—and by absorbing that, I became a Ghost King."

Xie Lian grimaces, and part of him can't help but wonder...

Is *that* why he's always felt a strong sense of connection to the calamity? Familiarity? Because he was born through the same sorrow that Xie Lian lived through?

"It was the same case with Blackwater. He was born following a plague that spread far further than Human Face Disease, and while there was no civil war, the human population was higher by the time of his birth."

Meaning that even just a plague was enough.

"...But there's been no major war since Yong'an and Banyue," Xie Lian frowns. "No plagues, either."

"No," Hua Cheng agrees. "There's less resentment for the Kiln to pass on—so it's unlikely it would take as long for this matter to be dealt with."

"...If there's less resentment, then why did Mount Tonglu open at all?"

To his surprise, Hua Cheng doesn't answer him verbally—instead, speaking into Xie Lian's private communication array.

'I have suspicions, your highness—but I cannot prove them. Not yet.'

'...And you don't want the others to hear?'

Hua Cheng's gaze flickers back toward Pei Ming and Ling Wen—two thirds of a shattered whole.

'I suspect it has something to do with the late Water Master.'

'Shi Wudu?' Xie Lian almost trips in surprise, forgetting to be careful.

'What would it have to do with him?'

'...Remember, back when we landed on the Island in Blackwater's territory, you told me you needed to speak to Shi Wudu. To warn him.'

'Yes...' Xie Lian agrees, grimacing at the memory.

Knowing what a horrible future awaited the water god for switching fates—and feeling so helpless to stop it.

'...He Xuan didn't know the consequences that came with switching fates—but he knew something that he only could have found in the Water Master's memories.'

Hua Cheng doesn't have to say anything further for Xie Lian to remember what he said before—

'...And He Xuan could have seen them if they fought inside the Kiln.' Xie Lian breathes, keeping pace with him instantly. *'But why would he bring him there?'*

'I don't know,' Hua Cheng admits. *'But I think that's where the Water Master died.'*

Inside the Kiln.

It's an interesting choice of words, too. Not saying that was where Shi Wudu was *murdered* , but simply that it was the place of his death.

'...And that on its own would have been enough to make Mount Tonglu open?' Xie Lian questions, stunned.

Hua Cheng is quiet for a moment, wrestling with his own theories, none of them quite fully formed, but...

'If someone planned it that way—then maybe.'

But who would plan for that? And why?

“Hey…” Pei calls over to them, looking at their surroundings with a frown. “Is it just me, or is this place getting narrower faster than it should be?”

Hua Cheng glances up, one eyebrow raising.

"...It looks like we've wound up caught between two mountain spirits," He murmurs, not sounding particularly bothered by the development.

"...You mean they're moving?!"

"If that's the case..." Ling Wen winces, turning a little green. "Climbing the sides is the best option."

"You would think," Hua Cheng shakes his head, "But no. You don't want to be climbing around or inside of those things if you can avoid it. Better to go through."

"...Won't we get crushed?" Xie Lian mutters. "I can hear them moving..."

"Don't worry, gege." As uncaring as he sounded, rejecting Ling Wen's plan, he seems perfectly kind now. "I won't let anything crush you."

"...He could have said *us* ," Ling Wen grumbles. "That would have been a little more comforting."

"He'll probably save the demon, too," Pei offers blithely.

"Besides," Hua Cheng helps Xie Lian continue forward. "There's another temple of Wuyong ahead."

"In the middle of a valley?" Pei Ming glances around, dreading having to go inside another one of those places. "How impractical."

"It probably wasn't a valley a few hours ago..."

Ling Wen's reminder of their possible impending demise doesn't bring him any comfort--and when they step inside the temple, he's met by the familiar feeling of cold dress, the hairs on his arms raising.

This time, the ghost king doesn't even lift a finger—just a simple inhale and exhale of breath, and every torch in the temple flickers to light, illuminating pitch black walls.

Xie Lian traces his fingertips over them, looking, and Banyue steps up behind him.

"General Hua...in the first temple we saw—after you left, the mural disappeared."

"I'm not surprised," Xie Lian replies quietly, tapping for thicker layers of soot, and Banyue's eyes widen.

"You're not?"

"These...were clearly made by magic—for us to find them."

Xie Lian says this like it's perfectly obvious—and Hua Cheng doesn't seem that surprised, but Pei Ming takes a step back from the wall, disturbed.

"And it's intended for someone who presses their hand to a wall when they move through an unfamiliar space."

Like a blind man.

If the person making these murals intended them to be viewed by just anyone—they'd be out in the open. Not covered in ash.

Ash that was only found *inside* the temple, not on the village outside.

"...And it doesn't freak you out at ALL that someone is running around, leaving creepy murals of Bai Wuxiang's past for YOU specifically to find?" Pei grumbles, rubbing the back of his neck—and then, his ears.

(They're buzzing again—like before, but louder.)

"No," Xie Lian shakes his head, rapping his knuckles against another spot on the wall, nodding to Hua Cheng.

CLANG!

"Haven't you ever wondered why so many killers and monsters in legends are portrayed as wearing masks?" He asks as the ash and soot crumbles away.

"I always assumed it was some sort of metaphor," Ling Wen offers, and Xie Lian shakes his head.

Maybe it turned into one over the centuries.

But for as long as humans have known their own reflections, they have feared men who hide their faces—a pure, raw instinct.

Sometimes a mask is a disguise. It makes you feel safe. Strong.

When Xie Lian wanted to feel control again, he wore a mask.

There's one mask he would embrace fondly now, desperately clinging to the memory of a lost, most devoted believer.

"There's nothing humans have feared longer than strangers."

Learning more about Bai Wuxiang wouldn't make Xie Lian fear him any more than he already does.

The most terrifying thing about the creature was always his anonymity. His complete and utter inhumanity.

And when Hua Cheng stares up at the wall, telling Xie Lian what lies beneath—

Cracks in that mask are slowly beginning to form.

"...It shows two children, your highness," Hua Cheng explains, the images flickering in the firelight. "With the same face."

"Like twins?" Xie Lian questions, his fingertips tracing the image.

Hua Cheng tilts his head to the side, his mouth twisting grimly.

"Maybe."

And as he describes the image further--the tale only becomes more somber.

One boy is always smiling and laughing.

Draped in jewels, shrouded in silks—surrounded by wealth, friends, adoring subjects. Doted upon by his mother and father, guided by his guoshis.

A prince with the world at his fingertips—beloved by all.

And the other...is always crying. Screaming with pain and fear.

Everywhere he goes, he's beaten. Forced to wear rags, and sleep on cold, barren floors. Half starved. Alone. Not a single ounce of kindness was shown to him.

Surveying the imagery, Hua Cheng feels a bitter taste growing on the back of his tongue.

But there's one image that bothers Xie Lian far more, when Hua Cheng describes it to him.

That of the prince shown misbehaving—running through the palace halls, crashing into a statue, toppling it over, and...

The boy in the rags is the one being beaten in the aftermath.

Clearly being punished for what the *other* one did.

"...Is that a thing with royalty?" Pei Ming comments, eyeing the figures curiously. "I know princes aren't beaten as a form of punishment. Did they have a stand in for you as a child, your highness?"

Xie Lian is almost startled by the suggestion, shaking his head. "...No," he mutters. "I wasn't beaten as a child—but even when I misbehaved, no one else was harmed in my stead, either. I've never heard of a tradition like that."

He can think of one instance—where Feng Xin broke his own arm as punishment for breaking Qi Rong's...but that was more complicated.

He punished himself in that instance to stop Xie Lian from getting into an argument with his father–but that wasn't *because* of Xie Lian either.

"...But you said Bai Wuxiang was the Prince of Wuyong," Xie Lian mutters, his eyes drifting back to the smiling boy. "Is this supposed to be some kind of metaphor, or...?"

Or, from infancy, someone else was always suffering from Bai Wuxiang's actions.

Maybe he had even been raised to believe that was the way of things.

"San Lang, did you see anything like that in Zhao Beitong's memories?"

"...No," the calamity replies, eyes fixed on the image of that little boy, curled into a ball on the floor.

"She met Bai Wuxiang when he was older...right when he came of age. All of this...it's from when he was younger."

All he knows about the man's childhood is what little he told his wife about it.

He actually said that it was *lonely* , being the only child in the palace.

That was why they hoped to have more than one child, even if Bai Wuxiang never took any other wives or concubines—because he didn't want their son to grow up without a playmate.

But there was no twin—or any mention of a boy being beaten in his stead.

But there was...

Hua Cheng grows silent, taking a step back from the wall, pressing a hand against his temple.

"San Lang?"

Having seen *so many* memories over the years, some his, some that of others—things bleed together at a certain point. But...there's one.

Faint, flashing across his mind.

Of sitting up in bed—a marriage bed.

The Crown Princess of Wuyong turning her head—and never finding anyone there, but...

His eyes can't seem to leave the painted face of that boy.

Sleeping on the floor.

'...Darling?' Her voice echoes in his mind—clear, confused—tinged with worry. *'What are you doing down there?'*

He's never been able to remember Bai Wuxiang's face outside of the Kiln. Even his voice is distorted.

But his words are clear.

'I...I'm not supposed to be here.'

"San Lang?!" Xie Lian squeezes Hua Cheng's arm, snapping him back to attention. "Are you alright?"

"…I'm sorry, gege," Hua Cheng replies, shaking his head. "I don't know what came over me."

"I—"

Creeeeaaaaak!

Everyone falls silent as the walls around them begin to shudder.

The rumbling—distant, before, has now grown into a roar.

"…IT'S THE MOUNTAINS!" Shuo cries out, watching as the walls crack around them. "THEY'RE CLOSING IN!"

Just as he says this, the ceiling begins to collapse—massive boulders and shards of rock raining down.

But, surprisingly—none of them seem to land on Xie Lian.

After a moment of standing there, braced for an impact that never comes, he realizes–all of the rocks, some big, others the side of a carriage, are landing on something overhead before bouncing away harmlessly.

...Hua Cheng's umbrella.

"See, your highness?" The calamity reminds him pleasantly. "I won't let anything crush you."

"...It'd be nice if the rest of us had the SAME GUARANTEE!" Pei snaps, helping the others hurry forward as the temple collapses in behind them.

Xie Lian twists his head around in their direction, concerned—but Hua Cheng shrugs that off, casually leading him forward as the walls crush in, reducing the entire temple into a long, winding hallway.

"...WE WON'T MAKE IT TO THE OTHER END BEFORE WE GET CRUSHED!"

Pei Ming glares at the path ahead, currently in the middle of blocking the shards of rock falling from the ceiling so Ling Wen, Pei Su, and Banyue don't get crushed as they continue onward.

"...Can we climb out?"

"No," Ling Wen grunts, staring at the ceiling. "The rock would just crumble away—and I'm in no state to attempt it right now."

Pei Ming glances ahead, then behind. Normally, he would be able to do it with Ling Wen on his back. But he's already working with an injured hand. Lang Qianqiu could help with that, but...

With the walls closing in as fast as they are—even with help, they wouldn't have enough time to climb.

"...Damn it," he mutters, taking a deep breath as he summons his spiritual power, throwing both arms out—planting each against one wall.

Holding apart two mountain spirits with his bare hands.

Ling Wen claps his hands together in quiet encouragement. "Oi, what a man Pei!"

"I'll help too!" Pei Su shouts, his gaze determined as he sets Ling Wen down, rushing to his general's side.

He'd be little help as is, with his body reduced to that of a mortal at the moment—but Banyue goes with him, "Me too!

And when her palm presses against Pei Su's back, it glows with spiritual power, giving his body more force as he throws himself between the two walls.

"TAI HUA!" Pei snaps between clenched teeth, the muscles in his arms straining through his robes. "ARE YOU GOING TO HELP, OR NOT?!"

That seems to snap the martial god out of his stupor from before, following his 'fight' with Shuo.

"Coming!"

He moves in beside the others, throwing both arms out—and Pei Ming shouts ahead to Xie Lian.

“We’ll buy you time! You think of a way out of this!”

The prince nods quickly, rubbing his head as he paces beneath the umbrella, thinking.

Up is impossible—behind them is crushed, and they wouldn’t have time to get through ahead.

Which only leaves…

“DOWN!” Xie Lian looks up, clapping his hands together with realization. “THE ONLY THING TO DO IS DIG DOWN AND LET THE MOUNTAIN SPIRITS PASS OVER US!”

“…That does seem like the best course of action,” Ling Wen agrees, breathing hard as he leans against one of the walls. “If your highness can dig down, we’ll jump after you.”

Xie Lian nods, immediately going to work with Fangxin—but Hua Cheng stops him with a hand on his arm.

“Gege—there’s no need for any of that,” The ghost king assures him. “Just wait a moment, all will be well.”

“Maybe for you three!” Lang Qianqiu glares, not missing the way that Shuo has slunk over to stand by Hua Cheng’s side. “BUT THE REST OF US ARE PRETTY CONCERNED!”

Xie Lian frowns, but Hua Cheng simply pats him on the arm again, reassuring. “Don’t worry—they’re being overly dramatic. There’s nothing to be worried about.”

Lang Qianqiu doesn’t know what’s more maddening—the fact that Hua Cheng would say that, or Xie Lian instantly believing it.

“He’s a little late,” Hua Cheng admits, casually holding the umbrella over Xie Lian’s head, in spite of the prince offering to hold it for him. “But I suppose that’s to be expected.”

“…To be expected?!” Lang Qianqiu sputters, stunned. “What the hell does that—?”

CRUNCH!

Hua Cheng guides Xie Lian to take a step back as the floor opens up beneath them, forming an opening about two meters wide, a head popping up.

“Apologies for the delay, sir.”

Hearing the sound of that voice, Xie Lian perks up.

It’s Hua Cheng’s assistant from Paradise Manor!

The ghost officer, wasn’t it—?

But this time, with so many other officials around—

Ling Wen glances over, eyebrows raising with surprise as Hua Cheng helps Xie Lian down into the newly formed hole.

“Lord Yin Yu—thank you for the assistance.”

The dark haired man stiffens, shoulders straightening at the mention of his real name--then slumps.

"...You're welcome," he mutters, moving to help the others down as well.

Xie Lian is shocked, but has the sense to keep his mouth shut, whereas some of them...

"HA! Hua Chengzhu is arrogant enough to take a banished Heavenly Official into his service?! And Lord Yin Yu didn't have enough self respect to turn him down?!"

The pickle jar in Pei Su's arms rattles as Rong Guang cackles with laughter.

"I always heard he was pathetic, but—!"

Pei Su slaps a talisman onto the jar, quickly silencing him—and Yin Yu doesn't show much of a reaction one way or the other, his expression impassive as everyone drops down into the hole, which quickly reseals itself, protecting them from the cave in overhead.

"...How can any of you see like this?" Pei Ming mutters, feeling around on the edges of the tunnel, and Xie Lian can't help but make the wry comment;

"I didn't notice much of a difference."

After a moment of awkward silence, Hua Cheng snorts.

With a flick of his wrist, a few ghost fires appear within the tunnel, lighting the way as Yin Yu begins to lead the way, digging forward—and Ling Wen squints at the tool in his hand.

"...How did you come across the earth master's shovel?"

There's an immediate shift in the air--one that feels almost claustrophobic, with so many of them pressed into a small tunnel.

"...What?" Pei Ming's voice is quiet, like the calm before a possible storm. "He has He Xuan's shovel?"

Xie Lian's hand tightens on Hua Cheng's arm, remembering what he said before—

That He Xuan had spoken to him *since* Shi Wudu's death, but the way Hua Cheng phrased things, it made it sound like he didn't think...

"I found it lying on the ground," Hua Cheng replies.

Pei Ming stares him down, nails biting into his palm, and Xie Lian clears his throat.

"San Lang just told me he hasn't been able to get in touch with Blackwater, I don't think..."

"I was unconscious when he fled the Heavens," Hua Cheng explains, rescuing him from rambling.

"Dianxia was with me at the time, he can corroborate that."

Pei Ming looks to Xie Lian, who is already nodding in affirmation—even if he's suddenly flushed for some reason.

"The emperor can track heavenly arms wherever they are—I suppose that's why he disposed of the earth master's shovel in ghost city after he fled. I wasn't aware until Yin Yu told me that something had been discarded, and I found it there."

He glances ahead of them, where Yin Yu is still tunneling forward. "I'm glad I held onto it in this situation—it's become rather useful."

Pei Ming glances at Xie Lian, who has made himself an ironclad alibi for Hua Cheng—and he sighs harshly, forcing those emotions down.

It's only for now, anyway.

Because if he makes it out of Mount Tonglu—Blackwater will only be a temporary problem.

Walking at the front of the group, arm in arm with Hua Cheng, Yin Yu working ahead of them—Xie Lian's lips are pursed, deep in thought.

'...Gege?'

Xie Lian bobs his head in acknowledgement, but otherwise shows no signal that the two are speaking in his private array.

'Yes?'

'It seemed like there was something you wanted to ask me before. Gege is always welcome to contact me in my private array, you know—'

'It's fine,' Xie Lian speaks over him, fighting the urge to clear his throat with discomfort. *'With a password like that, you can't be surprised that I don't...'*

Unbeknownst to him, that password was set on the far off hope that Xie Lian might *use it* one day.

Hua Cheng wouldn't complain about hearing him use that phrase in another context, but he isn't quite so hopeful.

'That's alright, I don't mind contacting gege directly. What is it?'

'...Before, when we were dealing with Ke Mo and Rong Guang...' Xie Lian frowns. *'He mentioned something about Shuo coming here because he might...be the next ghost king,'* Xie Lian recalls, feeling silly even bringing it up--but he hasn't been able to get the thought. out of his mind. *'Is...that the plan?'*

He's more surprised by the fact that Hua Cheng doesn't reply immediately—or deny it.

'...That's his decision, and he hasn't made it yet.'

Xie Lian fights the urge to look back at Shuo's aura behind them, warring with the conflicting feelings in his chest.

'Is that what you want?'

Hua Cheng watches Yin Yu's back, the earth dissolving in front of them like water.

'...I haven't decided either.' He admits. *'Still, it's not my choice.'*

That seems to be a common thread with him—ever since they first met.

When they returned from the Crescent Moon Kingdom—and Hua Cheng told Banyue that he didn't teach her magic with any grand expectations in mind.

He simply wanted her to have the freedom and ability to make her *own* choices.

And mistakes.

Xie Lian's first instinct is to say that it reminds him of Jun Wu—who has always allowed the prince to make his own mistakes.

Sometimes very big, horribly painful mistakes.

But when he asks himself whether or not they're truly the same...

His gut says no.

And that sparks two points of confusion inside of him.

First—that when he tries to ask himself if Jun Wu has allowed him to make his own choices...logically, Xie Lian knows that he has.

But that *feels* incorrect.

And second—

Comparing the two feels *deeply* wrong.

But why does it—?

"Hua Chengzhu, your highness," Yin Yu pauses, looking back at the two of them. "I've dug about thirty miles ahead. What do you suggest?"

Hua Cheng doesn't reply—and Xie Lian is quick to clarify;

"You don't need to ask me," the prince reminds him gently.

Yin Yu doesn't answer him, looking to Hua Cheng for proper guidance—seeming overly cautious of the way he addresses the prince—and his employer shrugs.

"I would still defer to your suggestion in this instance. What do you think we should do, gege?"

"...It'll be easier to navigate above ground," Xie Lian reasons. "And we should be away from the two spirits by now. Let's dig to the surface and see where we've ended up."

Hua Cheng nods to Yin Yu in affirmative, and the official immediately leaps into action, tunneling upwards.

Xie Lian can't help but notice that—while his presence is pretty underwhelming compared to most martial gods, he actually has the perfect demeanor for an assistant.

Quick, efficient, speaking just the right amount—it's no wonder Hua Cheng relies on him so much.

But when their group begins climbing out of the tunnel—even Xie Lian can tell something is wrong.

The air—it's too still.

Hua Cheng is peering overhead when Pei Ming crawls out behind them, squinting against the darkness.

"...Did the sun finally go down?"

It would almost be a relief if it had. Ever since he's arrived, the land has been placed under a weird state of eternal twilight--but Hua Cheng shakes his head.

"There's a long night that settles over Tonglu when the Kiln is about to shut—but it's too soon for that."

Lang Qianqiu attempts to step forward—only to stop when he feels a tug against his back, looking over his shoulder to find Shuo gripping the back of his robes.

Not saying a word—they haven't spoken to each other in hours—but not letting him wander, either.

"...Then where the hell are we?" Pei mutters, squinting.

"It would seem we weren't out from underneath the mountain spirit after all," Hua Cheng steps forward, each movement echoing throughout the chamber, endlessly vast. "Now we're inside of it."

"...Should we split up and try to find an exit?" Pei suggests, trying to find some sort of path or landmark in the darkness—but there's nothing.

"No," Xie Lian shakes his head. "Splitting up is the worst idea in situations like this—all that does is divide our strength."

Pei doesn't dispute that, glancing in the direction from which Hua Cheng spoke before. "In that case, why don't you and Crimson Rain lead the way? Since he's been so helpful with lighting the path so far."

Xie Lian winces, expecting Hua Cheng to respond—as he hasn't been particularly keen on Pei Ming's remarks so far—but he doesn't.

Instead, he moves forward—grasping Xie Lian's hand tightly as he does. "Make sure you stay close to me while we're in this place, your highness."

There's an implied sense of danger behind his words—one that Xie Lian supposes he noticed before, insisting on sticking together, but...

For now, their focus should be on getting out of here.

After a few minutes of walking through the dark, ghost fires dimly lighting a shallow circle around them, they eventually find a tunnel leading out of the chamber—narrow and inconsistent, constantly rising and falling.

"...Gege?" Hua Cheng grips his hand tighter as his other grasps Xie Lian's shoulder, steadying him when he stumbles. "Are you alright?"

"...Yes," Xoe Lian agrees, blinking blearily. "I'm sorry—these tunnels are so winding, almost like intestines...I got a little dizzy."

"Do you want to take a break?" The thought of that seems almost like a joke in a situation this dire--but Hua Cheng sounds completely serious.

"I..." Xie Lian trails off, and when he looks back over his shoulder—his blood runs cold.

There's no one left behind them.

No spiritual auras for Xie Lian to spy from beneath his cursed shackles. No breathing from Pei Ming, Pei Su, or Lang Qianqiu. No resentment from Banyue or Ren Song.

No heartbeats.

Nothing.

"...Where did the others go? San Lang, is there something else in here with us?"

"No," Hua Cheng admits, glancing behind them, then ahead. "That makes it all the more worrisome."

Because if there was another spirit in here trapping them or following their movements—then Hua Cheng would be able to sense it.

Now?

All around them—it's pure nothingness.

"…But how could something have snuck up behind us and taken the others without us even noticing?" Xie Lian mutters, truly startled.

Particularly in the dark—where Xie Lian's senses should have been sharper than anyone's.

"I don't know," Hua Cheng admits.

"Should we retrace our steps?"

It's their only option, even if he phrases it like a suggestion—and it leaves Xie Lian even more disoriented than before. Winding back through the same endless dips, curves, and turns.

It slowly leaves him more and more disoriented than before—to the point of Hua Cheng offering to carry him at a certain point, but Xie Lian insists on walking on his own two feet—

Until they reach a dead end.

As winding as their path was—there was only a singular root.

With no fork or branches in the tunnel along the way, retracing their steps should have eventually brought them back to the large chamber they entered through before.

But now…they're left standing before a wall of stone. One Hua Cheng stops him from reaching out to touch.

"…Is it real?" Xie Lian questions cautiously, reluctant to go back the way they just came, but seeing little other options. "Or an illusion?"

"It's real," Hua Cheng mutters, taking a step back. "I think we were expected to walk straight into it."

Just hearing him say that pricks Xie Lian's instincts with alarm—because it makes it sound like a trap

Like something they can't even sense is hunting them.

Trap or not, Xie Lian is still contemplating whether or not he should just punch straight through to the other side.

(Typical martial god behavior.)

"…Gege, let me see your hand."

Xie Lian is a little baffled by the request—given that Hua Cheng never let go of him to begin with—but doesn't protest when the calamity lifts his fingers up, tying something around one of them.

And when the prince pulls his hand back, much to his surprise—

He can actually see it.

A gleaming thread, shining with spiritual power—crimson, just like the aura of its owner—

Connecting one affinity knot wrapped around his finger to another.

Xie Lian stares down at the red string silently, his eyes perfectly wide —

And his heart—

Xie Lian told himself so long ago that he would be kinder to himself. That he wouldn't be so cruel to his own heart.

But god, he hates himself for the way it leaps right now.

Because the string wrapped around his finger feels so *familiar* .

Begging the question his soul has been asking since Paradise Manor. Since they were standing outside Qi Rong's Lair. Since Mount Yu Jun.

Since he was weeping alone on a mountainside, shivering in the snow.

"…This way we won't lose track of each other," Hua Cheng explains gently, squeezing his fingers.

Xie Lian lowers his head, hair obscuring his expression.

"…Your highness?" The calamity murmurs, reaching out to grasp his chin—only to hesitate, touching his shoulder instead.

But if he had—he might have noticed that his god's lips are trembling.

"…Where did you get this?" Xie Lian whispers, keeping his voice low in a valiant effort to maintain composure.

Hua Cheng stares at the dark curtain of his hair, wishing he could see Xie Lian's expression.

"…I've always had it," Hua Cheng replies carefully. "Ever since the first time I came to Mount Tonglu."

Xie Lian doesn't know why—

But he was almost hoping that Hua Cheng *wouldn't* be able to answer that.

And for some reason—hearing any answer at all stings.

"…Oh," the god takes a shaky breath, his voice small. "I see."

Hua Cheng bows his head, trying to get at eye level with Xie Lian, who avoids his gaze.

"If dianxia would rather not wear it—"

"No," Xie Lian shakes his head sharply, pulling his hand back.

He keeps his head bowed low for another moment, composing himself before clearing his throat. "No, I'll wear it—is it some sort of spiritual device?"

Hua Cheng hums in agreement. "It won't break, not unless one of us is gone."

"...Gone?" Xie Lian questions, still unsettled.

"Dead or dispersed," Hua Cheng's thumb strokes over the ball of his shoulder, soothing. "Obviously the plan is to stick together—but this way, even if we get separated..."

"You'll come back to me?" Xie Lian's voice is thick with emotion, and...

Hua Cheng stares at him.

"...Always," he agrees quietly, beginning to sound slightly unsteady himself. "Your highness, are you—?"

They both fall silent, turning their heads to stare off into the darkness when they hear sharp, violent thuds in the distance.

"...That has to be a martial god."

The blows are just too forceful to be anything else.

"You think it's Pei or Lang Qianqiu?"

Xie Lian is too familiar with Lang Qianqiu's fighting style to think this could be him—the pattern is all wrong, but...

"It might be General Pei. We should hurry!"

There's little more discussion before they go running off down the path once more, Xie Lian breathing hard and fast through his nose to avoid feeling nauseous as they charge through the winding passageways and tunnels again. But after running for only a few minutes—they stop.

More accurately, Hua Cheng pulls Xie Lian to a stop, sending the martial god stumbling into his chest.

"San Lang—?"

"It's one of Banyue's scorpion snakes," the ghost king leans forward, inspecting the stones before them. "It's sticking out of the wall."

"...What?"

Xie Lian reaches out to touch it for himself—only for Hua Cheng to grasp his wrist, gently pulling him back.

"Your highness—please refrain from reaching for something venomous with your bare hands the moment I tell you it's there."

Xie Lian smiles, sheepish. "Right..."

It's not as though he wouldn't be fine if he ended up getting stung—but when he remembers how bothered San Lang was by it back when they traveled to the Crescent Moon Kingdom...

It seems better to avoid it.

"But what is one of her snakes doing like that...?"

"...I'm not positive," Hua Cheng admits. "But I think I found where the commotion was coming from."

He leads Xie Lian forward, guiding his hand to reach out and feel—only to find that there's a man sticking out of the wall!

His head and arms are dangling uselessly, while his lower half has been completely submerged beneath the rock.

...But how could that be? Xie Lian's hand slips up from his shoulder, brushing against a mane of long, curly hair, and his eyes widen.

"...It's General Qi Ring," he mutters, taking a step back.

How did the martial god end up here?!

"San Lang, I—" He turns around, about to ask the ghost king to help him dig Quan Yizhen out, but...

All of the sudden, he's standing alone.

"...San Lang?!"

At first, there’s no clear thinking.

Just his heart squeezing with panic, fingers fumbling for the chain beneath his robes, caught by a painful, familiar thought;

‘He wouldn’t leave me.’

“San Lang?” He repeats himself a little louder now, looking down and remembering—

The string.

He swallows thickly, clutching trembling fingers, staring at the winding, gleaming red path of light, leading forward.

Xie Lian sucks in a deep breath, his heart pounding.

When he was young, having faith was such an easy thing to do.

It's easy to have hope when you've never lost.

Back then, he viewed faith as a foundation of stone, something to be built upon, brick by brick.

That couldn't be further from the truth.

Sometimes faith is as small and fragile as a single thread.

Xie Lian's lips tremble, fingers wrapping around the string—pulling himself forward through the dark.

Reminding himself that it's still here.

And if that's true—

Then Hua Cheng is still here, too.

That he's unsettled, because the string reminded him of—of—

But it's okay.

He takes slow, steadying breaths, reminding himself of that over and over again.

It's okay.

It's okay.

He's okay—

Thud.

Xie Lian pauses, startled—his palm pressed flat against the wall, where…

The thread leads right up to it, disappearing inside.

And now—Xie Lian finds himself beginning to understand what’s going on here.

First the scorpion snake, then Qi Ying, and now…

That really only leaves one thing to do—and Xie Lian doesn’t hesitate.

Taking a couple of steps back—then charging the wall at full force.

But, rather than slamming into a solid surface—he finds himself sucked in, sinking in slowly at first, head and shoulders first, then the rest of him slowly disappearing beneath the rock.

And at first—it’s suffocating.

Crushing from all sides, dirt in his mouth and nose.

It feels—

It feels like being buried alive.

For a moment, he freezes–arms trapped beneath the earth, breaths quickening as he sputters and coughs.

He—

He can't move.

He can't see. He can't hear anything. He can't—

One eye squints open, stinging as dirt falls into it—but still, he still sees that thread.

San Lang.

His heart is still throbbing, and he can’t catch his breath, but—

Xie Lian scrambles forward, clawing and kicking deeper into the earth—following it.

Even when every instinct is telling him to run, to go back the way he came—he struggles forward. Until he can't tell which way is up or down, left or right, or even how far into the earth he's gone.

Just pulling at that string. Further and further and further, until—

At first, when the pocket of air opens up around his face—all Xie Lian can do is cough, struggling to get dust and dirt out of his mouth and nose, but—

"Dianxia!"

The Cost of Being Extraordinary

Chapter Summary

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> "Probably not," Hua Cheng reasons, his arms still firm around Xie Lian's waist. "But these things can be difficult to predict."
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> "...He seemed like a gentle soul," the god remarks, surprised that such a side to him exists.
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> "Gentle?" Hua Cheng questions, raising an eyebrow. "He's patient, I suppose—but just because a man doesn't have a short temper doesn't mean he has no temper at all."
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>
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>
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>
> "Would gege like to see?"

Chapter Notes

> sorry for an extremely long chapter this time around, this part of the canon tends to move kind of slowly, so I'm trying to move past it quickly so we can get to more original content!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A choked sound of relief escapes him as he throws his arms around Hua Cheng, holding him tightly.

"San Lang—I found you!" He cries, pressing his face into the ghost king's chest. If he were a mortal man, his ribs would certainly have been crushed by now—but instead, he simply holds Xie Lian just as tightly, his face pressed against the prince's hair.

"And I found you!"

Xie Lian can't speak for a moment—not wanting to reveal how distressed he truly is.

(Even if that might be useless, Hua Cheng can almost certainly tell.)

"...Is the mountain swallowing people?" He rasps, his throat somewhat. raw. "How do we get out of this?"

There's a small pocket of air around their heads and upper bodies, created by Hua Cheng exerting spiritual power—but their legs are still submerged, pinned in the earth.

"...Looks like we resurfaced in a bad place," Hua Cheng explains quietly, rubbing Xie Lian's back as he coughs up more dirt. "We ended up digging into the stomach of the mountain spirit—and it's a bit angry at the moment."

Xie Lian, exhausted from the events of the day, has little other option than to lean his head against the ghost king's chest.

"Are the others alright?"

"They are," Hua Cheng reassures him. "The Mountain Spirit is more likely to spit us out before there's any harm done."

Hearing that is enough of a relief, even if it's slightly cramped at the moment—almost like being buried together, which is absolutely an improvement over prior experience, but...

"...Qi Ying is here," Xie Lian recalls. "He was half swallowed, but I..."

Xie Lian pauses, sheepish when he almost admits that he panicked the moment he noticed Hua Cheng had disappeared, leaving him.

"You mean the curly haired one?" Hua Cheng recalls. "He's alright. I can see him."

"...You can?" Xie Lian looks up, shocked.

"Through my right eye," Hua Cheng nods, and Xie Lian is momentarily baffled, not wanting to be rude, but—

Hua Cheng doesn't exactly *have* a right eye.

His questions are soon answered, however, when the ghost king leans down, pressing their foreheads together.

Xie Lian stiffens, startled that, after all this time, he's having images sent directly into his mind—circumventing the cursed shackle.

"...Is that really what Qi Ying looks like?" He mutters, startled.

"I suppose so," Hua Cheng agrees airily.

"My right eye can see anything the wraith butterflies or E'Ming see—and I've had one tailing him since he left Puqi Shrine."

Xie Lian supposes he shouldn't have assumed what Qi Ying looked like, he never touched his face—but he imagined someone...

He’s well aware of the fact that Quan Yizhen is nearly two centuries old—but Xie Lian thought he would *look* younger.

If only because of the almost childishly direct manner with which the martial god conducted himself.

But he’s nothing like that.

He's tall and broad, Xie Lian felt that much before—and from Shi Qingxuan's reaction when they accidentally stumbled into his bedroom escaping the heavens, he could have guessed, but—

It's his face that makes Xie Lian pause and take notice.

Maybe because it's been centuries since he saw a new face. The last time he could see, it was through Shi Qingxuan's eyes, and he saw...

A monster.

Instead, Quan Yizhen's face is sharp. Square jawed. The only thing to soften his features is a spray of freckles across his nose.

"...Isn't he in more danger if he's unconscious?" Xie Lian whispers, concerned. "He won't be able to fight back against the mountain spirit at all..."

"That might not be an issue," Hua Cheng murmurs.

The key word being might.

"Someone is coming."

Xie Lian perks up. "Who—?"

He falls silent when he sees someone moving down the hall, popping out of a hole in the floor, crawling out as silent as can be, then creeping over to where the martial god is dangling.

A tall, slender figure—wearing robes of black and purple, a white, horned mask on his face.

It's only when he creeps closer that Xie Lian notices the shovel in his hand—black as jade, tipped with gold. New to his eyes, but the power emanating from it is blatant enough.

"...Is that Yin Yu?" he whispers.

"The very same."

Just then, Quan Yizhen begins to stir.

And it's when his lids open, revealing round, earnest hazel eyes, that his visage begins to match his personality.

"...You," he speaks to Yin Yu directly, clearly not knowing who he is beneath the mask, "Can you let me down, now?"

He asks so...casually.

As though he's experiencing only a minor setback, and Yin Yu would be doing him a small favor by being so kind.

"I'd like to get down."

It's hard to know exactly what the look on Yin Yu's face is with the mask on, but...

Xie Lian bites his lip.

There's anger there.

Simmering just beneath the surface—and the one provoking it is painfully oblivious.

"...San Lang, he isn't going to kill him, is he?"

"Probably not," Hua Cheng reasons, his arms still firm around Xie Lian's waist. "But these things can be difficult to predict."

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"Gentle?" Hua Cheng questions, raising an eyebrow. "He's patient, I suppose—but just because a man doesn't have a short temper doesn't mean he has no temper at all."

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"Qi Ying seems so attached to him," the prince mutters, baffled. "It's hard to understand how things could have ended up like this..."

"Would gege like to see?"

When Xie Lian nods, the image changes—to that of a bustling city street. For most, recognizing a time and place isn't so easy.

But for Xie Lian, who has known what clothes were worn where, and when for the last eight centuries—it's easy.

Yong'an, nearly two centuries ago.

"…Were you here for this?" Xie Lian questions, eyes struggling to take in all of the stimuli in the city street.

It's not exactly like seeing, more like dreaming. And yet, it's more than he's had in *so* long.

"No, no," Hua Cheng shakes his head.

"I'm careful about doing background checks on anyone I hire. This is fairly standard."

Xie Lian can't say if examining someone's memories in detail is standard, but—

"SHIXIONG!"

Cries of panic permeate the air, along with a loud commotion, almost like a stampede.

"HELP!"

A dark haired youth rushes town the steps of a nearby temple, hair slipping out of its braid in his hurry.

“What’s going on—?!” He questions, craning his neck until he catches sight of a chaotic scuffle down the street.

“It’s that FREAK!”

“He BIT ME!”

“…” The moment he hears that, understanding settles over the cultivator’s features, and he sighs in quiet exasperation. “Stand aside, stand aside, let me through…”

He has to push and elbow his way through the crowd to reach the brawl, pulling younger disciples out of it.

When the last is tugged away by the scruff of the neck, he sees the little boy at the center of the chaos.

Barely more than twelve years old. A mess of dark hair and angry, wild eyes. Covered in dirt and sporting a bloody nose—but otherwise no worse for wear.

“Someone should put a MUZZLE on him!” One of the younger disciples from the local sect cries, clutching a bleeding bite mark on his arm, but Yin Yu pays him no mind—not yet.

“Who started it?”

When he asks that question—nobody seems to want to answer.

"...He threw the first punch!" One of the disciples suddenly blurts out, pointing at the child on the street. "He's crazy!"

"...Quan Yizhen?" Yi Yu prompts the boy gently.

Everyone in town is...aware of him. Not even a teenager, and viewed as a public nuisance.

He was left in the local orphanage by a wealthy couple passing through when he was five years old--stayed there for another five years, only to be put out on the streets when he became too difficult to handle.

He's been there—mixed up in trouble—ever since.

"...They were laughing at me," the boy mumbles, irritably wiping the blood from his nose with the hem of his sleeve.

Yin Yu kneels down to look him in the eye, looking between him, and the boys from the temple."What for?"

Quan Yizhen doesn't answer, and the others are forced to

"...He was eating out of the trash, Shixiong..."

Xie Lian watches the child more closely now—how the rags he wears hang off of his body, and his heart aches with sympathy.

"...And instead of offering him help, you laughed?" Yin Yu asks them quietly, emanating disappointment.

The senior disciple shakes his head. "That is not how our master has taught us to treat those in need."

"In need?" One of the boys sneers. "He nearly took a bite out of me!"

Behind him, Quan Yizhen's expression contorts—like he might spring up and fight again, but...

"If saints were the only ones who were worthy of charity, we would help very few of those who are actually in need," Yin Yu scolds them —his tone gentle, but his words firm.

Xie Lian finds himself nodding fervently with approval.

Yin Yu is not, by any measure, a particularly remarkable looking young man. Appealing in a very general way, but not memorable.

Long, dark hair—pulled into a high, neat ponytail, each strand perfectly straight. Unblemished skin other than one beauty mark on his cheekbone.

But he has kind eyes—warm and bright, despite being a simple shade of clear gray.

And when Quan Yizhen looks at him, he seems to find the senior disciple anything but unremarkable.

The boys are quickly ushered away, heads hanging in shame—but Yin Yu lingers behind.

Quan Yizhen is sitting cross legged, his head hanging low—clearly expecting to be scolded just like all the others—

But that moment never comes.

"Are you still hungry?"

The boy stiffens—sneaking a nervous glance through his bangs—

And Yin Yu doesn't seem angry at all.

Finally Quan Yizhen looks up at him, nodding earnestly—and Yin Yu smiles, offering him a hand.

"Come with me."

Xie Lian watches as he leads the boy back to his temple—past all of the judgmental stares and sneers, sitting him down on the back steps with a bowl of noodles.

He eats quickly, not even stopping to take a breath as he practically inhales the meal down his throat—and ignores the chopsticks offered, using his hands instead.

Yin Yu leans his chin on his hand, mildly vexed as he watches the child devour his first proper meal in days.

"...Quan Yizhen?"

The boy looks up at him immediately, chewing silently.

"Next time you can't find a meal—don't go digging through the trash," Yin Yu murmurs, reaching out to wipe a smear of sauce from the boy's chin with a cloth. "Come and wait here, I'll always feed you."

And in that moment—Xie Lian watches the boy come to watch Yin Yu with more than just gratitude.

It's the same look that his own worshippers used to give him, centuries ago. Back when he was considered to be powerful, beautiful—nearly the highest among all of the gods.

Sheer adoration.

And, in the most painful sense—Yin Yu never seems to notice it.

The boy returns. Not when he can no longer stand the hunger—but almost immediately the next morning, and every day after. Sometimes more than once a day.

Yin Yu never complains—always brings him a hot meal, sitting on the temple steps with the boy as he eats.

And the fighting lessens, even if it doesn't stop entirely.

After all, there are still some days where the other disciples find him waiting there first.

And every time, Yin Yu doesn't find himself protecting the child, no—it's usually the disciples, most of them larger and several years older.

"You nearly broke Ye Min's arm..." The teenager muses at one point, holding a cold cloth to Quan Yizhen's eye to stop the swelling.

The boy doesn't apologize—he almost never does, not unless Yin Yu asks him to explicitly. Simply shrugs, leaning into the touch. Not out of relief—more like a dog, eager to be patted on the head.

"I held back."

Yin Yu *should* scold him.

Any responsible elder in this situation would insist that violence is wrong, and Quan Yizhen should avoid fighting.

...So, why is he biting back a smile?

"Quan Yizhen?"

"...Yeah?"

Yin Yu leans his chin on his hand, turning to look at him.

"Why do you fight so much?"

He has many of his own guesses as to why.

Because the other children are cruel. Because he's lonely. Because being abandoned would leave any child angry. Because—

"I like it."

Yin Yu pauses, sending him a wide eyed stare. "...What?"

"I like fighting," the boy replies simply.

Finally, the cracks in Yin Yu's composure start to slip through—and a small laugh escapes him.

"You do?"

Normally the boy treats laughter as an attack—but now, he just stares up at Yin Yu with wide eyes, nodding earnestly.

"I can't imagine that!"

"Why would I do it all the time if I didn't like it?" Quan Yizhen tilts his head to the side, and Yin Yu pauses, thinking.

"I guess I always assumed you had a temper."

The boy shakes his head firmly, licking the remaining sauce off of his empty bowl.

"I'm not an angry person."

It sounds almost ridiculous, coming from the mouth of someone who will grow into a martial god infamous for beating his own worshippers—

But Xie Lian can see it.

Quan Yizhen isn't a spiteful, angry, or bitter person—he's just painfully direct, and addresses conflict as such.

But his emotions don't weigh him down, either.

And from the look on Yin Yu's face—he seems almost jealous of that.

Painfully self aware, a natural born worrier, all too grounded compared to a child born to be larger than life.

"…I hate fighting," he admits quietly.

Quan Yizhen sits up a little straighter, just as surprised by that admission as Yin Yu was by his own.

"…But aren't you the best in your temple?"

The teenager's smile doesn't quite reach his eyes.

"There's more to cultivation than fighting, you know."

Quan Yizhen seems genuinely shocked by this information, pausing to think it over–and Yin Yu can't help but smile.

He's not accustomed to having someone listen to every word he says so intently.

"...Would you like to learn?"

The boy looks up quickly, curls bouncing.

"About how to fight?" He asks breathlessly, his eyes round with excitement.

"..." Yin Yu's lips quirk at the corners as he reaches out, flattening Quan Yizhen's curls with his palm. "About cultivation as a whole...which includes fighting."

"Will you teach me?"

"Huh?" The teenager stiffens, shaking his head. "Oh, no—I'm too young to teach anyone." Seeing the disappointment on the child's face, though, he tacks on—

"But...I'll be your shixiong, and I'll always be there to help you along the way."

Watching the two together—Xie Lian frowns with dismay.

"...San Lang, Yin Yu seems like such a genuine, kind person—and he clearly cares for Quan Yizhen."

"Yes," Hua Cheng agrees. "Both of those things were true."

"But then..." Xie Lian swallows hard.

"How did things turn out so badly?"

"That..." Hua Cheng sighs, "It's easier if I show you, your highness."

From then on, Xie Lian sees flashes—of training, childhood, and strife.

He sees Quan Yizhen in the sparring ring day in and day out, working until his hands bleed.

He sees Yin Yu traveling from a wealthy home to the temple each and every day—but not a happy one.

An absent father and a bitter mother. The youngest of a long line of sons. Each successful in their own right. A merchant here, a doctor there.

An army officer. A famed poet.

And then, the fifth and last of them, was Yin Yu.

Being the senior disciple in a temple was an honor for most families. Something most parents would fawn and brag over.

But in his, by comparison to his brothers...he was completely unremarkable.

When he succeeded, it was expected. Actually—it was the *least* he could do, avoiding being a disappointment to such a prestigious family.

By contrast—when Quan Yizhen thrived in any way, big or small, it was regarded as nothing less than a miracle.

That he, an orphan living on the streets, could join a prestigious temple—that was nothing short of impressive.

(Yin Yu offering him a place was merely noticing talent.)

And when the boy showed natural potential—he was called a genius in the realm of martial arts.

But when Yin Yu succeeded—on any level—it wasn't that he *didn't* receive praise, but...

People would always use him as an example of what you could accomplish with hard work and humility. Always an addendum.

But his achievements were never treated as exceptional.

But Xie Lian doesn't see bitterness in Yin Yu's eyes. Perhaps frustration and insecurity—but never aimed in his shidi's direction.

The same could not be said, however, for the other disciples who called their temple home.

"Shixiong! You have to DO something about him!"

Yin Yu, now looking several years older—more of a young man than a teenager—sets his book down with a sigh.

"What has he done to offend you now?"

He says this as if it's one complaint—but from the group of disciples surrounding him, it's clearly more than that.

"He eats like an ANIMAL! He knocks rice everywhere, and he eats three times as much as anyone else! How are we supposed to feed anyone else?!"

Before Yin Yu can even respond to that, another disciple cries out in dismay.

"And does he have to be so damn scary all the time?!"

A few of the other young men echo him in agreement.

"He always glares at me like he's about to break my ribs!"

"And he's the WORST to have on missions—master favors him too much! He's not even close to a senior member of the sect, why should he be given so many opportunities?"

"I'd rather go on patrol with ANYONE but him shixiong, really! I can't take him anymore!"

Yin Yu listens to all of their complaints, massaging his temples in a vain attempt to alleviate the stress from so many people talking at once.

"Alright, alright, I've heard you."

He glances around, taking in the angry looks on their faces. "I'll investigate each complaint, and if there's anything that breaks the sect rules, I'll take it to the master."

"...Shixiong..." One of the disciples standing towards the back speaks up, his arms crossed.

Yin Yu looks over at him, paying more attention to his words than he would the others. "Yes, Jian Yu?"

This disciple is near him in age—good looking, tall and broad, but all of it wasted by the near permanent scowl on his face.

"The sect leader won't listen to anyone but you."

No one else says it, but it's clear that there's silent agreement among them. "If you don't say you think the kid is a problem—he won't do anything about it. How long are we supposed to deal with that?"

"..." Yin Yu hangs his head with a sigh, snapping his book shut.

"I don't agree with any of you."

That comment doesn't go over particularly well, stunned silence left in its wake, and the senior disciple sets his book aside.

"I'm going to say something that none of you are going to like," he mutters, bracing himself.

"If you aren't getting the opportunities you want, or if you feel sidelined—that isn't because Quan Yizhen has taken them from you. It's because you weren't good enough. It's that simple."

His words are delivered in a gentle tone, however harsh they might sound.

"...You're being passed over as well," one of the disciples mutters angrily. "Does that mean you're not good enough?!"

"Yes." Yin Yu replies instantly, looking him in the eye. "But I'd rather keep my dignity and work hard to earn my place, not push someone out of my way."

Few of them seem to know what to say to that, and Yin Yu rises to his feet. "Now—if the rest of you are finished, it's late. I'm going to do my meditations, then go to sleep. I suggest the rest of you do the same."

There's a collective groan of protest—but most of them listen.

Even Jian Yu, who lingers to make one statement;

“…Shixiong—I’ve only ever tried to be a friend to you, but…” He shakes his head, staring at Yin Yu wearily. “If you’re not careful, then that boy will only bring you misery.”

Even then, when they had no clue what was to come next—his words carry an oddly prophetic ring.

Yin Yu sags when the door closes behind them, head in his hands.

“…San Lang, your assistant really does have an impressive personality,” Xie Lian murmurs.

Hua Cheng doesn't reply immediately, simply watches the scene as it unfolds.

The chambers for the sect's senior disciple are on a split level—the lower half for studying and meditation, and the upper side for living and sleeping.

When Yin Yu ascends the steps to close the window and prepare for bed—he nearly stumbles backwards, clutching his chest with shock.

"Quan Yizhen, I—!" He hunches over, his heart pounding. "How long have you been sitting there?"

The boy doesn't respond, staring at the horizon.

Yin Yu straightens up with a sigh, reaching out to pull on his arm—but the younger man doesn't move or respond.

"...If you're going to stay here, could you let me shut the window? I'm getting ready for bed."

After a moment, Yin Yu responds—but not to what he asked.

"...Shixiong, am I annoying?"

Yin Yu pauses, his hand halfway extended towards him, unsure of how to respond.

"You're...um..." His eyes slip to the side, and Xie Lian can see him struggling, teetering between being honest, and being kind.

"You're...not so bad."

It's not exactly glowing praise—clearly, he just wanted to give an answer that wasn't hurtful.

And yet, Quan Yizhen takes him at face value.

"...But everyone else thinks I'm annoying."

"..." Yin Yu reaches behind him, stroking Quan Yizhen's curls. "Does that matter?"

"...I only care if Shixiong likes me," he mutters, reaching back to catch Yin Yu's hand at the wrist.

It's funny—he still looks so young in comparison, blessed with a handsome face, with no lines of worry—

But his grip on the senior's disciple wrist may as well be iron.

Ironically enough, in this case—Xie Lian sees what the young man means almost instantly.

That the word 'like' was used with utmost seriousness. To be taken a certain way.

And he watches with faint embarrassment and discomfort as the meaning is *not* understood.

"...Of course I like you," Yin Yu assures him, patting the back of his head. "I've always liked you."

He wouldn't have given him a place here if he hadn't.

Even if liking Quan Yizhen is hard sometimes.

The younger disciple looks back at him suddenly, eyes impossibly wide.

"I like Shixiong too," Quan Yizhen tells him breathlessly, still holding onto Yin Yu's wrist. "I like Shixiong better than anyone."

(Xie Lian groans, pressing his face into Hua Cheng's chest, unable to watch.)

Yin Yu laughs softly, ruffling his hair one more time.

"You don't like anyone else at all, Quan Yizhen. There isn't much competition." He tugs at his wrist gently. "Could you let go now? You're squeezing too hard—it hurts."

Xie Lian has never witnessed the man react so instantly and without question, dropping Yin Yu's wrist.

His shixiong reaches behind him, pulling the window shut. "Are you going to sleep here again? I hear your bunkmates are a bit upset with you."

Quan Yizhen doesn't even deny it, nodding shamelessly—and Yin Yu sighs, walking towards his bedroom.

"Let me change and wash up first—don't walk in like last time, okay? You nearly gave me a heart attack."

Quan Yizhen frowns, dropping down with a heavy thud to sit at the bottom of the stairs, waiting. "It's not like I haven't used the baths with Shixiong before..."

"The public baths," Yin Yu corrects him, pulling the curtain shut, the tub he filled earlier finally warm enough to use.

"And the private one."

"That was when you were a kid," the dark haired man huffs a laugh, pulling his hair up.

"Why is it different now?"

"Because," there's splashing sounds as he climbs into the tub, presumably naked, "two adults shouldn't be in a private bath together. Not unless they're married."

"..." Quan Yizhen scowls, pulling his knees against his chest, wrapping his arms around them as he waits.

There's a chance that, if Yin Yu had heard what he said then, he might have interpreted everything that came afterward differently.

"Later, then." Quan Yizhen mutters under his breath, his eyes staring determinedly at the curtain.

But...he didn't.

"...I'm guessing this means the problems between them started after their ascensions?" Xie Lina mutters, half mortified—and Hua Cheng nods, pushing the scene forward with a flick of his wrist.

And the moment the light shines down around them, Xie Lian knows where they are.

The Heavens.

Perhaps not in the grandest palace that he's ever seen in the heavenly capitol, but well made. With large windows facing a forest to the back, and smooth marble walls in the front.

"Ah," Xie Lian whips around at the sound of a familiar voice;

“So, this is the new palace of Yin Yu? I like it! Not…too overstated!”

A bright faced young man beams, one with long, chestnut waves of hair, gleaming like silk under the light—and warm, vividly green eyes.

“You think so, Lord Windmaster?” Yin Yu asks, hopeful.

Xie Lian couldn’t tell you why, but…

It makes him happy to know that the Shi Qingxuan has always had a kind face—and the prince suspects that carries over to whatever form the Wind Master takes.

It suits him, the way warmth can just be a second skin.

“I do!” Shi Qingxuan beams. “Very tasteful, really—some of the martial palaces are so gaudy, but this is just right!”

“I hear your own palace is rather extravagant,” a nearby civil god comments dryly, dressed in black.

“Well,” The Windmaster frowns, tapping his fan.

"It would be strange if the palace of Ling Wen didn't have any books, wouldn't it? So, of course my brother's palace is opulent, he's the god of wealth! Besides," he looks back to Yin Yu, smiling kindly. "New money is gaudy, old money is elegant. Elegance has its own charm!"

Yin Yu smiles at the Wind Master gratefully, and the civil god rolls his eyes, irritated.

"...Why does he seem familiar?" Xie Lian mutters, tilting his head.

"Oh," Hua Cheng is remarkably blasé about the matter, "that's because he's Blackwater."

"...He is?!" Xie Lian gasps. "But I don't understand..."

His first instinct is to blame the fact that he's so unaccustomed to taking in visual information, but—

"...He posed as more than just the earth master?"

"His true form was always disguised as Ming Yi," Hua Cheng explains.

"But he had around fifty clones embedded into the Heavenly Court by the time his cover was revealed."

...Fifty?!

"He can control that many clones at once?" Xie Lian marvels, silently awed by the level of compartmentalization, skill, and focus that must take.

"Ghost Kings really are amazing..."

Even at the peak of his power, Xie Lian never attempted controlling more than three clones at once.

"I've always been the best at changing my shape," Hua Cheng shrugs, only willing to give He Xuan a compliment if he gives himself one first.

"But Blackwater is the expert when it comes to clone manipulation."

Among other things, it seems.

"...Does he still have clones in the Heavens, you think?"

"Oh, I'm sure," Hua Cheng murmurs. "And I'm also sure that Jun Wu is going gray trying to weed them out."

He sounds a little too gleeful about that prospect—but Xie Lian is too distracted to ask him anything more about it, watching as Shi Qingxuan whispers with a minor forest god, hiding their faces behind his fan.

"Where are the others?"

"How should I know?" The older god whispers back. "Where's your brother?"

"Busy with the emperor," Shi Qingxuan's eyes flicker back towards Yin Yu, trying to act casual. "Ming Guang couldn't have made an appearance?"

"He's in the mortal realm on a mission!"

"He couldn't have made time?" Shi Qingxuan grumbles, annoyed.

Xie Lian is fairly sure that Pei Ming could be lying in the street, bleeding from the head, and Shi Qingxuan would say the same thing. The forest god seems to think the same, but has the sense not to say so.

"What about Xuan Zhen and Nan Yang?"

"It's better that they're not here," the Wind Master shakes his head. "They always make a scene."

(Xie Lian can't disagree with him there.)

"Still...I invited plenty of deputy gods to make an appearance with me..."

Shi Qingxuan cranes his neck, looking around. "You don't think they stood me up, do you? That's never happened to me before..."

Xie Lian thinks it was kind of the Wind Master to attempt to stir up interest in the opening of a new martial palace to begin with, but...

Given the reason that Hua Cheng is showing Xie Lian these memories, he has a fairly good guess as to why no one else is here.

"...Oi, is this the new martial palace?!" Voices cry from outside.

"What's the new guy's name? Yin...Su? No. Zu. No—Yin Wu?!"

"He's only been a god for a month--how did you forget his name already?!"

"I don't know! It's just kind of generic!"

Jian Yu, a newly appointed deputy, steps toward the door, veins popping in his forehead as he shakes his fist. "It's LORD YIN YU TO YOU, YOU IDIOTS!"

The group of middle court officials storm in now, knowing who they're looking for (by name, anyway.)

"...Oh!" Shi Qingxuan brightens, beginning to wave his fan. "You ca—..." He pauses, taking in the angry looks on their faces. "...came..."

"We were about to come, Lord Wind Master—and then we got attacked by someone from this very palace!" One of them declares angrily. "Is that how Lord Yin Yu intends to start his tenure in the heavens?! By having his deputies fight people in the streets?!"

Jian Yu steps forward, clearly incensed. "Now, you listen here—!"

Yin Yu puts one hand on his chest, stopping him, while his face drops into the other with a sigh.

"...If any harm was done to your property or persons, I'll be happy to reimburse you all," he mumbles, tired.

He doesn't even ask what happened, or who did it—it's a very familiar song and dance at this point—and he's used to playing along.

"...You're not going to punish him?!" Jian Yu rages at him later, once the others have left. "Shixiong—he ruined the palace opening!"

"...If I was going to punish him, it would be to make myself feel better, or to teach him something," Yin Yu mumbles, rubbing his hands against his temples. "Neither of those things are going to happen, so why bother?"

"You're just as bad as our master was!" Jian Yu snaps.

"Both of you always act like he can't be blamed for anything because he's ignorant to how the real world works! But can't he learn?! Isn't it our fault if we don't make him?!"

Yin Yu stares up at him with a helpless shrug.

"I've tried, Jian Yu. Some people are just..."

"What?!" Jian Yu throws his arms up. "Too stupid to learn?!"

Yin Yu's eyes flash with a rare hint of anger. "He's not stupid—don't say that just because you're angry with him."

"How are you DEFENDING him now?!"

"I'm not defending him—but why resort to insults?"

No matter how much they go back and forth, the reality is still the same. That Jian Yu desperately wants Quan Yizhen to face some sort of punishment—and Yin Yu outright refuses to engage in it.

It ends with Jian Yu storming off, leaving Yin Yu alone in his new palace, until…

"Gods!" Yin Yu stumbles to the side, clutching his chest once again when he steps into his bedroom, startled by the sight of Quan Yizhen sitting on top of his desk. "You really need to start announcing yourself..."

"It wasn't my fault."

Yin Yu stiffens, but doesn't reply.

Instead he turns around, working to straighten a set of knick knacks on top of a nearby dresser that clearly doesn't need any adjustment, just looking for something to distract himself with.

"I never said that it was."

"They were the ones who picked a fight with me."

"...What did they say?"

"They kept on asking me to bow to them, like I owed them something." Quan Yizhen wrinkles his nose. "But they were all just middle court officials. They don't matter."

No, but older deputy gods enjoy asserting seniority over new appointments.

"Was that all they asked?"

"No—they wanted me to call them certain titles, and apologize for getting in their way. I was just walking down the street like anyone else." Quan Yizhen shakes his head. "I wasn't going to do that."

"...But did you have to fight them over it?"

Yin Yu can't help but remember Jian Yu's words—how exasperated he seemed. "Could you not have simply told them no and walked away?"

"I tried," Quan Yizhen frowns, picking at his sleeve. "But they wouldn't let me leave. That was when I fought them."

When he says it like that--Yin Yu knows it was *their* fault, not Quan Yizhen's.

He knows that, but the flicker of frustration in his stomach remains.

Because would it have really been so horrible to do as they asked? To just suck up his pride and bow, saying a few nice words?

Yin Yu doesn't see how it could be so difficult—but his refusal to do so had real consequences for others.

Isn't that...selfish?

"...I wouldn't ruin today on purpose," Quan Yizhen mumbles, fingers tightening in his sleeve.

Almost self awareness, but—

"It was their fault."

Yin Yu sighs, fighting the urge to place his face in his hands with frustration.

"…I know," he agrees. "I know you would never do it on purpose."

(That's not the same, however, as saying he doesn't blame him.)

Quan Yizhen misses that distinction.

"…I have something for you," he mumbles, patting around in his pockets.

Yin Yu blinks, watching him I. Confusion. "…For me?"

"You're supposed to give people things when you want to congratulate them," Quan Yizhen speaks plainly, and Yin Yu's heart sinks.

It's a gift for his ascension, clearly.

"You didn't have to…"

Even if his resentment might be understandable, it doesn't feel right to accept it.

"Yes, I do."

And for all his insistence, it leaves Yin Yu with no idea what to expect, but…

He wasn't expecting his shidi to pull out a single Pearl, dropping it into his palm.

"…Oh," Yin Yu mumbles, staring down at it in surprise. "A Pearl?"

Quan Yizhen nods with utmost seriousness. He could have gotten a spiritual device, or a new sword—but this is better anyway.

"…Thank you, it's very pretty—"

"It made me think of you."

Yin Yi's face falters, because—

Pearls are beautiful, but…

Xie Lian’s face falls into his hands.

“He doesn’t see it, does he?”

“…He does not,” Hua Cheng agrees, faintly amused.

“This is just so….”

"Keep watching, gege."

(Because it gets worse.)

"...I don't really own any other jewelry pieces, so..." Yin Yu trails off, unsure of what to say, but Quan Yizhen pays him no mind.

"You can wear it by itself."

"...Right," Yin Yu mutters, fumbling around for a chain.

Once he slips the pearl onto the links, tying it around his neck—Quan Yizhen seems satisfied enough to change the subject.

"...I don't like it here, Shixiong."

Yin Yu looks up from his new accessory to find his shidi forlorn, hugging himself.

"Can we go home now?"

Yin Yu rubs the back of his neck, hesitant.

“…Quan Yizhen, it’s not that simple…”

“You don’t like it here either,” the deputy points out, looking up at him with wide eyes. “I can tell.”

Oh, so he can see that much, but he can’t see—

Yin Yu sighs, crossing his arms.

“Why don’t you want to stay?”

“Everyone lies here,” Quan Yizhen mumbles. “And it smells bad.”

That actually startles Yin Yu. “…What?”

The Heavens doesn’t have any distinct smell—it changes from palace to palace. His, for example, smells like cedar wood.

“It smells like ash,” Quan Yizhen mumbles, crinkling his nose. “…And bone.”

“…Bones have a smell?”

“Burnt ones do,” his shidi glances out the window, irritated. “It’s like sweet incense is trying to cover it up everywhere you go—but it’s still there.”

“…Why would the heavens smell like that? A-Yizhen—you’re sensing what you want to sense because you don’t want to be here. Everyone in the heavens is immortal—there’s no reason there would be ashes here.”

“I am not,” Quan Yizhen frowns. “Who wants to smell something like that?”

Yin Yu doesn't have an answer to that—and Quan Yizhen reaches out, grabbing his hands.

"Shixiong, we should leave. You don't have to live in the Heavens to be a god. Like Lord Rain Master."

Yin Yu stares down at their joined hands, hanging his head.

"I don't want to leave."

Quan Yizhen frowns, frustrated. "...Why not? What does this place have that everywhere else doesn't?"

"It..." Yin Yu hesitates. "It was so much hard work to ascend in the first place, Quan Yizhen. I earned my place here. Why shouldn't I want to stay?"

"...What's so important about ascending anyways?" Quan Yizhen shrugs, tugging at his hands insistently. "There are plenty of gods. Who wants to be just like them?"

Xie Lian cringes in silent discomfort.

Because of course, it's the wrong thing to say to Yin Yu of *all* people.

Someone who has *never* been considered remarkable, no matter how hard he worked. And now, having achieved one of the greatest distinctions, ascension—

Quan Yizhen is telling him that it isn't even that special to begin with.

"...If it's so easy, then why don't you try it?"

Xie Lian still hasn't lifted his head from his hands—and he groans before the memory even moves forward, knowing that Yin Yu will come to regret those words.

And he does—in a remarkably short span of time.

Six months.

That's how long it takes for General Qi Ying to ascend.

Six months of focused training—compared to years of Yin Yu giving it absolutely everything he had.

And Yin Yu doesn't seem to resent the fact that Quan Yizhen ascended. It was almost like he expected it, and Xie Lian can see why.

It's like the boy was born to be a martial god.

That in itself isn't the problem, no.

It's that Jun Wu—likely well intentioned, assigned them both to the West.

Two Martial Gods in any one region could be difficult. Ming Guang has always been the sole appointee in the North for a reason;

He would overshadow anyone else.

For martial gods--that can mean eventual destruction, even if the two don't mean each other any harm.

Even in Xie Lian's exile and eventual erasure from cultural memory, he's never been replaced as the martial god of the central plains either.

Because, on the off chance that he ever did ascend once more as a full blown martial god, shackles removed—he would likely quickly and immediately subsume any possible successor.

The only exceptions he can think of to that rule would be Mu Qing and Feng Xin.

And the reason for them being an exception isn't particularly hard to guess.

In terms of martial skills, the two are evenly matched. Feng Xin might have more brute strength and aggression, but Mu Qing is faster, graceful, and tactical.

Even in the skills where they surpass one another, neither is far behind. Eternal rivalry is good for some things, Xie Lian supposes.

And, unlike other martial gods, each of them has had the sense to diversify what they're worshiped for.

In Feng Xin's case, it actually isn't a matter of sense—it was purely a case of unfortunate error and bad luck.

But, being a god of virility isn't the worst thing—it's something men and women alike will always pray for.

The same goes for medicine.

Even if one of them became favored over the other as martial god of the south—they wouldn't fade from relevance.

But even so...

"...I wonder how Feng Xin and Mu Qing manage it..." Xie Lian murmurs out loud, watching the memories float by.

The balance exists for all of the reasons he's already stated, and by the fact that neither of them seems to wish genuine harm on the other, but—

"You know, they have more than a few joint temples," Hua Cheng comments idly, and Xie Lian is left dumbfounded with shock.

"...I can't imagine either one of them is happy about that," he mutters dubiously, and Hua Cheng snickers with agreement.

"From what I gather, each of them is too mortified to bring it up."

Finally, the memories come to a halt once more—and Xie Lian recognizes the music.

Songs that are only played during the mid-autumn festival.

Despite the fact that Yin Yu has never been in the top ten during the battle of the lanterns—or even close—he’s always enjoyed the celebration. Watching the fireworks, eating sweets with Jian Yu.

He makes the most of it

Watching the others—the special ones—taking center stage in the festivities.

Shi Qingxuan has clearly had too much to drink, half strewn over the earth master’s lap as she sings along with the folk songs.

“Ming-Xiong, stop eating and sing along!”

“Mmmphf.”

"I know," Shi Qingxuan slurs, patting his cheek. "I know it's not your comfort zone, but you need to GROW Ming-xiong! Expand your horizons!"

"Mmmm."

"Hey—that's just uncalled for!"

Then there's Mu Qing, and the sight of his silver hair gives Xie Lian a start.

Someone mentioned to him that he has to wear it that way during the mid-autumn festival—because his Worshippers depict him that way. Similar to how Shi Qingxuan has to take her female form.

He isn't shocked by the color itself—rather by how ethereal it makes his friend look.

Laughing and smiling—a rare sight—among the deputies from his palace. And across the room, Feng Xin scowls in his direction, taking a few extra swallows from his glass of wine.

It's a rather endearing scene—old friends and new, and Xie Lian supposes, around this time...

He would have probably been fighting in the army of Yong'an in the Crescent Moon Kingdom, looking after Banyue.

Xie Lian can't say he regrets those years with her, and yet—

For some reason, seeing moments like this...leaves an ache.

"Oh! You must be the Martial God of the West!"

Yin Yu whips around to see a minor deity offering a friendly smile.

"Oh—yes, that's me!"

"Has it been difficult lately?" It's rare that anyone stops to make small talk with him of all people these days—and the martial god is glad for the company.

"I heard that you've been assigned to the same territory as another martial god."

"Oh, it's not so bad," Yin Yu smiles pleasantly, shaking his head. "We were in the same sect together before we ascended, so we've always got along well."

"The same sect? How impressive!"

The other official places both hands on his hips, looking Yin Yu over. "Speaks to the training you both received, I'm sure! He's lucky you two are on good terms, I doubt he'd last very long against you, sir!"

"Oh..." Yin Yu pauses, confused. "I'm not sure that's the case..."

"Of course it is!" The official beams, taking a generous sip from his glass of wine. "After all, you're the most promising martial god to ascend in the last few centuries! Everyone's been talking about that wolf spirit you vanquished a few weeks ago!"

Yin Yu freezes.

"Oh, um...I think you've got that mixed up," He smiles awkwardly. "I'm afraid Quan Yizhen was the one who vanquished the wolf spirit, not me."

The official stares at him, his eyes widening, lips rounding into an 'o,' "You mean you're not...?"

Yin Yu's smile quickly fades.

"I..." The official seems to realize with dawning horror what he's done, and doesn't know what to do other than let out a shrill, awkward laugh, downing the rest of his wine. "I-I'm so sorry, I thought you were —!"

"It's fine!" Yin Yu blurts out quickly, waving his hands. "Actually, I've had too much to drink, and I'm pretty tired. I think—I think I'll just go ahead and retire for the night!"

(He winces at the word 'retire.' Why would he say it like that, after everything that was said just now?)

He turns around quickly, hurrying off.

By the time he's back on the street, he's walking briskly—not wanting to cause a scene by running, but desperate to get away from the party, a growing lump in his throat.

But...

"Do you see what I mean?!" Jian Yu mutters, appearing at his heels. "I was right all along!"

"...You saw that?" Yin Yu croaks, his arms crossed tightly, and Xie Lian's heart aches with sympathy.

"Of course I did! How could he dare to disrespect you like that?! You're the SENIOR martial god of the west!"

Yin Yu bites back a bitter laugh.

"I don't think that matters."

He's what—six months ahead of him in terms of ascension? As far as gods are concerned, they might as well be celestial twins.

And in age—they're what, five years apart in age? To immortals, that's absolutely nothing.

Why should that scrap of seniority matter—all when one is clearly so superior to the other in talent?

"None of this would be happening if we had just kicked him out to begin with! He has NEVER known his place! Always stealing opportunities from everyone else—!"

"Like what?!"

They step back inside the palace of Yin Yu, with the deputy general practically bursting at the seams with built up frustration.

"There were so many points—you take your pick! He was lucky enough to be appointed to the middle court by you, and look how he shows his gratitude!"

"Being appointed to the middle court has nothing to do with whether or not you actually ascend," Yin Yu sighs, walking across the room to pour himself a drink. "He did that on his own."

And Yin Yu doubts he's grateful for any of it—Quan Yizhen still asks him to go home.

Maybe it's a yearning for childhood. For things to be simple again. To go back to a time when he could monopolize his shixiong as much as he wanted, but...

Yin Yu still catches him wrinkling his nose when he sniffs the air here.

Almost like he *still* smells ash and bone.

"So?! He wouldn't have learned cultivation at all if it wasn't for you! And he doesn't CARE about any of this, but he STILL takes opportunities from you! Like killing the wolf demon and getting all of the credit for it!" Jian Yu sputters, pacing the room. "He's shameless!"

"...Look, the people in the area prayed to him, not me. And even if they had asked me..." Yin Yu sighs, staring down at his glass. "I probably wouldn't have been able to handle it. He was the better choice."

"...Lord Yin Yu," Jian Yu implores him, exasperated. "You can't keep going on like this."

"I don't—" Yin Yu slumps, pressing a hand against his forehead. "I don't know what you expect me to do."

"Something! Be selfish! Be greedy! Fight for yourself!" Jian Yu glares, smacking his hand on the table between them.

"Because if you don't—if you don't learn how to start playing the game the way the rest of these people do, you aren't going to be a god for very long."

"I—playing the game?" Yin Yu mutters, shaking his head. "What are you talking about?"

"Look—I like Shi Qingxuan as much as anybody, but do you honestly think he's the Wind Master because he's an amazing cultivator?"

Watching the dream, Xie Lian stiffens, startled. "...He figured it out that soon?" He whispers.

"Not exactly," Hua Cheng shakes his head. “But Jian Yu wasn’t a fool. To the contrary, he was the most intelligent of the three—just the least skilled in cultivation, and not destined to ascend himself.”

Within the memory, the deputy god shakes his head. “He’s the Wind Master because the Water Master made it so!”

"Okay?!" Yin Yu throws one hand up, the other still clutching his forehead, frustrated. "What am I supposed to do about that? I don't have any connections to the higher level gods, in case you hadn't noticed!"

"You have your family in the mortal realm!" Jian Yu glares.

"With all of the connections your brothers have—couldn't they build you temples? Or make larger donations at the very least!"

Yin Yu's face contorts with a flash of something that has built slowly—over a lifetime of disappointments;

Wounded pride.

"No!" He snaps. "I can't ask them!"

He'd rather deal with the worst case scenario than ask his family for help. Than admit that the one thing that finally made him remarkable wasn't—

That *he* wasn't good enough.

"...Then tell Quan Yizhen to back off!" Jian Yu gestures animatedly. "If he actually gives a damn, maybe he'll listen!"

That—

Yin Yu can't do that either.

"Why should he have to change, just because I can't—?"

Creak!

Both men fall silent, looking towards the door.

Speak of the devil, and he shall appear.

"...Quan Yizhen!"

Yin Yu's smile is all forced politeness and false warmth, desperately trying to hide the conversation they were having before. "Shouldn't you be at the festival?"

Behind him, Jian Yu picks up his half finished drink, downing it as he rolls his eyes.

"Shouldn't he have learned to knock?"

Yin Yu sends him a look, but Quan Yizhen doesn't respond to that. Actually, he doesn't even seem to acknowledge Jian Yu's presence, instead focusing on Yin Yu.

Which is entirely normal, after all—he is *always* focused on his Shixiong, regardless of the circumstances.

"I heard that you left the banquet in a rush," Quan Yizhen steps forward, examining Yin Yu's face.

Before he was pale, stricken—and now, in his Shidi's presence, his forced smile remains in place, fighting not to betray that anything is wrong.

"I was tired. It's been busy lately..."

Behind him, Jian Yu takes another swig of his lord's wine, scowling. "So busy," he repeats.

(They haven't received a request to go on a mission in the mortal realm in over a month. Jian Yu has been reading the compiled volumes of Jing Wen's essays for the third time. Yin Yu has taken up studying different celestial maps in order to pass the time.)

Quan Yizhen finally does look at Jian Yu now, a rare flicker of irritation flashing in his gaze. Jian Yu never liked the younger disciple—but that feeling was never mutual.

Honestly , Quan Yizhen never paid much attention to him one way or the other, but...

"Oh," Xie Lian breathes, eyes widening. "Does he think...?"

Hua Cheng shrugs. "I suppose even the most oblivious souls aren't immune to jealousy, are they?"

(Oh, if only he knew.)

Quan Yizhen shrugs off Yin Yu's explanation without question, glancing around. It's only been ten years since his own ascension—but he misses it here. That much is clear from the look on his face.

His own palace is boring, too big—and filled with far too many things that he couldn't be bothered to care about.

"I heard that someone mistook you for me."

Yin Yu grows pale, his jaw clenching.

"...I suppose that did happen," he mutters, turning his gaze toward the floor in order to hide his expression. "It was an. honest mistake on their part."

Honestly, Xie Lian has learned to know better than to expect any reaction from Quan Yizhen, but—

He wasn't expecting Quan Yizhen to *laugh* .

Not unkindly, but loud—hunching over and clutching his ribs, shaking his head as though it's the funniest thing he's ever heard.

"Ha! I would have liked to see that!"

Behind Yin Yu, Jian Yu's fingers tighten around his glass—practically trembling with rage.

That Quan Yizhen would even dare laugh at something that caused their Shixiong such humiliation.

(On the contrary, Xie Lian doesn't think it ever occurred to Quan Yizhen that such an experience might be humiliating for Yin Yu. Honestly, he probably found it funny because the two look nothing alike, but...

Jian Yu has never been generous when interpreting him.)

It takes Yin Yu a few moments to speak. Always patient, always understanding, but—

There's only so much a man can take. And having such a profoundly mortifying experience, hearing Quan Yizhen laugh at it...

It gets to him. It's visible from the hunch in his shoulders.

But when he speaks, there isn't a trace of that in his tone.

"...Then I'm sorry that you didn't get the chance to see it," he mutters, clearing his throat. "But as you can see, I'm perfectly well. Did you just come here to check on me?"

"That was part of it," Quan Yizhen acknowledges, "But I was going to come over later anyway."

Yin Yu waits for an explanation as the martial god stares at him, expectant.

"...Well, I'm glad to hear it," Yin Yu forces another smile. "I'm always happy when you decide to visit."

Such a statement probably would have been sincere, a few years back. Now, listening to him say it makes Xie Lian grimace.

Quan Yizhen stares at him, as though he finds something about this odd—and the reason for it soon becomes clear.

"I always visit you on my birthday."

Yin Yu bites back the urge to swear when he realizes.

Right.

Quan Yizhen's birthday IS during the Mid-Autumn Festival this year. How could Yin Yu have forgotten?

"...Right!" The martial god agrees quickly. "I'm sorry I didn't speak to you earlier, it's just been so busy!"

"So busy," Jian Yu parrots from behind the two, rolling his empty glass against his palm as Yin Yu steps forward, patting the top of Quan Yizhen's head.

Even now, as a grown man and formidable martial god, the gesture makes Quan Yizhen brighten.

"Happy Birthday!"

Yin Yu enthuses cheerfully, smiling at his shidi with a little less force, and a little more genuine warmth.

It's nice that now, even when things are so different than the way things used to be, some things will stay the—

"Where's my present?"

"I..." Yin Yu falls silent, his mouth hanging open as he struggles for an answer. "I, ah..."

He almost tells him the truth, he really does.

But he's standing there, staring all expectantly, and he just—

"...Have it back here somewhere! Jian Yu, come and help me find it!"

He stumbles backwards, grabbing his deputy by the sleeve as he drags him out of the room, disappearing into the private chambers of his palace, leading Jian Yu down the hall.

"What should I do?!" He whispers frantically. "I completely forgot!"

And how could he have done that?

He's gotten Quan Yizhen a birthday present every single year, even back before he began training in their temple. He hasn't missed a year in decades, and it's something that he expects—

"You could always tell him that he's a grown man, and it's ridiculous for him to show up here like this, laugh at you, then demand a birthday present?" Jian Yu counters dryly.

"I can't do that!"

"Why not?!"

"He won't understand—it'll just hurt his feelings," Yin Yu mutters, his hair slipping free from its braid in his distress, several pieces falling into his face.

"And?! He just hurt YOUR feelings!"

"That's different."

"How?!"

"He didn't MEAN to!" Yin Yu groans. "That doesn't mean I should be cruel to him!"

"It's not cruel! Because you're both ADULTS and you have bigger things to worry about than getting him a birthday gift! He's immortal! He can't expect his birthday to be celebrated indefinitely!"

Oh, but he can.

Yin Yu doesn't really expect Jian Yu to understand.

For Quan Yizhen—it isn't really about getting a birthday gift. Not necessarily. It's about the gift being from *Yin Yu* , because...

Yin Yu is the only one who's ever bothered to give him anything.

Quan Yizhen has never had many connections, or sources of stability in his life. Those he does have, he holds onto tightly.

Among them—

Yin Yu gets him a birthday gift every year. Always has, always will.

That's important to him.

"Look..." Yin Yu sighs, pressing his face into his hands for a moment, taking a deep breath. "Just go find that armlet I was given a few months ago, alright? That should be nice enough, I don't have anything else here I could give him with no notice."

"But—"

"Please, Jian Yu."

"...Fine, fine!" He grumbles, walking off. "I don't even know why I bother!"

He can complain all he wants—Yin Yu is just relieved that he's actually doing as he says.

He walks back out to the front, where Quan Yizhen is still waiting, leaning against one of the pillars.

“…Jian Yu remembered where it was while we were looking,” Yin Yu explains, a little nervous. “He’ll be back with it in just a moment.”

“…He didn’t help you pick it out, did he?”

Yin Yu pauses, a little surprised by the question. “Um…no. Why?”

Quan Yizhen shrugs.

“No reason.”

Yin Yu tilts his head curiously—and that’s when Jian Yu returns, a gift box in hand.

(Having even taken the time to properly package it before bringing it out, bless him.)

“Here you are, General,” he mutters, handing it over. “Happy birthday.”

From that moment, Yin Yu should have known.

Jian Yu NEVER referred to Quan Yizhen by his proper title before that moment—or even deigned to wish him a happy birthday.

Yin Yu should have known—but he didn’t.

And the things he should have known would cost him everything.

“Thank you,” Quan Yizhen bows his head, going to open the gift, but —

“Maybe you should wait to open it until you get home,” Yin Yu mutters, exhausted. “You’ve had such a long day.”

“…Alright,” Quan Yizhen agrees with a shrug.

"I'm going on patrol in a few weeks—if Shixiong has time, he should come with me."

"Yes," Yin Yu replies distractedly. "Yes, we'll see..."

The minute Quan Yizhen is out the door, Jian Yu is fuming.

"Did you hear him?! Bragging about going on patrol—who does he think he is?!"

Yin Yu sends him one tired look, then shakes his head, walking back to his bedroom.

It doesn't matter anymore, really.

"..." Xie Lian watches events unfold, his stomach sinking. "...San Lang, that gift he gave him wasn't the armlet, was it?"

"No," the calamity agrees.

"It was the Brocade Immortal."

"...But why did they even have it?" Xie Lian frowns, trying to understand.

"Before this incident, it was normal for martial gods to house cursed objects in order to guard them, rather than leave that task solely to the emperor."

That makes sense—Xie Lian faintly remembers housing a few cursed blades in his own palace after his first ascension.

"But...they left something as dangerous as the Brocade Immortal with Yin Yu?" He questions, startled.

He means no offense—but it's beyond his capabilities.

A god like Pei Ming or Feng Xin would have been more suited. Xie Lian would say Mu Qing as well—but given his spiteful temper, perhaps...

"Prior to this, no one realized just how dangerous the brocade immortal was," Hua Cheng shakes his head. "So, they saw no risk."

Xie Lian supposes he can understand that circumstance. If the brocade immortal had never been turned against a god before, there was no reason to think the cursed robe would work in that sense. Not yet.

And giving it to someone as kind tempered as Yin Yu would seem practical.

“…But Yin Yu didn’t even know what Jian Yu had done,” Xie Lian frowns. “Why would his punishment for what happened be so harsh?”

“It only takes three days to see why,” Hua Cheng replies—and with a flick of his wrist, time rapidly moves forward.

The sun rising and setting quickly across the sky, shadows shifting across the floor—until the day arrives.

Yin Yu’s last day in the Heavens.

“…Jian Yu?” He steps out into the main hall, something clutched in his hand. “Where are you?”

“Here, my lord. What is it?”

“…Why did I find the golden exorcism armlet here?” Yin Yu frowns, holding it up in front of him, the golden bangle gleaming in the light. “You didn’t box something inappropriate to give to Quan Yizhen instead, did you?”

Jian Yu shrugs, crossing his arms smugly.

“Oh, I gave him something that suits him much better.”

Yin Yu sends him a confused look, sighing with annoyance.

“Why do you always have to insult people?” He mutters, turning away, but—

Yin Yu’s palace isn’t exactly overflowing with treasure. What could he have possibly—?

The moment Yin Yu realizes, his face grows pale.

“Jian Yu…you…” his hair whips around him as he turns to look at his deputy, panicked. “You didn’t give him that robe, did you?!”

“And so what if I did?” His friend glares. “Maybe he’ll finally learn a lesson!”

“Jian Yu!”

“What?!”

“That thing is dangerous!” Yin Yu groans. “It feeds off the blood of anyone who wears it—he could get hurt!”

“That brute? He could probably wear it for the next decade without noticing anything was wrong. Besides—all it means is he has to do what you tell him to!”

It’s the same assumption that landed Yin Yu with looking after the Brocade Immortal to begin with.

That of course he could be trusted with that sort of thing—because he had such a good temperament.

He would never misuse it.

In Xie Lian’s experience, assumptions like that…

They never end well.

Everyone has their limits.

“Where are you going?”

“Where do you think?” Yin Yu mutters, pulling on his boots as he heads toward the door. “I have to get that thing off of him!”

Without letting anyone else realize what‘s happened either—no small task.

Xie Lian almost wishes he could shout for him to stop—already knowing that, somehow, the martial god is doomed to fail, but…

It’s too late to change the course of the past now, and they can only watch.

“…Lord Yin Yu,” Jun Wu raises an eyebrow when the doors slam open.

“It’s rare to see you here these days. To what do we owe the honor?”

“I, ah…” Yin Yu clears his throat, his eyes flickering to the side, taking in the sight of Quan Yizhen. “I just wanted to…”

General Pei kicks back in his chair, smiling crookedly. “Like Qi Ying’s new armor?”

"Um..." Yin Yu can't stop staring at it, the shoulder plates gleaming impressively under the light, almost demanding to be seen. "Yes, they look very nice on you."

Quan Yizhen smiles faintly, clearly pleased. "They were a birthday gift from Shixiong."

It's almost shocking how quickly Yin Yu goes from smiling politely to looking slightly shell shocked.

"I—ah, yes, so it is."

"Your shixiong is very kind," Pei Ming muses, leaning back in his chair, slightly forlorn.

"My birthday is soon to be upon us, and I doubt I'll receive such a generous gift..."

From the seat to his right, the Water Master rolls his eyes, most of his face obscured by his fan as he waves it in front of his face lazily.

"I suppose you'll just have to wait and see."

"I, um..." Yin Yu swallows hard, glancing among the gathered heavenly officials, some of the most important in the heavens, realizing...

He feels so out of place here. Like a child sneaking into a meeting where he doesn't belong.

Quan Yizhen, however, looks utterly at ease.

The stark difference between the two of them has never felt quite so bitter until now.

"Quan Yizhen, when you have a moment, I need to speak with you. I'll just...wait outside until then."

"No need," Jun Wu shakes his head, rising to his feet. "We've just about finished all of our work here already. This meeting is adjourned."

The other officials nod, murmuring in acknowledgment as they go about their business, filing out of the room.

Ling Wen nearly trips over her own feet, twisting her head around to look at the two of them, her face oddly pale—only for Shi Wudu to catch her by the wrist, tugging her along.

"What's gotten into you, Ling Wen?"

"Sorry, I..."

Her eyes linger on the general for a moment longer, lips drawn into a thin, firm line. "I got distracted."

When Quan Yizhen goes to follow, Jun Wu calls over to him—

"Oh, and General Qi Ying—I'll think about your request."

Quan Yizhen looks back, giving him a short nod before walking out beside Yin Yu, who can't help but glance back over his shoulder as they go down the steps, baffled.

"...Request?" He mutters, his brow creasing.

"I don't think I've ever heard of you requesting anything from the emperor."

"Huh?" Quan Yizhen looks over at him, then shrugs, rubbing the side of his neck. Not in a sheepish gesture, no—there's just been a sting there lately. Like some sort of bug bite...

"Oh—I told the emperor that I wanted you to go on patrol with me next month, and he said he would think about it."

Yin Yu freezes on the final step, almost like he's been grabbed by an invisible force.

Xie Lian can only peek through his fingers at this point.

Patrols are a major component of a martial god's prominence. Each god is responsible for their own territory, but each month certain deities are selected to descend to the mortal realm full time, fighting monsters and earning merits as they do so.

It's a privilege, one only given to the higher ranking martial gods as a sign of their status. Yin Yu was invited on a few patrols in the very early days following his ascension, but...not recently.

The idea that Quan Yizhen would go to the emperor and ask him to invite his shixiong along...there's something so profoundly mortifying about it, Yin Yu has nearly lost the ability to speak.

"I...I didn't ask you to do that!" He croaks, his face flushing an angry shade of red. "Why...why would you do that?!"

He didn't ask Quan Yizhen to do that—but Quan Yizhen *did* bring up the idea of going on patrol together on his birthday.

But Xie Lian doubts that Yin Yu remembers such things—or that it would have made a difference.

"Shixiong..." Quan Yizhen's voice is a sharp contrast to Yin Yu's mortification. Shocked, staring back at his shixiong with confusion. "Are you angry? Did I do something wrong?"

"You...!" Yin Yu turns away, clutching the sides of his head, nostrils flaring.

Trying so, so hard not to lose his temper.

But when Quan Yizhen's hand lands on his shoulder, he just...

"YOU GO BACK TO THE EMPEROR RIGHT NOW AND TAKE IT BACK!" Yin Yu cries.

That patience, ever present, ever relied upon, *finally* snaps.

Yin Yu catches his breath, trembling with anger as he fights to get his emotions back under control, turning around, planning on repeating himself far more calmly, but—

When he does, he sees Quan Yizhen staring back at him, stricken—white as a ghost.

"I..."

Yin Yu swallows hard, suddenly ashamed. He's never raised his voice to Quan Yizhen before, of course—

Of course, it must have been a shock to him. But—

Before Yin Yu can say a word, Quan Yizhen's body jerks back around, running back up the steps to do as he's told, but...

Not the way he would if he was simply doing as Yin Yu asked him to. No. His body...is moving strangely.

Almost like his limbs are that of a marionette, strings being plucked with every step. Jerking, unnatural, and quick.

"...Quan Yizhen?" Yin Yu starts after him, gasping with horror when his shidi violently shoves a deputy ogd out of his way. With so much force that it sends him flying into a nearby pillar, breaking his arm. "...QUAN YIZHEN!"

Around them, there are voices of panic rising through the crowd as the martial god begins violently throwing people out of his way, leaving no one in his path unscathed.

And with slow building horror, Yin Yu visibly begins to realize what he's done.

That it isn't Quan Yizhen doing this, it—

It's the Brocade Immortal.

Xie Lian watches two diverging, equally distressing emotions cross over Yin Yu's face.

First, guilt. For the situation that Quan Yizhen is in, and the fact that he's now made it *so* much worse.

And second, maybe even more importantly: fear.

Yin Yu looks absolutely *petrified* . Not over the fact that Quan Yizhen might harm him, no. Brocade Immortal or not, that's an impossibility.

No.

Everyone is *seeing* this. Everyone is going to *know* .

Yin Yu's chances of getting Quan Yizhen alone and getting the robe off of him without anyone knowing about it are gone now.

He'll be blamed. He'll—

He'll be punished for it, too.

Even though he never meant for this to happen.

Even if he wasn't the one who gave Quan Yizhen the stupid thing to begin with—

No one else is going to care about that. No one else is going to *see* that. They'll just—

They'll just see him for what he really is.

Someone entirely unremarkable, bitterly trapped in the shadow of someone who always shines.

The shame and fear that brings strikes him to the core, and he just—

"SOMEONE CALL THE MARTIAL GODS, HE'S LOST HIS MIND!"

"IS HE TRYING TO BREAK INTO THE IMPERIAL PALACE?!"

"SOMEONE HELP, HE'S BROKEN MY LEG!"

"...JUST GO!" Yin Yu shrieks, hunched over, pulling at his hair. "JUST GET OUT OF HERE!"

He can't be reasonable anymore.

And Xie Lian's speculation earlier—that the brocade immortal had never been used on a god, and they wouldn't know what to expect—all of that was true.

Before now, the Brocade Immortal had never been inflicted on anyone but mortals.

And centuries later, in the hands of a civil god, it would be quite formidable.

But in the hands of a martial god—that's when the cursed object is at its least stable point.

When even the one who gifted the wearer the cursed object can't completely control them.

Quan Yizhen turns around, staggering slightly, dark energy emanating from his body as he walks past the injured officials remaining in the martial hall, descending to the outside with slow, heavy footsteps.

And the moment he's past Yin Yu...

Any god that gets in his way, he attacks.

And one of them...

"MURDER!" One of the deputy officials shrieks with terror, watching as blood pools in the streets. "MURDER IN THE HEAVENS!"

...isn't as lucky as the others.

"Oh god..." Yin Yu whispers, horrified, taking a trembling step backwards.

...How did it come to this? He never...he never meant...!

"SOMETHING IS CONTROLLING GENERAL QI YING, DIDN'T YOU NOTICE?! HE DIDN'T START ATTACKING UNTIL YIN YU SHOUTED AT HIM!"

"I SAW THE SAME THING!"

"Don't run," Xie Lian whispers desperately, watching the rising panic in Yin Yu's expression. "That'll make everything look so much worse, don't—"

But his words cannot carry through time—and in his terror, Yin Yu simply turns on his heel and flees, making like he's going to descend into the mortal realm, until—

SLAM!

"Oof!"

He hits the ground—hard—one arm twisted behind his back until he feels the bone snap.

"What the hell is this?!" A voice snarls in his ear, just as other gods around them begin to cry out in relief.

"The martial gods—they're here!"

And one of them—General Xuan Zhen—already has Yin Yu in custody.

Capturing Quan Yizhen, however...isn't so simple.

Not without killing him.

"Hell!" Feng Xin snaps, holding his bow in a locked position, the notch of the arrow moving around frantically. "That armor only has gaps at the LETHAL points! Who the hell designs it like that?! Where's Pei?!"

"The emperor had him descend to deal with a matter in the mortal realm as soon as the meeting was over!"

"Could he not—!" Feng Xin grits his teeth, trying to aim for the back of Quan Yizhen's knee, only to find the armor covers *that* too. "Could he not have WAITED A MINUTE?!"

"We're calling him, we're—!"

Just then, Quan Yizhen makes eye contact with Mu Qing, holding Yin Yu down—and his pupils dilate with rage, surging forward—

And Xie Lian sees a flash of an unusual emotion on Feng Xin's face.

Genuine fear.

"HEY—!"

BOOM!

Perhaps the armor isn't giving any options for an arrow or a blade to strike Quan Yizhen in a place that isn't fatal, forcing the other martial gods to choose between saving the others, and killing their comrades.

Water, however, is a far more flexible medium than a blade.

And even with just the spiritual pools around the Heavens, there's enough to pin Quan Yizhen down, enveloping him with a pulsing current, one that even the Brocade Immortal cannot escape.

Feng Xin sags, letting out a breath he didn't know he was holding.

"...Thank you, Lord Water Master."

Xie Lian turns his head around. Shi Wudu's face was hidden by his fan during the meeting, and he hardly spoke.

Now, his eyes burn with a vibrant, intensely blue light, hair whipping around him as he guides spiritual power through his fan.

Shi Wudu barely nods to acknowledge Feng Xin's gratitude, his eyes narrowed with concentration as he controls the currents around Quan Yizhen's body, using them to slowly—painfully—pry the armor off of him, piece by piece.

"How the hell did Qi Ying end up like this?!"

Quan Yizhen struggles violently just then, forcing Shi Wudu to grit his teeth and grip onto the water tighter, allowing only his face to escape so he doesn't drown—and two things occur to Xie Lian.

First, he finds it odd that no one ever spoke often of the Water Master's looks.

Even in a situation like this—and Xie Lian was never one to pay much attention to such things—

Shi Qingxuan's elder brother is uncommonly beautiful.

But there's something far more pressing, something strange—

Something that never occurred to him until now.

Standing here, with Hua Cheng beside him, his friends before him, watching Quan Yizhen and Yin Yu struggle, seeing Shi Wudu standing there, a living, breathing person who would fade into a painful mystery—

It feels like broken pieces surrounding him, rather than actual people.

Like he's supposed to be matching the shattered edges together, as though everything before his eyes is a puzzle of someone else's design.

And Shi Wudu is the piece that doesn't fit.

Because seeing the scope of his skills with his own eyes—Xie Lian doesn't understand.

"..." He steps toward the water master, invisible inside this scene, watching his face with ever growing confusion.

"...Why did he let you die?" Xie Lian whispers, hand hovering in mid-air.

"Who?" Hua Cheng asks him softly, watching from a few steps behind.

"The emperor," Xie Lian starts, his voice faint. "Everyone spoke about how close he and Shi Wudu were, I..."

Xie Lian can think of so many things that have happened since the opening of Mount Tonglu that the Water Master could have stopped, if he had lived.

As a matter of fact—things really only started to fall apart *after* he died. An almost predictable result of Jun Wu losing his most powerful ally.

Hell—when Jun Wu asked Xie Lian to step in and take over his duties while he went to Mount Tonglu, he...

All Xie Lian could think of was the fact that the only people qualified to do that would have been Ming Guang, or the Water Master.

One dead—and the other devastated by his loss.

"...You think Jun Wu allowed him to die, your highness?"

Hua Cheng's voice is carefully neutral.

Xie Lian's stomach drops, his face pales, and he shakes his head—suddenly wracked by this overwhelming sense of guilt.

That he would even think that. That he would *say* it.

The—

The Water Master was dear to the Emperor. He was just as hurt by his loss as anyone.

"N-No," he mutters, clearing his throat. "I—that was horrible of me to say, San Lang—I don't know what I was thinking."

Ju Wu has given him *so* many chances. Given Xie Lian the benefit of the doubt—even when he didn't deserve it.

Thinking something so awful—he's ashamed.

Finally, the scene clicks back into motion—the Water Master struggling to contain Yin Yu, and—

"JUST STOP!" Yin Yu cries, wincing with pain from his broken arm, staring up at Quan Yizhen imploringly. "Quan Yizhen—STOP!"

The moment those words leave his lips...

Quan Yizhen goes limp, and Shi Wudu releases the water around him, allowing the general to sink to the ground.

"What did you do to him?!" Mu Qing snaps at Yin Yu squeezing his arm until the martial god cries out, sending Quan Yizhen flailing—but Shi Wudu slams him back down.

"Whatever it is, release it now!"

"I..." Yin Yu presses his forehead against the ground beneath him, trembling with frustration, sadness—and utter humiliation.

How did things come to this? He—

He tried *so* hard to be a good person. Where did it all go wrong?

How did he end up here?

"ANSWER HIM!"

"Can you believe that he would do this to his own shidi?!"

"It's a disgrace!"

"Should we arrest him? Do we even have enough evidence to do that?"

The voices are overwhelming, rattling around in his ears, tension building in his chest.

Until he can't—

"...Shixiong?"

"...SHUT UP!" Yin Yu shrieks, slamming his forehead against the ground again, and again, and again. "JUST—JUST GO FUCKING DIE!"

Who he meant those words for isn't clear to Xie Lian, but...

Screams echo across the streets as Quan Yizhen immediately turns his sword upon himself.

It shatters in a flash of golden light before it can penetrate too deeply between his ribs—but he still sinks back down to the ground, clearly wounded.

"QUAN YIZHEN!" Yin Yu cries out.

A few people nearby shake their heads with disgust at the idea that he would dare express worry after what he's done.

Heavy footfalls echo on the streets, the Heavenly Officials around them parting like the tides—making way for the emperor, who kneels beside Quan Yizhen.

"..." He snaps his fingers—and in another flash of light—similar to what destroyed the general's sword before he could take his own life—the armor falls from Quan Yizhen's body, landing on the ground with a clatter.

"It would seem Qi Ying was wearing the Brocade Immortal."

The armor that Quan Yizhen indicated had been a gift from Yin Yu turned out to be the deadly, cursed item that Yin Yu had been tasked to *guard* .

The moment Jun Wu says those words—Yin Yu's guilt in the matter is all but sealed.

And even if it wasn't...

When Yin Yu said those words—

'Just go die.'

It was like trying to commit murder in front of the entire Heavens, and...there's no way to get away with that.

Xie Lian watches in silence as the memory fades, Mu Qing moving to treat the wounded as Yin Yu is arrested.

"...There was a trial shortly after that," Hua Cheng explains calmly. "Jian Yu claimed responsibility for the entire thing, but that didn't make much of a difference for Yin Yu in the end."

They were both exiled. Jian Yu dying of old age, and Yin Yu...

Found stable employment.

Now, they fade back into the present, with Yin Yu still holding the shovel in the air, indecisive—face unreadable beneath the mask.

"…You want to come out?" He repeats slowly.

"Yes," Quan Yizhen agrees, having made himself perfectly clear already.

"…"

WHACK!

The shovel slams into his forehead—hard, until Quan Yizhen slumps forward, limp.

"Is he—?" Xie Lian gasps, concerned, but Hua Cheng shakes his head.

"Just knocked out. It seems unlikely that Yin Yu would let him die—but he doesn't want to be recognized either."

The image of the two fades as Yin Yu uses the earth master's shovel to pull Quan Yizhen out of the wall—leaving Hua Cheng and Xie Lian alone, crushed inside the darkness.

Well—partially crushed.

Xie Lian's arms and head are still free, comfortably leaned against Hua Cheng.

Almost like being buried together.

Xie Lian honestly didn't think he could bear another moment underground, not after…

He presses his cheek a little closer against Hua Cheng's robes, taking a deep breath.

But this…isn't so bad.

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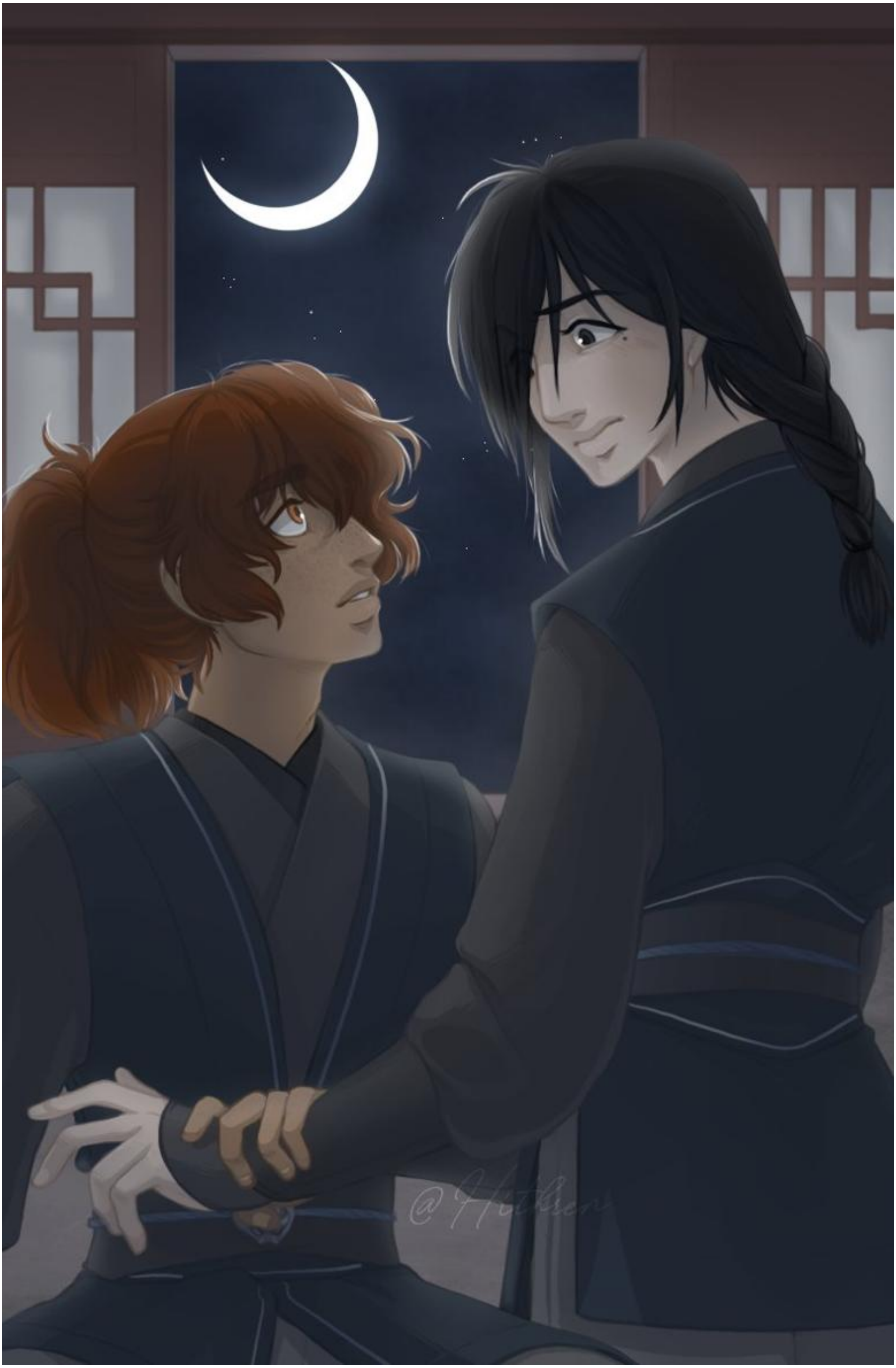

CREDIT: HITHREN

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you to Hithren for their beautiful artwork, and allowing me to share it!

Stunted

Chapter Summary

> "…The prince is here now too," the man sighs, speaking to someone that Xie Lian can't sense. "But he's far beyond saving."
>
> Hearing that makes the god grow still.
>
> …He's beyond saving?
>
> Something about those words hits Xie Lian in a deep, nearly forgotten place.
>
> One that aches.

Chapter Notes

> sorry for another long chapter, but the plot should be moving a bit faster from here on!

"…Do you think the mountain spirit is going to spit us out any time soon?" He inquires, trying not to think too much more about that thought, knowing—

Knowing it doesn't matter, in the end.

"…Perhaps," Hua Cheng agrees. "But if gege is uncomfortable, I can blast us out now."

Xie Lian considers it—not because he's panicking like before, but because they really should try to find the others, but—

"…Did you hear that?"

Hua Cheng falls silent, listening.

"…I do."

On the other side of the wall—Xie Lian can hear a voice. Faint, but clear.

And when Xie Lian presses his ear against the stone—he can make out the words.

"…The prince is here now too," the man sighs, speaking to someone that Xie Lian can't sense. "But he's far beyond saving."

Hearing that makes the god grow still.

…He's beyond saving?

Something about those words hits Xie Lian in a deep, nearly forgotten place.

One that aches.

Hua Cheng's hand tightens against the small of his back, and that voice speaks again.

"I've…Oh, my friend," the man sighs, so…mournful.

Remorseful.

"I don't know what to do."

Hua Cheng can't show him who it is—he doesn't have any butterflies in the area—but…

…Xie Lian knows that voice.

Remembers it from times far behind him, faint, but impossible to forget.

"…Guoshi?" He whispers, jaw slack with shock, feeling Hua Cheng stiffen against him.

"That's—?"

"It's Mei Nianqing," Xie Lian confirms, biting his lip.

The State Preceptor of Xianle, and a dear, beloved teacher to the crown prince.

But…he's alive? What…what is he doing here?

"…There were so many lies," Mei Nianqing's voice trembles. "I don't know what the truth is anymore."

There's a faint pause where he seems to be listening to someone else, and—

"She couldn't kill him, and he was weaker then."

She—?

“I don’t know if he genuinely cares for the child, or—no,” Mei Nianqing cuts himself off firmly, like he’s trying to remind himself of something that he’s forgotten countless times. “Even if that’s what he thinks this is—it's an obsession. Or…”

His Guoshi falters. Almost…afraid.

“…Or, he knows that the boy is a threat, and in that case…I don’t know if I can save him. The spell binding him is nearly unbreakable, and his highness…he’s never going to let him go. It’s been so long already.”

…He couldn’t be talking about Xie Lian, it just isn’t possible.

But if that's the case—then what prince is Mei Nianqing talking about? And—

What child is in danger?

“Well—you’re right, the spell could be broken. But it’s beyond my skills—and the sacrifice required would be immense…of course I’m trying to warn him. Haven’t you seen?”

Mei Nianqing’s voice turns slightly frantic, and the next words out of his mouth make Xie Lian’s thoughts grind to a halt.

“I know there are other things that are more important to show him—but that curse—it’s incredibly difficult to work around it!”

…A curse?

“Yes, yes, I can’t show him what he became—that’s why I’m trying to show him who he was before!” Mei Nianqing continues explaining, irritated by some response that isn’t for their ears. “I think…you might think I’ve gone mad, but I think…”

Hua Cheng rolls his eyes, muttering under his breath, "Wouldn't talking to the mountain spirit like you're old pals be the crazier part of this situation?"

Xie Lian pauses, looking up.

He's...talking to the mountain spirit?

Still, Mei Nianqing's voice echoes through the walls.

"...What if we were wrong about everything, all this time?"

His tone takes on a haunting quality—as though he's caught between fear and regret.

"What if we were tricked, and...Guoshi was right all along?"

It takes Xie Lian a moment to understand, taken aback at first.

Of course—Mei Nianqing must have had his own teacher at some point or another. Or a guoshi that preceded him in his work, but—

What was he right about, and how were they tricked?

"...There's not enough time," Mei Nianqing mutters.

"At this rate...he'll reach the Kiln in two days. If he traps the boy in there...it might be the end of us all. I should hurry now. Pass that message to the others for me, will you?"

And just like that—all trace of him is gone.

No voice, no breaths, no heartbeat.

That's when Hua Cheng seems to take his cue to break the wall open, holding one arm around Xie Lian's back as his palm reaches out, a powerful bolt of energy blasting through the rock, setting them free.

He almost staggers when they land on the ground—but Hua Cheng steadies him.

Xie Lian whips his head around, hoping to catch a glimpse of his former teacher, but instead...

Hua Cheng's blast seems to have dislodged another part of the wall, and two bodies drop out—one after the other.

"..." Shuo sits up sharply, hair askew. "Hua Chengzhu!"

Lang Qianqiu groans sharply when the demon's knees dig into his ribs as he gets up, relieved to be free.

"That was suffocating..."

"At least you didn't have to be crammed up against someone with the sharpest elbows in existence—OW!"

A few dozen meters down the tunnel, Yin Yu looks up, startled by the voices. "...Did the others get free?"

As he does this, his grip on Quan Yizhen loosens—and it's that moment when the martial god stops pretending to be unconscious, reaching up and snatching his mask.

For a moment, the two are comically frozen in place, staring at one another with round eyes and gaping mouths.

Two very *different* forms of shock.

"..." Quan Yizhen lunges forward, just as Yin Yu turns tail and flees down the tunnel.

"SHIXIONG!" He cries, only for Yin Yu to cover his ears, shaking his head frantically.

"YOU'VE GOT THE WRONG PERSON!"

"DON'T RUN! IT'S ME!"

"THAT'S EXACTLY WHY I'M RUNNING!"

They come around the bend in the corner, catching up with the others—and Hua Cheng shows mercy.

There's a crack of his fingers--and Quan Yizhen disappears in a gold puff of smoke, a small, wobbling daruma doll left in his place.

"..." Yin Yu hunches over with a relieved sigh, clutching his chest as he recovers from the panic. "Th...thank you, Hua Chengzhu..."

Shuo scratches the side of his head, kneeling down to pick up the doll. "...It didn't seem like he wanted to hurt you, Yin Yu. What were you running like that for?"

"...Not everyone wants a big, emotional reunion, alright?" Yin Yu grumbles, snatching the doll from his hands.

"And sometimes there are just conversations that people aren't ready to have."

"Hey..." A voice echoes down the hall, "Crimson Rain, your highness—did you two manage to get out?"

"General Hua!"

Xie Lian sags with relief at the sound of General Pei and Banyue's voices.

She runs to his side, pulled into a tight hug as Pei Ming and Pei Su join them, the latter visibly gaunt and exhausted, while his former general rubs pebbles from his hair.

"...I suppose the spirit spat the rest of them out when I knocked us loose," Hua Cheng muses.

"...What about Ling Wen?" Xie Lian mumbles, listening around. "Do you know where he is?"

"I didn't have a butterfly tracking him," Hua Cheng admits, "so no."

"...Very comforting," Pei mutters, working to shrug that one off.

"...But I doubt Bai Jing would let anything get to him—not when he nearly bit my finger off when I tried to get the robe off of him."

That's...a fair point.

Xie Lian opens his mouth to ask something else, but—

THUD!

THUD!

A massive rumbling sound overtakes the tunnel as it sways back and forth, the floor seeming to rise up and down underneath their feet.

"What—?" Xie Lian gasps, grabbing onto Hua Cheng's arm to gain purchase. "Is the spirit trying to swallow us again?!"

"No," Hua Cheng shakes his head, bracing one arm back against the cavern wall, using the other to hold Xie Lian close to him. "It's running."

"What is?" Shuo frowns, rubbing his forehead after falling head first into the wall, sporting a growing bruise.

"That Mountain Spirit!"

"...Two days..." Xie Lian mutters under his breath, holding Hua Cheng's arm even tighter as he remembers what Mei Nianqing said before.

That they were running out of time.

"It's running towards the Kiln!"

In which case—their best option is to ride there along with it.

Eventually the swaying back and forth isn't as violent as it was before—giving them all the opportunity to slump down against the cavern walls, resting while they have the chance.

Well—some of them are resting.

Pei Su is deeply asleep, his head resting against Banyue's leg.

Lang Qianqiu has taken to doing pushups in order to work off the excess energy and nerves, pointedly ignoring Shuo's barbed comments as he does so.

And Pei Ming, well...

He sits back against the wall, staring at something in his palm.

A gold hair pin.

Hua Cheng watches from the other side of the tunnel, not saying a word—and when Pei Ming glances up at him, he’s already looking away.

“…I need to ask you one thing about Blackwater,” the general mutters, looking back down at the pin. “Just one.”

Hua Cheng doesn’t reply at first, slightly wary. But eventually, he looks back at the general, his expression impassive.

“What about him?”

Pei Ming’s fingers close around the pin, and he locks his jaw.

“…Would he scatter someone’s ashes?”

The calamity stares at him, silent.

“You mean Shi Wudu’s.”

Pei Ming doesn’t confirm or deny it—but there’s no other option that he could remotely care about.

“I don’t see why you’re concerned, given that you have his remains,” Hua Cheng sighs. “But no—He Xuan wouldn’t stoop to that. He has limits.”

Limits.

Pei Ming's eyes drop back down to the pin clutched between his fingers, wrestling with that.

With the idea that the death that he's mourning is one that so many believe to be *justified* .

If that's the truth—then it feels cruel.

Limits are fluid things, changing from one situation to the next. A man can be capable of anything, depending on the circumstances.

And yet...Hua Cheng sounds absolutely certain that Blackwater wouldn't stoop to scattering someone's remains.

"...Very well, then."

That's when Hua Cheng does something somewhat out of character.

Always the one to avoid making conversation. Never asking more, or expressing interest in other people.

(Unless that person is Xie Lian, anyway.)

But now...

"...Why do you ask?"

Pei Ming falls silent, and the ghost king doesn't expect a genuine answer, more than aware of the fact that he doesn't exactly inspire emotional vulnerability in others, but—

"Did you ever lose someone when you were alive? Someone dear to you?"

Hua Cheng grows silent.

Pei Ming is staring ahead—his expression pale, a shadow of his normal, lighthearted self.

Ghosts don't haunt mortals, in Hua Cheng's experience.

Grief does.

"...My mother," he finally replies, his tone somewhat curt. "When I was young."

Pei nods, his hand lowering to rest against his leg, clutching the hairpin until it digs into his skin.

"...My mother was taken away from me when I was young, too," he admits, rubbing his thumb over the dragon carved into its face.

"She didn't pass until I was in my teens...but I never saw her again," Pei recalls softly. "Still...even before my father told me—I knew she was gone. I just...felt it."

That isn't entirely unheard of—even if it does leave Hua Cheng slightly surprised.

There have always been mortals who are slightly more sensitive to the barrier between life and death than others, even without training in cultivation.

Hua Cheng was one of them.

And he...never would have expected that from a god like General Pei Ming.

He isn't exactly known for being particularly perceptive outside of the battlefield—and most martial gods aren't. Xie Lian is an exception, not the rule.

"In all of my years...I've experienced almost every kind of grief there is," Pei Ming continues. "But...this is different."

His fingers tremble slightly—forcing him to press them down against his thigh until they stop.

"I...didn't feel it when he passed," he admits, his stomach churning with confusion and shame.

Because he *should* have felt it.

"And at first that gave me hope, but now..." Pei Ming stares ahead vacantly, his eyes glassy. "...I can't feel him anywhere."

It isn't an overemotional, weeping sort of confession. More like a quiet, yet profound statement of loss.

"Jun Wu says its denial. But...I've never struggled with that before."

Being a god of war, in many ways, is being a god of death. Pei Ming grew up surrounded by it. Has dealt with it. Felt its sting.

Even with Qing Yuan, as painful as that grief was—he never denied the fact that she was gone.

And the hairpin was just...

Something wasn't right.

Hua Cheng glances around them—finding that nearly everyone is asleep other than Shuo and Lang Qianqiu, who seem too utterly absorbed in irritating or ignoring one another to pay attention.

He has never had any difficulty when it comes to keeping out of the problems of others.

In general, it's not hard to remain uninvolved when you don't care.

But he remembers what He Xuan told him about Jun Wu. What he *is* . Who was most likely to have suffered from it. And he...

There are some things even he can't force himself to stomach.

"...Don't speak to the emperor about it anymore."

Pei Ming stiffens, his eyes snapping back to Hua Cheng, brows raising.

"Speak about what?"

Hua Cheng closes his eyes, leaning his head back against the wall.

"Anything that makes you vulnerable."

As he says that, his head slumps to the side, resting his cheek on top of Xie Lian’s head, where the prince is sleeping peacefully against his shoulder.

Pei watches the two—the small acts of genuine intimacy that seem to come so easily.

Such unusually profound trust.

“…You two didn’t meet on Mount Yu Jun, did you?”

Of course—Hua Cheng doesn't answer him. He doesn't even open his eyes or acknowledge the fact that Pei Ming asked.

But…

…He doesn't deny it, either.

When Xie Lian wakes up, it smells familiar.

Slightly wild—like a forest, just after the rain falls.

The kind of scent that calls memories forth, ringing in his ears.

'Dianxia! Did you see me—?'

Slowly, his eyes open—cursed shackles flickering dimly in the dark tunnel.

"…" his cheek is resting against something soft—warm.

If Xie Lian didn't know better, he would say he was dreaming, but… life had never been so kind.

He doesn't remember his dreams.

His fingers reach up, grasping the chain around his neck.

"…Good Morning," he whispers.

He's said that 255,833 times, always to the same person—even if Hong'er could never hear.

But for the first time, someone answers.

"Good morning, gege."

(Even if it's not him—and it never will be.)

"…How long was I asleep?" Xie Lian rasps, his voice slightly rough.

"Close to sixteen hours, give or take." The number startles Xie Lian, but…given the stress he's put on his body since coming here, maybe he shouldn't be surprised.

"Don't worry," Hua Cheng's voice is somewhat dry, staring at the group around them in annoyance.

"Gege really didn't miss anything."

Xie Lian was able to sleep soundly—if only because Hua Cheng created a magical barrier around his ears, keeping the annoying, loud nonsense from the others away from him.

“…Do we know how far we’ve traveled?”

“Close to 800 miles,” Yin Yu answers him quietly.

“…We’re actually nearing the foothills of Mount Tonglu,” Hua Cheng explains. “The imperial city of Wuyong is beneath us right now.”

After everything they’ve seen, Xie Lian almost doesn’t want to ask, but…

“…Do you think there’s another temple of the Crown Prince down there?”

“There is,” Hua Cheng confirms. “His grandest temple sat adjacent to the imperial residence.” Hua Cheng turns to look at him. “Would you like to stop and see, your highness?”

Xie Lian swallows hard, bracing himself—then nods.

Hua Cheng gives the silent order to Yin Yu, who immediately starts tunneling back down though the bottom of the passageway.

"There's going to be a drop."

That's the only real warning he gives the others, wrapping an arm around Xie Lian's waist as the tunnel opens up to the ground below—and Ren Song rolls his eyes, watching as he drops down with the prince in his arms.

"...I guess getting the rest of them down is my job, huh?"

Lang Qianqiu looks over at him, rubbing the fatigue out of his eyes after spending so many hours trapped in the dark mountain tunnels.

"How are you going to get us—AHHHHHHH!"

His question is cut off with a scream as the ground crumbles beneath them, sending them plummeting.

When Hua Cheng said there was a 'drop,' what he really meant was that they were already several hundred meters off of the ground—no longer digging out of the bottom of the mountain, but rather launching themselves off of an outcropping on the side.

Xie Lian had pressed his face into Hua Cheng's chest as they dropped to shield himself from the wind—but now he looks up, concerned.

"San Lang, don't you think we should—?"

"They'll be fine."

Lang Qianqiu and Yin Yu have spiritual devices they can fly on, but the others...

But, before any of them can plummet that far down—they find themselves caught by something rather solid.

Pei Ming glances down, almost comically unbothered by suddenly falling out of the sky—and tree boughs are wrapped around his middle, arresting his fall.

Similar branches have also stretched out to catch Pei Su and Banyue, easing them back towards the ground.

Lang Qianqiu hops off of his own sword, glancing over towards Shuo, watching him help the others down with a complicated expression, until he notices...

The ground is soft.

Sinking under the heavy material of his boots--and when he looks down to examine it...

He sees ash.

Several inches—maybe more than a foot deep, stretching for as far as the eye can see.

Covering an entire city, staining everything black.

Most of the roofs are caved in, making this place look far less pristine than any of the other villages or cities in Wuyong they've passed so far—which makes sense, given that it's so much closer to Mount Tonglu itself.

Only two buildings remain intact.

The palace—and the temple, standing side by side like long forgotten sentinels, looming over the barren landscape.

Shuo stares down at something on the ground beside his foot, then looks away.

A child's toy—petrified wood crumbling away beneath the ash.

"…General…"

Banyue looks up from where she's tending to Pei Su, visibly concerned.

"Pei Su gege isn't waking up."

That immediately catches the attention of Pei Ming, who kneels beside the two with concern.

"What do you mean, he isn't waking up?!"

"It isn't her fault," Xie Lian murmurs.

"Pei Su's body is the same as a mortal's right now. He's dehydrated and malnourished most likely—but he'll survive."

"…Wouldn't that be the case for you, too?" Lang Qianqiu is willing to say it out loud, while Hua Cheng turns his head away, his face dark.

"That's…different."

The underlying understanding being that Xie Lian is more than used to it by now—

And Hua Cheng strains under that ugly little reminder.

"…It might be for the best for Pei and Banyue to wait here," Xie Lian mutters, listening around. "It'll only be more dangerous ahead."

Pei Junior, that is—

Xie Lian doesn't like the idea of leaving Pei Ming on his own in a place like this. Not with his mental state being what it is—or the impact reuniting with Rong Guang seemed to have on him.

"…Are you sure, General Hua?" Banyue frowns, almost guilty.

But it's more than that.

"…" Xie Lian smiles, kneeling down beside her as he places a hand on top of her head.

“You’ll see me again soon,” he promises her gently. “It won’t be as long as it was last time.”

Her relief is unspoken, a shaky sigh and trembling lips.

"...Alright," she agrees, holding Pei Su against her side. "I'll find us shelter, and we'll wait there."

"Don't feed him any more scorpion snakes," Shuo warns her sternly. "Just use the rest of what I already made, understand?"

"...I understand, Ren Song gege," She mumbles, bowing her head in agreement.

"We'll send someone to come get you two when this is over," Xie Lian assures them both as they set off deeper into the city. "It won't be long."

General Pei raises an eyebrow, staring at the back of Xie Lian's head—but he waits until they're out of earshot ask;

"...You sound rather sure of that, your highness. Just how soon do you think this matter will be dealt with?"

Xie Lian stares ahead blindly, grim.

"Two days."

After hearing Mei Nianqing's words before, speaking to the mountain spirit, he's nearly certain of it.

Something is arriving to the Kiln by then. A prince—and a child is going to be in danger.

Whatever they're facing—Xie Lian senses it will come then.

But, considering how long he slept...

"Actually—more like one."

And Xie Lian couldn't have known it then.

That the world will be *different* for him tomorrow. And every single day that comes afterwards.

That today, in so many ways, is the *last* day.

"...Then we should move quickly," Hua Cheng mutters, holding Xie Lian's hand firmly as he pulls him toward the Grand Temple of Wuyong, its ruins jutting sharply into the sky.

Pei Ming, Lang Qianqiu, and Ren Song follow behind, the latter noticing;

"...Has anyone seen Yin Yu?"

Hua Cheng looks around, then presses his fingertips to his temple, silently checking in his communication ray.

"...He's probably fine," the ghost king finally concludes with a shrug, continuing on.

"Probably?"

"He hasn't sent out a distress call—it can't be that serious."

Xie Lian doesn't know if he would agree with that, given that he also just so happens to have Quan Yizhen's daruma doll in his possession, but...

When they step inside the final temple, he finds himself stopping, feeling his foot bumping into something...

Solid—like an oddly shaped rock sitting in the middle of the entrance to the temple. Which seems counterintuitive—even as Hua Cheng simply guides him around it, Pei Ming stops to examine the formation, his face growing pale as he notices others like it.

"Are these...bodies?"

Just from the poses, Pei Ming would have mistaken them for statues, but...

No sculptor would leave them so rough and uneven, and the closer he looks, the more agonized and petrified their positions seem to be.

"...There were over half a million people living here before."

The City of Gu was once one of the most prosperous cities in the ancient world—and the largest of the seven great cities of Wuyong.

Most of its citizens had not fled, prior to the greatest of Tonglu's eruptions—believing that they would be saved.

Men, women, and children alike died in their homes. In the streets.

Fleeing and hiding within the temple of the god who promised to protect them.

"...This is what happens when volcanic ash hits a mortal body," Hua Cheng explains quietly, stopping Xie Lian from touching it.

"Careful, gege—every body within the realm of Mount Tonglu rapidly develops corpse poison."

Even if the remains trapped within are long gone—the curse remains.

"...Oh," Xie Lian pulls his hands back with a nod.

"I'm already immune to most poisons at this point—I've accidentally poisoned myself enough times."

Xie Lian often tries to reassure Hua Cheng by saying things like that—and every single time, he only seems to send a dark cloud of dismay over him.

The prince used to be utterly oblivious to that—but now, he's gained a certain amount of awareness. Enough to force a bright—if not slightly inappropriate, given their surroundings—smile at Hua Cheng before straightening up, feeling along the walls for another mural.

Hua Cheng and Pei Ming share a brief moment of mutually irritated eye contact as the prince continues to look around, and behind them...Shuo notices something else.

Most of what was once furnishing the temple, like its worshippers, has been reduced to ash and rubble.

But there's one thing that isn't stained with soot, or crumbling with decay—still bearing the enchantment from centuries, no, millennia before.

A protection charm.

Clutched in the charred form of a long dead believer.

"...Chengzhu..." He mumbles, kneeling down. "...Can you read what this says?" He barely manages to pry the charm free without ripping it, handing it over to Hua Cheng's waiting palm.

The calamity stares down at the bright yellow paper, characters painted in gold—and he frowns.

"...The Saint Born Under a Cursed Star."

As he reads the words aloud, Xie Lian's fingers go still against the wall, pressing inward. "...San Lang! It's over here!"

E'Ming immediately rushes forward, slashing against the wall with a—

CLANG!

Before, whenever the scimitar slashed at the layer of ash, it would come down from the wall in a solid slab—almost like peeling the lid back from a coffin.

But not this time.

At first, nothing happens. The edge of the blade digs into the wall, vibrating—but nothing moves.

Shuo waits for the usual—Hua Cheng smacking the blade around, scorning it for being so useless—but the ghost king says nothing, his arms crossed.

Like he's waiting for something.

Slowly, all four walls of the temple begin to rumble, dust falling from the ceiling in sheets.

Finally, it all comes crumbling down in piles of ash and volcanic glass—leaving the group crowding towards the center of the temple to avoid it.

Everyone except for Xie Lian that is, easily sheltered beneath Hua Cheng's umbrella.

"..." Lang Qianqiu whips his head around, having not seen the temples before this one—so startled that he takes a step back, instinctively reaching for Shuo's elbow.

The forest demon stares at the place where his hand is gripping him, but...

He doesn't complain, either.

"...San Lang?" Xie Lian murmurs, swallowing down his nerves. "What do they say?"

"..." Hua Cheng turns to the first wall, clearing his throat. "...It's the cliff from the first mural, your highness."

A cliff on the path leading toward the Kiln.

The same cliff that countless numbers of people were being thrown from, screaming as they crashed toward the bottom of the valley below.

"...The child from the other murals we saw—the one who was being mistreated..." Hua Cheng takes a slow breath. "He's being thrown from it."

"...What?" Xie Lian questions, surprised by how...startled he is to hear that. "By who?"

"...Bai Wuxiang, I would presume," Hua Cheng mutters, stepping closer to the wall. "Or someone wearing the same mask."

Xie Lian presses his palm flat against the wall—and he feels it.

The face of a screaming teenager, painted over stone—plunging towards his death.

But...none of it makes any sense.

If the prince in the murals is Bai Wuxiang...why was the other boy with the same face treated so terribly?

And why was he killed?

In a strange way—it feels almost as though the conversation he heard from Mei Nianqing in the belly of the Mountain Spirit wasn't about what *would* happen—but events that had already occurred.

Because here's Bai Wuxiang—a prince—sending a child to his death from the Kiln.

Regardless—the child Mei Nianqing spoke of couldn't have been Bai Wuxiang, he—

The muscles in Xie Lian's jaw work as he reaches down to squeeze his right hand, stopping it from trembling.

Bai Wuxiang is dead.

He can't be a danger to anyone. Not anymore.

Hua Cheng turns his head to look at the other murals, quietly explaining them to Xie Lian—as he has every other time.

They show memories he's seen before, through the eyes of the last Queen of Wuyong.

Bai Wuxiang's ascension. The prophecy of the fall of Wuyong.

All of his attempts to stop it—and finally…

The bridge.

It's hard for Hua Cheng to look at that sparkling golden image now, this idyllic plan that, in the end, was a horrific display of ego.

He can't see it now, without remembering Zhao Beitong's son plunging into darkness.

"…How could he have even attempted that?" Xie Lian mutters, shaking his head. "The only way he could have taken the people of Wuyong to the heavens would have been by appointing all of them as deputies…"

Saving everyone would have been impossible.

Not with even just the imperial city, much less the entire country.

Even a god of Jun Wu's strength couldn't appoint more than a few thousand deputies.

The very same god who was able to slaughter Bai Wuxiang on the streets lining Lang'er Bay, thousands of years later.

The bridge Hua Cheng goes on to describe in the next mural seems even more ludicrous.

The idea that one god could sustain such a single structure single-handedly feels like a fool's errand.

Even if…

In his youth, Xie Lian would have tried the same thing.

He stops next to the mural in question, feeling the edges of the bridge with his fingertips.

Remembering being a teenager, holding the pavilion on Mount

Taicang up by himself.

Only his mother standing beside him, holding an umbrella over his head.

Even on that smaller scale of difficulty, it felt like carrying the weight of the entire world.

All alone.

And maybe, if he hadn't known what Bai Wuxiang would become, he would feel something more than sickness now.

Not disgust.

That word is too shallow to describe it.

Xie Lian isn't disconnected enough from Bai Wuxiang's actions to regard them with disdain or distant moral outrage.

No.

He feels every scar. Every loss. Every invasive, lingering memory of the demon's impact upon his life.

Most of it, Xie Lian could accept and move on from.

He broke the rules of Heaven by descending to Xianle. The war—the plague—

Those are his responsibility to bear. Jun Wu warned him of the dangers enough times. Tried to protect him. To guide him.

But Xie Lian had been arrogant.

An arrogant, over confident, ungrateful child.

Maybe he could even forgive Bai Wuxiang for that night in the temple, or—

Forgive is the wrong word.

Maybe Xie Lian could let go of that night. Could speak like it happened to someone else, and actually mean it.

But there is one thing that he'll never forget.

That day.

Over 255,833 days ago.

Kneeling on the forest floor as the snow began to fall.

Feeling his heart die, leaving a disloyal, immortal body behind.

All from feeling a pair of boots beneath his hand.

Familiar.

Because he knew them.

He *made* them.

Xie Lian reaches up, grasping the ring hanging around his neck tightly, until his knuckles grow white.

Hong'er.

For as long as Xie Lian remains in this world—and long after he leaves it—

He won't forget what they did to Hong'er.

What they *took* from him.

Behind him Hua Cheng reaches up with a small wince, rubbing the back of his neck.

"…Gege, are you alright?"

Xie Lian pulls his hand back from the mural, curling his fingers into a fist.

"…Yes," he mutters, turning away. "I'm sorry."

Pei Ming watches them both, thinking.

"…If the Prince of Wuyong was Bai Wuxiang…" He murmurs, glancing from the falling child, to the cataclysmic events that followed—he wonders. "…Do you think he killed the other child in order to gain the power to save his kingdom?"

Xie Lian swallows hard.

"…Maybe."

"I didn't see anything like that in his wife's memories," Hua Cheng shakes his head, watching the painted faces with a distant glare. "Maybe they weren't connected events."

"Or," General Pei sends him a curious look, "Zhao Beitong didn't know everything her husband got up to."

Hua Cheng doesn't reply—but he still doubts it.

Of Bai Wuxiang's many methods of controlling those around him—he doesn't necessarily go out of his way to completely erase events.

He'll reframe them. Switch details.

Or, force others to keep his secrets for him.

Through guilt, through shame—

Or something as maddeningly simple as stealing a name.

If the truth can be found, Hua Cheng suspects it's hiding in plain sight.

Shuo walks along the edges of the temple hall silently, looking at huddled forms of stone.

Some of them so small.

It's hard.

To be in a place like this. A land drenched in the blood of children, knowing that you're the last one standing.

Even among the dead.

He turns his head to stare down a dark corridor, knowing that even more bodies probably wait in the levels below.

Women and children most likely, fleeing the molten ash falling from the sky, only to suffocate from the smoke underground.

Turning the Aqueducts and catacombs beneath Wuyong into the largest graveyard in history.

Every breath here feels heavy, almost weighed down with death.

When he stares down that corridor, leading into the dark—he almost feels it.

Like a heavy, oppressive presence.

In one blink, it’s like staring into an endless, dark abyss.

And in the next, something is staring back at him.

Beady red eyes, gleaming in the shadows.

Xie Lian and Hua Cheng turn around when they hear a terrified shriek, the latter far more concerned, because—

Shuo doesn’t scare easily.

And when the ghost king looks—it’s just in time to see a rat lunge from the darkness.

One the size of a *man* , fangs glinting viciously.

Shuo scrambles backwards, having fallen down in a rare state of panic, pushing back with his feet—and he gives the creature one hard kick in the jaw with the heel of his boot, making it stagger briefly.

By the time it recovers, a blade pierces it through the neck.

Shuo shudders as the blood splatters across his cheeks, Lang Qianqiu standing over him as he yanks the blade out, kicking the dying creature back down the dark hall from where it came.

"What the hell was that?!"

Hua Cheng appears behind them, pulling Shuo up by the arm as they back away from the corridor.

"...The rats here spend years feeding upon the dead," he explains, summoning E'Ming back to its scabbard. "It left them slightly...mutated."

"Mutated?!" Lang Qianqiu glares. "They've turned into monsters!"

"...They weren't that big last time," Shuo whispers hoarsely, wiping the blood off of his face with the end of his sleeve.

He's never liked rats.

Back in Xianle, when the bodies fell too quickly to bury, they became rampant.

It wasn't uncommon for Shuo to wake up to Bao chasing them away from his bed, making sure they didn't take a bite out of him while he slept.

But the rats in Mount Tonglu...

In those years he spent hanging from that tree—he listened as they devoured countless souls.

Back then, they were the size of dogs at most—and they were still terrifying. But now...

The forest demon continues scrambling backwards on the floor, watching the dark corridor in terror as more sets of eyes begin to appear.

"...They travel in packs," he croaks.

E'Ming flashes forward, from Hua Cheng's hip, disappearing down the corridor as it slashes through unseen enemies, the rest of the group retreating back towards the temple exit.

"...There are hundreds of them!" Xie Lian shouts, listening to the sounds of their feet, scurrying.

Pei Ming shoves Lang Qianqiu and Ren Song out the door ahead of him, sending a bolt of energy down the hall after the rats—likely incinerating a few of them, but not all.

"Are Pei Su and Banyue safe where they are?!"

"Probably," Hua Cheng mutters. "But I can't guarantee it."

"...You go back and check on them," Xie Lian places a hand on the general's arm as they run down the steps. "Have Banyue keep her scorpion snakes nearby—that should keep them away."

"And tell them to move to one of the roofs," Shuo calls after them. "They hate sunlight!"

Pei Ming peels off from the rest of them, returning from where they came, and Xie Lian pauses, his head whipping to the right—shackles gleaming as he stares into the distance.

"...Everyone—jump onto the temple roof!"

Hua Cheng is the first to obey without question, wrapping an arm around the prince's waist as he leaps up, bringing Xie Lian with him—and Shuo and Lang Qianqiu are quick to follow.

"San Lang," Xie Lian whispers, motioning for the rest of them to get down and lay low.

"Can you make a communication array for the four of us? I would, but I don't have enough..."

"Does gege need to borrow more?" Hua Cheng offers, always courteous—and Xie Lian almost agrees, until he remembers the other two on the roof with them.

"No—it's better if you do it."

Hua Cheng smiles faintly, doing as asked, speaking into the newly formed array—

'It's done, your highness.'

Xie Lian nods, speaking to the others.

'Lay low and be quiet—someone is coming, and I'd rather observe than get into a fight.'

'...Do you know who it is? ' Shuo asks.

'I recognize the aura,' Xie Lian nods.

An angry, pulsing shade of resentment—burning red. One that Xie Lian hasn't seen in some time.

(And he can't help but feel silently relieved that he sent Pei away.)

In the streets below, a figure rounds the corner.

Thump...

There's a thudding sound as she walks. Slamming one boot forward into the ground—dragging one useless, limp leg behind her as she walks.

Thump...

Ding...Ding…

A small, ornamental bell rings against her belt—

Part of her wedding gown.

Xie Lian recognized Xuan Ji from the minute he heard her familiar gait, turning his head to catch sight of her aura—the same sight as when he was on Mount Yu Jun.

His curiosity is dampened, however, when he hears a familiar voice coming from down below.

"Jiejie..." Guzi whines, holding onto her sleeve as he stumbles along beside her. "I don't feel so good..."

The sight of the child makes both Shuo and Lang Qianqiu stiffen, concerned for the child. After all—they both had plenty of time to bond with him in Puqi shrine.

Xie Lian holds a hand up, keeping them both silent.

'We can move in if she makes a move to harm him—but if she knows we're here, she might take him hostage.' Or, knowing her vindictive nature—she might kill the boy just to get a rise out of them.

But...

'San Lang, I thought you said Guzi was in Ghost City?'

'...He was supposed to be,' Hua Cheng agrees, audibly displeased. *'He must have been initially—or else Yin Yu would have reported otherwise.'*

'Do you think Xuan Ji abducted him?' Lang Qianqiu frowns. *'But why would she?'*

'That's not possible,' Shuo peeks his head over to get a better look at them, his stomach churning when he watches how Guzi clutches onto the deceased general's hand. *'No one can be abducted from Paradise Manor.'*

'What do you mean?'

'There's a spell on every door that protects against thievery,' Shuo explains. *'But guests are under Hua Chengzhu's protection. They don't leave unless it's of their own free will. And Xuan Ji wouldn't have been able to enter, anyway.'*

Lang Qianqiu frowns, trying to understand.

'...Why not?'

'Anyone can enter the throne room of Paradise Manor,' Hua Cheng finally replies, his eye scanning their environment for possible threats. *'But no one can enter beyond that unless I allow it.'*

Which leaves one blinding mystery.

How *did* Guzi manage to leave Paradise Manor? And why is either one of them here?

'...Do you think Xuan Ji is making her way to the Kiln?' Xie Lian asks quietly—and Shuo shakes his head.

'She's way too weak for that. She's only dangerous because she works for Qi Rong.'

And considering how lowly Hua Cheng and Ren Song regard the Night Touring Green Lantern—Xie Lian supposes that *does* leave her pretty far down the ladder.

'...There's something about that I don't understand,' Xie Lian murmurs, watching her aura as she walks down the street. *'If Xuan Ji works for Qi Rong—why is her aura so much stronger than his?'*

Not only that—but Xie Lian genuinely struggled to deal with her on Mount Yu Jun.

Granted—back then, he had still been recovering from the Battle of Gusu, sick and wounded, but...

She isn't harmless.

'...That is a mystery to me as well,' Hua Cheng admits. *'Qi Rong has never been able to command high level ghosts up until now, either.'*

And Xuan Ji isn't the only one.

After their encounter at the Inn...It became clear that Cuocuo—the fetal spirit—was the one singing.

It's even more surreal to him now, knowing that the spirit is *Feng Xin's* son, and the very same voice he heard that night on Mount Yu Jun.

'New bride, new bride...'

How could Qi Rong, whom Xie Lian can suppress easily, command both of them?

Guzi clutches Xuan Ji's sleeve a little tighter as he trudges along, pale and thin.

"…I think there was something wrong with that water, jiejie…"

Xuan Ji sends him an annoyed look, flicking her hair over her shoulder. "What? You're fine! Keep walking…'

She drags him along, not stopping until they reach the only other intact building around;

The Palace of Wuyong.

The four of them creep along the roof, carefully leaping from one building to the next—

And Xie Lian's heart immediately sinks.

'…There are other mortals here.'

Lang Qianqiu stiffens. *'There are? How many?'*

Xie Lian tilts his head forward, silently tracking the number of heartbeats he can hear.

'…Around eight or so.'

But from the stench of blood coming from within the palace…

Xie Lian suspects it used to be more than that.

And when he sees that all too familiar, acidic green aura in the darkness below—he can already guess what happened.

"…Papa!" Guzi cries out in dismay upon entering the ruins of the ancient throne room. "You shouldn't eat weird things like that anymore! It's bad for you!"

And of course—that shrill, cursing voice, one that Xie Lian is all too familiar with, replies with—

"Damn it, Xuan Ji! You couldn't have kept him away a little longer?! I was almost done!"

"He wouldn't stop complaining!" The female ghost snaps. "What was I supposed to do?!"

“Don’t you have any motherly instincts?!” Qi Rong wipes the blood from his mouth, irritated. “Just entertain him while I’m busy!”

“…Why are you traveling around with this child, Anyway?” Xuan Ji grumbles, letting go of Guzi’s hand with a distasteful look.

“Ain’t that obvious?!” Qi Rong drops the bone he was previously gnawing on, gesturing towards Guzi. “Children have the most tender flesh there is!”

“…Then why haven’t you eaten him yet?”

Xie Lian has been wondering the same thing himself—But Qi Rong simply cackles in reply.

“Because! The little fucker likes calling me dad, and I find it amusing!” He tossed the bone down next to a growing pile of human remains. “You don’t have to give a calm about someone to let them live a little longer. Just look at me and Ren Song.”

He picks at the dried blood beneath his nails, rolling his eyes.

“He’s had plenty of chances to get rid of this ancestor. Not because the brat is any good, that asshole Hua Cheng’s always giving him an unfair leg up!”

Shuo rolls his eyes from beside Xie Lian on the roof.

Qi Rong has been reduced back to a ghost fire by Hua Cheng so many times—his strength is hardly notable.

But there’s nothing he loves more than talking about himself—how strong he is, how unfair and jealous everyone else is.

“But that little shit won’t ever get rid of me—‘cause if he does, he might disperse.”

Qi Rong makes a snapping motion with his fingers—and Shuo looks slightly less self assured than he did before.

“…Really?” Xuan Ji pauses, startled. “How are the two connected?”

“I killed his big brother, remember?” Qi Rong yawns, picking at his teeth. “Once I’m dead, the resentment that’s been tethering him to this world might disappear.”

A ghost doesn’t necessarily need resentment to remain in this world—

but they do need drive.

A purpose.

Between Yanlin and Bao, Shuo was always the strongest of the three ghost children—and he had a reason to remain.

Looking out for them.

With both of them gone—his tether holding him to this world became far weaker than it was before.

But his *resentment* skyrocketed.

“He didn’t become Autumn Twilight Shrouding Forests until AFTER this ancestor did a number on him,” Qi Rong crows, always eager to take credit for the achievements of others.

“…If you think about it, I had a hand in both him AND Crimson Rain getting where they are. HA!”

Both Xie Lian and Hua Cheng stiffen at that.

One from confusion, the other from anger.

“…You helped make Hua Cheng gege a ghost king?” Guzi gasps, his eyes round. “How did you do that?”

Qi Rong snickers, his expression smug.

“That’s a secret!”

Of course, he’d say it like that. Making it sound like he’s *choosing* to keep his cards close to his chest, rather than admit that he can’t say.

“…” Xuan Ji half kneels, hampered by her wounded leg. “My lord Qi Rong truly is impressive.”

The green ghost looks at her, pleased.

“…You’ve served me well these last few decades, General. When all of this is over and I have Pei Ming in chains, I’ll cut off his cock and give it to you to play with.”

Xie Lian grimaces at the crassness, and Xuan Ji grins widely to show her delight, shaking her head.

“If my Lord could just give him to me intact…that would be more than enough payment for my service,” Xuan Ji promises, looking over to count their human prisoners once again.

“…Say, did you pick up another one while I was gone? Why is he covered in resentment?”

Shuo and Hua Cheng exchange silent looks, the former dropping down the side of the roof, claws digging into the wall as he peeks through the window, glancing into the rooms below.

What he finds is an abandoned great hall, broken tiles forming an ancient mosaic on the floor.

Forming the shape of a sun, its rays now streaked with long dried blood and ash.

Sitting at the top of the dais, upon what once must have been an elaborate throne, is Qi Rong. Slumped to the side, his legs kicked over the arm.

And lined against the wall, are…humans.

Farmers from the look of it. Clothes well made, but worn.

The one who Xuan Ji indicated lifts his head, his voice calm.

“Lord Rain Master has me give rice to hungry ghosts when they pass through her territory. I suppose I picked up the essence of evil from them.”

‘…I suppose that’s where Yin Yu went,’ Xie Lian mutters into the communication array. *‘Qi Rong must have captured him when we fell from the mountain spirit.’*

Shuo hadn’t guided him down with the others, assuming he would use the earth master’s shovel to fly to safety.

The other farmers from the kingdom of the Rain Master seem to be more than aware that he isn’t one of them, signing to one another silently—but no one says a word to contradict him.

“…Well I’M a hungry ghost too, ain’t I?” Qi Rong grumbles, crossing his arms.

"But look at the kind of treatment I get! Chased halfway across the damn continent, and all I took was a few measly farmers!"

"She doesn't actually care about them," Xuan Ji scowls, her voice turning even more vicious. "She just likes looking like a little hero."

Xie Lian turns his head to Hua Cheng, surprised by the female ghost's tone. *'...Wasn't Xuan Ji a general of Yushi? Why would she speak of someone from her own Kingdom so harshly?'*

'She also sold out her kingdom in an attempt to keep Pei Ming's affections,' Hua Cheng reminds him.

'Not to mention that Yushi Huang has a history with Pei Ming herself,' Shuo points out from where he's hanging on the side of the roof, and when Xie Lian and Hua Cheng both look at him, he shrugs. *'I saw memories from Rong Guang and that sword when they were in my array.'*

'...If that's Hua Cheng's assistant down there, shouldn't we be more concerned with trying to get him out? ' Lang Qianqiu grumbles, the first to display any real concern for Yin Yu.

' *You forget—he has Qi Ying's daruma doll with him,'* Hua Cheng shrugs. *'If he wasn't too proud to deal with him, he'd have escaped already.'*

Pride is an interesting word to use. After everything Xie Lian saw in the former god's memories, he had assumed that his reaction was from shame, but...

Pride and Shame are siblings, not strangers.

You can't have one without the other.

"...Dad," Guzi's voice drifts up to them from the throne room. "How come all of these people aren't running away? They aren't tied up."

"Huh?" Qi Rong glances over at the farmers with a sly, self satisfied grin. "Ah! They're all too scared to move, because of a spell your dad put on them."

Guzi gawks up at him, his mouth hanging open with awe.

"...YOU'RE THAT AMAZING?!"

Xie Lian bites back a groan, his face falling into his hands.

Qi Rong needs many things. A reality check. Maybe even an executioner.

But *not* validation.

"Sure!" Qi Rong agrees delightedly, sitting up slightly in his throne. "Your dad has ALWAYS been better than any of those other idiotic fuckers calling themselves GHOST KINGS!"

Hua Cheng rolls his eye, but exhibits no other reaction as Shuo crawls back onto the roof.

“And once this ancestor passes this trial—they’ll BOTH be bowing to ME!” He smacks a hand against his chest for emphasis, his eyes gleaming with vicious pride. “THEY’LL ALL SEE!”

‘…If we’re going to get the other humans away from them, it’ll be easier to do if we get Xuan Ji away from here,’ Xie Lian mutters.

He doesn’t doubt that they could deal with her, but there’s no guarantee that the farmers would escape unharmed.

Xie Lian doesn’t need to explicitly explain to Hua Cheng what the best way to lure her away would be.

He already almost successfully used a similar trick on Ke Mo, back when they were fighting against him and Rong Guang.

Xuan Ji, however, requires something more compelling.

Hua Cheng flicks two of his fingers, the edge of one of his vambraces glowing as a silver butterfly leaps forth, almost like it’s bursting through the surface of a still lake, drifting down to the rafters of the throne room below.

It’s a simple matter to connect this butterfly to one that was left with Pei when he left to check on the others, and just like that—

“…Both of you should be safe here.”

Pei’s voice is echoing throughout the room, and Xuan Ji goes completely still—stiff as a board.

“…Did you hear that?” She whispers, whipping her head back and forth, the chiffon of her bridal veil twisted about her neck.

“Hah?” Qi Rong frowns, cupping his hand next to his ear. “What are you talkin’ about?!”

“IT’S PEI!” she shrieks, face contorted. “HE’S HERE!”

“…What?” Qi Rong frowns, looking around. “What are you on about now?! Someone's just tryin' to mess with ya!"

For once—he's completely correct, but…

"Thank you, General…" Banyue's voice soon follows, drifting through the air, and the sound of a *young woman* with Pei Ming…

…It completely sets her off.

"HE'S HERE!" Xuan Ji scrambles out of the great hall, half running, dragging her injured leg behind her as the butterfly flutters off into the street, luring her away. "I CAN SENSE HIM! I'LL TEAR HIM APART!"

Xie Lian winces.

'…You don't think Pei will be in any danger, do you?'

'The butterfly is going in the opposite direction of where he and the others are,' Hua Cheng assures him. *'They should be fine.'*

Xie Lian nods, relieved, just as Qi Rong begins to grumble.

"That stupid bitch is OBSESSED!"

He tears at his hair with frustration. "She just hears the name PEI and she flies off the handle! She's LUCKY I can handle this group of weaklings on my own, that FUCKER!"

"…Dad?" Guzi looks up from where he's been hand chopping Qi Rong's legs (at his request), curious.

"Yeah?" Qi Rong grumbles, nearly kicking him in the face in his irritation. "What do you want?!"

"All of these people," Guzi stares around at the farmers with wide eyes. "How does the spell you put on them work?"

"…Oh," Qi Rong sits up on his elbows, eager to boast. "See those green lights on their heads?" Qi Rong sends a careless wave in their direction, watching the way the farmers shrink, turning away from him in fear—a smirk spreading across his face.

"Yeah?"

"Well, when your old man gives the signal—BOOM!" He claps his hands. "They all go up in flames! Even if that fucker Hua Cheng was here—there'd be NOTHING HE COULD DO ABOUT IT!" Qi Rong cackles. "The spell can only be lifted if you know the password! It's PERFECT! SO PERFECT!"

His laughter echoes across the walls, and Guzi tilts his head.

"…What kind of password?"

The green ghost snickers, leaning forward to whisper it in the child's ear.

Guzi's eyes grow round, and he repeats him innocently—

"…Dog fucker Xie Lian?"

"…" Xie Lian wipes a hand down his face, exasperated, and Hua Cheng's expression grows dark.

"HA! GOOD BOY! THAT'S EXACTLY—!"

CRASH!

Qi Rong falls silent when a large, glass window—one of the only left intact—shatters, four figures dropping through it, landing in front of him.

"…" Guzi's face lights up, just as Qi Rong grows pale. "Shuo gege!"

The forest demon sends Qi Rong a sharp look, extending his arms to Guzi, who runs straight to him.

Hua Cheng takes an angry step in the green ghost's direction, but is stopped by a palm placed against his chest.

"Qi Rong," Xie Lian crosses his arms. "How is this going to go?"

His cousin glares back at him, visibly irritated.

"The hell is that supposed to mean?! YOU'RE THE ONES WHO BUSTED IN WHEN THIS ANCESTOR WAS—"

"Are you going to let them go," Xie Lian continues, not in the mood to waste any more time than he already has. "Or, are we fighting?"

"…" Qi Rong's eyes flicker to Hua Cheng, holding back for the moment—if only on Xie Lian's silent request. Then, to Ren Song and Lang Qianqiu, each of them glaring at him venomously.

Ironically, he has all of those with the greatest grudges against him gathered in one room.

“If you even try it, I’ll just set off the spell!” He sneers, holding his fingers up in a warning motion.

Xie Lian sighs, wishing he could send the farmers a sympathetic look; any form of comfort—but he can’t.

“…It’s either that, or being eaten by you,” he points out. “Which do you think they would prefer?”

The farmers look at one another—then shrug, seeming to come to an agreement, gesturing to each other with their hands.

“…We’d prefer going quickly if he’s going to eat us anyway, actually.”

“Understandably,” Xie Lian agrees.

Then, he addresses Qi Rong directly once more.

“There’s not an outcome where you’re going to be able to eat them. Xuan Ji isn’t here to protect you. So, what’s it going to be?”

Qi Rong glares at him, his lips twisting into a frustrated frown.

“…Fine, you heard the password! YOU LET THEM GO YOURSELF!”

Hua Cheng grinds his teeth, taking another step forward.

“Dog fucker Xie Lian,” the prince states calmly, taking another step towards Qi Rong. “Dog fucker Xie Lian.”

Another step.

“Dog fucker Xie Lian.”

Another.

“Dog fucker Xie Lian.”

The prince stops, standing before the rotting throne of a would-be usurper.

He can’t see Qi Rong’s eyes—and still, the green ghost shrinks when those shackles gleam down at him.

"Aren't you going to laugh?" Xie Lian prompts him calmly. "That was the joke, wasn't it? It only works if you're the one who says it."

He leans over him, not a particularly large man himself—but still, he towers over Qi Rong.

"…You…" The green ghost shrinks back into the throne, limbs scrambling. "YOU WOULDN'T HARM THIS BODY!"

He searches Xie Lian's face, trying to see if his cousin is bluffing, but—

Qi Rong genuinely can't tell.

All he finds in those eyes is quiet contempt.

"IF YOU DO, THAT BRAT WILL—!"

He falls abruptly silent, noticing small sparks of light from behind Xie Lian.

Shuo is holding Guzi against his side with one arm, and with the other, his fingers dance before the child's eyes, sending small sparks of illusion into his senses.

A simple spell, but he can't see what's going on.

He can't *hear* , either.

"Did you think I hadn't noticed?"

Qi Rong is so quick to scramble away, he falls from his throne. Halfway strewn down the steps, pushing away with his feet, glaring up at him.

"You don't have a heartbeat anymore, Qi Rong."

He's already drained the body of Guzi's father dry, using it as nothing more than a husk.

"There's no human in there for me to hurt, Qi Rong," Xie Lian explains calmly. "It's just you."

"…You think I'm scared of you?" Qi Rong sneers, pushing himself back up the steps toward the throne with his hands, hair falling in his face. "You're PATHETIC! A DISGRACE!"

"You think so?" Xie Lian replies, unbothered—even as Hua Cheng's hands ball into fists behind him, his jaw locked.

“IF I’M SO MUCH LOWER THAN YOU, THEN WHY ARE YOU THE ONE IN CHAINS?!”

Lang Qianqiu shakes his head vehemently, rolling up his sleeves. “You SHUT YOUR—!”

Xie Lian kneels before Qi Rong, and in a rare instance, their faces are level with one another.

The prince lifts his hand to his throat, pulling Ruoye aside until the cursed shackle around his neck is visible.

The shackles in his eyes have always been considered beautiful.

But no one could say that about the shackle around his neck.

Angry, twisting marks—the color of soot, carved deep into his skin.

Ever present, always constricting.

The shackle that binds his spiritual power.

“I wear these chains because I need them,” Xie Lian answers simply.

“I could cause harm without them.”

Because Xie Lian—

He breaks things.

Even when he doesn’t mean to.

He can’t stop breaking things.

“But you…” Xie Lian shakes his head. “In all of this time, you’re still just words.”

“I’VE CAUSED COUNTLESS DEATHS, I—!”

“No,” Xie Lian isn’t interested in indulging any more self delusion. “It’s not you, Qi Rong.”

His cousin tries to stand up, but a palm presses on his chest, shoving him down.

“You’re only dangerous when someone powerful is using you as a pawn.”

Back then, it was Bai Wuxiang.

Xie Lian has never regarded Qi Rong as anything other than an offensive murder weapon.

Not Hong’er’s actual killer.

“…YOU HAVEN’T CHANGED AT ALL!” Qi Rong squirms, incensed. “ALWAYS LOOKING DOWN ON ME! PERFECT XIE LIAN, SO NOBLE! SO KIND!”

He twists his head around, veins bulging in his temples as he attempts to wriggle out from underneath Xie Lian’s hand.

“It makes me SO FUCKING SICK!”

“You haven’t changed either,” Xie Lian agrees, not particularly riled by his words.

“That never surprised me before. Up until recently, I didn’t think you were capable of guilt. Or empathy.”

His hand presses down just a little harder, drawing a wheeze from his cousin.

“Then, I saw the way you reacted to Mu Qing in that Inn.”

Even now, when Xie Lian mentions his friend’s name—Qi Rong doesn’t say a word.

The man who always has an insult.

Who normally wouldn’t even hesitate to make a grotesque remark at the expense of a victim to get a rise out of him.

The man who gloated/about torturing Hong’er.

He can’t even lift his head when Xie Lian says Mu Qing’s name.

“…You *can* feel remorse,” the prince concludes. “Which means you could have changed.”

“…Changed?!” Qi Rong sneers. “Who says I ever wanted—?!”

“You.”

Xie Lian's reply reduces him to stunned silence.

"Always wanting everyone's admiration and approval. To be accepted. You *want* these things, and you've had countless chances to change over the centuries, but…" Xie Lian shakes his head, rising to his feet.

"Part of you has always known it would start eating you alive if you tried to look it all in the eye, hasn't it?"

Hua Cheng is barely holding back his own anger, but—

For the first time, Shuo sees something beneath all of those layers of bravado.

Pain.

Genuine suffering.

And he didn't—

Seeing that in Qi Rong's eyes doesn't make Shuo want to forgive him for what happened to Bao.

It doesn't even make Shuo pity him at all.

But even acknowledging that there is anything human about Qi Rong at all makes him *sick* .

"…What's the point of this?!"

Qi Rong hisses, staring up at him. "You think convincing me I have a conscience is going to make me let those humans go?! YOU THINK I CARE?!"

"No," Xie Lian shakes his head. "I'm explaining."

"Explaining WHAT?!"

"Why I won't feel guilty for what I do to you."

It's not exactly a threat—not when he has every intention of actually doing it.

And yet, Qi Rong still seems to be in disbelief.

"…And just what do you think YOU'RE going to do?! You can't—!"

He quiets again when Xie Lian reaches over his shoulder, drawing Fangxin.

A sword Qi Rong knows all too well. The same one that…

The memory already would have been fresh in his mind, even without Xie Lian saying—

“Do you think I need my sight to hurt you, Qi Rong?”

The same words Xie Lian said to him *that* night.

Back when he—

Qi Rong starts to scramble backward again, nearly tripping over his own feet in his efforts to get away, but—

He doesn’t get far.

Ruoye slithers away from Xie Lian’s neck, wriggling across the floor until it shoots upward—Wrapping around Qi Rong.

Squeezing until he collapses.

Qi Rong twists around until he's on his back, feet kicking uselessly, staring up at his cousin as he approaches, fangxin dragging across the ground as he walks.

Xie Lian's expression is calm—not holding a single emotion.

Not the hatred or the *rage* it had...that night.

But Qi Rong can still remember.

Hanging from the ceiling. Begging for his life. All as his cousin, the one he used to adore, who he used to look up to the way he had to no one else, said—

'You were murdered by a cutsleeve—avenging another cutsleeve.'

Up until now, he'd looked back on the moment as a grudge, something to hold onto, to be spiteful over—

Never realized until this moment, when his hands begin to tremble in Ruoye's grip, that it might be a source of...

Fear.

That he might...

Be *afraid* of Xie Lian.

"You..." His lips tremble, skin someone growing even paler now, losing any semblance of color as his cousin approaches him, fangxin gleaming wickedly in the dim light filtering in through the windows. "You...YOU THINK I'M SCARED OF YOU, YOU PIECE OF SHIT?!"

Qi Rong's reactions are almost predictable, beyond a certain point.

His breath quickening as he watches Xie Lian pull fangxin back, preparing to strike.

"FUCKING FREAK! DEVIANT! SICK MOTHER FUCKER—FUCKER—YOU—!"

Xie Lian lunges, and he cringes.

"...DOG FUCKER XIE LIAN!"

The blade never lands.

Qi Rong trembles, his eyes squeezed shut—and after a moment of hesitation—he slowly opens them.

Only to find his cousin turned away from him, sliding fangxin back into its sheath.

"I'm sorry about that," he addresses the others in the room quietly.

"Does anyone need medical attention?"

That's when Qi Rong glances around at the farmers, now rising to their feet and stretching their limbs, stiff from staying still for so long...

...And realizes what he's done, unleashing a storm of curses.

"YOU ASSHOLE, YOU TRICKED ME!!"

Xie Lian ignores him, walking back to Hua Cheng's side.

"Gege was just pretending," the ghost king sighs, sounding...somewhat relieved. "I was beginning to worry."

Xie Lian bites back a smile, raising an eyebrow. "For Qi Rong?"

Hua Cheng quickly laughs in reply, shaking his head. "Hardly."

"...Thank you, your highness," one of the farmers steps forward, bowing deeply. "We're all in your debt!"

Xie Lian shakes his head, waving it off. "Oh, no! He and I used to be family—his mess is my responsibility."

They make their way out of the palace—leaving Qi Rong behind after Shuo hands Guzi off to Yin Yu, giving the ghost a solid kick in the head, knocking him out.

"Take the boy and return to Paradise Manor," Hua Cheng glances over his shoulder, where Mount Tonglu looms behind them.

Yin Yu nods at first, then looks down, staring at the Daruma doll of General Qi Ying in his hand. "...And what should I do with Quan Yizhen?"

"Whatever you choose," Hua Cheng shrugs, uncaring. "It's not for me to tell you."

The former official nods, his expression...conflicted.

Shuo stops him before he goes, pushing Guzi's hair back from his face, many emotions roiling behind his eyes.

"...Make sure you feed him as soon as you can," he finally mutters, pulling his hand back. "Who knows the last time that freak actually gave him a meal."

Yin Yu nods, stopping Shuo with a hand on his arm before he walks away.

"He'll be fine, you know."

"..." The demon nods, clearing his throat before he returns to the others.

Lang Qianqiu has his arms crossed, looking him over.

"...You're that worried about him?"

"No," Shuo shakes his head, rubbing the back of his neck—stiff after being on the move for so long. "Just...doesn't it piss you off?"

"...Piss me off?"

The demon follows after the others, his expression dark.

"Seeing anyone treat Qi Rong like their *father."*

Lang Qianqiu grows quiet, watching him as they return to the city street.

Ahead of them, Xie Lian stops, thinking.

"...We can't just leave these people here, out in the open..." he reasons.

"Do you think we should bring them back to where Banyue and Pei Su are?"

Hua Cheng is quiet for a moment, then—

"Perhaps we should wait a moment, your highness."

Something about his tone gives Xie Lian pause.

"...Is there a problem?"

Hua Cheng lifts a finger, one of his butterflies drifting over to land on it.

"...It would seem that Xuan Ji isn't *quite* as gullible as we expected."

It takes Xie Lian a moment to understand what he means.

Then...he begins to hear the voices drift over.

That Which was Never Ours

Chapter Summary

> “General?” Banyue frowns, looking like she might climb down to check on him more thoroughly, but—
>
> “STAY AWAY FROM HIM!”
>
> The shriek is so sudden, so shrill, it throws both of them off guard.
>
> When Pei Ming turns his head, he sees something rounding the corner.
>
> Crawling across the ground, dragging one leg behind her—long, tangled hair, shrouded with a bridal veil.

In the lower region of the imperial city, Pei Ming leaps down from a nearby roof, shaking another layer of soot from his robes.

"...You're sure you want to go on with the others?" Banyue calls after him.

She's leaning over the edge of the rooftop, where he left her with Pei Su. One of the few undamaged buildings in the city—keeping them up and away from any possible rats that might want to attack.

"I can't exactly sit around and wait it out, can I?"

"...Can't you?" Pei pauses at that, turning his head back to look at her—finding Banyue pinched with concern. "You don't look well, general."

And in fairness—he doesn't.

He's pale, the stubble on his chin having formed into more of a beard at this point—visibly exhausted.

It's not the first time that someone has expressed concern for him recently—and he wouldn't even say that she was the most persistent about it.

And yet.

Coming from someone that Pei has never been particularly *kind* to, it...it makes the General rub his forehead with a groan.

“General?” Banyue frowns, looking like she might climb down to check on him more thoroughly, but—

“STAY AWAY FROM HIM!”

The shriek is so sudden, so shrill, it throws both of them off guard.

When Pei Ming turns his head, he sees something rounding the corner.

Crawling across the ground, dragging one leg behind her—long, tangled hair, shrouded with a bridal veil.

Her dress is bloody and torn, soot coating her hands and feet.

“IS THIS YOUR NEWEST WHORE?!”

Pei Ming glances up at Banyue, then back at the newcomer.

“…Excuse me?”

He squints, trying to see her face through the veil and dark, matted hair.

“DON’T TRY TO DENY IT!” She snarls, pointing a clawed finger in his direction. “I SAW HER FAWNING OVER—!”

“…Do I know you?”

The female ghost freezes, her finger trembling for a moment in shock.

Pei can tell that they obviously *have* met—but he can’t recall having been with anyone recently enough for them to hold a grudge like this.

“…Ha…” One small, breathless laugh escapes her as she sits up on her knees. “You…you’re teasing me, aren’t you?”

Her hands claw at her veil, yanking at it.

“Trying to get the bride to show her face…you…you’re still such a dog!” She giggles, her voice cracking as she rips the fabric aside, finally showing her face.

And still, when she looks up at the general…

It takes him a moment.

He's had quite a few women over the years—and has only been with one person for the better part of the last century, give or take a few decades, but…

"…Xuan Ji?"

Just hearing him say her name earns a delighted sigh from the female ghost, but…

Pei Ming is gawking at her.

Not…in a positive way.

The general takes a step back, looking her over with utter shock.

"…How did you end up like this?" He mutters, shaking his head. "And what the hell are you wearing?"

"I…" Xuan Ji's jaw drops, agog. "What…do you mean?"

Pei glances over her gown with mild disgust. "Is that from one of the girl's you murdered on Mount Yu Jun? Have you so little shame?"

"From one of the…?" Xuan Ji starts to repeat him, almost numb. "EXCUSE ME?!"

"You murder nearly twenty brides, but that question is offensive?"

"I BOUGHT THIS WHEN I WAS ALIVE!" She shakes her head, shaking her fist at him. "DON'T INSULT ME BY CALLING ME A THIEF!"

Pei Ming stares at her, and miles away, listening through the recording of a wraith butterfly—his answer makes Xie Lian smack his palm against his forehead.

"…For who?" He asks blankly, his brow furrowed with confusion. "Were you engaged before? You told me there wasn't…"

He doesn't even finish his sentence before he sees Xuan Ji's face darken, claws extending as she lunges for him.

"ARE YOU MOCKING ME?!"

"…WHAT?!"

He barely manages to avoid getting throttled, catching her by the firearm.

“I BOUGHT IT FOR OUR WEDDING!” She snarls up at him, eyes red.

“…Our wedding?!” Pei’s eyes narrow with age-old frustration as he shoves her back. “How many times did I tell you I DIDN’T WANT THAT?!”

“AND HOW MANY TIMES DID I SHOW YOU THAT I DESERVED IT?!” Xuan Ji claws forward, grabbing him by the sleeve. “AFTER EVERYTHING I'VE DONE—HOW COULD YOU TREAT ME SO COLDLY?!”

“…Deserved it?” Pei Ming repeats her, caught between frustration and exhaustion. “Xuan Ji…”

“I BETRAYED MY COUNTRY FOR YOU!” Xuan Ji cries, refusing to let go of him this time, her claws digging into the flesh of his forearm. “I DESTROYED MY LEG FOR YOU!”

Pei Ming doesn’t even wince, trying to shake her off. “Do you think I WANTED any of that?!”

“YOU DIDN’T STOP ME!”

“…Stop you?! You were a grown woman! A GENERAL no less! Your actions were your own—and I never USED the plans you tried to give me.” He shakes his head, “Xuan Ji, I was always clear with you about what I wanted—“

“And why should that be more important than WHAT I WANTED?!”

“You can’t love someone out of OBLIGATION!” Pei Ming can feel her nails digging even deeper into his flesh, already wounded from being bitten by Bai Jing before, but—

He doesn’t care.

“It wouldn’t have mattered WHAT you gave me, don’t you understand?! I didn’t feel that way!”

“But I—!” Xuan Ji grits her teeth, tears slipping down her cheeks. “BUT I LOVED YOU SO MUCH! WHY WASN’T THAT ENOUGH?! WHY WON'T YOU EVEN GIVE ME A CHANCE NOW, AFTER EVERYTHING I’VE DONE FOR US?!”

“This wasn’t FOR us!” Pei Ming glares. “It’s for YOU! It’s ALWAYS been about you!”

“I GAVE UP MY ENTIRE LIFE! I—!”

“NO!” The general snaps, losing what little remaining patience he has. “I SPARED your life in the first place, or have you forgotten?! You had EVERY opportunity to return home and take your place among your people!”

“I WANTED TO STAY WITH YOU!”

“Do you even REMEMBER what you did the last time we saw one another?!” Pei glares, pointing to the scar on his face. “When you nearly clawed my damn eye out?! Was THAT ‘for me’ too?!”

“You…!” Xuan Ji swallows thickly. “You wouldn’t even LOOK AT ME! I lost my temper, I—!”

“And when you didn’t get what you wanted, you crippled YOURSELF to try and FORCE me into a marriage, and spent ALL THIS TIME BLAMING ME WHEN IT DIDN’T WORK?!”

They glare at one another, each vehemently angry, neither backing down.

“YOU WOULD HAVE CHANGED YOUR MIND ONE DAY!”

Xuan Ji had always *known* that he would.

Pei Ming wasn’t any different from the colts her father used to raise on their estate.

Young, proud, powerful.

He loathed being controlled, or caged in.

But eventually, if you don’t let go—any colt will tire out.

If he had just kept her around a little longer, until he was older, he would have been ready to settle—

“It’s been NINE CENTURIES,” Pei Ming’s eyes are just as bright now as they were back then, burning down at her like the sun sinking into the horizon.

“All you’ve been since then is a BAD MEMORY for me, understand?!”

That actually makes Xuan Ji flinch, her anger faltering; and—

“General?” Banyue stands on the edge of the rooftop, watching the two with concern. “Do you need assistance—?”

Xuan Ji’s eyes snap up to her, pupils narrowing into slits—not so different from that of a snake—and Pei grits his teeth, gripping her arm.

“LEAVE HER BE, XUAN JI!”

“DON’T YOU DARE SPEAK TO HIM!” She snarls, charging forward with all of her strength. “HE’S *MINE* , YOU LITTLE *BITCH!”*

“Wh—?”

“I SAID LEAVE HER ALONE!”

“HA! SO PROTECTIVE OF YOUR NEW LOVER!”

“Lover?!” Pei hisses, “SHE’S NO SUCH THING!”

“YOU’RE LYING TO PROTECT THE WHORE! I’M NOT FALLING FOR IT! I’LL RIP HER THROAT OUT AND MAKE YOU WATCH!”

In their struggle the two end up slamming into the side of the building—fracturing stone, kicking dust down with them.

And when they do—a jar tips over onto its side, rolling off of the side of the roof.

“IT DOESN’T MATTER IF I HAVE A LOVER OR NOT!” Pei glares up at her. “That doesn’t change the fact that I have NEVER loved you! Understand?! And I NEVER WILL!”

“…SHUT UP!” Xuan Ji shrieks, her eyes wild and frenzied. “IS YOUR HEART MADE OF STONE?!”

“AS FAR AS YOU’RE CONCERNED?! IT MAY AS WELL BE!”

“SHUT UP! SHUT UP, SHUT UP, SHUT UP!!!”

Her arms flail wildly as she tries to claw any inch of skin she can get her hands on, and as her eyes flicker around frantically—something catches her eye.

A pile of shattered clay.

THUD!

At first, Pei Ming doesn’t feel anything—only searing heat in his ribs.

But he knows.

He’s all too familiar with the feeling of being stabbed.

When he looks down, he sees Ming’guang buried between his ribs, running him all the way through.

“If you’re incapable of loving someone—“ Xuan Ji locks her jaw, tears pouring down her face. “THEN YOU DON’T DESERVE TO—!”

She falls silent—but not by choice.

Rather, because she's been grabbed around the neck—Pei Ming's hand completely enveloping her throat, squeezing until she falls silent.

"I have." He sounds remarkably calm, in spite of everything—blood dripping from the corner of his mouth.

"I heard you that day, on Mount Yu Jun. I remember what you said," He watches as she lets go of Ming'guang, clawing at his forearm as he holds her by the neck. "Do you?"

"True..." Xuan Ji rasps, staring back at him hatefully, "True love...would burn you!"

Her feet kick at his shins in an attempt to force him to let her go—but with no effect. "IT WOULD REDUCE YOUR HEART TO—!"

"It did."

In her eyes, Pei Ming sees a reflection of every sin he's ever committed.

The person that he used to be.

The war hero that he *loathed* .

How single minded and self serving he used to be.

How he used to run away from the truth if he didn't like it, refusing to look at it.

How stubborn he used to be, refusing to change, or see any point of view that wasn't his own.

"I fell in love." He watches now as her eyes grow impossibly wide, filling with hurt. "And that was what made me realize that you *never* gave a damn about me."

"You—!" She shakes her head vehemently, eyes welling with angry tears. "DON'T SAY THAT! Of course I—!"

"No," Pei squeezes her throat tighter. "You don't. You don't know how."

"I DO! ALL I'VE EVER WANTED WAS TO—!"

"I would do *anything* to see him one more time." Pei cuts her off, and—

His eyes have tears of their own.

"I would break every oath I have ever made."

He reaches down, squeezing the hilt of Ming'guang—

Knowing that his old friend can hear him.

"I would turn myself into a hypocrite."

He never understood Rong Guang when he was young.

Never understood a love so consuming, that it could steal your principles.

The kind of ache for another person that grows overtime, like roots tearing into stone.

The kind of bond that you'd sell your own *soul* to protect.

"And even if I did all of that, and he never wanted to see me again—I'd be fine with that," Pei Ming smiles faintly.

"Because he would be happy. Because he would be here. That would be enough for me. *That* is what it means to love someone."

It means wanting them to be happy—even if they can only do that without you.

What Xuan Ji wants isn't love—all she's ever wanted was to exploit.

If Pei Ming knew that Shi Wudu was out there somewhere, happy—

then he could take a full breath again.

If he knew that he could be with Shi Qingxuan, and watch his nephew grow—he could *sleep* again.

But he could never love again.

Not like that.

"And he loved *me* ," Pei Ming squeezes her throat as his own constricts with emotion. "He never wanted to change who I was, or the life I lived—he just wanted to be a part of it."

And of all of the regrets the general has had in his life—none of them have ever weighed on him as much as the fact that he never told Shi Wudu how he felt.

That he had lived for so long, he had begun to take time itself for granted—assuming they would never run out of it.

There were so many things he hadn't said yet, thinking that his lover wasn't ready to hear them. So many things he wanted to ask for, but—

He always thought they would have more time.

His arm whips to the side, throwing Xuan Ji by the neck, sending her flying.

"So, don't you DARE say you love me!" He glares, reaching down and yanking Ming'guang out of him, tossing the blade to the ground. "NOT WHEN I KNOW WHAT IT ACTUALLY FEELS LIKE!"

"You..." Xuan Ji hangs her head, nails clawing into the dirt. "...YOU HAVE NO IDEA—!"

She launches herself forward—only to be stopped again, but this time, not by Pei.

When she looks down–-the little girl she was screaming before—the one with the black cloak and long, ebony hair—

She's gripped Xuan Ji by both wrists, holding her back.

"Don't hurt him!"

Pei Ming stares at her—how ferocious she's become in the blink of an eye.

Not the meek, useless child that he once saw her as.

Rather a fierce young woman, unafraid to look Xuan Ji in the eye.

"HAVEN'T I ALREADY TOLD YOU TO BACK OFF, HE'S—!"

"His *own* person! Not yours!"

Xuan Ji shakes her head, her veil whipping around her, the bell at her hip jingling wildly. "YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE SAYING!"

"I do!" Banyue holds onto her, refusing to let go—and when she looks at Pei—

He's shocked to find the former preceptor shedding tears of her own.

"I know what it means to love someone so much that you would compromise yourself for them!" She cries, even as Xuan Ji rattles her around fiercely, trying to shake her off. "I know what it is to betray your country to protect someone precious to you! But—!"

She stares up at Xuan Ji with determination, unafraid.

She isn't a young, mortal bride—cowering and begging for her life on the mountainside.

Unlike Xuan Ji's other victims—she isn't easy prey.

"But that doesn't mean you can make yourself a burden on the person you love!"

If you do that—then it isn't love at all.

Xuan Ji cries out, feeling something sharp sink into her forearm, looking down to find some sort of snake biting into her—and she glares, finally managing to throw both it, and the child aside.

"DON'T LECTURE ME, BRAT!"

Xuan Ji reaches down to lift Ming'guang again, stalking towards Pei. "I'VE LIVED FOUR TIMES AS LONG AS YOU, WHAT WOULD YOU KNOW ABOUT—!"

But when she lunges forward, prepared to run the general through again—

The sword won't budge.

Pei Ming stares up at it from where he's fallen to the ground—one arm wrapped around his middle, lips parted with shock.

"...You...?" He whispers, unsure at first, until he hears a voice ring out —

"...You think any officer worth his salt is going to watch the enemy attack his general and not do anything about it?"

Rong Guang isn't strong enough to take Xuan Ji on—not after his battle with Ren Song.

But that doesn't mean he can't possess the sword that he used to inhabit, stopping Yushi Huang from being able to turn it against him.

"...You?!" Xuan Ji sneers, glaring down at the blade with disdain. Remembering Rong Guang from her mortal years—

The man had *hated* her.

"THAT'S RIGHT!" Ming'guang rattles in her grasp. "It's ME you ugly, two timing, gold digging, DOUBLE CROSSING *SNAKE!"*

Banyue sits up, rubbing her head. "...Don't two timing and double crossing mean the same thing?"

Pei Ming doesn't look over, waving her off.

"He's on a roll, let him have it."

"..." Xuan Ji tosses the sword to the ground, her claws extending as she marches forward, prepare to shred Pei and Banyue with her bare hands, but—

"That's enough, General Xuan. Stop."

Her foot freezes in mid-step.

Once again, not by her own choice. Rather, she—

She *can't* move forward.

Her shoulders hunch with rage, a darkness passing over her expression, lips twisting into a sneer.

"...Your highness," she whips her head around with a glare. "I didn't know you were here."

The newcomer does not avert her gaze—staring back at Xuan Ji calmly, until the general is the one to turn away, snarling with contempt.

"It's rare that the usurper herself GRACES us lowly peasants with her presence," she hisses. "What did you do to me?!"

The Rain Master pushes her bamboo hat back, letting it hang about her shoulders as she surveys the situation.

"I brought Yulong with me," She murmurs, barely sparing the treasonous general another glance.

Yulong was traditionally the sacred sword of the Kingdom of Yushi—and if wielded by its ruler, the citizens of Yushi can be compelled to obey their commands.

Treacherous as she may be—Xuan Ji is no exception.

"...You dare to use that sword?!" The female ghost snarls.

"You dare call yourself the ruler of Yushi, after the way you took the throne?!"

Yushi Huang tilts her head back, allowing the breeze to stir her hair for a moment—then she lets out a slow sigh.

"Quiet."

And just like that, Xuan Ji's jaw locks shut—even as she struggles.

"Queen Yushi!" Banyue rises to her feet, hurrying to the Rain Master's side. "I heard you got hurt! Are you alright?"

"...Oh? I suppose I did," Yushi Huang shrugs, showing very little sign of any injury. "Here."

She hands the young ghost a pickle jar.

"Put Xuan Ji in this."

Banyue nods eagerly, taking the jar as she goes to do as instructed—and Yushi Huang remains where she is, her hands folded into her sleeves.

Meeting eyes that she hasn't seen in nine centuries.

The same eyes that looked down at her as she took her last breaths.

General Pei.

"…" He struggles to sit up, his hand still pressed against his side to staunch the bleeding, and she moves forward, dropping to her knees before him

"There's no need for that," the Rain Master murmurs, placing her hand over his. "Let me see."

General Pei averts his eyes.

Her hand is half the size of his—but firm as she pulls his fingers out of the way, examining the wound.

"It takes something more serious than this to kill me," Pei mutters, his eyes fixed on the ground, and Yushi Huang looks up, searching his face silently.

"…I know."

The general stares pointedly at the ground for another long moment, seeming to realize she isn't going anywhere before looking up with a sigh.

"…Thank you for looking out for Pei Su," he mutters, clearing his throat—startled when he actually looks at her face, because…

…She's smiling at him.

In a soft, natural way, reaching up to place a hand on his shoulder, brushing the spot from his armor.

"He's a good man," The Rain Master responds quietly. "Anyone is welcome in my temples."

And after centuries of running, shouldering such a heavy weight of shame, remorse, and blame…

Pei Ming realizes that applies to *him* , as well.

…But *why?*

He stares at her, open mouthed and dumbfounded, unsure of what to —

"General!"

Xie Lian bursts around the corner with the others, breathing hard from the rush to make it back.

"I heard Xuan Ji had been dealt with—we tried to get here as fast as we could. Are you alright?"

Yushi Huang helps him stand, one arm pulled around her shoulder.

"He will be."

She looks Xie Lian over briefly, eyeing the cursed shackle in his eyes with dismay.

"…Your highness," she clears her throat, and that, along with her aura, gives him a better idea of where she's standing. "Do you remember me? It's been a very long time."

It does take Xie Lian a moment to recall her voice. The last time they met, it was before his first banishment—and he had only been a teenager at the time.

But he already heard Banyue call out to her through Hua Cheng's butterfly—and that's enough to make the connection.

"Queen Yushi," he bows in acknowledgment, folding his hands in front of him. "Thank you for protecting General Pei and the others."

"They had a handle on it without me," she shrugs, her tone serene as she looks down at Ming'guang, discarded on the ground "Lieutenant Rong Guang."

The demon doesn't reply, still lurking from within the blade.

"…I don't think he means harm," Pei offers—which is rather honorable, coming from the man Rong Guang was trying to murder only two days before.

"Good," Yushi Huang nods, "I'll carry him until you recover."

Neither Pei or the sword seem thrilled with the situation, but no complaints are made.

"Lord Rain Master!" The farmers rescued from Qi Rong run to her side, looking their goddess over for any cuts. "Are you alright?!"

“We heard the man in black cut you up pretty good!”

“…You mean Ling Wen?” She blinks, shaking her head. “He didn’t mean to—it wasn’t his fault.”

“Are you sure?”

Her response makes Pei Ming frown, looking down at her suspiciously.

“Ling Wen would never hurt me.”

“…Have you two become close?”

“Yes,” The Rain Master nods.

“…Oh,” The general looks away, his brow furrowed. “I didn’t know you were friends.”

“We’re not.”

His eyes snap wide open as Yushi Huang raises her fingers to her lips, whistling loud and sharp, the sound echoing across the plains.

“Xie Lian.”

It takes the prince by surprise for a moment—but Yushi Huang is among the only Heavenly Officials aside from Jun Wu to actually outrank him. And, given her informal nature—she wouldn’t necessarily always use his title.

(He prefers it to ‘Xianle,’ anyway.)

“…Yes, Lord Rain Master?”

“Is it still your intention to go to the Kiln?” As she asks him this, Xie Lian can hear the sound of approaching hooves. “I’ll evacuate the others—but I can take your party there on my way.”

“…You’re sure it isn’t too much trouble?”

Yushi Huang looks him over, then examines the looming figure of Mount Tonglu behind them.

“…Given the gravity of the situation, I don’t think it would matter if it’s trouble or not.”

As usual, the Rain Master is perfectly practical.

Pei Ming actually finds himself grimacing as she leads him towards the guardian ox, muttering under his breath—

“Actually, I don’t know why I didn’t see it before—you and Ling Wen make perfect sense.”

Much to his utter dismay.

At first, it’s almost impossible to believe that they could all fit on the ox’s back, like the Rain Master is indicating—

Not until the best kicks its hind legs at her urging—growing to twice —no, three times its original size.

More than enough to carry all of them.

But as they start loading up and onto the ox—mortals first, then Pei Su and Banyue, when Hua Cheng goes to follow them…he notices one person hanging back.

Shuo.

Standing off to the side, his expression…conflicted.

“…” The ghost king hangs back, crossing his arms.

The younger demon doesn't speak at first—and Hua Cheng doesn't prompt him, more than aware of the fact that he's waiting for the others to drift out of earshot.

And once they do—Shuo takes a deep breath.

"I don't think I should go with you."

Hua Cheng crosses his arms, taking that in.

"...Is that your way of saying you've made a decision?"

Shuo nods shallowly, unable or unwilling to look him in the eye.

"I..." He lets out a heavy, frustrated sigh, biting his lip. "I wouldn't make it."

Hua Cheng doesn't argue with him.

Not because he thinks of him as weak—

Surviving the Kiln isn't necessarily about strength.

There are plenty of ghosts—like Ren Song—who are strong without the Kiln. But there's a reason only Hua Cheng and He Xuan survived as ghost kings.

Surviving is far more about focus and *purpose* .

Hua Cheng doesn't have room for fear or self doubt. He feels those emotions, but he pushes them aside.

He Xuan has the uncanny ability to warp his entire personality around a singular goal.

For him, it was vengeance.

For Hua Cheng, it was something far more singular:

Xie Lian.

And after hearing what Qi Rong said in the ruins of the Palace of Wuyong...

If his resentment towards Qi Rong truly *is* the only thing keeping him tethered to this world...it really wouldn't be good enough.

No matter how prepared Shuo is, or how much strength he's obtained—

If he's directionless, the flames of Mount Tonglu will consume him, leaving nothing behind.

"...What are you going to do instead?"

The forest demon looks to the horizon, thinking.

"That thing that attacked me on the Terrace of Cascading Wine—I still haven't recovered all of the resentment I lost yet. But...it's weird," he mutters, eyeing the fields behind them.

"There are so many ghosts left."

It's true. By this stage—the field should be narrowing. Instead—there are still hordes of relatively low level ghosts, left almost completely untouched.

As though the more powerful demons are ignoring them for some

reason.

(That, or they've already been wiped out.)

"If I consume them...I still might not be able to go into the Kiln," Shuo reasons. "But I'll still be more useful going forward."

Hua Cheng stares out in the same direction, frowning.

And then, he says something that leaves Shuo dumbfounded.

"You don't always have to be useful."

Hua Cheng doesn't look away from the fields of Tonglu, even when Shuo whips his head around to look at him, jaw hanging open with shock.

"...Huh?"

Hua Cheng lowers his gaze to look at him.

"You don't have to justify your own existence."

Shuo stares at him, struggling to form words. Unsure how that makes him feel. If it's comforting, or it’s just...

"...What?"

Hua Cheng sighs, his eyes flickering back toward the others—who haven't noticed them lingering behind. Not yet.

"You never tried to do that before."

He doesn't have to specify what he means by that.

When it comes to Shuo, there's only one before that matters.

Before Bao was gone.

Before that—he was never so focused on proving that he could be useful.

That he deserved to be here, even if everyone else was gone.

Because Bao's love, his acceptance, the fact that he needed Shuo—that was a secure attachment. He never felt as though he only mattered to his brother if he remained useful.

Convenient.

And after Bao was gone—no one needed him.

There was never going to be anyone else who would stand by him through anything. Who would love him, even when it was hard.

Shuo knew, when his brother dispersed, that he would never be someone's priority ever again.

And when you know that...

It makes you think that you constantly have to justify why people should keep you around, rather than discard you the first chance they get.

"...I feel like I do," he whispers, swallowing hard.

Hua Cheng's hand lands on his shoulder.

"Do you want to move on?"

It's a question he always asked Shuo, ever since he was small. His head barely reaching Hua Cheng's waist, clinging to the ghost king's side as he watched more and more children pass on into the next life.

He never looked at Hua Cheng when he answered.

He still doesn't now—shaking his head, his voice raw.

"No."

But if he had—he would have known that each and every time, including now...

Hua Cheng was always visibly *relieved* to hear it.

"You don't need another reason to be here. Not to me."

They don't look at one another—neither one accustomed to conversations like this, and...

There's more that needs to be said—but now isn't the time.

"Knowing that, do you still want to go with that plan?"

"..." Shuo nods, clearing his throat and rubbing at his nose.

Hua Cheng nods, lifting his hand from his shoulder.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

As he starts to walk away, the corner of Shuo's mouth curves up half heartedly.

"And don't do anything you would do, either?"

Hua Cheng smiles faintly.

"Exactly."

He doesn't doubt that Shuo will find more of a drive—a purpose.

Spirits like him don't linger on for as long as he has for no reason.

And Hua Cheng isn't wrong.

Before everything is said and done—Ren Song will find something to utterly dedicate himself to.

But that's a double edged sword.

Purpose can give your life meaning—or, it can be the end of you.

(Because some things are worth dying for.)

As he returns to the Ox, he finds Xie Lian speaking to Lang Qianqiu in hushed tones.

"...You're sure you want to go back for Qi Rong?"

Lang Qianqiu nods, glancing back over his shoulder.

Not at anyone in particular, obviously—just eyeing the path back to where they came from

"He's caused enough damage. We can't let him roam free at a time like this, but...Don't worry, guoshi. I won't get rid of him."

Funny enough—the moment Qi Rong said what he did back there...

Xie Lian had the sneaking suspicion that Lang Qianqiu wouldn't be trying that again.

"...Ready, San Lang?"

"As long as you are, dianxia," the ghost king replies simply, helping him climb onto the Ox.

Once they're settled—with Xie Lian in front, and Hua Cheng sitting behind him, steadying the prince with an arm around his waist, the Guardian Ox of Yushi takes off.

But, unlike a mortal beast—it runs with the swiftness of the wind, leaping hundreds of meters with every step.

Carrying them towards their final destination.

Like chess pieces being deftly maneuvered across the board—carefully placed into their positions for the endgame.

And the place where it all began is the same place where it ends.

The Kiln of Mount Tonglu.

There's only one thing left behind in the square.

All the gods, ghosts, and mortals left it behind—each going on to meet their own destinies.

A small, clay pickle jar. Weakly rolling around, faint screams of protests echoing from within.

No one answers.

Not for hours.

And in an abandoned city on the edge of the world—well.

There’s no reason to think this couldn’t go on for all eternity.

Trapped. Voiceless. Powerless. Unable to move.

Knowing her beloved is still…is still…

Then, there’s a miracle.

Someone finds the jar.

Xuan Ji feels herself being lifted into the air—the tell tale relief in pressure when the lid is opened, eagerly scrambling back out into the world, gasping for air.

“T-Thank you, I—!”

And at first, she assumed the only one who would come looking for her was Qi Rong.

But when she looks up—even Xuan Ji finds herself frozen, dropping to her knees with terror—then sinking into a low bow, her forehead touching the ground.

“M-My lord!” She croaks, too terrified to look up. “I thought—I thought you were—!”

Long, billowing white sleeves blow toward her in the breeze—and Xuan Ji doesn’t move. Terrified of what might come next, until—

A hand lands on top of her head, and a cold, chilling voice speaks out;

“Don’t be afraid, child. I have no intention of devouring you.”

Xuan Ji bites back a sob of relief, her shoulders trembling as she lets the tension deep out of her. “You…you don’t?”

“No, no…” The figure shakes his head. “As a matter of fact—I think we can help one another.”

Finally, she gains the courage to look up at him.

“…We can?”

It’s impossible to see his expression, but…

It feels like he must be smiling.

“I can give back everything Pei took from you—and give you your heart’s desire.”

Xuan Ji’s long still heart begins to pound, lips trembling.

“All I ask is that you tie up a loose end for me.”

“…What is it?” She breathes.

“First,” the figure extends his hand, “do we have a deal?”

In her mortal life, she never would have agreed to such a thing without knowing the terms, but…

She doesn't really have a choice. And even if she did—

Her heart's desire is worth it.

She reaches forward, grasping his hand—and when she does, the transformation is immediate.

Ripped fabric twisting and shifting—new flesh knitting into place.

After spending eight centuries in a wedding dress—

It feels good, wearing her old armor again.

Standing on both legs.

And this—this isn't even her reward.

Her lord tilts his head to the side, watching as his new servant trembles with eager excitement.

"All I want in exchange is something you already want yourself, Xuan Ji."

"Name it," She whispers.

"The person your General fell in love with…" her teeth gnash together at the memory, hands balling into fists. "…What if I told you he was still alive?"

He watches as the female ghost freezes, eyes bulging with shock and rage.

"Change that, and we'll both be satisfied."

Xuan Ji's head snaps up to look at him, eyes glimmering in fierce delight.

"…Where is he?" She snarls, lips pulled back over her fangs.

Miles away, Pei is slumped forward, half conscious—leaning against the one person he's spent his entire life avoiding.

And his ears…

They won't stop ringing.

Static crackling louder and louder, until all he can do is cut off his communication array with a swear, cursing Ling Wen for leaving them in disrepair, but…

Just before he does—there's a whisper. Garbled, but…

'…Pei-Xiong…'

Across the continent, in a city far to the north, a cultivator slumps forward, breaking his meditation pose as he coughs heavily, shoulders trembling.

The teenager beside him offers him a rag to cough into, patting his back.

"You're pushing yourself too hard…"

Shi Wudu grimaces—and when he lowers the cloth from his mouth, it comes away red.

His recovery in the last few weeks has been nothing short of miraculous—held together by nothing but sheer grit and determination.

"I'm fine," he mutters, "mortals aren't meant to access the communication arrays of heavenly officials. Trying to get through is obviously going to put the body under strain."

Jin Feng watches as the fallen god rises to his feet, pouring himself a glass of wine.

Since Pei ordered the temple to offer 'Pei Yuan,' any assistance he needed, there's been ample food and drink to go around.

Shi Wudu hasn't hesitated to help himself to the latter.

"…Then why are you trying so hard to get through?"

Shi Wudu glances at him through the corner of his eye as he swallows.

He was never one to drink to excess before.

Keeping your mental and physical balance is a tenant of cultivation, but…

He can't remember the last time his body felt sacred—so he supposes it doesn't matter.

"Someone has to try to warn him," Shi Wudu mutters, setting his empty cup aside, combing his fingers through his hair, pulling it back. "The emperor sent him to Mount Tonglu for a reason."

Most likely hoping that it would get Pei *killed* .

With Shi Wudu and Ling Wen out of the way—he's the only one left standing in the upper echelons of the heavenly order.

And unlike the others—he's older, and while his base of support can fluctuate over the centuries like anyone else's…

His core believers aren't easily swayed.

Jun Wu has nothing to hold over him—and he can't just break the man down and watch him fade.

He's been trying that for almost two centuries with little success.

No. If he wants to get rid of Pei—he'll need to kill him.

Luring him to the Kiln might be the easiest way to do it.

"…Where are you going?" Jin Feng sits up, watching as the cultivator throws on a cloak—

The very same cloak a certain martial god left here, before.

"Fresh air," Shi Wudu mutters. "You stay here."

"…Huh?" The teenager frowns. "Why?"

"You wanted help with your cultivation," Shi Wudu shrugs. "You haven't been meditating, you've been staring at me."

The tips of Jin Feng's ears turn red.

"…Oh."

"Maybe you'll have an easier time focusing if I'm not here."

He's blushing and stammering by the time Shi Wudu is out the door, pulling his hood up.

He knows it's not particularly nice to tease the kid—but, it's the easiest way to stop him from asking any more questions.

The thunder rolls as he walks through the streets of Langling—known for its bright summers, but dreary winters.

He's had time since he arrived to learn the layout of the place—and the guard towers placed strategically around the border by local cultivation sects.

The areas are strategic for the locals when it comes to defending from criminals or possible invaders.

For Shi Wudu, they serve another purpose.

He ducks into an alley across from one of said towers, looking around to make sure that he hasn't been seen.

After a moment he steps back out, jumping up, catching his fingertips against the eave of the gutter before pulling himself on top of a neighboring rooftop.

A seal awaits him—eroded after a week of being in place, and he kneels down to redraw it.

Before, when he was a god—he would have placed a barrier array around the entire city, barring any gods and ghosts from entry.

Now, the most he can manage is a spiritual detection array—which isn't entirely useless.

If Jun Wu had the foresight to place that curse on him—it was because he already suspected a possibility that Shi Wudu might *survive* He Xuan.

But he also knows too much to be allowed to live long—and in this state; he's vulnerable.

Using an array like this—if someone shows up to attack him, he'll have a better chance at being able to flee.

He doesn't expect Jun Wu to come himself. His focus will be on Xie Lian.

No—he'll send an underling.

And Shi Wudu can deal with that.

If he's prepared.

The magic is simple—but ancient. A spell he can manage in this state, even if it means he has to spread seals around the entire perimeter of the city.

Before, he was overseeing trade and finance for the entire continent.

By comparison, this is a small task.

Once he's finished reforming the seal, he Rises to his feet, prepared to move to the next rooftop.

But something stops him.

Voices, echoing from the warehouse below.

An odd time of day—and what's even stranger…

"Did you bring it?"

"Yes…but there's a problem."

Shi Wudu recognizes one of the voices—

Deng Su.

By the sound of it, the other is an older cultivator from the south—one who has come to tutor disciples in Langling, hoping a cultivation sect might take root here.

But why meet in a grain storage warehouse at this hour?

"Considering how much money I paid you and your friends, it had better not be."

"…"

Shi Wudu kneels back down, slipping in through a small window just underneath the roof line—kneeling among the rafters as he watches the men.

Silent as a cat, completely unnoticed.

Deng Su has a long, thin wooden box laid out on an empty table between them—his arms stiff by his sides.

Attempting to hide his nerves.

“Has anyone else managed to bring it back to you before?” He mutters. “We were more than worth your money.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“…We’ve all tried it—and the spell locking the mechanism is too complex. We can’t make it work.”

“Of course *you* can’t,” the older cultivator drags the box towards him, pushing at the lid. “It wasn’t built for you.”

When the contents are revealed, Shi Wudu tilts his head.

…A ring?

Why keep it in a box like that? And what sort of spell could be sealing it?

“…But didn’t Crimson Rain take it back from you, Master Yu?” He mutters, watching as the Lord slips the ring onto his finger.

And…

Nothing happens.

“…See?” Deng Su frowns, taking a step back when his prospective buyer whips around to glare at him.

“Are you trying to sell me a fake?!”

“Are you kidding me?!” Deng Su hisses, shaking a finger. “Two of my friends DIED helping get this thing out of ghost city!”

“Then why isn’t it working?!”

“Because Hua Cheng locked the damn thing after you backed out on your deal!” Deng Su shakes his head, snapping the box shut. “That isn’t my fault!”

“Well, I’m not paying an arm and a leg for a whip that doesn’t damn well WORK!”

“Like hell you aren’t!” Deng Su snarls. “I’m getting married soon—and I already committed this money towards a house for us!”

“If the whip doesn’t work—then there’s NO deal.”

The young cultivator gnashes his teeth together, frustrated.

“…You just want Zidian for bragging rights anyway! The Yu clan aren’t warriors like the Jiangs. You’ll never be the rulers of Yunmeng. So, why go to all that trouble—?!”

“Do you have any idea what this weapon can do?” Master Yu slams his hand down, the ring gleaming.

"It was designed for exorcisms. ANY ghost or inhuman energy will be extracted from a mortal body! You don't NEED to be a warrior for Zidian to be useful—people pay a fortune for an exorcism!" He glares down at the amethyst, frustrated.

"And in the hands of a proper warrior—do you know the stories they tell about Crimson Rain Sought Flower, boy?! Do you have any idea?!"

"I know that half of the stories about Hua Cheng aren't even true," Deng Su scowls, pacing along the edge of the table.

"I was in the gambler's den that night, before Paradise Manor caught on fire—and you know what? I didn't see any forked tongue, and he didn't drink anyone's blood. He just tried to trick some cultivator into kissing him after losing a dice roll—!"

"They say he learned how to forge weapons from the same god who smithed every blade in the heavens, countless generations ago! Any weapon made by him is on the same level as a Heavenly Blade! This —!" he shakes the ring on hand for emphasis. "Is worth more to me than your life!"

"...I hope that isn't a threat," Deng Su pauses, looking from the ring, to Master Yu's glaring expression. "Because you can't figure out how to make that thing work either. I've had nearly every cultivator in my temple give it a try—and no one has been able to do it."

"If Hua Cheng has actually locked it...it would take someone as skilled as a Heavenly Official to use it," Master Yu glares, sliding the ring off of his finger as he slams it back into the box. "For your sake—I hope that isn't true."

Deng Su's nails bite into his palms.

"We had a deal! You can't just—!" He pauses suddenly, looking around. "Did you hear that? Did someone follow you here?"

"..." Master Fu looks around, raising an eyebrow. "You think I'd hire someone to steal from a ghost king, then be careless about it?!"

"No, I just...!"

Den Su looks up towards the rafters, but...

There's nothing there.

"...Never mind..."

Shi Wudu straightens on the rooftop, throwing his head back to stare at the sky, feeling somewhat sardonic.

"Was that supposed to be some sort of sign?" He mutters, his voice dry.

He doesn't know who he's trying to talk to.

The universe. Fate.

Himself.

He pulls the hood of his cloak up once more as he walks across the rooftop, moving on to add another seal, but...

When he glances back over his shoulder—there's a pair of eyes watching him.

Perched on one of the higher roof tops, further up the slope away from the sea.

Some sort of bird—large and black.

With sharp, piercing eyes, bearing down on him like a warning.

FLASH!

The sky grows bright with lighting as it strikes down against the sea.

BOOM!

The flash of light forces Shi Wudu to blink—and when he opens his eyes again...it's gone.

"...Well," he mutters, leaping to the next rooftop, starting on another seal. "That might have actually been a sign."

Of what—he doesn't know.

But time will surely tell.

My Dearest Enemy, My Oldest Friend

Chapter Summary

> The beauty of mortality and impermanence is that all things eventually pass. Not just the good.
>
> There is no suffering without relief.
>
> There is no grief that does not one day become a fond memory.
>
> And sometimes, the things we are so certain have gone forever…
>
> "San Lang?"
>
> ...Never left us at all.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Xie Lian loses track of how long they ride through the foothills of Mount Tonglu, steadily climbing higher and higher, until there's a permanent chill to the air.

Not because it's been that long—but more so because he often finds himself dozing, leaning back against Hua Cheng.

In spite of the situation that they might be charging into—there's something comforting about the shape of him pressed against Xie Lian's back, paired with the gentle rocking back and forth.

He's eventually roused by the feeling of Hua Cheng's arm squeezing around his middle.

"Lord Rain Master—it's fine to stop here," Her raises his voice so Yushi Huang can hear him—and the goddess nods, ordering the Ox to a halt.

"Are you sure?"

After all—they've only reached the base of the mountain so far, but...

Hua Cheng nods. "I'm certain."

He helps Xie Lian down, and when Pei moves to follow them—the Rain Master holds him back, her hand firm on his sleeve.

"You're in no condition to carry on."

The general stops, swallowing hard.

The wound in his side won't kill him, but...she's right.

He can't fight like this. Of course—he remembers what Jun Wu said before. His warning about Hua Cheng taking Xie Lian to the kiln, and what Pei Ming should do if it came to that, but…

Even if he thought Hua Cheng *would* harm Xie Lian—and he doesn’t—

He’s in no condition to stop either of them.

Part of him considers passing that warning on to Xie Lian—if only to help him be vigilant—but…

“…Be careful, your highness.”

Saying that to Xie Lian feels a little pointless—he uses his immortality as an excuse to be anything *but* careful. Still…

The prince nods.

"You too, General."

Pei Ming holds on as the ox springs forward once again, charging back down the mountainside.

Leaving Crimson Rain Sought Flower and the Crown Prince alone, nearly at the Kiln's doorstep.

"They'll be alright."

Yushi Huang's ever-present sense of calm is probably a sense of comfort, for most.

At a time like this, however, Pei Ming has absolutely no desire to feel comforted.

"There's no way of predicting that."

The goddess glances at him from the corner of her eye.

"...Do you know what you learn after almost a thousand years of watching the rain?"

Pei Ming couldn't begin to guess—but it's not a question that he's meant to answer.

Yushi Huang looks toward the horizon—through the layers of ash.

Knowing the sun is there.

"Storms pass."

Even in a world of immortality, there's no such thing as true permanence.

Decay and rot are always associated with things people don't want to *lose* .

But just as a beloved king will wither and fade with old age, so will a tyrant.

Monsters will eventually be slain.

The beauty of mortality and impermanence is that all things eventually pass. Not just the good.

There is no suffering without relief.

There is no grief that does not one day become a fond memory.

And sometimes, the things we are so certain have gone forever…

"San Lang?"

...Never left us at all.

Hua Cheng helps him step over an overgrown root as they move through the mountain path, delicately picking their way up the steep incline.

"Yes, gege?"

"...I'm sorry that so much of this burden has fallen on you," Xie Lian sighs.

"I never minded my bad luck when I was traveling alone, but...It feels like I've done nothing but drag you into one mess after another since we met."

Even since leaving Blackwater Manor—not so long ago, but it feels like a lifetime...

He's put him through so much trouble.

"...The matter of Mount Tonglu concerns me too, your highness—you didn't drag me into it."

"Maybe so," Xie Lian frowns, holding onto Hua Cheng's wrist a little more firmly as the path becomes uneven.

"But...something makes me think that you wouldn't have taken the task on if Jun Wu hadn't made that request of me. And now it's just the two of us, and I..."

Xie Lian stops walking for a moment, biting his lip.

"...If it comes down to it, I don't know how much use I'll be."

Hua Cheng stops beside him—and Xie Lian is startled when he feels fingertips brush underneath his chin, tilting his head up so the ghost king can examine his expression properly.

"What do you mean?"

It's ridiculous—Xie Lian can't make eye contact with him, but he finds himself averting his gaze anyway.

"...There's only so much a person can do while fighting blind," the prince mutters, even if it feels like pulling teeth.

He loathes admitting to his own limitations.

Everything he's done since his banishment has been an assertion of self sufficiency.

But Xie Lian *knows* that he can fail. And each time he has, the consequences...

They've been nearly too painful to endure.

And facing the birth of a new ghost king...

All Xie Lian knows is that the first time he fought a Ghost King, he was at the peak of his power.

No cursed shackles, and all of the wealth, power, and fame that the world had to offer.

And still—he lost.

Then, slowly, he lost everything.

A death by a thousand cuts.

(Or, to be more apt—by a hundred swords.)

"...I wouldn't blame you if you didn't want to be bothered with this," Xie Lian offers, finding himself falling back into old habits. "It's not fair for you to carry my share of the burden—"

In a rare instance, Hua Cheng speaks over him.

"I will never let you face a challenge alone, dianxia."

Hua Cheng always has this way of speaking—a bone deep self assuredness that gives the prince pause, his breath stalling in his lungs.

"I will always be on your side."

Any hope Xie Lian had of regaining the ability to breathe disappears when Hua Cheng grasps his hand a little tighter, lifting it to his lips—pressing a kiss to the back of his knuckles.

A gesture Xie Lian used to be so familiar with.

Back when he was a mortal prince, it wasn't unusual for new vassals to be brought to the throne room in Xianle, kneeling before the royal family, kissing rings and swearing their loyalty.

"And it's never a burden," the calamity concludes, releasing his hand. "Not if it's you."

"..." Xie Lian swallows hard, trying to ignore the jackhammering of his heart, pulsing so hard, he can feel the blood rushing in his ears.

And part of him can't let go of that old habit.

The same one that pushed him to wander off on his own during his first banishment.

The same part of him that prayed that Hong'er would leave him before it was too late.

Because he was a burden.

He *is* a burden.

And those who stay too close for too long...are inevitably shaped by his own ill-fated destiny.

"...How much further is it to the Kiln entrance?"

Hua Cheng glances ahead of them, eyeing the path leading up the mountainside.

"Not far—maybe two hours at most. But we can travel faster if it becomes necessary."

"...We can?" Xie Lian tilts his head. "Is E'Ming suited to flying?"

Hua Cheng snorts at the suggestion.

"Maybe--but that isn't what I had in mind. I would simply transform into something more suitable and carry you."

Xie Lian pauses, lifting his hand to his chin as he thinks.

"...Like a goat?" He muses, trying to imagine it—and Hua Cheng lets out a loud, surprised laugh.

"I was thinking of something that could fly, but if gege would prefer —"

"No, no!" Xie Lian waves his hands, realizing how ridiculous that his guess must have sounded. "That makes more sense!"

Hua Cheng is still chuckling, and his ears burn.

But that mirth slowly fades as he notices something else, the smile disappearing from his face.

A cliff looming overhead—high and sharp.

Familiar.

One he's seen painted in stone murals several times by now.

"...San Lang?" Xie Lian mumbles, feeling himself being pulled along.

Hua Cheng comes to a halt—seeing what was never depicted in great detail in the murals—which only showed skeletons and smoke.

"...The cliff from the murals," he explains, holding Xie Lian's arm firmly. "We're standing at the bottom of it now."

Xie Lian takes a step forward after hearing that—and notices something strange.

They aren't standing on earth anymore. Or even the craggy surface one might expect from a mountain slope, no—

They're standing on a polished, smooth surface.

Man-made.

"...What is this place?"

Hua Cheng surveys the area, his mouth pressing into a grim line.

The surface they're standing on is a large, round disk on top of the earth—carved and polished obsidian, with symbols etched around the edges.

He recognizes them of being that of Wuyong—but the dialect is so ancient, even he can't read them—

Except for one.

The character for death.

They all seem to spiral inward, meeting one point at the center, and when Hua Cheng looks up...

It's directly underneath the ledge.

"...Human sacrifice."

Xie Lian takes a step back, a notable chill running down his spine. "...What?"

Hua Cheng can't take his eye off of that cliff, feeling a deepening pit in his stomach.

"That's what the mural was showing."

"...That can't be right..."

Any form of blood sacrifice is banned in Taoism—and to Xie Lian's knowledge, it always has been, going against the fundamental beliefs of its philosophy.

Even sacrificing animals is considered taboo—but *humans?*

Outside of myth--he's never heard of it.

"…Bai Wuxiang suggested it once, hoping to prevent Mount Tonglu's eruption," Hua Cheng explains. "I always assumed he came up with the idea on his own, but…"

Apparently there was already a tradition of such things in the Kingdom of Wuyong.

In which case, it makes the reaction of Tonglu Hudie, Mei Nianqing, and the others…confusing, in retrospect.

Xie Lian turns his head—feeling a presence behind them. Some sort of structure breaking the path of the wind coming down the mountainside.

"Is there another temple?"

"Yes," Hua Cheng agrees, turning around to look with him. "But not for Bai Wuxiang."

It hadn't occurred to Xie Lian until then, but…

It is odd, isn't it?

They've traveled the entire length of Wuyong, and this is the first temple they've encountered that *isn't* Bai Wuxiang's.

Logically, they should have seen ruins for other gods before. Even if they were from the last Heavenly Dynasty.

"…Which god is it for, then?"

Hua Cheng strains his gaze, looking at the symbols etched into the establishment plaque, but…

"I don't know," he admits.

There's no divine statue or portrait as they walk inside—no establishment plaque.

Nothing to indicate who this god was, or what they stood for—just smooth, dark walls, carved straight from volcanic rock.

And…no altar.

The only other remnant of the worshippers who must have once come here is an etching on the floor of mount tonglu itself, but other than that...

"Is there another mural?" Xie Lian questions, pressing his palm against the wall.

"...It looks like someone was interrupted."

Both of them managed to surmise early on that someone had painted these murals recently—for them to find.

And that said person was Mei Nianqing.

As Hua Cheng knows all too well, trying to warn Xie Lian of Bai Wuxiang.

But someone else got here first.

The mural that was painted is almost impossible to discern now—showing only what Hua Cheng can recognize as the inside of the Kiln, but...

There's a scorched black mark in the center of the image, obscuring whatever it was meant to show of what lurked inside.

Xie Lian frowns, pressing his fingertips over the scorched mark—frustrated.

Unable to shake the feeling that whatever was here before—

It was important. Maybe more important than anything that came before it.

"...If something got here first, we should keep moving."

But just as Hua Cheng turns around to lead Xie Lian out of the temple, he freezes.

The one who destroyed the mural got here first, yes.

And he left something else behind.

Xie Lian's hand tightens in his, tugging at him curiously.

"...San Lang?"

His concern spikes when he feels that...

Hua Cheng's hands are trembling.

Not violently, but noticeable.

He steps closer, placing his other hand on his shoulder. "What's wrong?"

Hua Cheng's pupil has narrowed into a slit, his fangs gleaming—mouth twisted with rage.

"...It's just a threat, your highness." He fights to keep himself from snarling—not wanting to speak to Xie Lian that way, even if the rage isn't directed at him. "We need to move, now."

"...Alright," Xie Lian agrees—trusting that Hua Cheng wouldn't react like this if it wasn't serious, but...

And when Hua Cheng said they should move—he didn't mean that he was going to wait for Xie Lian to lead the way, as usual.

Xie Lian gasps with surprise when he feels Hua Cheng bodily drag him—far more forcefully than he ever would have dared in a normal situation.

"San--?"

His voice is cut off when he feels himself being yanked up into Hua Cheng's arms, and—

In a matter of seconds, the ghost king makes it to the top of the cliff face, clearing it in one leap—leaving the ancient temple and whatever horrifying secrets it may have held behind.

Once they're on even ground, Hua Cheng sets him on his feet again.

"...San Lang, I—" Xie Lian reaches for his sleeve, "I know you want to hurry, but do you hear that?"

Faint rattling coming from the hills and trees—

Almost like whispers, forming words he can *almost* understand.

"It's the fallen souls of Wuyong," Hua Cheng mutters.

"They get louder the closer you get. They might say disturbing things—but they can't hurt you."

Xie Lian nods, starting to follow as Hua Cheng continues forward—but the ghost king holds him back.

"Give me a moment, gege—I'm going to change forms, I don't want to crush you."

"...Change forms?" Xie Lian murmurs—and after how silly his last guess was, he doesn't want to venture again.

Hua Cheng pauses for a moment, pressing both hands to his temples—forcing himself to calm down.

"...I need to tell you something."

His voice is calm—quiet, in a way.

But the way he says those words—it sounds so...

So *desperately* important.

"...San Lang can tell me anything," Xie Lian reminds him, his throat suddenly dry.

Hua Cheng doesn't address that, he only says—

"Not here."

"...I don't understand—?"

"I can explain all of it," Hua Cheng's voice...

It trembles, having become somewhat raw.

"Every question you've had since we met—I can explain all of it to you, your highness. But we have to get to the Kiln, first."

"I don't..." Xie Lian frowns, allowing Hua Cheng to step away from him, wrapping his arms around himself as he desperately tries to understand what's going on. "I don't understand...what does this have to do with what you saw down there?"

Hua Cheng glances back down at the bottom of the cliff, his eye flashing dangerously.

It's a vile place.

An *evil* place.

"...You'll understand everything soon, your highness. You just have to trust me."

Slowly, Xie Lian nods—a small smile on his face.

"That makes it easy, then."

Hua Cheng pauses for a moment, his gaze softening as it lingers upon his god's face, his chest buzzing with countless emotions.

Fear. Anger. Anxiety. Anticipation. But more than any of that—

"...Wait..." Xie Lian pauses, twisting his head around to look up the mountainside.

The whispering was indistinguishable before—but now he hears something loud and clear.

Voices in the distance—closer to the mountain's snowy peak, and two familiar auras.

"...What are Feng Xin and Mu Qing doing here?" Xie Lian mutters, feeling the wind pick up.

Even with it howling down the mountainside, he can hear them—each screaming to be heard over the weather.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?!”

Feng Xin, it would seem, is confused about the very same thing.

“I COULD ASK YOU THE SAME THING!”

“I WAS FOLLOWING YOU!”

“WHY?!”

“Wh—?!” Feng Xin isn’t just shouting to be heard over the wind anymore—the beginnings of what must be a full blown blizzard.

"WHY DO YOU FUCKING THINK, YOU STUBBORN BASTARD?!"

"YOU SHOULD BE WITH JIAN LAN AND YOUR SON RIGHT NOW! IF YOU'RE PISSED AT ME FOR NOT TELLING YOU—!"

"BELIEVE IT OR NOT, I GET WHY YOU DIDN'T WANT TO TALK TO ME ABOUT THAT!" Feng Xin's voice is deeper, slightly more difficult to hear over the wind. "YOU DON'T LIKE TALKING ABOUT THINGS THAT HURT YOU!"

Xie Lian finds himself shocked by Feng Xin being…sensitive, for once.

If not…still too blunt for Mu Qing, who panics when anything hits too close to home.

"…HURT?!" He shrieks—and the higher pitch of his voice is far easier to hear. "WHY WOULD I BE HURT?! IT WAS NONE OF MY FUCKING BUSINESS! THAT'S NOT WHY! I JUST DIDN'T WANT YOU TO BLAME ME!"

Xie Lian rubs a hand against his forehead, mourning what little progress could have been made.

"WELL, I DON'T!" Feng Xin shouts back at him. "I SAID IT BEFORE YOU GOT ARRESTED—I KNOW YOU WOULDN'T DO THAT!"

"…THEN WHY DID YOU FOLLOW ME?!"

"BECAUSE YOU DIDN'T COME BACK!"

"SO?!"

"YOU WERE CLEARED OF THE ACCUSATIONS—SO WHY DID YOU KEEP RUNNING?!"

"DIDN'T YOU HEAR WHAT I SAID BEFORE?!" Mu Qing shouts, calling back to what he said outside of the Inn, after that truth came to light. "I'M *DONE!"*

"WH—?"

"I'M NOT GOING BACK!"

Xie Lian's stomach plummets, and Feng Xin falters.

"W-WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU MEAN?!"

“CONGRATULATIONS!” Mu Qing laughs, slightly crazed and frantic. “YOU’RE GETTING EXACTLY WHAT YOU ALWAYS WANTED! I CAME HERE TO TELL HIS HIGHNESS SOMETHING—THEN NONE OF YOU WILL SEE ME AGAIN!”

“…WHEN DID I DAY THAT WAS WHAT I WANTED?!”

“I’M SORRY, WERE OUR ENTIRE MORTAL LIVES A BLUR FOR YOU?!”

“WHEN—?!” Feng Xin pauses, amending. “WHEN IN THE LAST TWO CENTURIES HAVE I SAID THAT?!”

“YOU DIDN’T HAVE TO!”

“I DON’T WANT THAT!”

“…WHY?!”

Feng Xin’s voice is strained with exasperation—but as always, he speaks plainly.

“…DO YOU REALLY THINK WE CAN JUST WALK OUT OF EACH OTHER’S LIVES, MU QING?!”

To Xie Lian’s dismay…

Mu Qing half screams, half sobs in reply.

“WHY CAN’T WE?!”

“San Lang…” He swallows hard. “The storm sounds like it’s getting pretty bad. We should warn them that we’re down here.”

Hua Cheng doesn’t reply, but Xie Lian sees a silver butterfly dart through the darkness, flying up the mountainside far faster than they could climb.

That’s a good idea—once it’s up there, it can pass on that Hua Cheng and Xie Lian are waiting at the—

Xie Lian feels Hua Cheng stiffen beside him, his expression growing dark.

“…San Lang?”

At the top of Mount Tonglu, visibility is only a few meters ahead.

All Mu Qing can see through the swirling clouds and snow is Feng Xin—who reaches forward, roughly rubbing the back of his glove against Mu Qing's cheek.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!"

"STOP CRYING!"

"FUCK OFF, I'M NOT—!"

"IT'LL FREEZE TO YOUR FACE!"

Feng Xin cups Mu Qing's face in both of his hands, squinting at the tear drops sticking to his eyelashes.

Ironically enough, covered in snow like this—he doesn't look so different from the form that mortals worship.

"IF YOU DON'T STOP, IT COULD FREEZE YOUR EYELIDS SHUT!"

"I…" Mu Qing chokes, staring up at him with wide eyes, then he shoves him back, staggering backwards in the snow. "WHAT THE *FUCK?!"*

"WHAT?!"

Mu Qing—

All he can remember is being back in the heavens, hundreds of years ago.

Being shoved back against a wall, so certain Feng Xin was about to scream at him over a typo in one of his temples, but…

'Who did it?'

He had been worried about a *bruise* on Mu Qing's face.

And after, when he kissed him—

' …*You taste the same.'*

…Have they really been doing this for that long?

"THIS ISN'T FUCKING *FAIR* , FENG XIN!"

"YOU THINK I DON'T KNOW THAT?!" The martial god glares.

"YOU'RE THE ONE SAYING YOU WANT TO LEAVE ALL THE SUDDEN—!"

"BECAUSE YOU WERE RIGHT!" Mu Qing interrupts him, his throat raw. "BECAUSE I DON'T DESERVE TO HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH HIS HIGHNESS, OR—!"

"WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?!" Feng Xin frowns, grabbing him by the shoulder, but Mu Qing shoves him off again.

"DID YOU FORGET THAT FUCKING PLAY?!" He sobs. "THAT WAS *MY* FAULT!"

How could he forget?

Hearing an actor who was playing their friend, screaming in agony.

Begging for their help.

All while a crowd jeered, counting every single cut.

"IF I HADN'T SAID WHAT I DID, HE WOULDN'T HAVE RUN OFF! NONE OF IT WOULD HAVE HAPPENED!"

"YOU COULDN'T HAVE KNOWN WHAT THAT FREAK WAS GOING TO—!"

"THAT DOESN'T MATTER!" Mu Qing sobs, shaking his head violently. "BECAUSE NOW, I KNOW HOW IT FELT!"

Feng Xin freezes, his voice so quiet with shock, it's lost to the wind.

"…What?"

"I CAN'T—!" Mu Qing tears at his hair, shoulders shaking. "I CAN'T LIVE WITH THAT!"

And there's something about the agonized, helpless edge to Mu Qing's voice that makes something in Feng Xin's head crack.

Unleashing a flood of blind terror.

Mu Qing jumps when he feels Feng Xin grab him by the shoulders, and—

He's gripping Mu Qing so tightly, the martial god can't push him away—shaking him fiercely.

“DON’T SAY THAT!” He roars, startling Mu Qing out of his spiral. “DON’T *EVER* FUCKING SAY THAT!”

The two stare at each other, wide eyed and confused, breathing hard.

“I…”

Rumble…

The two turn their heads, and—

There’s just a wall of white.

Lower on the mountain, Xie Lian feels his stomach sink even further—hearing the tell tale rumble of an avalanche.

“…Dianxia, we have to move out of the way.” Hua Cheng reaches over to grab Xie Lian, who resists—

Running towards the wall of snow instead of away from it, panicking.

“What about Feng Xin and Mu Qing?!”

“Your highness, you can’t reach them, they’re already swept up!”

Xie Lian shakes his head, refusing to turn back. “I can’t leave them! What if we can’t find them—? Mount Tonglu is huge, we can’t—!”

“I promise I’ll find them for you, gege,” Hua Cheng swears, audibly desperate to get him to turn back.

“But if you get swept into a crevasse, you won’t be able to get out on your own. We don’t have enough time!”

Xie Lian swallows hard, his lips trembling—knowing that Hua Cheng is right.

But his hesitation was costly.

Before he can make it back to the Ghost King, who has already transformed, claws reaching out to grasp him—

What feels like a wall of concrete slams into his back, swallowing him beneath a river of ice and snow.

“DIANXIA!”

Xie Lian can’t feel which way is up or down.

All he hears is the roaring of the snow around him, freezing cold—chunks of ice the size of small houses crushing down on him, cracking his ribs.

And over all of that, he hears screaming.

Countless voices, all around him.

“YOUR HIGHNESS!”

“HELP US!”

“I CAN’T BREATHE!”

“MOMMY!”

“PLEASE, MY LEGS WON’T MOVE—JUST TAKE MY DAUGHTER AND RUN!”

“WE DID EVERYTHING YOU ASKED OF US!”

One voice is perfectly clear, speaking as though it might be next to Xie Lian’s ear.

“Do not fall for the cuckoo’s tricks, little prince.”

Xie Lian tries to croak out in response, choking on snow as it fills his mouth and nose, and that voice speaks again;

“What is the only part of our inheritance that we carry to our graves?”

Is…

Is that some sort of riddle? But—?

A scream interrupts his thoughts, loud and blood curdling—louder than all of the others.

A woman, her howl so blood curdling and painful, and Xie Lian can feel it in his gut—

A mother.

“SAN LANG!”

Xie Lian scrambles, panicked, choking and coughing.

The snow got him, too?

“...NO!”

Her howling out screams the avalanche.

“ZHU XIN, SAVE HIM! LEAVE ME, SAVE HIM!”

Zhu…Zhu Xin?

Xie Lian feels his eyes roll back from the lack of air, only hearing that final shriek as he slips out of consciousness.

“SAN LANG!”

“It’s funny,” Pei Ming has one arm thrown around his middle, now properly bandaged, staring at the sky overhead. “It almost looks normal out here.”

They’re on the very edge of Wuyong, having traveled far further and far faster on the back of the Ox than they did before.

Pei Su, Banyue, and the farmers are sitting off to the side, devouring the provisions that the Rain Master brought along with her, leaving the general stretched out beside the road, his arms folded behind his head.

Yushi Huang hums from beside him.

"Once the Kiln shuts, we'll be able to take the mortals to a nearby town for treatment," She explains calmly. "By then, we'll both have to plan our next steps."

Pei Ming will have healed enough to fight by then—his body is already recovering.

"...When it comes to that," Yushi Huang reaches over, lifting up Yulong and sliding it over to him, "You should take this. It's better off in your hands than it is in mine."

"..." Pei Ming sits up, staring down at the sword like just touching it could burn him.

"That's kind of you, Lord Rain Master," he shakes his head, looking away. "But I have no right to touch that sword. It belongs with you."

Yushi Huang sighs, reaching down to pluck something from the ground.

Here, at the very edges of Tonglu, life endures.

Blades of grass poke up through the ash, and with them, small blossoms of iris blossom, untouched by the coming winter.

Soft blue petals curling softly, veins of purple running through them.

"...What makes you think you don't have the right, general? I'm offering it."

When Pei Ming doesn't reply, she gently presses him. "Do you think I don't have the right to give it to you?"

"No."

"Then..."

"You know why I can't take it, your highness," Pei Ming mutters, refusing to look at her.

"...Ming Guang..." Yushi Huang sighs, shaking her head. "We should have spoken about this a long time ago—I'm sorry for that."

The general stiffens, daring the glance at her from the corner of his eye. "I'm the one who has been avoiding you, your highness."

"Maybe," she agrees, fiddling with the flower between her fingertips. "But I never sought you out, either."

That wasn't her responsibility. Pei Ming can't imagine a reason she would have to ever want to see his face again. In fact—he always thought that her absence from the heavens was, in fact, an effort to stay away from him.

"...And I should have," Yushi Huang concludes quietly. "Because I never, ever want to speak my mind," she turns her head slowly, watching him with ancient eyes in a youthful face.

"But...there are so many things that I want to say to you."

Pei Ming swallows hard.

He braces himself—knowing that he's spent a lifetime running from this conversation, but now that she's here...

He doesn't have the right to deny that to her, if talking is what she wants.

"...More than anything else, that I'm sorry."

The general freezes, his mind blank.

Unable to comprehend that phrase—not coming from her, of all people.

"...What?"

Yushi Huang plucks another flower from the ground, twisting the stem until the petals become a blur.

"It's hard, dispelling a myth. Especially when *you're* the story that people believe in."

"I..." Pei Ming finally gathers the nerve to stare at her, their eyes meeting in a rare instance of clarity. "I don't understand."

Yushi Huang smiles faintly, her nose crinkling—but the warmth doesn't reach her eyes.

No—her gaze holds...genuine remorse.

"I am not a saint, Pei Ming." She explains quietly, her knees pulled up against her chest. "I feel anger, resentment, and fear. I make choices out of spite. And I...I placed a heavy burden on you, and I allowed you to carry it for so long."

Pei Ming can't stop shaking his head in vehement disagreement.

"You—you're..." he exhales shakily, his stomach twisting into knots. "You're the bravest woman I've ever met. You were protecting your family, your country. I...what I did...I have no excuse for."

"...I'll tell you a secret," Yushi Huang murmurs—as though she's speaking to a dear friend, rather than her oldest enemy.

"I hated my family."

Hearing such words coming from her is...startling.

"My father, my brothers and sisters...Every night when I fell asleep...I would pray to the gods to make me a bastard, just so they would send me away." She leans her chin against her forearms, twisting the two flowers in her fingers together, forming a knot between them.

"Just for being born from the lowest concubine...I was like less than a human being to them," she recalls calmly, lifting her eyes to stare at the others, sitting a ways away from them. "How do you think they viewed commoners? Farmers...soldiers?"

She shakes her head somberly, reaching down to pluck another flower.

"There was a war in Yushi long before you or your army came. I had never known anything different."

Except *that* war was between the royal family, and the common people.

Just as it was in Xuli.

Wars are wasteful acts of theater. A violent cycle of reincarnation in which empires die, only to be reborn once again.

And so often, they're fought by two sides of the same coin.

Xuli and Yushi.

Xianle and Yong'an.

Yong'an and Banyue.

The farmers and the soldiers acting as the metal in between. Flipping round and round, doomed to be crushed when the coin lands, deciding the victor.

"My entire life, no one in my family looked at me. Not until the day I died."

Yushi Huang doesn't recall that day with much feeling one way or the other—a stark comparison to the weight that Pei Ming seems to place upon it.

"When I asked my father to take the crown—it was like that was the first time he remembered that I existed."

He shed a tear for her.

Just one.

Her siblings watched her with distant curiosity. As though they were seeing an exotic beetle speak the human language by some sort of magic.

"I didn't do what I did that day for them," she shakes her head. "If anything—it was to spite them."

"...You saved them," Pei Ming points out, still struggling to follow her train of thought...but Yushi Huang settles her gaze upon him, silently imploring him to listen more closely.

"When you saw me walk out to the city walls, what did that make you think of my father?"

"...That he was a coward," Pei Ming admits quietly.

Much like the other princes and princesses of Yushi—willing to allow the youngest of them to give her life in their name.

"Because he was," Yushi Huang plucks another flower. "They all were. But royalty—it isn't supposed to be that way."

Pei Ming finally sits up fully, his own fingers brushing through the grass. "You don't think so?"

Yushi Huang shakes her head, certain of that.

"...Then what is it supposed to be?"

Yushi Huang has spoken more in this conversation than she normally would in an entire month--and she doesn't hesitate to offer her answer now.

"Something that unites people."

Her death didn't save Yushi. It didn't *save* her family.

It allowed her people to retain dignity in defeat.

To hold their heads high, even as the old world began to fade away.

Because their final Queen was now the Goddess of the Harvest—and each time the rain began to fall, they knew that she was with them.

"...I still don't know why that means you should have to apologize to me," Pei Ming admits. "Just because your family was cruel...that doesn't change—"

"Intentions matter," Yushi Huang contradicts him quietly. "You intended to save lives."

And Yushi Huang's actions, while brave and selfless, were fueled by far more spiteful intentions.

She doesn't regret what she did.

But she *does* regret never explaining to Pei that she never viewed him as an executioner, or an enemy.

"...Once you cause enough death, it doesn't matter how many lives you save." Pei Ming swallows down a rush of emotion bubbling up in his throat, remembering how small she felt, drawing her final breaths in his arms. "I realized that when I caused yours."

Battle became such a naked, ugly thing after that.

Pei Ming couldn't find joy in victory, or thrill in the fight itself.

He could only see the ugly outcome that always came with it.

And...he didn't want to fight anymore. Not after that.

He starts after a moment, looking down to find...

Yushi Huang is grasping one of his hands in her own, squeezing gently.

"General...did you know that we met before that day?"

Pei Ming pauses, staring over at her with wide eyes, shaking his head.

"We didn't."

"We did." Yushi Huang smiles fondly at the memory. "It was before the invasion—and you and your officers were visiting the capital during negotiations. You actually had affairs with three of my sisters if I remember correctly."

Pei Ming had forgotten—but now, he's sheepish.

"...Did I say something inappropriate to you?" He mutters, instantly remorseful—only for the princess to laugh softly, shaking her head.

"No, no...you were the first man who ever gave me flowers," her eyes are soft now, recalling how surprised she was, warm with fondness.

He saw her alone, working a garden while the other nobles of Yushi were making their way to the banquet—a beauty among the weeds.

And he thought it was a shame that such a lovely young girl would be left doing chores on a night meant for celebration.

Instead of hurrying on with the other officers to accept a place of honor, he lingered with her.

Offering the young lady an armful of flowers that had been thrown his way during the parade upon their entrance to the city—cheekily saying that each rose paled compared to her.

Yushi Huang had been sixteen back then. Blushing and smiling, unsure of how to respond to such attention—quietly thanking him as she continued about her work.

He invited her to walk into the banquet with him, offering her a dance, and she agreed to come later, but...never did.

She finished her work—only to stop in the hallway, seeing her own dirt stained, farmer tanned body in comparison to the soft, delicately perfumed ladies of the court, and...

The princess carried her roses back to her room, delicately counting each petal—like stars in the sky.

Knowing that she would never be at ease in a place like that, even if—

Even if she wanted so *badly* to dance with the young soldier who gave her flowers, his smile shining like the sun as he told her that she was lovely.

She isn't surprised that Pei Ming doesn't remember.

But Yushi Huang does.

She remembers rolling onto her stomach in her bed, staring at the moon outside the window, playing out countless scenarios in her head.

Her mortal life was uneventful, filled with hard work and little fun—and it left her prone to daydreaming.

Imagining what it would have been like if they had danced. How his hand would have felt in hers. If she would have had the nerve to say something funny—how he might have laughed.

If he might have called her beautiful again—

Because no one had ever called her that before.

Then, she would fall asleep with one of those roses next to her face, breathing it in with a sigh as she drifted off, dreaming of a happier life.

One that would never be her own.

Yushi Huang isn't ignorant to the real reason that Xuan Ji hates her.

When people tell the story of the General Who Broke his Sword and the Princess Who Slit her Throat, more often than not—they're depicted as star crossed lovers.

When the Rain Master was young, part of her had wished that was true.

It was more beautiful than reality.

The truth behind the fiction was a broken war hero and a princess consumed with disdain.

These myths that people pinned their hopes and dreams upon—each rusted and warped beneath their gilded layers of gold.

Yushi Huang spoke the truth before.

It *is* hard to dispel your own mythos—especially when that's all the people around you seem to adore you for.

"...Us four famous tales are a rotten bunch, aren't we?" Pei Ming admits tiredly, looking down at their joined hands.

"It's almost like all of our titles are some sort of cruel inside joke."

The General Who Broke His Sword

The Princess Who Slit Her Throat.

The Prince Who Pleased the Gods.

The Young Lord Who Poured Wine.

Each tale holds some twisted irony or painful secret.

The young lord poured wine from a stolen cup.

The prince who pleased the gods was scorned by them in turn.

The princess who slit her throat did so out of spite.

And the general who broke his sword didn't want to fight anymore.

"...Those tales are old," Yushi Huang shrugs.

"Who's to say they're the greatest ones we'll ever tell?"

Pei Ming laughs tiredly, shaking his head—eyes exhausted.

"I'm too old for that, I think. My greatest stories are long behind me."

He hopes they are, anyway.

If he has to go last, finishing this story on his own—then he would rather this be the epilogue.

Yushi Huang squeezes his hand gently, shaking his head.

"I don't think that's true." She murmurs. "What's the point of growing up if nothing comes of it? You've changed so much."

Pei Ming doesn't disagree with her on that.

"...I used to have really strong views on what a king should be myself, when I was young." Pei Ming recalls. "That's what I thought, anyway."

"You don't anymore?"

His gaze slides over to Rong Guang, chained beside the Guardian Ox.

"I prayed to Jun Wu when I was conflicted about invading Yushi...and he told me that we're born with roles to play. Mine...was always to be a soldier."

And Pei Ming had believed that whole heartedly.

When Rong Guang did what he did...Pei Ming had told himself that his friend was using him- trying to push him into being something that he wasn't.

And those things may have been true. But...

Pei Ming is old enough now to understand how fiercely independent he had been.

That so much of his reaction had been driven by the fact that he felt trapped, forced down a path that he had been desperately trying to leave.

"...Now," Pei Ming sighs, thinking back on it. "I don't think we're born to be anything. We grow into who we're meant to be."

Yushi Huang smiles faintly in agreement. "What would you say you've grown into, then?"

"...I don't know," Pei Ming admits after a moment. "I've been lost, lately."

If you had asked him a few months ago, ironic as it is—

He would have said, 'a husband.'

"Well..." Yushi Huang looks up at the sky, seeing a faint outline of the sun, hanging low. "We've grown up together. I don't see why we couldn't figure it out together."

It startles Pei Ming to hear, but...she's right.

In terms of celestial age...they may as well be twins.

"...You have rotten luck," Pei Ming shakes his head, smiling half heartedly.

"After all of these years—you're stuck with me all over again."

The Rain Master turns to face him, sitting up on her knees.

"I'll tell you another secret," she murmurs, reaching for his head.

She lays something there, tangling it amongst the slightly unruly waves of dark hair.

A crown of irises.

Doing so places them face to face—and she looks him directly in the eye with a smile that breaks his heart.

"I have always considered you my oldest friend, Pei Ming."

And finally, like a dam breaking—his lips begin to tremble, eyes welling with tears.

"...I don't deserve it," he whispers, shuddering when the princess wipes one tear away with her thumb.

"Life isn't about what we deserve."

More often than not, it's about what you need.

And now more than ever—

Pei Ming desperately needs a friend.

There's as much comfort as there is an ache in the knowledge that, even when he didn't know it—he has had one all along.

Learning now that sometimes, facing your greatest failures can reveal blessings in disguise.

"...I'm so tired," he admits, another tear slipping down his cheek, shuddering when her palm presses against his jaw.

A simple gesture of comfort, from the last person he ever expected to give it.

"Rest, general."

Pei Su looks over some time later—startled to find his general slumped over in slumber, his head resting against the Rain Master's leg as she strokes his hair, soothing him as he dreams.

Allowing him to sleep while he can, watching him with sorrowful eyes.

Wishing she could shed tears as easily as him.

Like Xie Lian, she was raised in a family that prioritized dignity and grace over transparency.

She feels the same as anyone else, as much as anyone else—but *showing* it is harder.

It made her clumsy before, struggling to convey how she felt about Ling Wen—even after centuries of watching from afar.

And now, if she could—she would shed tears for Pei Ming.

Because his battle is far from over, and before long...

He'll need to fight again.

It's dark.

But when he sits up...he sees dust motes drifting like liquid gold in diagonal rays of light, coming in through cracks in wooden beams.

Where...

His head turns from side to side, taking in a small, cramped space—distant cheers coming from below.

He leans over, bracing his hand against the wall, peering through the cracks, and...

There's some sort of parade going on in the streets.

Dancers throwing flowers, acrobats cartwheeling ahead. Cavalrymen trotting through, armor gleaming.

And a prince, shining like the sun.

Everything about it feels so familiar—and yet he's sure that he's never been here before. And—

And he hears something behind him.

Quiet, ragged sobbing.

"It isn't fair!"

A child's voice, quietly pleading.

"Please—it isn't fair!"

He turns around to comfort the boy—but when he does, he freezes, scrambling backwards until he slams against the wall.

Staring at the mask on the child's face, even as the boy weeps from underneath it.

"It isn't FAIR!"

Half smiling, half crying.

Xie Lian screams.

So loud, it feels like his ears are about to burst open from the force of it, desperate to get away, clawing at the wood behind him, fingernails ripping.

"IT'S NOT FAIR!"

"IT'S NOT FAIR!"

"IT'S NOT—!"

The prince sits up with a gasp, chest heaving.

"Just..." he rasps, clutching at the front of his robes, feeling around until his fingers wrap around Hong'er. "Just a dream..."

It's ironic—most people know they're dreaming when they *can't* see clearly.

For Xie Lian, it's just the opposite.

When he reaches down to feel underneath him—it’s a soft layer of grass placed upon a large boulder, and most of the snow has already been brushed off of him.

“…San Lang?” He calls out, looking around for his aura, but…

It’s completely dark.

He’s alone.

He must have lost his boots somehow during the avalanche, his robes torn in places from scraping against shards of ice.

The stone floor of the cave is cool beneath the balls of his feet—and surprisingly smooth.

“San Lang—? Oh!”

Xie Lian gasps when he stumbles into someone, rubbing his nose with his palm as he takes a step back. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to—!”

But when he reaches out to adjust the stranger’s robes…they’re made of stone.

…A statue? Inside Mount Tonglu?

"…What are you?" Xie Lian whispers curiously into the dark, fingertips dragging over robes carved from stone.

Familiar.

The height and width of the figure is eye level with him—but when he reaches to touch its face…

There's a thin veil covering it.

The prince pulls his fingers back, baffled—taking another few steps away from the statue—

Only to stumble into another one—twisting around to steady its shoulders with his hands, startled.

"…What on earth…?" He mumbles, cautiously feeling his way around, hands extended.

Only to find another statue, and another, and another—

In varying sizes and poses, but…

Xie Lian tilts his head back, whispering aloud to himself—

"…A Cave of Ten Thousand Gods?"

He's heard of them before—but they're exceedingly rare.

For the time and dedication they take to build. Hundreds of worshippers could work for decades, and still not come close to finishing the task.

Any god that's worshiped here…must be incredibly powerful, to inspire such devotion.

Xie Lian continues stumbling forward through the dark—hands outstretched in order to avoid knocking into any other statues—

And eventually they come into contact with a softer, familiar set of fingers—

With the tell tale callouses from years of using a saber.

Clink!

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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GOAT!CHENG

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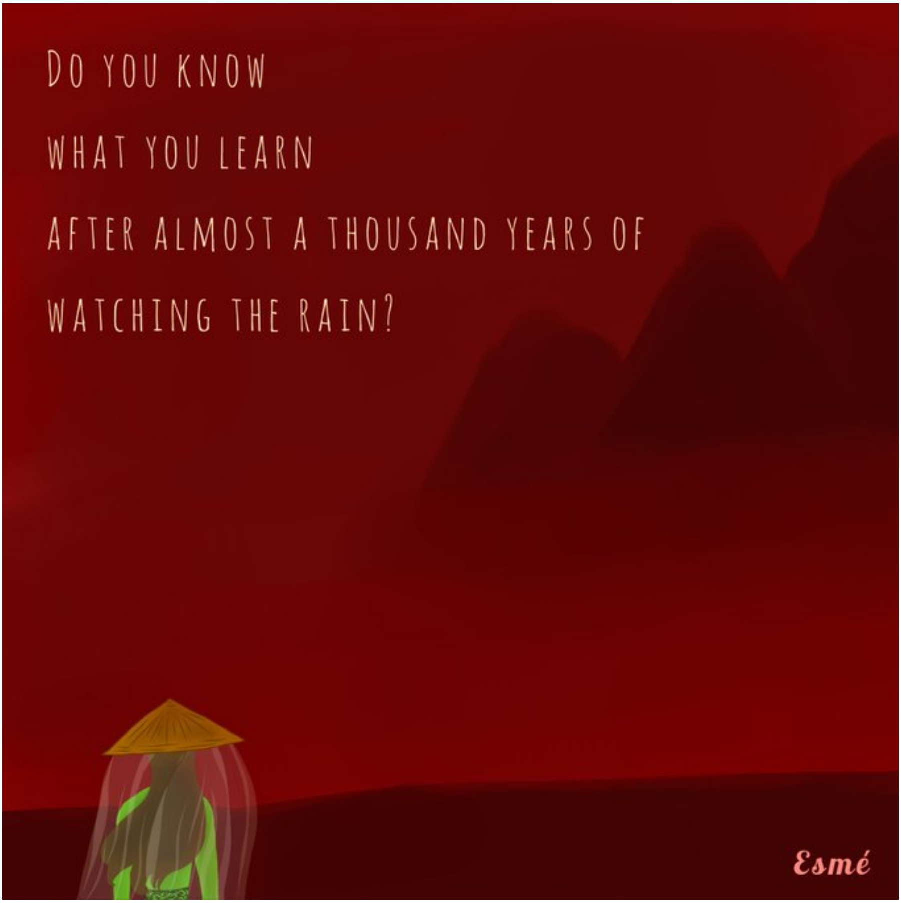
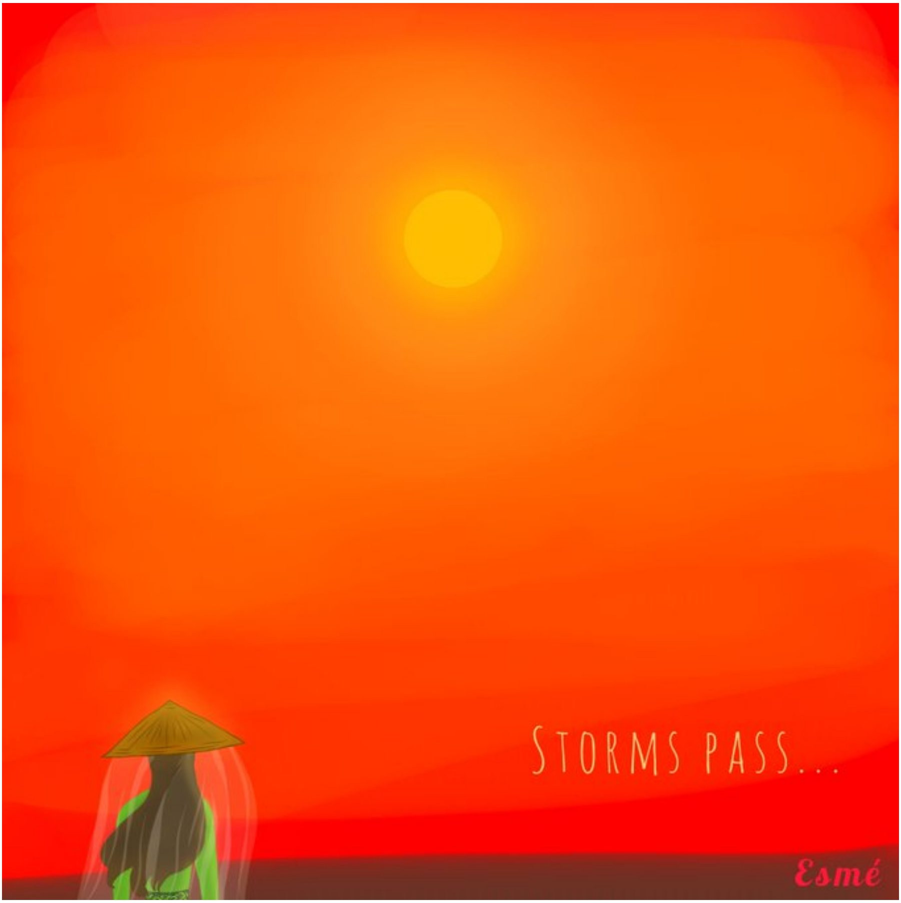


Do you know
what you learn
after almost a thousand years of
watching the rain?

Esmé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Chapter End Notes

Cave of 10,000 Gods Time!

Thank you so much to Ban, Syl, and Esme for their amazing artwork!

xoxo, Evie

The Cave of Ten Thousand Gods

Chapter Summary

> "…In that case, don't you think we should try and see which god is being worshiped here?" Xie Lian mutters, reaching for one of the veils, "It could be the same one from that temple, before…"
>
> But before he can grasp it, Hua Cheng continues tugging him along.
>
> "It isn't."
>
> "…How are you so sure?" Xie Lian asks, almost certain now that the ghost king knows far more than what he's admitting to.
>
> "That place felt evil," Hua Cheng answers resolutely. "This pace doesn't."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"…San Lang!" A relieved smile spreads across Xie Lian's face as he throws his arms around Hua Cheng's neck, hugging him tightly. "You're alright!"

The ghost king is a little stiffer than usual—but he still hugs the prince back, arms right around his waist.

"Of course—but we should keep moving your highness, we don't have much time."

Right…before they heard Feng Xin and Mu Qing screaming…Hua Cheng seemed desperate to tell him something.

But they had to go to the Kiln, first.

"Alright…but do you know what this place is?"

Hua Cheng is already pulling him along. "Can't say that I do."

That gives Xie Lian pause.

Hua Cheng, who knows everything about everyone…doesn't know about a Cave of Ten Thousand Gods underneath Mount Tonglu?

"…You really don't? But…I thought you spent ten years here."

"The mountain is incredibly vast," Hua Cheng's reply is calm—logical as ever. "Of course, there would be sections that I'm not familiar with."

That does make sense, but…

"…If that's true, how do you know which way we should go?"

Now, there's a brief pause.

"…I don't."

Xie Lian wiggles his wrist in Hua Cheng's grasp, emphasizing how firm and brisk his pace is. "You certainly seem like you do…"

"My luck has always been good," Hua Cheng counters. "If I choose the path, there's a solid chance it's the right one."

He isn't wrong.

But that's always been true—and he's always had Xie Lian choose their path before.

"…In that case, don't you think we should try and see which god is being worshiped here?" Xie Lian mutters, reaching for one of the veils, "It could be the same one from that temple, before…"

But before he can grasp it, Hua Cheng continues tugging him along.

"It isn't."

"…How are you so sure?" Xie Lian asks, almost certain now that the ghost king knows far more than what he's admitting to.

"That place felt evil," Hua Cheng answers resolutely. "This pace doesn't."

Well. He has a point there.

"…Then what's the harm in looking?"

"Remember the veils on the dead brides on Mount Yu Jun?" Hua Cheng reminds him. "Who is to say that the statues won't become violent if you disturb them?"

Another good point, but…

"…I thought you just said this place didn't feel evil?" Xie Lian points out, confused. "If it was filled with traps, wouldn't we sense that?"

"…"

Hua Cheng stops walking for a moment, his shoulders hunched.

"…San L—?"

"We can come back and look at them later."

…Whatever the reason must be…

Hua Cheng really is desperate to get him into the Kiln, isn't he?

But what could he tell Xie Lian there that he couldn't say right now?

"…Alright," The prince agrees, allowing himself to be pulled along.

They delicately weave their way between rows and configurations of statues, Xie Lian following along compliantly, until…

"…HEY!" A voice screams in the distance, echoing off of the cave walls. "CAN ANYONE HEAR US IN HERE?!"

Xie Lian stops walking.

"HELLO?!"

"…It's Nan Feng and Fu Yao…" he mutters, twisting his head around to look in their direction.

Hua Cheng rolls his eyes at the way Xie Lian immediately adopts their disguises, even if they all know who the two "deputy gods" are at this point.

"They'll be fine."

"WE'RE SUFFOCATING!"

Xie Lian is visibly worried, and Hua Cheng wipes a hand down his face, grumbling against his hand—

"That's just dramatic."

"IS ANYONE HERE?! YOU CAN'T JUST LEAVE US TO DIE LIKE

THIS!”

“Dianxia—”

“They need help, San Lang!”

“They’re really—dianxia, you can’t just run off here!” Hua Cheng’s voice fades away as Xie Lian charges in the direction of Mu Qing and Feng Xin’s voices, delicately twisting around statues rather than damaging them.

“NAN FENG?! FU YAO?!”

“YOUR HIGHNESS!” Feng Xin cries. "YOU'RE HERE TOO?!"

"YES!" Xie Lian feels himself running around the curved side of a cavern wall, following his voice. "I GOT SWEPT UP IN THE SAME AVALANCHE THAT YOU TOO DID!"

Then, Mu Qing's voice cries out, panicked.

"WAIT! STOP RUNNING!"

Xie Lian doesn’t, only slowing down marginally as he listens to the two argue.

“DON’T TELL ME YOU’RE TOO PROUD TO ASK FOR HIS HELP?!”

“IT’S NOT THAT, YOU IDIOT!” Mu Qing screams. “HE’S NOT GOING TO BE ABLE TO SEE THE EDGE!”

“…The edge—?”

Then, there's no more ground beneath his feet—just thin air, sending Xie Lian plummeting down into darkness, hearing--

"Are you happy?! He's gonna FREAK OUT—!"

"I FORGOT, OKAY—?!"

Why is he going to—?

SLAM!

He lands hard, but into something...relatively soft.

Xie Lian twists around, struggling to sit up—feeling something tacky and stringy wrapping around his limbs.

"W...what is this?!"

"Probably some sort of magical thread," Mu—

'Fu Yao' replies, sounding slightly strained.

"The sort of thing you'd expect in an evil cave."

Xie Lian can't help but think to himself that this cave doesn't feel evil at all. Actually, up until he'd fallen into this pit, there was something distinctly pleasant about it.

"Yeah!" Nan Feng agrees quickly, clearing his throat. "Just magic thread! Nothing to worry about!"

"..." Xie Lian squirms, his face slowly turning green. "...This doesn't feel like thread..." He mumbles, shivers running up his spine.

"It is!" Fu Yao reassures him, "It just feels different because of the evil magic! We're the ones who can see it!"

"...You..." Xie Lian's voice cracks slightly, and both of them wince. "Why are you guys trying...to convince me...this sticky stuff...is thread..."

"BECAUSE IT IS!" They both cry in unison.

"It is, dianxia! There's nothing to be concerned about!"

"It's not from a bug!"

"...WHY WOULD YOU SAY THAT?!"

Xie Lian hears something scuttle in the distance—

And they're done for.

"....EEEEEEEEAKKKKKKKKK!"

Both of the martial gods beside him cringe, unable to cover their ears.

"FENG XIN! KILL IT! WHERE IS IT?! IS IT IN MY HAIR?! GET IT—!"

He flails and twists around violently, screaming at the top of his lungs until the walls of the cave rattle, and Feng Xin squirms valiantly beside him.

"I DON'T SEE ANY, YOUR HIGHNESS! I REALLY DON'T SEE ANY HERE!"

Xie Lian wrenches himself around, coughing, and Mu Qing flinches when he feels something wet land on his cheek, vaguely disgusted at first, assuming it's saliva, but...

"...WHY ARE YOU COUGHING UP BLOOD?!"

"I-I BROKE MY RIBS EARLIER—!"

"AND YOU'RE STILL RUNNING LIKE THAT?!"

"IT DOESN'T MATTER!" Xie Lian cries, "FENG XIN, DID YOU KILL IT?!"

"HE JUST TOLD YOU THAT HE DOESN'T SEE ANYTHING!" Mu Qing snaps at him. "AND YOU COULD PUNCTURE A LUNG!"

"I t...think I already did!" Xie Lian wheezes, "It's fine, Mu Qing, just—!"

All three fall silent.

"..."

"..."

"..."

"...How long have you known?" Mu Qing asks him grimly, staring up at the cavern ceiling, silently willing it to collapse in on all of them.

Xie Lian is still trembling with fear, limbs splayed.

"I...not that long..."

"...It's because Nan Feng, Feng Xin, and Nan Yang sound too similar, isn't it?" Feng Xin mumbles miserably.

"Oh, no..." Xie Lian fights back another cough, still squirming. "I...just thought...you were a big fan of your general, that's all..."

"Don't patronize him," Mu Qing mutters, still glaring at the ceiling. "That doesn't actually help anything."

"...I wasn't trying to..." Xie Lian mumbles, shoulders shaking with another silent cough. "How did you two...end up down here?"

"The avalanche," Feng Xin groans. "It swept us down here ages ago. Our mouths were covered too at first, but we managed to chew our way through and call for help..."

"...Your highness," Mu Qing sighs, "twist to the right—you should be able to get my hands free."

"Oh, so now you're accepting help?" Feng Xin glares over at him, annoyed—only for Mu Qing to send him an equally irritated look as Xie Lian moves to follow his instructions.

"If he's actually punctured a lung, he's drowning in his own blood right now."

Xie Lian shudders—but not because of what Mu Qing said. Rather than that, he's just fighting back the urge to gag as he tears at the spider silk around Mu Qing's wrists, freeing them.

"If I don't work on him soon, he'll pass out," Mu Qing mutters, wrenching one hand free. "And then we'll have to figure out how to get out of here with an unconscious person in tow."

Which is almost as daunting as figuring out how to get free of the silk to begin with.

The moment Mu Qing's other palm is free, he presses them both to Xie Lian's sides.

"...Yeah, it's nearly every single one," Mu Qing grouses, irritated by the way Xie Lian doesn't even seem bothered. "Your elbow has a fracture too, from the look of it..."

"...Really?" Xie Lian blinks, sounding genuinely surprised—and Feng Xin and Mu Qing share a silent look.

Feng Xin watches as Mu Qing works on the prince, and it occurs to him.

"...Didn't you have something you wanted to talk to the prince about? Isn't that why you came here?"

Mu Qing freezes as Xie Lian looks over at him expectantly.

"...We can talk about it later," he grumbles.

"Why? You made it sound pretty fucking important—"

"Because he's the only one who needs to know about it, alright?!" Mu Qing grumbles, pulling his hands back. "There—there's more to deal with, but I need to save the rest of my spiritual power for getting out of here."

The moment he says that—

(Almost as if on cue.)

—a voice calls down from the darkness above.

"Your highness, is that you?"

Xie Lian lets out a trembling sigh of relief, craning his neck.

"San Lang!" He cries. "I knew you'd come!"

"...I did tell your highness, wandering off in a place like this is dangerous." Hua Cheng explains--sounding calm, but...

There's something off. Xie Lian can tell from his tone.

"I'm sorry—I found Feng Xin and Mu Qing, though! They're both alright!"

"He doesn't give a damn."

Xie Lian sends Mu Qing a pleading look, waving it off. "Could E'Ming cut us loose?"

"...E'Ming isn't in a good state right now," Hua Cheng mutters, leaping down into the pit with them.

Unlike the others, his boots don't sink into the silk, remaining free as he walks over.

"It isn't?" Xie Lian frowns, quickly taking Hua Cheng's hand as he uses his claws to slice the prince free, eagerly clinging to his side to get away from the silk. "What's wrong with it?"

"Being this close to the Kiln makes E'Ming unstable."

"How convenient," Mu Qing mutters.

Hua Cheng's gaze lands on him sharply as Xie Lian hands over

Fangxin, giving Mu Qing the chance to cut himself and Feng Xin free.

"Hold onto me, dianxia." This time, Xie Lian doesn't disobey—holding his arms tightly around Hua Cheng's middle as the ghost king lifts his umbrella.

"What about the other two?"

"They'll be fine," Hua Cheng repeats his words from earlier as a gust of wind fills the umbrella, gently lifting the two of them up and over the edge of the pit, depositing them back on the ground above.

"...AHHHHHHH!"

Feng Xin and Mu Qing both shriek as another wind passes through—this one far more violent, swirling them about in a small cyclone before tossing them out, leaving them landing on top of one another in a heap.

"See? Safe and sound." Hua Cheng snaps his umbrella shut.

Mu Qing brushes himself off, straightening his clothes with a glare.

But when he sees Hua Cheng's face…he hesitates.

"…That's what he really looks like?"

Xie Lian swallows down a small bout of jealousy.

Mu Qing and Feng Xin have both seen what Hua Cheng looks like as a child, and a teenager—and now, they're seeing his true form.

Xie Lian has felt it against him, seen a loose outline of spiritual energy, but…

"What of it?" Hua Cheng asks him coldly.

"Nothing," Mu Qing responds curtly. "You just look like…" He glances over to Feng Xin for assistance, but gives up when the general stares back at him cluelessly.

"Ming Guang? I said that before, but it's more noticeable in this skin."

"That's not what I…"

"This isn't a skin," Xie Lian corrects them both, "You heard San Lang just now—this is what he really looks like."

Feng Xin's eyebrows raise. "Really? I thought the resemblance to Pei was intentional since everyone thinks he's so handsome—but I suppose it was a coincidence."

"I wasn't trying to say that he looks like Pei Ming!" Mu Qing snaps. "Just forget it!"

He says that, but Hua Cheng seems lost in thought now, brow pinched, his gaze suddenly distant.

"Besides…what is this place?" Mu Qing mutters, holding Xie Lian by the sleeve.

In doing so, he pointedly situates himself between Xie Lian and Hua Cheng—something the ghost king doesn't fail to notice, his eye glinting.

"It's a cave of Ten Thousand Gods," Xie Lian explains, "Pretty amazing, right?"

Feng Xin frowns, looking around. "Who is worshiped here?"

"I don't know," Xie Lian admits, "I couldn't tell through the veils. But it must be someone pretty important, right?"

"In that case," Mu Qing reaches over, "Why don't we just—?"

FLASH!

"HEY!" Feng Xin draws his bow, "WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR SABER BEING IN A BAD STATE?!"

Mu Qing is frozen, his fingers outstretched, faintly grasping one of the veils—

And the edge of E'Ming is pressed against his throat, gleaming wickedly.

Not cutting him—but it would only take the smallest movement to change that.

Hua Cheng smiles, cold—but polite.

"E'Ming is just stopping you from causing trouble."

Mu Qing drops the veil—but the saber still doesn't relent.

"What, I can't even touch the stone to feel it?!"

Hua Cheng's smile grows thin, "Not without causing trouble, no."

"…Mu Qing…" Xie Lian sighs. "San Lang told me he would explain everything later, so why don't we just drop it for now?"

Mu Qing stares at him, incredulous.

"Are you kidding?! What if I back off, and he doesn't?"

"That's fine," Feng Xin replies sharply, his bow aimed at Hua Cheng's neck. "Because I'm not backing off until you take that blade off of his fucking throat."

"There's no need for this," Xie Lian points out quietly, "none of us are enemies."

Mu Qing lowers his hand, E'Ming slips away—and Feng Xin lowers his bow, all in that order.

"My, my…" Hua Cheng's lip pulls back into a sneer as he steps forward, leading them through the cavern. "You two are terrifying," he muses, E'Ming flying back to his waist. "I better be careful."

Mu Qing has never been particularly clingy—but he holds Xie Lian's arm firmly as they walk.

"Why are we following him?" The god glares, watching Hua Cheng suspiciously. "What if he's leading us into some sort of trap?"

"I'm just stopping you from causing trouble in someone else's territory," Hua Cheng shrugs.

"This isn't YOUR territory!"

"If you want to run off on your own and fall into another pit, go ahead," Hua Cheng rolls his eyes. "I really couldn't care less."

Mu Qing's expression becomes even more sour as Xie Lian laughs awkwardly, shaking his head.

"San Lang, there's no need for that…"

"Wait, wait…" Feng Xin pauses, looking around. "I'm thinking…"

"Don't strain yourself," The Ghost King replies coldly.

"HEY!"

"Remember, we're not enemies here!" Xie Lian holds his hands up between the two of them, "what were you thinking, Feng Xin?"

"…" The martial god glares at Hua Cheng, clearing his throat. "Well—not many people have ever been able to enter Mount Tonglu, right? So…wouldn't this place have been built by ghosts? Do ghosts still worship gods?"

"…San Lang has never been to this part of the mountain before, so I wouldn't even know who to ask," Xie Lian admits with a frown.

But that sounds correct.

Behind them, their voices seem to fade into the background for Mu Qing.

Who keeps looking back and forth.

From the veiled statues, to Hua Cheng's face—

Then to his hand, twisting something back and forth between his fingertips.

A—

…A red pearl, braided into his hair.

The god feels the bottom of his stomach drop out, falling, falling, falling…

Trying to reconcile that Pearl, with…

Just then, a silvery flicker of light flashes in the corner of Mu Qing's eye, and…everything just seems to snap together with a painful *click* .

Xie Lian feels Mu Qing's hand tremble slightly where it grips his arm, covering it with his own gently.

"…Mu Qing? What's wrong?"

The martial god swallows thickly as Hua Cheng's gaze turns to him—whispering something that manages to baffle everyone.

"The…guy with the…the butterflies…"

Xie Lian raises an eyebrow, because—

Everyone knows about Hua Cheng's butterflies. That was exactly how everyone knew who it was that he encountered on Mount Yu Jun.

…So, why does Mu Qing sound so terrified?

"…FENG XIN— *NOW!"*

There was no spoken plan between the two—but the moment Feng Xin hears him scream, he acts on instinct, built on nearly a millennia of fighting together.

His bow snaps up as Mu Qing yanks Xie Lian behind him, firing into the ceiling.

BOOM!

"MOVE!"

They jerk backwards, just as a cave in crashes down around them, a pile of boulders blocking the path between the three of them, and Hua Cheng.

"What are you—?!" Xie Lian sputters, feeling Mu Qing haul him forward, sprinting through the cavern.

"We have to find a way out of here!"

"What about San Lang?!"

"FORGET ABOUT HIM!" Mu Qing snarls, shaking his head. "IT'S BETTER IF YOU NEVER SEE HIM AGAIN!"

Xie Lian freezes, his stomach turning to ice as his heels begin to drag.

…Never see him again?

"What are you saying?!"

Xie Lian won't stop dragging his feet, and Mu Qing gnashes his teeth together, panicking.

"Fine, look!" He reaches over, snatching the veil off of one of the statues—

And Feng Xin comes to a stop beside them, bow still drawn, his jaw dropping.

“…Oh, *fuck…”*

Xie Lian reaches forward, pressing his fingers over the statue’s cheek, its chin—tracing over the shape of his nose, and…

He yanks his wrist back with a shocked gasp, clutching it against his chest.

“There is only ONE god being worshiped here!” Mu Qing stomps his foot.

“YOU! They’re all *YOU!”*

He tears off another few veils for emphasis, and Feng Xin’s increasing sounds of shock are enough to confirm to Xie Lian that it’s true, and…

It feels *just like* the statue Hua Cheng carved for him in Puqi Shrine, many months ago.

“…Well…” Xie Lian’s voice is suddenly small, shocked. “That’s…that’s not…”

“…How do you know they’re all him?” Feng Xin scratches the side of his neck—not trusting Hua Cheng any more than Mu Qing does, but…

Not wanting Xie Lian to be disappointed, either.

“Who do you think was the one handling this one’s robes all of those years?” Mu Qing scowls. “I know EXACTLY what they look like, I would know them anywhere! And he had them right! Down to every last detail!”

He turns to Xie Lian, grabbing him by both wrists.

“Do you remember those dreams you used to have?” He presses the prince, looking him in the eye, staring desperately into the glow of Xie Lian’s cursed shackle, willing him to remember. “Back when we were kids?”

“…What?” Xie Lian frowns, straining to remember.

“Of the man with the silver butterflies!” Mu Qing prompts him, squeezing his wrists tighter. “You said it seemed like he knew you—and he told you to wait?”

All of that—

It sounds vaguely familiar, it's so long ago, Xie Lian can't remember the man's face, but…

The prince's stomach lurches.

He *does* remember that the man only had one eye.

"I don't know what he wants with you—but he's been watching you your entire life," Mu Qing shakes his head. "He's DANGEROUS, and I can prove it!"

"…How?"

Mu Qing whips his head around to stare at Feng Xin imploringly. "Did you see the thing that Hua Cheng had braided into his hair? The one he kept on messing with?"

The martial god frowns, thinking.

"…You mean that red bead?"

"It's a Pearl!" Mu Qing shakes his head vehemently.

"A Pearl earring! The same one he lost that day during the Parade on the Grand Martial Avenue!"

"…What?" Feng Xin frowns. "Was he wearing Pearl earrings that day? How could you remember?"

"Because I was accused of STEALING it when it went missing!" Mu Qing glares. "Of course I remember what it looks like!"

Both of them pause then—noticing that Xie Lian has been oddly quiet.

And when Mu Qing looks back at him…

He doesn't think he's ever seen Xie Lian so pale.

"…He really has it?" The prince whispers."You're…you're sure, Mu Qing?"

"…Yeah," Mu Qing agrees, struggling to read Xie Lian's expression. "I'm positive."

Feng Xin's eyes drift over Xie Lian's shoulder, only to widen even further.

“…Oh, hell…” He mutters. “Do you think he painted those?”

“…Painted what?” Xie Lian croaks, twisting around.

“…Murals,” Mu Qing explains, shocked when Xie Lian rushes past him, desperately pressing his palms flat against the walls, trying to feel the images.

“What do they say?!”

Both of them pause, looking at each other, and Xie Lian presses his forehead against the wall.

“Tell me!”

“…It just shows what I already said,” Mu Qing mutters, lighting a palm torch, examining the paintings more thoroughly. “One is of the parade I was talking about…you…” His eyes focus on a child falling from the sky—

Like a falling star.

“…When you caught that kid…”

Feng Xin looks to the side, taking in images of a boy in the army—fighting—

“It shows the civil war in Xianle, too…”

Mu Qing swallows hard, baffled by the age of the paintings, because…

“How is Puqi Shrine here?“ he mutters, stepping closer. “You only moved there recently.”

But there it is, clear as day.

With Xie Lian knelt before a loom, working threads together, and…

The same boy beside him, holding threads wrapped around his fingers.

And in every depiction…

The child is painted as something *hideous* .

Small, broken, and deformed.

“…I don’t know what this place is,” Feng Xin admits. “Some sort of city by the sea, but…you’re there.”

Mu Qing steps forward, examining the beautiful colors of the sunset, molding into the water below like liquid fire.

“…You’re crying.”

And that’s startling, because…

Xie Lian really doesn’t cry often, if at all.

Mu Qing has only ever seen it once, and here…

He’s sobbing, hand outstretched, desperately reaching for something beyond the painting’s frame.

And…

He doesn’t have a cursed shackle in his eyes.

Clink!

The tell-tale sound of a silver bell has all three of them turning their heads, Xie Lian beginning to rush forward as Mu Qing holds him back.

“How did he find us that quickly?!” Feng Xin frowns.

“He…it’s that string on his highness’s finger!” Mu Qing spits out.

“It’s some sort of spiritual device! He’s using it to track us down!”

Feng Xin reaches forward to take it off—but even with Mu Qing restraining him, Xie Lian manages to slap him away.

“DON’T!”

“What’s wrong with you?!” Mu Qing glares. “We didn’t even tell you about the most depraved shit that was on there! The man is SICK! He’s so powerful—if he gets his hands on you, there is NOTHING we can do, do you understand that?!”

“What?!” Xie Lian snaps, not sounding like himself at all. “What else did he paint?!”

Feng Xin clears his throat, his ears turning red. "…It doesn't bear repeating!"

"Either you tell me, let me go—or I will MAKE you let me go!" Xie Lian twists his head around, glaring at them both.

"…I guess we don't have a choice," Feng Xin mutters, rolling up his sleeves.

Just then—Xie Lian feels something slap into his shoulder, hard.

"BE QUIET, AND START RUNNING!" Mu Qing barks, and…

Without Xie Lian meaning to…his legs start moving.

"…Huh?" Feng Xin watches the prince run past him, fists raised. "I thought we were fighting?"

"He was obviously stalling!" Mu Qing glares, dragging Feng Xin with him. "That—that creature got some sort of spell in his head, he wasn't going to listen!"

That's when Feng Xin notices the talisman on Xie Lian's shoulder, and…

He can't disagree with Mu Qing.

The situation is nothing less than insane, and Xie Lian's reaction in the face of that…

It was frightening.

It *does* seem like the prince was bewitched.

Like the old stories of fox spirits, luring innocent travelers away from the mountain path each night–never to be seen again.

But…

Both of them fall silent as a sharp chill drags through the room—and the very air before them seems to bend.

…An aura so powerful, even the two great martial gods of the south almost choke under it, and—

BOOM!

Ahead of them, unable to stop, Xie Lian slammed into a pile of rumble —not managing to dislodge it, but scraping his face and arms in the process.

"…What is this?!"

Feng Xin and Mu Qing both skid to a stop beside him, staring…

At the same pile of rubble Feng Xin knocked down from the ceiling earlier.

"…How are we back here?!" Feng Xin glares, punching at the rock frantically. "We didn't go in a circle!"

"Unless…" Mu Qing swallows hard.

Unless Hua Cheng somehow managed to create a travel array remotely, and they ran right through it without noticing.

…But even Jun Wu couldn't pull something like that.

"…Just how strong is he?!"

Clink!

Clink!

A sound that has always brought Xie Lian such comfort–and now, it seems to inspire nothing but terror in his friends, their faces growing pale as it comes closer, closer…

Both Feng Xin and Mu Qing leap in front of Xie Lian as Hua Cheng rounds the corner, weapons raised.

"JUST STAY AWAY FROM HIM!" Feng Xin snarls, arrow notched.

Normally, Hua Cheng would have ignored them with a smug little laugh—

But not now.

Now, he…hangs back.

"What is the meaning of this?"

And he sounds…wary.

“DROP THE ACT!” Feng Xin glares, an arrow aimed directly for his heart. “WE KNOW WHO YOU ARE! WE SAW THE STATUES, THE MURALS—ALL OF IT!”

Hua Cheng doesn’t look at them.

From this angle, it’s impossible to see his face.

“…How much did you see, exactly?”

“ENOUGH!” Feng Xin glares. “Enough to know what your intentions are! If you have ANY dignity as a Ghost King—you should NEVER show your face in front of his highness again!”

It takes the calamity a moment to answer–but when he does, his voice is deathly quiet.

Dangerous.

“…And who are you,” Hua Cheng questions slowly, “to order me?”

Feng Xin grows silent, his knuckles white around the bow, and Mu Qing—

“If you could STAND to show yourself to him after what you’ve done, then you don’t deserve to even SHARE THE SAME ROOM AS HIM!”

Something about the viciousness in his tone…actually seems to cut through.

“…His highness saw as well?”

His voice is so small—and behind them…

Xie Lian’s hands tremble.

Mu Qing swallows hard, his own hands trembling violently as he clasps his sword.

“We told him,” he confirms with clenched teeth. “We told him enough. I don’t know—I don’t know if you just feel ENTITLED to him after this many years of following him. I don’t know what you want with him. But he doesn’t owe you ANYTHING! He isn’t YOURS!”

“…” Hua Cheng finally turns his head, looking Feng Xin over, before his gaze finally settles in on Mu Qing.

"You see the monster who hurt you and you in every man you look at, don't you?" He questions, watching as Mu Qing drains of color, stumbling backwards.

"…SHUT THE *FUCK* UP!"

"What…" Feng Xin's brow furrows, glancing back and forth between them. "What is he—?"

"If you *ever* imply I would do something like that to his highness again," Hua Cheng's voice is calm—but such an irony, compared to the blood thirst in his eyes. "Those will be your last words."

Mu Qing grits his teeth, his shoulders shaking as his breaths come faster.

"I guess we all would have been BETTER OFF if you had just DIED when you f—!"

He stops—not because Hua Cheng interrupted him, but because…

His voice almost seems to die in his throat.

"…Mu Qing?!"

Feng Xin grasps his shoulder, watching as Mu Qing clutches his throat, spitting out blood, whipping around to glare at Hua Cheng.

"WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU DO?!"

"…Nothing," Hua Cheng mutters, staring Mu Qing down. "I suppose you understand now then, don't you?"

The martial god glares up at him, breathing hard.

"I've never had the luxury of making my own mistakes." Hua Cheng glares right back at him, placing a hand on the sword at his hip. "But you two have reminded me, now…"

His eye slides from Mu Qing, to Feng Xin.

Thirty four, and thirty five.

"We have unfinished business."

He lunges forward in a flash—and Feng Xin and Mu Qing barely have enough time to throw up a shield aura.

BOOM!

Ever since he emerged from the Kiln, no one has seen E'Ming fight seriously.

They still don't, now.

But the blow against their shield is so violent, that even with the combined power of both gods…

It shatters.

And in an instant, there's a flood of silver butterflies—shrieking, each wing as sharp as a razor blade.

Mu Qing and Feng Xin fall into long hardened battle instincts—one taking on the butterflies, rapidly firing off golden arrows of light—

The other crossing blades with their master.

Mu Qing braces himself, both arms trembling from the effort it takes to hold Hua Cheng back.

The Ghost King only uses one, raising an eyebrow as he smirks down at him.

"It would seem that one of us was better suited to sabers after all, General," he muses, watching Mu Qing snarl in defiance, but…

CLANG!

Just as Mu Qing's blade is knocked aside, the wraith butterflies overwhelm Feng Xin, swooping forward to envelop them both…

Wrapping each of them in cocoons of silk.

"…IT WAS BUTTERFLY SILK, NOT SPIDERS!" Feng Xin shouts, incensed. *"YOU* THREW US INTO THAT PIT!"

Hua Cheng kicks their weapons aside, bored. "You should be grateful that I tried to keep you two out of the way. In fact—you should be grateful that I'm sparing your puny lives now," he sneers, glaring down at Mu Qing. "I'll wait for your expressions of gratitude."

Instead of saying thank you—Mu Qing tries to spit in his face. It doesn't land, with Hua Cheng simply tilting his head to the side to avoid it, but...

Mu Qing has no such luck when Hua Cheng's fist lands against his jaw—splitting his lip.

"...WHAT KIND OF BASTARD PUNCHES SOMEONE WHEN HE'S ALREADY WON?!" Feng Xin snarls at him, wrenching around in his bonds, his face flushed with anger. "YOU'LL PAY FOR THAT!"

Hua Cheng hangs his head, smiling faintly.

His laughter is anything but amused.

"He knows what that was for," he murmurs, slowly lifting his head to look the general in the eye, his own flashing in a painful burst of nostalgia. "Don't you, Mu Qing?"

The god glares up at him, struggling uselessly against his bonds.

"I saved your *life!"* He hisses. "How did you end up dying, anyway?!"

"..." Hua Cheng's eye drifts over to Feng Xin, then to Xie Lian's back, finding the prince perfectly still.

He places one hand on the stone wall above Mu Qing's head, leaning close—whispering next to his ear;

"The way you should have."

Mu Qing falls silent, his eyes growing wide as Hua Cheng leans back, elbow still braced against the wall over his head, watching Feng Xin as he struggles uselessly.

The jealousy in his eyes soothing an old, inflamed wound, deep in the ghost king's heart.

"...I'm going to ask you one more thing, before I change my mind about returning the favor and saving *your* life," Hua Cheng murmurs, turning his head back to stare Mu Qing down.

"What you said, just before the avalanche—was it true?"

Mu Qing grows silent and still.

Hua Cheng surveys his expression for a moment—taking that as a yes.

"Who did it?"

And if Mu Qing had trusted him, he could have told him.

If he *had* —

Things may have been different.

But now, staring up into Hua Cheng's face...

The only thing Mu Qing feels is *fear* .

"...YOUR HIGHNESS, RUN AWAY FROM HERE!" He cries, squeezing his eyes shut as he waits for Hua Cheng to punch him again, but...

He doesn't.

His gaze immediately turns to Xie Lian who, the moment Mu Qing gave the order, began sprinting back down the hall.

But he doesn't get very far.

Not before white silk appears around his wrists and ankles—and he's sent lurching towards the ground.

But he doesn't fall.

No.

Hua Cheng would never let him hit the ground.

He scoops the prince up in his arms, cradling him carefully.

"DON'T!" Mu Qing struggles uselessly against his bonds, voice cracking as Hua Cheng carries him down the hall. "JUST LEAVE HIM ALONE!"

"HUA CHENG!" The ghost king actually does stop, turning his head slightly when Feng Xin dares to scream his name.

"His highness...he's already suffered enough!" The former guard cries, agonized, watching his prince falling into Hua Cheng's clutches—

Unable to do anything to stop it.

Like so many other things that he was always *powerless* to stop.

Hua Cheng looks away from him then—disappearing around the corner with Xie Lian in his arms.

"Just...don't hurt him! LET HIM GO! IF YOU DO, HE'LL PROBABLY FORGET THIS EVER HAPPENED!"

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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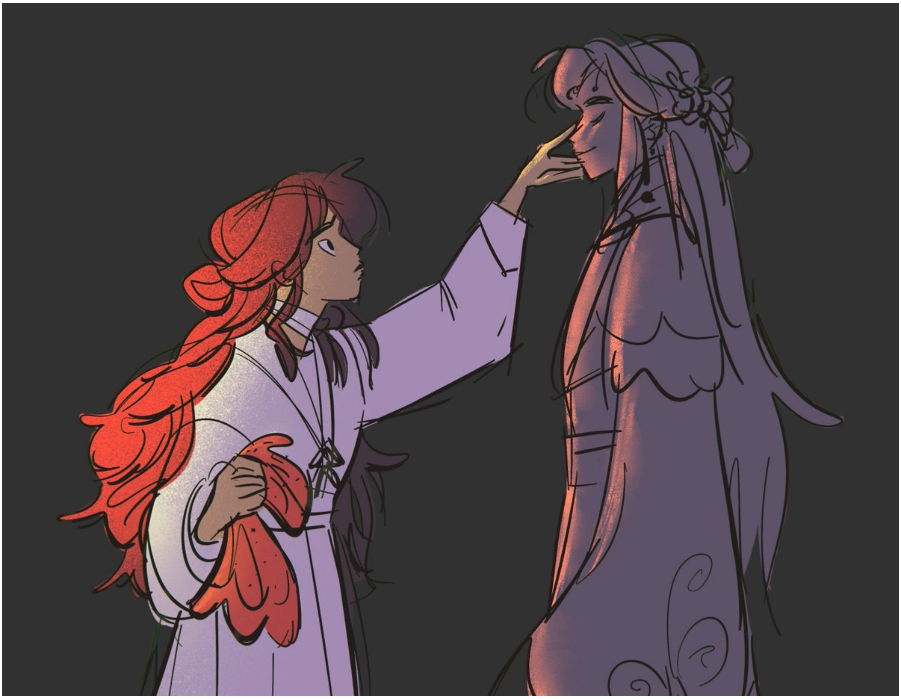
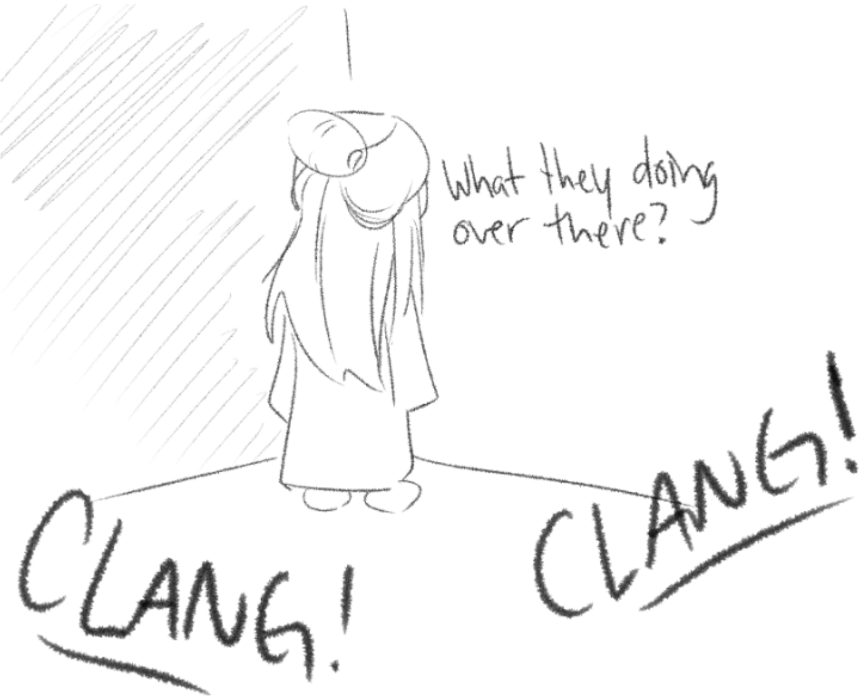
[image]

CREDIT: **SYL**



CREDIT: **_LEAFSHEEP**

Xie Lian, stuck facing the corner Blairwitch Project Style while Hua Cheng + Fengqing Battle it out


What they doing over there?
CLANG!
CLANG!

CREDIT: **MUSINGLOTUS**

MEMES FROM THIS STORY

(Art comes in many forms, and this was just too funny not to include.)

[image]

CREDIT: **SKULLY**

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to _Leafsheep, Syl, and Musinglotus for the beautiful artwork! And Skully for the meme!

xoxo, Evie

You Never Left Me

Chapter Summary

> To the prince's surprise, Hua Cheng embraces him.
>
> Pulling the prince against his chest—pressing his face against his hair, stroking it gently.
>
> Knowing that, in all likelihood, he'll never be allowed to hold him again.
>
> "...How could I possibly let go?" He whispers, his eye brimming.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Feng Xin's pleas echo, then fade as Hua Cheng carries the prince down a dark hallway.

After some time, Xie Lian feels himself being laid down on a soft surface—like straw covering stone.

What he can't see are the ancient remnants of what was once a bedroom.

A makeshift one, anyway.

One where a young ghost dreamed so many years away.

Makeshift scratchings of one face on the walls—early sketches, similar to ones made in chalk made in Puqi Shrine centuries ago, long since faded.

The same room where the mother who forged him told him that he had to stop mourning the life he could have had.

But no one mourns like a ghost.

And he's still mourning now, watching his god laying on a makeshift bed in a cavern of the dead.

Mourning every single day that they spent apart.

Mourning every single day that they *will* spend apart, when he's cast away.

He reaches around, feeling the talisman on Xie Lian's back—his voice quiet.

"...They put a spell on you?"

Xie Lian can't answer—but Hua Cheng knows he's correct.

Still. He doesn't remove the talisman—not quite yet.

Instead, he reaches for the belt of his robes.

By unfortunate coincidence, that just so happens to be the moment that the talisman weakens just enough for Xie Lian to jerk, but...

It looks like a flinch.

Hua Cheng's hand quickly jerks back, fingers trembling.

"Your highness, I..." He swallows thickly, shoulders slumping.

"...I would *never* hurt you, or do anything like..." His voice fades, remembering the look in Mu Qing's eyes when they faced each other down in the cave of Ten Thousand Gods.

How disgusted the martial god was by the mere *sight* of him.

And Hua Cheng wishes he could say that after eight centuries on this earth, he had changed...but...

His voice is still small, that of a lonely child—one who doesn't even think he has the right to pray for salvation.

"Just...don't be scared."

He reaches for him again—carefully parting the front of Xie Lian's robes, and he doesn't even touch the prince's skin.

(He doesn't dare.)

Rather, his butterflies do—swarming in, gently glowing with energy as they flutter around his arms, torso, and face.

Healing broken bones, cuts, bruises, and frostbite from being caught in the avalanche.

Leaving him as good as new—if not still caught under the talisman's grip.

Hua Cheng sits on the edge of the bed, facing away from him—not looking at the prince's bare torso.

"…If…you'll still come with me, I can explain everything," he whispers, slightly slumped over with exhaustion.

Having carried the burden so well, for so long—

But this kind of all consuming terror drains him.

"You'll understand…I promise."

For a little while, anyway.

As soon as he steps away from the Kiln...he'll forget anything that Hua Cheng tells him about his name.

Who he is.

What they were to one another.

The only thing he'll remember are the words exchanged between Hua Cheng, and Mu Qing.

How *frightening* they must have seemed.

And when he does...in all likelihood, he'll never want to see Hua Cheng's face again.

Hua Cheng—

Before that, Hua Cheng just wants the chance for Xie Lian to know everything, and to...

To ask Xie Lian what he should do.

What Xie Lian *wants* him to do.

He can't look at Xie Lian's face right now. Can't bear to see what emotions he might find. Dreading that one of them might be fear, but...

Even more than that, terrified that he might see disgust in Xie Lian's eyes.

But before he can even try to build up the nerve...

A voice echoes from behind them, harsh and sneering.

"Hua Cheng—oh my god, you're fucking DISGUSTING! Just what do you think you're doing to his highness?!"

The ghost king looks back over his shoulder—surveying Mu Qing, unimpressed.

"How did you manage to get out so fast?"

Feng Xin stumbles into the room after them, pointing one trembling finger at Hua Cheng, his eyes burning with protective rage.

"You...YOU LET HIM GO RIGHT NOW, CRIMSON RAIN!"

Hua Cheng surveys the two, not bothering to stand up.

"Are both of you tired of my mercy?" He raises an eyebrow. "Or are you just tired of living?"

Mu Qing sneers, his expression filled with nothing but contempt.

"Get your filthy hands off of him! The ugly little toad wants a taste of swan meat?"

He laughs, and...

It rings with cruelty.

"Forget eight hundred years—you could wait a THOUSAND, no, TEN THOUSAND, and he would NEVER want to be touched by a lowly wretch like you!"

Before—even in the pain and distress of the moment, there was little Mu Qing could say that seemed to bother Hua Cheng.

Even when Hua Cheng did lash out—it was with words, or a relatively harmless blow in comparison to what he was actually capable of.

But now—his eye glitters with dark, dangerous rage.

"If you're so eager to die..." He mutters, rising to his feet.

"Fine," E'Ming slides from its scabbard with a menacing gleam. "I don't mind playing executioner."

Behind him, Xie Lian jerks on the bed's surface—but can say little more as the scimitar lashes out, slicing both Feng Xin and Mu Qing at the waists, each of them collapsing.

Each of them rolls on the ground, screaming in pain as Hua Cheng pauses, staring down at their dying forms...suspicious.

He's quick to turn around, returning to Xie Lian's bedside—helping the prince sit up, and...

To the prince's surprise, Hua Cheng embraces him.

Pulling the prince against his chest—pressing his face against his hair, stroking it gently.

Knowing that, in all likelihood, he'll never be allowed to hold him again.

"...How could I possibly let go?" He whispers, his eye brimming.

How on earth could he *ever* let him go?

What's left of him, if he does?

Stars don't orbit the cosmos again, after they fall.

They simply fade, forgotten by all except those who watched the moment of descending, making a silent wish.

But...Hua Cheng does.

He reaches up—ripping the talisman away.

And the moment Xie Lian is free from its grasp, he springs up—rushing over to his friends, bleeding on the ground.

"FENG XIN! MU QING!"

"Y...Your highness..." Feng Xin rasps, blood dripping from his lips. "He...he's a monster...you...you have to run..."

"He..." Mu Qing reaches up, tugging at his sleeve weakly. "He only...wants to bring you to the Kiln...to devour you...you...you can't listen to whatever he wants to tell you!"

Hua Cheng stands off to the side, arms crossed—almost unable to look at the three of them.

"...A monster?" Xie Lian repeats, his voice deathly quiet. "Then what does that make you?"

Before either one of them can say another word, he rams fangxin through Feng Xin's heart, nailing him to the ground.

"Y-YOUR HIGHNESS!"

"I never said a word to either of you about San Lang wanting to bring me to the Kiln," Xie Lian points out coldly. "Or about him wanting to tell me anything. So, why don't you stop hiding behind those false skins and show yourself?"

Both of the forms on the ground grow quiet, stopping their fake moaning and crying...staring up at Xie Lian with wide, lopsided grins.

Then...there's laughing.

Horrible, deranged laughing—like two jackals in the night.

Not his friends.

Even when Mu Qing and Feng Xin seemed to fear the worst from Hua Cheng—they were never intentionally cruel to him, only wanting to get Xie Lian away.

These...

This is an imposter.

And surely enough—their forms begin to fade, twisting and morphing into a new form.

Blood fading, faces melting into something unreadable.

A tall, haunting figure.

Wearing white mourning robes with long, trailing sleeves.

A staff clutched between his fingertips.

And maybe, on some level, Xie Lian always knew.

Like a prick at the skin, a twinge from a healed bone that can't quite forget the feeling of being broken.

Maybe he sensed it, in Shi Qingxuan's body that night, standing on a mountainside near the Terrace of Cascading Wine.

Maybe he knew it, but he didn't dare say it.

As though acknowledging the horror of the truth could somehow will it into existence.

As though there was just as much to fear in a name, or a memory, as there was in it becoming more.

Reaching back through the past to haunt him.

He can't see the figure's face.

Even if he had his sight—he knows that he wouldn't.

But from beneath his mask...his voice is almost warm.

As though he's greeting an old friend.

"...How are you, Xie Lian?"

The prince doesn't reply—hands trembling at his sides, but...

Somehow, he's keenly aware of how closely his every move and reaction are being watched.

That anything he does now will be used against him.

Before he can move, think, or breathe—

Hua Cheng is in front of him.

Striking out with E'Ming, a move that Bai Wuxiang dodges, moving as swiftly as water, lunging past Xie Lian, reaching out, as if to touch his face, but...

Hua Cheng catches him by the wrist, twisting the limb until it detaches from the rest of his body, falling to the ground.

"That's a bold move," he snarls, eye flashing with warning, "especially in your wife's house."

And just as the White Clothed Calamity got under his skin before—Hua Cheng has returned the favor.

Bai Wuxiang snarls, fingertips sharpening into claws as he lashes out.

He lunges for Hua Cheng's only real weak point—his missing right eye. But the younger ghost is quick to step back—only receiving two deep gashes in his cheek for Bai Wuxiang's efforts, blood dripping down.

And before he can attack again...

A swarm of wraith butterflies swarms the calamity, attacking him in a frenzy, but even then—one of his arms manages to reach out, clawing at Hua Cheng's right eye again.

But this time, a blade slashes out—slicing off his entire arm, taking part of his shoulder with it.

Xie Lian sheathes fangxin as Hua Cheng grabs him by the arm, pulling him from the room, guiding him to run alongside him down the hallway.

And while they do, Xie Lian can't help but cover his hand with his mouth, lips trembling with fear.

"He...He really didn't die!"

Xie Lian chokes the words out—finding that one piece of comfort, the *only* thing that got him through all of these years with a shred of peace, just..melting away.

"...How did he not die?!"

"That might not have been the original version of him..." Hua Cheng offers comfort, even if…

He himself has *no* idea how Bai Wuxiang managed to survive—or how he managed to hide himself for so long.

On some level, he should have known—because his curses have lingered on for until now. But…

It takes him a moment to realize that Xie Lian has stopped running—coming to a halt in the hall beside him.

Hua Cheng almost grabs him again, telling him that they need to run, but—

Xie Lian shrinks away from him, hanging his head.

And the events from before come rushing back.

“…Dianxia,” he starts, feeling helpless, but—

“I need to ask you something.”

Xie Lian…

Hua Cheng has heard him a thousand different ways.

Hurt, angry, frightened, happy—and mournful.

But never like this.

As though he’s locking everything behind a door, holding it shut.

“…And I think…” Xie Lian squeezes his eyes shut so tightly, it actually hurts. “I think…this is one you can answer.”

Hua Cheng doesn’t say a word, waiting—watching the way Xie Lian’s hands ball into tight fists at his sides, trembling.

And Xie Lian is right.

“This…precious, noble person…” Xie Lian whispers, “…Who is it?”

There’s no reason that Hua Cheng *can’t* tell him that.

He tilts his head back, his undead heart squirming in his chest, being dragged to the edge of a cliff.

“…You’re asking like you already know.”

Xie Lian lifts his hand to his chest, squeezing something tightly.

“…It’s true, then?”

Hua Cheng turns away, pressing his forehead into his hand, unable to look at him.

“You…” Xie Lian takes a step toward him, and now Hua Cheng is the one shrinking.

Living in utter terror of the next few moments.

Knowing that he isn’t the one that Xie Lian wants to hear this from.

That Xie Lian has never loved Hua Cheng. Not the way he loved Hong’er.

Or Wu Ming.

Or Feng Xin.

That he's second, third, or fourth best in a race that he has always been losing.

"…You never wanted to know how I felt?"

Hua Cheng once said he wanted to know everything Xie Lian thought and felt. That he could never get bored of it.

But this…

Hua Cheng's voice cracks.

"…Could you…not tell me?"

When it comes to this, Hua Cheng would rather be a coward.

Living with a useless hope that might as well be fool's gold.

But just that hope is enough for him.

It always has been.

"…No."

Xie Lian takes on a wobbling, unsteady edge—as though he's barely holding that door back now, straining at the hinges.

"I'm sorry, but…I really need…"

Hua Cheng stays still, fists clenched by his sides.

"…Okay," he rasps.

Feeling like a man on death row.

He closes his eyes, taking a deep breath—letting it out shakily—and he forced himself to smile.

Even as two streaks of blood fall down his cheeks.

Bracing himself for—

Thud!

For a moment, the universe is beautifully still.

Like floating on your back in a lake, ears slipping beneath the water.

Until all you can hear is your own heartbeat, and the rush of blood inside your ears.

All Hua Cheng feels is a pair of arms, hugging him tightly from behind.

And when the silence fades…

The first thing he hears is a sound that leaves him on the very edge between sorrow, and euphoria.

Shattering him, but relief hides in every beautiful point of fracture.

Xie Lian is *sobbing* .

Not crying. Or weeping.

Neither verb encompasses how deep every cry reaches.

Coming from somewhere so far inside of him, Xie Lian feels as though he'll never stop.

As though he could cling to Hua Cheng and scream for a hundred years—and he would still have more tears to shed.

And before Hua Cheng can turn around to look at him, to ask him what's wrong, Xie Lian—

"I-I can't…I can't say your name anymore," He sobs, his face buried between Hua Cheng's shoulders.

Feeling the Ghost King go completely still—not daring to move a muscle.

"But…it's…it's you!" He chokes, holding him tighter, until a mortal man's ribs would have been crushed.

"It's you!"

Xie Lian's heart died centuries ago, in a forest beneath the snow.

It beats painfully now, feeling so many things that had been long forgotten.

His body became numb to pain overtime, something you learn from constantly enduring suffering.

Just as a heart does, after constantly weathering sorrow.

But—

He's *here* .

Hong'er is here, not just on a chain around his neck, but—

In his arms.

And Xie Lian feels *everything* .

Another sob tears from him, his knees buckling—and finally, Hua Cheng catches him. Twisting around to wrap Xie Lian in the tightest embrace that he's capable of, crushing the prince against his chest.

“You…” the prince's voice cracks, and Hua Cheng…

“…You never left me!” Xie Lian whimpers through a flood of tears, his cheeks soaked with them.

…Hua Cheng is crying, too.

“…This world and the next could come to an end,” he whispers, hugging Xie Lian fiercely.

“And I would never, *ever* leave you.”

Xie Lian *knows* .

That day, when he couldn't find him, no matter how many times the villagers tried to suggest that Hong'er had run away—

Xie Lian had *known* .

He would NEVER leave me.

And when he called out to Hong'er's spirit over the years…so many times…

He had known that, if Hong'er was still in this world—he would have found his way back to Xie Lian.

…And he *did* .

The emotions crest in his chest as he lifts his head up, reaching up to grasp Hua Cheng's hair, pulling him in, and—

Xie Lian kisses him.

The first kiss he's ever initiated on his own.

Given to the man who has—and will have—every single one of his firsts.

To the only person he's ever *wanted* to share this part of his life with.

Even if he didn't always know it was him.

Even if he didn't always know Hong'er was there.

But love and faith are two shades of the same emotion.

Sometimes you can't see it, or feel it.

But no matter how miserable, broken, or alone you are—

It is *with* you in that pain.

And when you climb out of the darkness, clawing your way up that winding staircase towards the light…

It is with you on every single step.

Xie Lian says it now—the words he always wished he had said back then—

A broken maybe, given new life.

"I…I love you!"

They're the most sincere words to ever leave his lips. Said desperately through tears and ragged breaths, sinking into Hua Cheng's bone.

Somehow, more sacred than any prayer he's ever uttered.

And *that's* when the Ghost King realizes this isn't a dream or trick of the mind.

Because for every day that Xie Lian has whispered good morning to his ashes, Hua Cheng has dreamed of him learning the truth.

He's imagined holding his god in his arms enough times to be ashamed of.

But in all of those years, he never dared to dream of Xie Lian saying *that* .

And when he does—

Hua Cheng is seventeen years old again.

Heart pounding, curled on his side, replaying the way Xie Lian said ‘My Hong’er’ in his head, over and over again.

My Hong’er.

Silently asking himself—

‘…Did he mean it like that?’

‘Please…god, please…’

‘Did he really mean it like that?’

‘…About *me?’*

He’s been frozen in shock, ever since Xie Lian pulled him into a kiss—hasn’t moved a muscle since he said those words.

And now, he whispers them again, hoarse—but fierce.

“I-I love you…”

That’s when Hua Cheng understands.

Xie Lian—

He already knew.

Back when Hua Cheng was fighting with Feng Xin and Mu Qing. When the prince couldn’t move or speak.

Xie Lian already knew that he was Hong’er.

But he asked Hua Cheng who his noble, precious person was *first* .

Holding back his reaction, even if it must have been killing him.

Because even then, he…

He really…

The sound that wrenches itself from Hua Cheng's chest isn't even *human* .

Xie Lian barely sucks in one surprised breath as he's backed up against the cavern wall—with Hua Cheng's arms cradling his head and shoulders, protecting him from any harsh stone edges.

Kissing Xie Lian like he could reach in and grasp his very soul.

"I love you."

Hua Cheng has said it more eloquently before in his mind.

Carefully weaving his feelings for his god into lines of near poetry.

But not now.

Now, he barely has the composure to say those three words, over and over again, each time there's a gap between their lips.

I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

Whispering each word like a prayer against his skin.

Xie Lian's hands flutter, tightening in Hua Cheng's hair. Overwhelmed, but always pulling him closer, because—

He's never been kissed like this before.

Because Hong'er was always a selfish child. Wu Ming was a selfish teenager.

And Hua Cheng—

His arms tighten around Xie Lian until there isn't an ounce of space left between them, weaving the edges of them together.

Hua Cheng is a selfish man.

He doesn't kiss Xie Lian like a gambler collecting a debt, or a servant granting a request.

He doesn't kiss him as a means of healing or sharing spiritual power.

It couldn't be called sharing air—he's practically stealing every breath as it passes through Xie Lian's lungs.

And his love is still shaking, unsteady, tears slipping down his cheeks as he holds him tight, whispering—

"How long?"

Their noses brush against one another as Hua Cheng leans against the wall, breathing hard.

"…Always."

He can't remember a time when he didn't.

The moment he saw Xie Lian that day, leaning over the side of the city walls—he knew.

The rest of his life, long or short, was going to be for him.

That loving Xie Lian, protecting him, following him—

It's what Hua Cheng was *born* to do.

"…" Xie Lian's fingers slide down from his hair, stroking over his cheeks—trembling slightly.

"…H…Hon…!"

It's a testament to his endurance for pain that Xie Lian can manage to utter a single syllable of his name—more than Hua Cheng has ever managed—before falling silent.

He tries again, only for a pained—incredibly rare—whimper to rip from his throat.

Hua Cheng presses his forehead against Xie Lian's, shushing him gently.

"Don't, dianxia, it's alright…"

Tears fall from Xie Lian's eyes endlessly, shining like diamonds under the silver light of countless wraith butterflies.

Because it isn't alright.

It could *never* be alright.

“I…I’m *so* sorry that I couldn’t protect you,” He chokes, weighed down by centuries of guilt.

Hua Cheng’s smile carries the sweetest kind of heartache there is.

“But you did.”

Xie Lian shakes his head, another sob ripping from him—

Until Hua Cheng’s hand slips down between them, palm pressed against Xie Lian’s chest.

Over his ring.

“You have *always* kept me safe.”

Xie Lian remembers then, what he was told so long ago—asking if Hua Cheng’s ashes were safe.

That, if the place where his ashes were held was gone…

Hua Cheng wouldn’t have a reason to remain in this world either.

His throat is so thick with emotion—it’s difficult to speak.

“…I missed you everyday,” Xie Lian croaks, wrapping his arms around Hua Cheng’s neck, hugging him tightly.

“I’m so…I’m so sorry that you are alone for so long…”

Hua Cheng shakes his head, nuzzling his face into Xie Lian’s hair.

“I should be saying that to you, gege.”

Because Hua Cheng was never alone—not really.

He had Zhao Beitong.

Then Fai and Xiang.

Bao, Yanlin, and Shuo.

Even He Xuan, as strange as that is to admit.

And the loss of so many of them aches all the more—

Because Xie Lian never got to know them.

“…I spent every single day looking for you,” Hua Cheng mutters, holding him tighter. “And once I found you—I tried to tell you so many times, I…”

“I know,” Xie Lian whispers, breathing him in.

Smelling the wildness of the forest after it rains. Metal and distant smoke.

Finally feeling that joy of familiarity without the sadness and fear of disappointment that used to follow it.

Because he smells like Hong’er.

He smells like *home* .

Xie Lian makes a small, frustrated sound in the back of his throat, pressing his face into Hua Cheng’s neck.

The ghost king squeezes him gently in response, one hand rubbing up and down the small of Xie Lian’s back.

“What is it?”

The god bites his lip, his toes barely touching the ground, refusing to allow any distance between them.

“…I want to see you,” he whispers.

For so long, Xie Lian didn't miss his sight.

He wasn't interested in seeing a world that didn't have Hong'er in it.

He felt like the last thing he *deserved* to see was Wu Ming disappearing into darkness—

Not the beauty of the sunset that came after.

There are so many faces that he's never seen. So many places that he wouldn't recognize now.

But when he returned to the Heavens, and Jun Wu asked Xie Lian if he deserved his shackles...

Xie Lian had been content to carry that penance to the end of his days.

But now...the weight of them—something he's long since become accustomed to—

It feels claustrophobic, like he's reeled in with literal chains. Unable to move. To think. To breathe.

And Xie Lian...suddenly doesn't care if he *deserves* to feel this way or not.

He...

Xie Lian just wants to see him

Hua Cheng holds him closer, his cheek resting on top of Xie Lian's head, taking deep, unburdened breaths for the first time in centuries.

"You will," he promises him, leaning back to look at his face. "I promise."

He strokes his thumb under Xie Lian's eye, staring into his cursed shackle, brushing the tears away. Hesitating at first, only for his god to lean into the touch—like a flower stretching toward sunlight.

In that moment, it feels real to Hua Cheng.

That he can touch Xie Lian.

That it's not only welcomed, but *wanted* .

Xie Lian tilts his cheek into Hua Cheng's palm, biting his lip.

"...I want to say your name," his voice carries so much longing, it's impossible not to feel an ache.

Hua Cheng's thumb traces down his lip, over his mouth—freeing Xie Lian's bottom lip from his teeth.

Reaching down to replace it with his own mouth—kissing him so softly now, all Xie Lian can do is lean into it with a sigh, eyelashes fluttering against his cheek.

Hua Cheng bears all of his weight with ease, the prince content to sag against him, clinging his arms around the ghost king's neck.

"If it's all the same to you," he murmurs, fingers cradling the back of

Xie Lian's head.

"I prefer that you call me San Lang."

"..." Xie Lian smiles faintly, not content—but comforted, fingers finding the red pearl braided into Hua Cheng's hair, stroking over it gently.

"...My San Lang," he whispers against his lips, making the calamity shudder, crushing Xie Lian against him.

"Your San Lang," he agrees breathlessly, feeling a lurching in his chest, a long dead heart straining to beat again.

Always, his San Lang.

Xie Lian pulls back slightly, their lips parting.

"My ha—"

There's rumbling in the distance, and they both look towards it.

Suddenly remembering that, no matter what it might feel like, there's an entire world outside of the two of them—

And danger lurking not far behind.

"...We have to keep moving," Hua Cheng pulls back mournfully—pressing a kiss to Xie Lian's forehead. "He'll be coming."

The mere reminder of him makes Xie Lian grimace, holding Hua Cheng’s hand tightly as they start moving again.

His limbs slightly wobbly, head still spinning as he tries to process the new reality.

A world so profoundly different from the one he woke up in yesterday.

The world didn’t have Hong’er in it yesterday.

Xie Lian didn’t have hope, yesterday.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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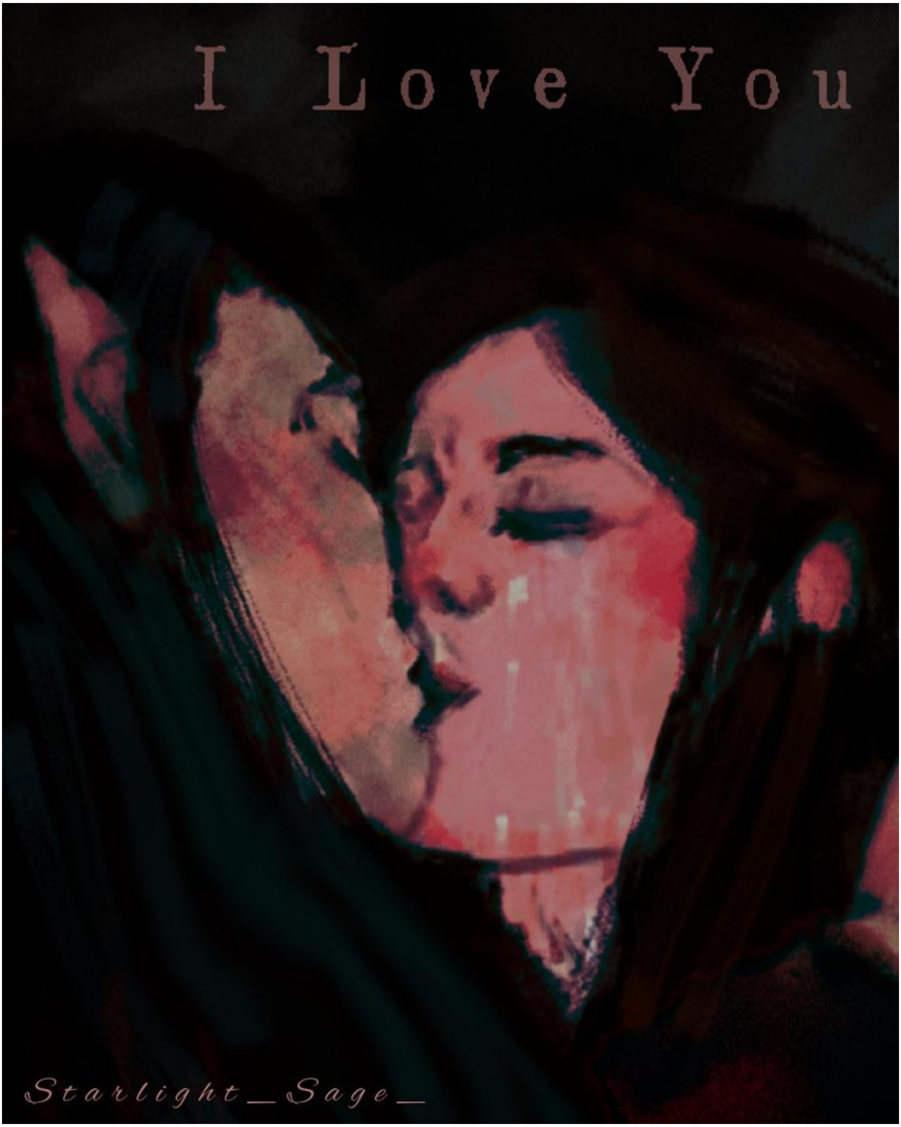
I Love You
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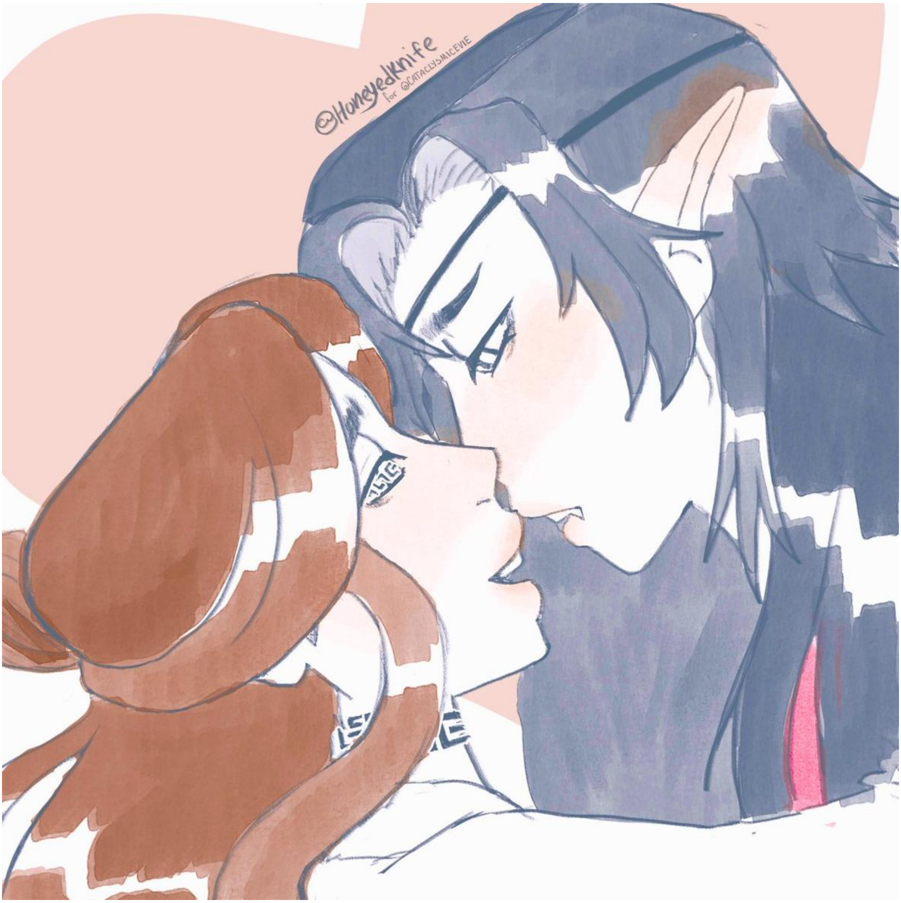
@HoneyedKnife
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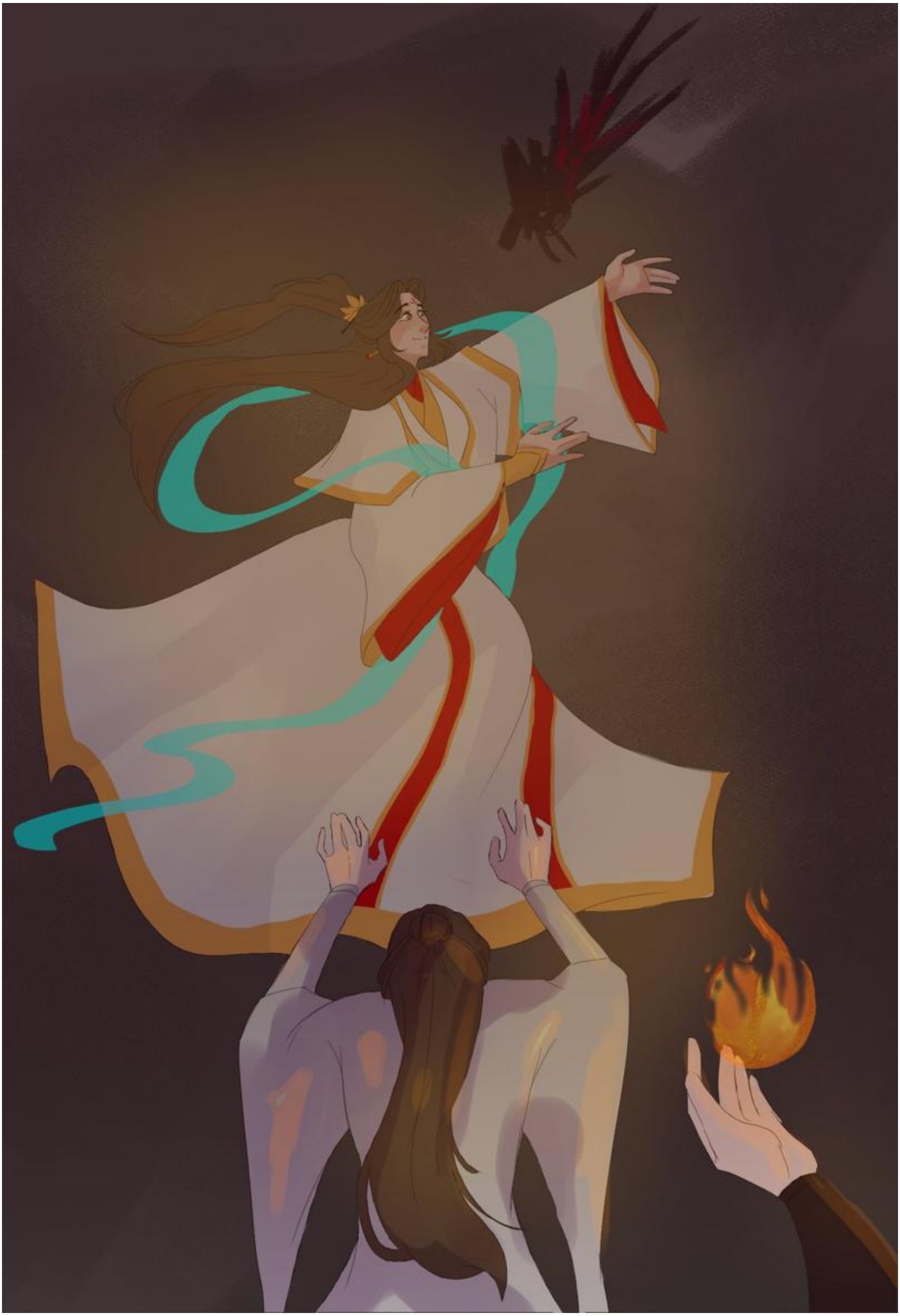

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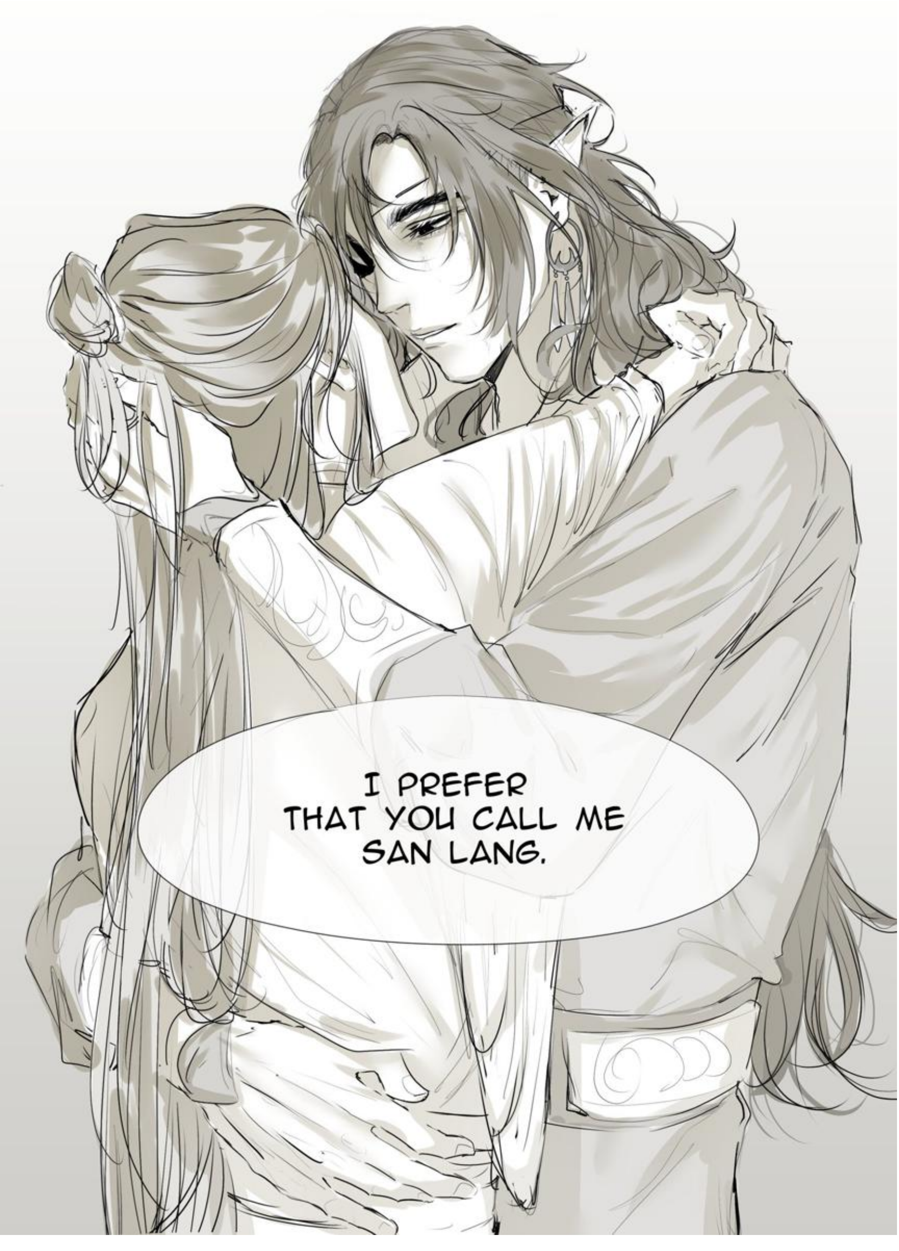
I PREFER THAT YOU CALL ME SAN LANG.

CREDIT: IMAGINARY CANVAS

Chapter End Notes

Let's pat ourselves on the back for surviving a nearly 900k slowburn guys, there aren't many fanfic readers who can say that!

Thank you so much for sticking around for 800+ years of content for this, it's been a WILD ride, and I hope I was able to do the payoff justice!!

Thank you to Imaginary, Cass, Esme, Honey, Sage, Syl, and Ash for their gorgeous artwork, it means so much to me!!

xoxo, Evie

From the Kiln One Supreme Shall Emerge

Chapter Summary

“Bai Wuxiang has returned.”

Those words are all it takes for both of his friends to fall silent.

All four of them understand the gravity of that.

All four of them, survivors of his plague.

All four of them, veterans of his war.

Children of the nation he burnt to the ground.

Victims of his genocide.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“…If it’s really him…” Xie Lian swallows hard, biting back his fear. “Does he know who you are?”

Hua Cheng thinks it over.

“…I think so.”

The way he used Feng Xin and Mu Qing’s forms to taunt Hua Cheng—

It was so similar to the way he taunted him *that* night, 800 years before.

In a temple, clutching a ghost fire before a bloody altar.

Xie Lian grimaces, running even faster. “San Lang…if that’s true…”

“What?”

“…He’ll try to use you to hurt me,” Xie Lian mutters, swallowing hard. “I-I tried not to show that I realized who you were in front of him before, but if he’s been watching us long enough…and he knows that I know…”

Xie Lian swallows hard, his heart pounding.

Remembering the thread Bai Wuxiang made before, pretending to be the Venerable of Empty Words on the Terrace of Cascading Wine…

Because that *must* have been him, Xie Lian is certain of it.

'I'll hang him.'

He squeezes Hua Cheng's hand tighter.

'…Just like I hung Hong'er.'

Hua Cheng squeezes his hand in return, shaking his head.

"Don't be scared, your highness. Bai Wuxiang can do whatever he likes—but he'll never win against me."

He speaks with such certainty, without an ounce of fear for himself.

Xie Lian must be a coward, because…he really can't fathom it.

"…How are you so certain?"

"Because," Hua Cheng guides him through the passage, wraith butterflies flitting past them, charging down the passage to find and attack their pursuer.

"No matter what he does—even if he tries to force me from this world—I'll always come back."

Because Hua Cheng still has someone precious in this world.

And Bai Wuxiang has already tried to get rid of him before.

Hua Cheng was far weaker back then—and still, he survived.

"It's no coincidence that the only time he's shown himself before me since his return was an effort to break gege's trust in me."

Bai Wuxiang doesn't actually *want* a fair fight.

Xie Lian squeezes his hand, his voice resolved.

"He was wasting his breath."

Even if Hua Cheng's intentions had always been betrayal, Xie Lian would have happily accepted it.

Accepted anything, for the chance to see Hong'er one more time.

"But...how did you know those clones of Mu Qing and Feng Xin were fakes?"

Hua Cheng's lips quirk into a lopsided smile. "I left a butterfly with the real ones. I promised gege they would be alright, didn't I?"

Xie Lian bites back a smile of his own, his chest so full, it could burst.

"...You did."

Even when Hua Cheng was fighting them so ferociously—he never had any intentions of seriously harming them.

"Though you could have been a little more gentle San Lang, they really had no idea..."

Especially towards Mu Qing.

Hua Cheng shrugs, unbothered.

"I didn't try very hard."

They round the corner—back to where Mu Qing and Feng Xin were left behind, both of them struggling fiercely against their bonds.

The minute Feng Xin sees Xie Lian's face, he cries out with relief.

"Your highness! You escaped! You...!" His elation fades when Hua Cheng follows.

Mu Qing glares at the ghost king, struggling even harder than he was before. "If you made some sort of deal with him so he would let us go, just forget it and run! You can't trust him!"

"Yes," Xie Lian feels his way over, loosening their bonds, "I can."

Mu Qing looks over at Feng Xin, then Hua Cheng—his eyes narrowed hatefully. “What did you do to him?!”

“Mu Qing.”

“Your highness, he’s *obsessed—!”*

“If so,” Xie Lian frees one of his hands, moving onto the other, “It’s mutual.”

His friends freeze, their jaws dropping in unison

"He's…" Feng Xin looks at Hua Cheng, whose eye is sparkling, listening to Xie Lian say that. "…Your highness, I've never been one to judge, but…"

Not true, but Xie Lian lets him go on.

(Affectionately.)

"…You've really lost your mind this time…"

Xie Lian sighs, turning back to Mu Qing, their faces level.

"You remembered who he really was, didn't you?"

Mu Qing hesitates, squeezing the fingers in his free hand to get his circulation back.

"…Yeah…it…doesn't freak you out that he's been following you for so long?"

Since Mu Qing already knows—and Feng Xin couldn't remember much about Hong'er anyway, curse or not…

"I told you about him," Xie Lian explains to Mu Qing quietly. "When you came to visit me during my first banishment."

Mu Qing's eyes snap to Hua Cheng, and he grows still.

Suddenly, he's a kid again—trying to navigate the world after it fell apart. And the painful juxtaposition of seeing Xie Lian, someone he once admired as much as he envied, reduced to such a state.

Broken and hollowed out—left to wander the world like a ghost.

Not out of humiliation, no.

Xie Lian was humiliated when his banishment began—to the point where he couldn't stand being seen in such a state.

But when Mu Qing saw him again…

Xie Lian didn't smile genuinely anymore. Any warmth in his expression was forced.

He was…shattered.

Mu Qing could barely get more than two words out of him the entire time he was there, avoiding Feng Xin, trying to find some peace of mind by checking to see that Xie Lian was alright, only to find…

That he wasn't.

And before long…the reason why became clear.

When Xie Lian admitted to Mu Qing that he hadn't been alone, when he was gone.

That someone had taken care of him.

And…that Xie Lian had lost him.

"You're…" Mu Qing mumbles, his voice hoarse. "You're the…"

'Were you in love with him?'

Xie Lian's voice had been so raw when he answered back then—unable to speak of the companion he lost. Not without losing his composure.

'I…I think I was.'

The prince frees Mu Qing's other hand, squeezing it gently.

"He is."

Mu Qing looks back at Xie Lian's face, and he—

He pauses, staring at the god in shocked silence.

Because the warmth in Xie Lian's eyes…

It isn't fake anymore.

The smile on his lips isn't forced.

He looks—

Like the boy Mu Qing grew up with.

He looks—

…Happy.

Mu Qing blows out a tired breath, his shoulders sagging in what could almost be seen as defeat, and…

He nods.

“Okay.”

“…Okay?!” Feng Xin glares, baffled. “How the hell is it okay?!”

“They already knew each other,” Mu Qing mumbles, watching as Xie Lian moves on to help him.

“I promise, I’ll explain everything to you when I can.” Xie Lian assures him as he works to free his hands—and before Feng Xin can argue, his prince squeezes his shoulder.

“I’m not saying that to procrastinate, Feng Xin. I mean it. When this is all over…”

He grasps his shoulder and Mu Qing’s, squeezing them both.

“I’ll explain everything. To both of you.”

Both of his friends pause, watching Xie Lian as if…

Almost as if they’re seeing a ghost.

“But for now—both of you need to report back to the Heavens.”

Mu Qing hesitates, his expression becoming dark.

“Your highness, I can’t go back.”

“I heard you before,” Xie Lian shakes his head, just as grim. “But you have to—at least once.”

“You don’t—”

“Bai Wuxiang has returned.”

Those words are all it takes for both of his friends to fall silent.

All four of them understand the gravity of that.

All four of them, survivors of his plague.

All four of them, veterans of his war.

Children of the nation he burnt to the ground.

Victims of his genocide.

“Someone has to warn the emperor and gather the martial gods.” Xie Lian explains, stepping back when they’re both completely free.

“General Pei should be at the edge of the fields of Tonglu with the Rain Master—you’ll need both of them. Take them with you when you ascend.”

“…Mu Qing can go,” Feng Xin agrees. “I’ll stay and fight with you.”

He says so fearlessly, without an ounce of hesitation, and Xie Lian can’t help but remember his words, the night of the mid autumn festival.

‘I didn’t promise to protect you until it got hard.’

‘I promised to protect you forever.’

“No…” Xie Lian shakes his head. “Go with Mu Qing. I’ll have San Lang here to help me.”

“You…” Feng Xin looks back and forth between them. “Don’t you need all the help you can get?”

“You don’t understand. Bai Wuxiang will never kill me…”

Xie Lian swallows hard, knowing that much in his bones. “But…he’ll kill both of you, and force me to listen.”

“…” Feng Xin looks to Hua Cheng. “But he’s staying.”

“I’m already dead,” the calamity points out dryly.

Not to mention the fact that Xie Lian honestly *would* prefer it if Hua Cheng would leave him to face this alone, but…

He would never do that, no matter what Xie Lian said.

“And once you warn the others—we can all face this together. But you have to go—now!”

A silver butterfly slides from one of Hua Cheng’s vambraces.

“There’s a path through Tonglu that never closes,” Hua Cheng explains. “Follow this, and you’ll get out quickly.”

Feng Xin nods, reluctantly listening—but Mu Qing stops next to Xie Lian.

Clearly torn.

"…Your highness," he squeezes Xie Lian's wrist, his voice urgent. "Once you get out of here—find me. Before you speak to anyone else."

It's…an odd request coming from anyone—but especially Mu Qing, of all people.

And he—

"Promise me."

He sounds *desperate* .

"…I will," Xie Lian agrees slowly, nodding as Mu Qing lets him go. "I promise."

They don't have time to debate it anymore.

Not with the distant rumbling growing more and more violent.

"…We'll see each other soon," he steps back, grabbing Hua Cheng's arm. "San Lang!"

"This way, dianxia!"

They charge down the pathway, in the opposite direction of Feng Xin and Mu Qing, heading back the way they came.

Running towards Bai Wuxiang, instead of away from him.

Eight centuries ago, Xie Lian would have called this an act of madness.

Even now, part of him still thinks that it is, but...

They have no choice.

The further they run, the more spiritual remnants they come across—torn and fading butterfly wings.

Xie Lian's heart sinks.

"I can't believe he was able to kill so many of them..."

"So?" Hua Cheng raises an eyebrow, unbothered. "For every butterfly he kills, I'll send a hundred more. That ancient excuse for a ghost will tire out eventually."

"You..." Xie Lian turns his head towards him, amazed."You really aren't afraid of him, are you?"

Hua Cheng's shoulders are straight, eye staring straight ahead as they move through the caverns at a breakneck pace, no longer forced to pretend to be ignorant to their surroundings.

"There is only one thing that has ever frightened me."

Somehow...Xie Lian knows what it is.

"Can I ask you something, gege?"

"Anything," Xie Lian replies instantly, silently wishing he could see the statues around them.

(There's one in the distance, lying on its back, that Hua Cheng would rather disperse than let him see—but Xie Lian has no way of knowing that.)

"...How did you figure out it was me?"

Xie Lian is quiet for a moment—and his answer nearly knocks the wind out of him.

"I suspected for a long time, actually."

If Hua Cheng didn't have to lead both of them, he would have turned his head to gawk at him.

"...You did?"

Xie Lian nods, thinking back on it.

"I called out for you the first night we met on Mount Yu Jun, remember?"

Hua Cheng does.

And he remembers how crushing it was, realizing that after so many centuries—he still couldn't defy the curse and manage to answer.

"You smelled the same...and the way you led me down the path...it was exactly the way you did it before," Xie Lian recalls quietly. "And when you couldn't answer...I felt like I was losing my mind."

"I'm sorry, your highness," Hua Cheng whispers mournfully. "I tried."

"Oh, no..." Xie Lian looks up at him, shaking his head, "I know you did, San Lang...But after that, being in Puqi Shrine with you...it was *so* much like it was before. And even though we were supposed to be strangers...it was like you knew me inside and out."

And then there was the time when they were in Qi Rong's lair...and Hua Cheng wouldn't deny that they'd met before, but he wouldn't say it, either.

Or then here was the way Hua Cheng became so frustrated when Xie Lian asked him about Shuo's Xianle accent, saying—

'What if I was from Xianle, too?'

And when they were running from Heaven's Eye and the other cultivators, and Xie Lian asked Hua Cheng about his childhood...

'Please don't ask me.'

Remembering how tortured Hua Cheng sounded breaks his heart, in retrospect.

'I hate lying—so please, don't ask me.'

"But you have to understand, Ho—" Xie Lian doesn't mean to try to say his name this time, it's a pure reflex—one that leaves him clutching his throat with a wince. "...San Lang, every time I thought I found you, and I was wrong..."

Xie Lian presses his lips together tightly, struggling to hold his emotions back.

"It...it was like losing you all over again."

Over, and over, and over again.

"So...even though I wondered, or even hoped...I never allowed myself to seriously consider it."

Xie Lian could only bear so much disappointment.

"Not until Mu Qing told me that you had...the pearl earring I placed on your pyre," Xie Lian's voice turns slightly rough, still raw with grief—even after all of this time.

"That was when I knew it was you..." Xie Lian's jaw locks, his eyes narrowing. "And that Bai Wuxiang must have stolen your name."

"...How did you figure that part out?"

Hua Cheng could have guessed how Xie Lian surmised his identity after Mu Qing told him that, but the curse...

"...I think one of the lost souls of Wuyong told me," Xie Lian admits, his brow furrowed as he remembers the screams he heard, reverberating in his ear. "When we were swept up in that avalanche...I heard a voice—and it was like it was talking to *me* ...not just a memory."

Whispering words that sounded like a riddle—but when Xie Lian stood there, his forehead pressed against the painted mural on the wall, with Mu Qing asking how there was a painting of Puqi Shrine...

He realized it was the truth.

"...What did it say to you?"

"What is the one thing from our parents that we take to our graves?" Xie Lian recalls, his heart pounding as the rumbling ahead grows more and more violent.

"And the answer...is a name," He breathes as they round the corner. "It goes on our tombstones."

Hua Cheng isn't surprised by Xie Lian's brilliance—that's to be expected.

...But which soul from Wuyong would have been trying to help Xie Lian with *that?*

"And...I think I know what I have to do now, when I confront Bai Wuxiang..." Xie Lian admits, biting his lip.

"But...I'm not like you, San Lang. I'm...I'm scared."

It feels shameful saying it—but less so when Hua Cheng squeezes his hand, gently reassuring him.

"You don't have to be, gege—no matter where you go now, I'm always with you. I am always on your side."

Even now, hearing Hua Cheng say that...

He smiles, even though part of him feels like crying.

"I know."

But when they round the final turn, reaching the end of the cavern where Bai Wuxiang should be...

There's no one there.

Only a dead end.

"...Where did he go?" Xie Lian frowns—nearly staggering to the side when the mountain rumbles again--but Hua Cheng is quick to catch him with an arm around his waist, looking up with a frown.

"...He's in the Kiln, your highness."

He's beaten them to it.

"He's forcing it shut as we speak."

Xie Lian's heart seizes up in his chest as his grip on Hua Cheng's arm tightens.

"...And what happens if it closes while he's the only one inside?"

"He can break out on his own—the result would be similar to a god passing a Calamity."

So...he'd become even stronger than he was before.

Xie Lian grimaces. "...Is there a way we can get to him before the Kiln closes entirely?"

"...There is," Hua Cheng agrees. "But you would have to trust me—and hold on tight."

Xie Lian's arms wrap around his waist.

"That's easy, then." He smiles softly, and the sight of it is so sweet, Hua Cheng...

Part of him wants to gather his love in his arms and leave this place.

Leave this world behind, as it has proven over and over again—it does not deserve him.

But Xie Lian loves this world.

And as long as that's true, Hua Cheng will fight for his place in it.

He leans down, pressing a kiss against the top of the prince's head—closing his eye for a moment.

Just one.

When he opens it again, he reaches up to the back of his head—slipping aside the black, leather eyepatch that covers his right eye.

"Hold your breath, gege."

Xie Lian does so without question, listening as Hua Cheng sucks in a deep breath, his nostrils flaring.

Though he can't see it, in a scarred, long empty eye socket—

There's a spark.

And when Hua Cheng exhales...

Smoke pours out.

Afterone, two, three breaths...

A wall of fire bursts forth, slamming into the cavern wall, creating a massive, gaping hole to the world outside.

One of his eyes shines like starlight, and the other...

Burns like hellfire, roaring brighter with every breath he takes, pulling the prince into his arms as he leaps forward, out into the ferocity of the blizzard near Mount Tonglu's peak. But Xie Lian...

He isn't cold.

It's almost as though there's a small sun within San Lang's chest--not allowing any of the snow or ice around him to touch his skin, evaporating into steam before it gets too close as they shoot upward, higher and higher—

Directly over the volcano's caldera.

There's a moment before gravity overtakes them—and they float, Xie Lian's hair surrounding him like a halo.

"Your highness!" Hua Cheng shouts to him over the sound of the wind. "Before we face him—there's something you have to remember!"

"What?!"

Hua Cheng's next words leave him stunned—because it's not that Xie Lian *forgot* ...

"You're stronger than he is!"

It's that he never believed it to begin with.

How could he be stronger than Bai Wuxiang—especially *now* , a shadow of the god he once was?

Just then, Hua Cheng's lips press against his—and Xie Lian feels a surge of power flowing into him.

That's when they begin to fall back to earth, plunging into the swirling smoke and ash surrounding the volcano's rim.

And Xie Lian knows—

He can't defeat Bai Wuxiang.

He couldn't do it back then—and he couldn't do it now.

But he thinks...he thinks he might have something on his side that he didn't, last time.

And even if that fails—he isn't fighting alone.

He has—

And in the horrifying flash of an instant...

Xie Lian's arms are empty.

Not because Hua Cheng let him go, no.

It's just that one moment, he was in Xie Lian's arms—and the next, he was gone.

Disappearing like smoke.

Xie Lian stretches his arms out, grasping blindly against the dark as he plummets, screaming—

"SAN LANG?!"

Hundreds of miles away, Pei Ming hobbles along, one arm slung around Feng Xin's shoulders, following behind Yushi Huang and the others.

"If...If you were just on the Mountain with those two...how did you make it here so fast?"

"Travel arrays," Mu Qing explains. "Apparently Blackwater and Hua Cheng were preparing for an event like this for some time—they're hidden all over the region, but the butterflies are the only ones that know where they are."

Pei Ming grumbles, his ribs twinging. "...We couldn't have used them before now?"

Feng Xin shakes his head, following the butterfly in front of them to the next portal, ignoring the awkward fact that they're, well...

Using an escape route engineered by the man who...happened to...assassinate The Water Master.

You do what you have to do, but it's awkward.

"Travel arrays don't work while the Kiln is open—but once it starts to close, they start becoming operational again," he explains.

"Just...how do you know all of this?" Pei Su mumbles, exhausted and half starved, chewing on melon seeds the farmers generously gave him.

"...The butterflies talk," Mu Qing grumbles, sounding like he'd rather die than admit it, but...

"...They're actually really informative..."

Pei Ming sends Feng Xin an incredulous look.

"...Did Xuan Zhen just give Crimson Rain a compliment?"

Feng Xin gives him the look of a man who has, to put it simply, given up.

"...If I told you everything Xuan Zhen and his highness have said today, you really wouldn't believe me, general."

They step into another array, a silver butterfly fluttering ahead of them, guiding them into the darkness—and when they step back out again, they're on an abandoned country road.

Outside Mount Tonglu, at last.

For the first time in what feels like ages, they see the sun.

"...You can ascend with the others from here," Mu Qing mutters, stepping away from the group. "I'll be right behind you."

He takes one step away, then pauses in shock, looking around, realizing where they are.

"What?" Feng Xin frowns, setting Pei Ming down.

"We told Xie Lian that we would report this to the Heavens. Whatever is happening with Bai Wuxiang—you're the best healer we have."

Not to mention the best swordsman, after Pei Ming and Xie Lian.

"You'll be needed—"

That's when he looks up, coming to a halt beside Mu Qing.

"...Why...would Hua Cheng and Blackwater design an escape route from the Kiln that leads here?" Feng Xin mutters, his hands balling into fists.

"..." Pei Ming glances around at the ruins surrounding them, raising an eyebrow. "You know this place?"

"...We grew up here."

Standing before them, trees a delicate sea of crimson in the autumn twilight, wind gently rustling through the leaves...

Is Mount Taicang.

The ruins of the capital lay to the North. Mu Qing's village to the South.

And at its peak...

The Temple of the Crown Prince.

And if that's the case...

Mu Qing knows exactly where he needs to go.

"...It doesn't matter why he chose this place, you have to take the others," he mutters. "I'm going to the lake. I'll follow in a minute."

"...The Lake?" Feng Xin frowns, taken by surprise. "Why go there?"

"I have something I need to take care of before I ascend to the heavens, alright?" The Martial God grumbles. "It won't take me long."

But he...

He can't look Feng Xin in the eye now, and not notice—

He seems genuinely *terrified* that Mu Qing won't come back.

But...why?

Before either of them can say another word—a rumbling shakes the ground around them.

So violently, even Mu Qing nearly topples over, stumbling straight into Feng Xin's chest--too distracted by the commotion to be mortified, whipping his head around to look for the source.

It's impossible to see, but--

A roar rips through the air. So loud, so powerful, Mu Qing feels his ears pop, hands clutching either side of his head as he drops to his knees, Feng Xin and the others doing the same.

"WHAT THE HELL IS THAT?!"

Feng Xin throws an arm out, bracing himself and Mu Qing as a heatwave blasts past them.

"...DID TONGLU ERUPT?!"

"NO!" Pei Ming shouts over them both, rubbing at his ears—aggressively ringing now, buzzing until his teeth almost want to chatter. "THAT'S NO VOLCANO!"

"THEN WHAT THE HELL IS IT?!"

Pei Ming grimaces, using a hand to shield his eyes as he glances back toward the array they just passed through.

Still open—

Firelight glimmering on the other side.

He's only heard that sound a few times in the last millennia.

It's *rare* .

Behind them, Yushi Huang tosses her rain master hat into the air, summoning clouds to cool things down for the surrounding area—and he swallows hard, knowing whatever this is...

It can't mean anything good for the friends they left behind.

"...It's a dragon."

Keeeeen...

Xie Lian rolls onto his back, coughing.

Keeeeeen...

Ears ringing—either from the explosion of the Kiln closing above him, or the impact of landing on the floor.

Shockingly smooth beneath him—almost like marble.

Keeeeeen...

"...SAN LANG!" He sits up immediately, head spinning violently—but he ignores it, staggering to his feet.

Falling over, knees bruising themselves against the unforgiving surface of the floor—but he gets up again, desperate.

"SAN LANG!"

He feels something odd, then.

Something brushing against his cheek. A ghost of a touch—barely even a whisper.

But when Xie Lian reaches up to touch his face, there...

There's nothing there.

He jerks back, blinking rapidly as he swallows down a lump of fear in his throat.

"...WHO IS IT?!"

A voice finally answers him—calm, quiet—

And yet it managed to fill the entire dark, oppressive void that Xie Lian feels around him.

Pressing down like some sort of nightmare—making it almost impossible for the prince to utter a single sound.

“You know who I am.”

He’s almost…gleeful.

Over the fact that Xie Lian knows that voice from the nightmares that he can never remember.

That his is the voice that the prince can never *forget* .

Xie Lian scrambles backwards, tripping over his own feet—

Petrified.

“SAN LANG!”

“There’s no need to shout.”

Bai Wuxiang’s voice is as calm as ever as he walks through the kiln, gripping a staff in his hand. “It’s just you and me here. No one else will come—the Kiln is sealed.”

Each step he takes echoes, telling Xie Lian as he gets closer.

Part of him wants to be relieved—because if Hua Cheng isn’t here, then—

Then he’s safe.

But…

Xie Lian doesn’t know that. *Can’t* know that, when he disappeared the way he did.

Xie Lian's grip on Fangxin tightens as he lifts the sword up, pointing it directly at his chest.

"Where is he?" The god snarls, his voice unafraid—not for himself.

He's never fearless when it comes to himself. But for Hua Cheng…

"Where is he right now?"

"He's gone," the calamity replies simply.

And, despite trying to hide his reaction…

Xie Lian's face falls.

"…What's that supposed to mean?!"

"He doesn't believe in you anymore. Dead. He left. What do you think?"

Each word rings with this harsh tone of finality. Like it actually *is* the truth. The only thing that could be true.

But…

Xie Lian's hands curl into fists.

Liar.

This man is a liar.

He has always been a liar.

He will always *be* a liar.

And he can't change the things that Xie Lian KNOWS are true.

"…STOP YOUR NONSENSE!" He shouts, lunging, thrusting the sword towards Bai Wuxiang's chest.

"SAN LANG WOULD NEVER LEAVE ME!"

Bai Wuxiang laughs, parrying the blow with ease. "Alright, alright—I've sent him outside the Kiln. But even if he does arrive—it'll be too late."

Xie Lian’s heart pounds with every word he speaks, struggling to understand. But…

Bai Wuxiang’s tone…

“It’s better that he doesn’t see this,” the white clothed calamity continues, stalking towards him.

“Even if he doesn’t realize it now—he won’t want to see the state of you.”

Even as he whispers Xie Lian’s worst fears into the darkness, it sounds like…

…Like Bai Wuxiang thinks he’s being merciful.

“Who knows if he’ll still want to be with you.”

And on some level, some foundational part of his mind—

Xie Lian knows that he will.

Knows that no matter what he does, or how many times he fails—

San Lang will love him the same.

But knowing that you will be loved and knowing that you *deserve* to be loved are two very different things.

And Xie Lian…

He knows he’s done nothing to deserve being loved so fiercely. That he could never, in a thousand lifetimes, deserve what Hua Cheng has done for him.

But that's always been the point of Bai Wuxiang, hasn't it?

Rendering him into something completely unlovable.

Xie Lian trembles, fear and rage twisting together, forming a vicious knot in his chest. Pulsing with one thought.

No.

No.

You won't take him from me again.

“...SHUT THE FUCK UP!”

The words tear from his throat in a visceral scream.

The god flies towards Bai Wuxiang, attacking him in a fury. “WHAT DO YOU WANT?! WHY DO YOU KEEP CLINGING TO ME?!”

Bai Wuxiang dodges every single attack—and it only seems to infuriate the prince even more.

“WHY HAVEN’T YOU DIED?! WHY DID YOU COME HERE?!”

What does he have to gain from coming back?

Xianle is gone. The Heavens are in disarray Xie Lian has been a disgrace for eight hundred years.

What more could Bai Wuxiang possibly do?

What else could he possibly take from him?

Ghosts have drive. They remain in this world for a reason.

Why, in thousands of years, has Bai Wuxiang stubbornly refused to fade away?

“Because you’re here.”

Xie Lian freezes, fangxin raised—his eyes wide as his mind struggles to comprehend those words, scrambling around the edges of their meaning.

“...What do you mean?”

No, he...

He couldn't mean...

“Because you’ve come,” Bai Wuxiang replies. “So, I’ve come too.”

He watches Xie Lian's face with a beastly sort of hunger, waiting for the emotions he knows are there to rise to the surface.

Horror. Fear. Disgust.

Helplessness.

That's what Xie Lian has always done before.

And yet.

The prince takes a step back, then...turns away from him.

Fangxin hanging at his side.

His empty hand trembling—until he curls it into a fist.

"...That's why you hated him so much, isn't it?"

His voice trembles, and underneath Bai Wuxiang's mask, a slow smile begins to form.

"Hated who, my prince?"

Xie Lian twists his head, looking back at him over his shoulder—cursed shackles gleaming under the Kiln's light.

And even as blood drips from his lips, he snarls that name—

Here, where all of Bai Wuxiang's curses are at their weakest.

"Hong'er."

Bai Wuxiang's mask is unmoving, its expression forever frozen in place.

But his shoulders stiffen.

"...It makes you sick, doesn't it?" Xie Lian's nails bite into his palm until it bleeds.

"That no matter what you do, I will always choose him over you."

They've played this game of back and forth, cat and mouse, for far too long now.

But Xie Lian isn't a teenager anymore.

Terrified of suffering, loss, and defeat—because he hadn't experienced any of those things before.

The answer to Bai Wuxiang...has always been simple.

People will attack others in the ways they believe will hurt the most.

Because it's what *they* are the most afraid of.

Xie Lian doesn't need his spiritual power to hurt him.

He doesn't need his *sight* to hurt him.

When he speaks again—his voice is cold.

"...Tell me, your highness," his fingers uncurl from their fist, hanging loosely at his side.

"Has anyone ever chosen you?"

Xie Lian has fought this man with all of his might. Spent years twisting in his grasp.

And now...

Bai Wuxiang is the one who flinches.

Fingers squeezing his staff until it splinters, taking a step back.

"...Do not call me by that title, Xie Lian," he hisses, like a snake rattling its tail. "Or we might stop being friends."

"Have you ever had a friend, your highness?" Xie Lian turns around, tilting his head to the side. "Or do they just fall in love with the masks you wear?"

"I am losing my patience," Bai Wuxiang warns, but—

His tone is lilting.

Uncertain.

"That's why you wear them, isn't it, your highness?"

“ENOUGH!”

His scream is so fierce, Xie Lian is blown off of his feet—slamming into the wall of the Kiln.

The wind is knocked out of him, feeling something inside his torso crunch as he slides to the floor.

“YOU WEAR AS MANY MASKS AS I DO, YOU INSOLENT CHILD!”

Creeeak…

Xie Lian feels a hand in his hair, yanking his head up, dragging him across the floor.

“SEE?!”

Creeeeeaaak…

“SEE WHAT YOU DID?!”

Xie Lian offers a wry, bloodstained smile.

“I don’t see anything, your highness.”

CRACK!

The slap sends blood splattering across the floor.

Bai Wuxiang seized his wrist, wrenching it forward as he forces Xie Lian to press his hand against the face of the man hanging in front of them.

Heavily bandaged—but Xie Lian knows exactly who it is.

Lang Ying.

“What did you do to him?!”

Cold fingers caress his bruised cheek.

“Don’t be sad, my prince,” he croons, taking satisfaction in the horror in Xie Lian’s eyes. “You never knew him.”

“…Wh…what are you talking about?!”

“It was me,” fingers cup under his jaw, tilting his chin up, sneering. “I never left you.”

Xie Lian’s stomach twists with nausea, long healed wounds burning like molten scars against his heart.

“I will never leave you, Xie Lian.”

“You stole that child’s body?!”

“No, no…” The calamity croons. “He gave it willingly.”

“You’re LYING! Why would he do that?!”

“You know why, your highness.” His palm presses against Xie Lian’s chest.

“In your heart, you’ve always known exactly who the boy was.”

No…

“That was why you fainted when you first touched his face, isn’t it?”

No…

“Why you were so desperate to look after him…”

Xie Lian turns his face away, fighting back the urge to gag when cold breath hits the side of his neck.

“I didn’t steal the child’s body. He gave it to me.”

“You MANIPULATED—!”

“So I could pursue the criminal who destroyed his future.”

Lang Ying was, as Jun Wu is implying—the first Crown Prince of Yong’an.

Infected when Xie Lian laid siege to the palace, so many years ago.

Likely cast out and ostracized until his death, so he couldn’t spread the plague to anyone else.

Suffering for centuries.

Because of what Xie Lian…

The prince presses his lips together firmly, his heart pounding against his rib cage.

Knowing what he has to do.

But it’s like he already told Hua Cheng before, he…

Xie Lian is *scared* .

But…Bai Wuxiang was right about one thing.

He raises one trembling hand, pressing it against the side of a cold, ceramic mask.

Biting down the nausea in his throat.

Remembering what Hua Cheng said to him.

'You're stronger than he is.'

Maybe not physically, but…

Xie Lian's lips curl into a knowing smile.

"You were so desperate to stand beside me?"

Bai Wuxiang's grip on his hair tightens.

When the prince speaks, he carefully enunciates every single syllable, each word leveled at his captor like a knife.

"The ugly little toad…wanted a taste of something he couldn't have?"

Using the words Bai Wuxiang weaponized against Hua Cheng feels vile on his tongue, but…

From the snarl Xie Lian hears in his ear—

It works.

"I can have ANYTHING I desire, you have run to my arms more times than you can count. OR HAVE YOU ALREADY FORGOTTEN?!"

Blood drips down Xie Lian's chin as he laughs, shaking his head.

"You mean when you wore Feng Xin's face?"

Bai Wuxiang freezes, his hand holding Xie Lian's wrist in a vice grip.

"Or when you burned everything else in my world that wasn't you?"

"…You made your own choices, Xie Lian. I never forced you."

Oh, that makes Xie Lian *laugh* .

His head snapping back, chest heaving with humorless relief.

"You…you really don't have that many tricks, do you?" He sneers, not flinching when the calamity yanks at his hair.

"You lock every single door except for one, then blame a man for the path he takes out of a burning house." He sighs, breathing hard from so much laughter.

“No one ever chooses the path to you.”

CRACK!

His head whips to the side with another slap as he flies to the ground.

He rolls from the force of it, slamming into the Kiln wall again, this time with so much force, the cavern trembles.

Bai Wuxiang paces like a wounded beast, breathing hard, watching the way Xie Lian’s body had begun to shake with vicious satisfaction.

Until he realizes…

Xie Lian is laughing.

Pushing himself up on his elbows.

“You could wait another eight hundred years…another thousand years…” he smiles, breathing shakily. “And I’ll always choose…H… Hong’er over you.”

He spits blood at Bai Wuxiang’s feet.

The Calamity stares down at him, his gaze cold from frustration.

“…You would really put yourself through so much pain, just to call that worm’s name?”

Xie Lian smiles up at him—

And his words ring with sincerity.

“I’ll call his name a thousand times…before I ever call for you.”

Bai Wuxiang’s hands begin to tremble—and Xie Lian’s last words find that final straw in his resolve—

And they snap it in two.

“…Besides, it isn’t even your name, is it?” Xie Lian whispers. “Your highness.”

Bai Wuxiang hangs his head, staring down at him.

Shoulders rising and falling faster and faster, taking angry, snarling breaths.

"…ENOUGH!"

Xie Lian is thrown down again—this time, into the center of the Kiln. Landing on his back, gasping for breath.

"I've been too gentle with you…" The calamity snarls, and before Xie Lian can sit up—

Thud!

He can't.

There's a hot, burning pain in his gut.

Fangxin rammed through his middle, pinning him to the floor of the Kiln.

The prince does not cry out.

"You have forgotten to FEAR ME!"

Oh, but he hasn't.

Xie Lian raises his hands to struggle, when he feels a mask being lowered over his face—his heart pounding.

Only for both his palm to be run through with a dagger, pinned to the floor above his head.

Xie Lian is *terrified* .

Trapped, unable to move.

Like a butterfly, pinned beneath a layer of glass.

"What was that you said before…" Bai Wuxiang recalls raggedly, standing over him. "That I would never kill you?"

Xie Lian tugs at his hand weakly, his chest heaving.

"What makes you so certain?"

Jun Wu extends his fingertips, feeling the Kiln groan and resist his commands—

And Xie Lian stares ahead blindly, managing a small, trembling smile as he sees a flicker in the darkness.

A small flutter of silver light.

A wraith butterfly.

“It doesn’t matter…” He rasps.

Lips trembling, stained with blood.

It doesn’t matter what Bai Wuxiang does to him.

“I’ll…” His eyes flutter, that image blurring over his head, looking almost like—

“I’ll…always come back.”

…Like a ghost fire.

Because Xie Lian still has someone precious in this world.

“…I have every intention for you to do so,” Bai Wuxiang responds coldly, glaring at the walls of the Kiln around them, his face bare before the light.

Staring down at his mask upon the prince’s face.

“There were always meant to be four ghost kings, Xie Lian.”

Four ghost kings, for four great tales.

His wife only ever forged three.

“…You’ll have to forgive me, I’m a novice compared to my wife, but…” He smiles.

“Unlike you, I learn quickly.”

His fist grasps at thin air—then catches hold.

“OPEN!”

And after resisting for as long as it can…

With a rumbling groan—the forge of the Kiln groans to life.

And, seemingly from thin air, Bai Wuxiang pulls a weapon of dark steel, golden tunes engraved across the handle.

A blacksmith’s hammer.

Finally, prepared to remake Xie Lian in his own image.

Whether the prince goes willingly, or not.

Xie Lian receives no warning, no indication that it's coming, before—

CLANG!

The hammer is slammed directly into his chest.

Into Xie Lian's *heart* .

"Oh…"

He smiles, bringing the hammer back again, swinging it down for another blow.

"What a beautiful monstrosity you will be…"

CLANG!

Xie Lian's limbs jerk, blood gurgling past his lips.

"The things that we will do…"

CLANG!

This time, the hammer doesn't strike flesh.

It strikes something hard, and unforgiving.

Diamond.

Xie Lian's eyes suddenly snap open, his shackles burning impossibly bright, because—

Hong'er.

The hammer whistles through the air, ready to make another blow—

And a hand catches it.

Xie Lian's.

He wrenches his hand free of the dagger—not caring if he leaves a hole in his palm in the process.

Sits up, not caring if that means running himself through even further with Fangxin, blood pouring down all around him.

“NO!”

Hands wrap around Bai Wuxiang’s throat.

Crushing it.

“YOU DON’T GET TO TOUCH HIM!”

He slams down to the ground beside Xie Lian, feeling the dagger that once pierced Xie Lian’s wrist plunge into his side.

“YOU DON’T *EVER* GET TO TOUCH HIM AGAIN!”

Xie Lian’s fist comes down over and over again, not thinking, not feeling anything beyond blind rage and fear.

“YOU CAN’T TOUCH HIM!”

Xie Lian won’t let him.

He won’t.

He’ll kill him.

He’ll—

Then, there’s no more pain.

No more Bai Wuxiang.

No more Kiln.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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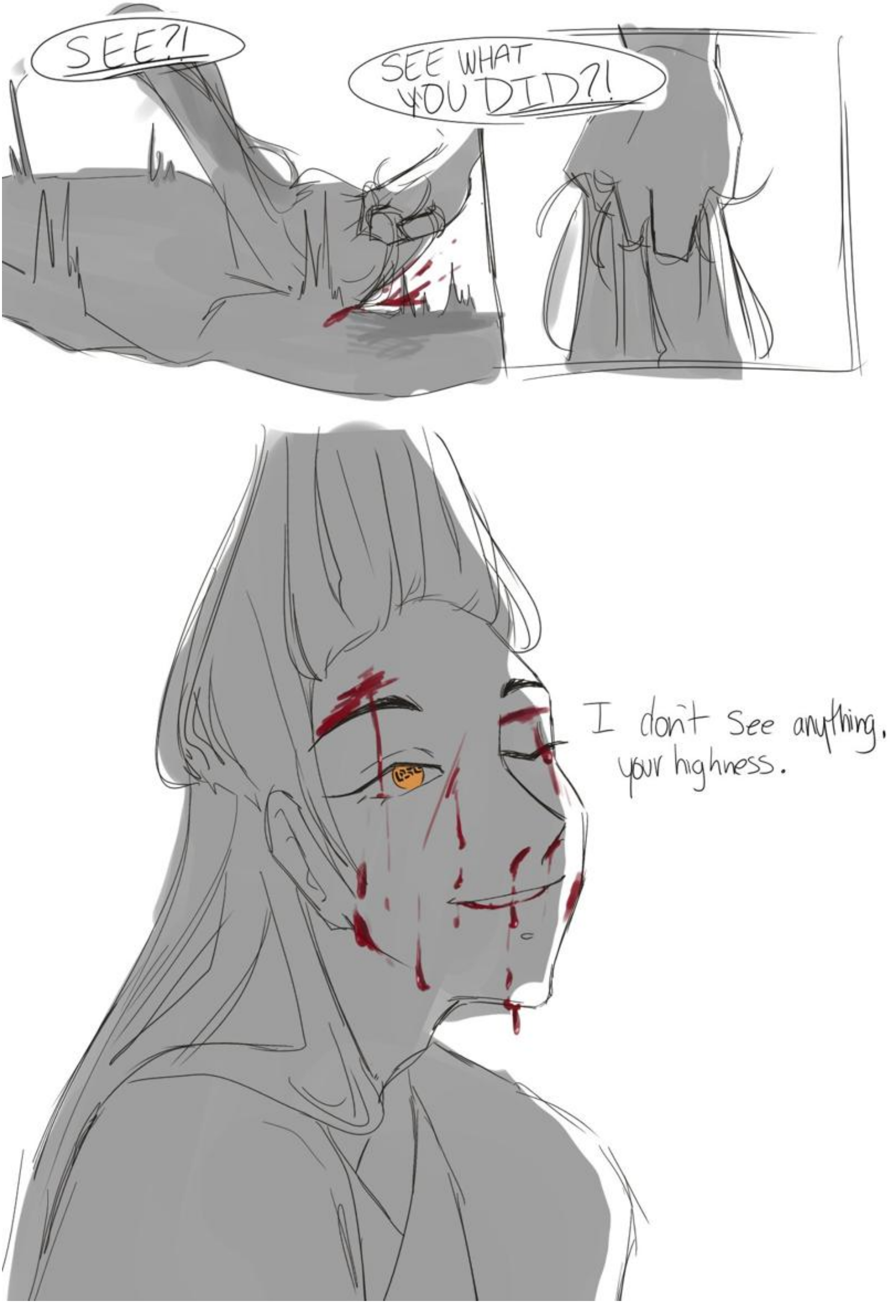
TW // VIOLENCE / BLOOD


SEE?!
SEE WHAT YOU DID?!
I don't see anything, your highness.

CREDIT: MUSINGLOTUS

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Cass for the beautiful artwork!

xoxo, Evie

From the Cuckoo's Nest

Chapter Summary

> Yes, Guoshi…” the boy mumbles, cradling the bundle of blankets carefully.
>
> He can’t be more than eleven years old, with long, dark hair—crystal blue eyes that jog Xie Lian’s memory as he walks beside them, leaning closer.
>
> “…Mei Nianqing?” He whispers, shocked.

Chapter Notes

> CONTENT WARNING: THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS DEPICTIONS OF SEVERE CHILD ABUSE, AND REFERENCES TO MISCARRIAGES.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THUD!

Xie Lian lands on the floor with a gasp, scrambling to sit up, fumbling at the front of his robes, reaching inside desperately.

Finding the ring hanging safely from its chain—intact.

Safe.

The prince chokes out a sob, curling in on himself, trembling.

“It’s okay,” he croaks, stroking his fingers over the ring. “I’m okay…we’re…we’re okay…we’re…”

Then he freezes.

Laying sideways on the ground, staring at…

A mosaic tile floor.

And…sunlight.

He…can see.

The prince sits up sharply, pressing both hands to his face.

The wounds from fighting Bai Wuxiang are gone, so…

Is this a dream? Or…

Xie Lian forces his eyes to focus, staring at the mosaic on the floor around him—

Formed in the shape of Mount Tonglu.

Remembering what Hua Cheng told him before.

That, if you fight someone inside the Kiln…

You share their memories.

That…

That was why he provoked Bai Wuxiang.

Terrifying as it was.

And it worked.

"Your majesty…" Xie Lian twists around at the sound of a voice.

Finding a man sitting upon a golden throne.

Wearing robes of black, gold, and red—the royal colors of Wuyong.

Middle aged—and stern faced.

"What is it?"

"…Bai Wuxiang has come to seek an audience," one of the royal attendants explains, bowing low. "It would seem that it is finished."

King Jun Liang instantly sits up straighter, waving his hand in agreement. "Send him in—quickly."

The doors to the throne room open with a groan, and when they do…

A white robed cultivator steps forth.

Wearing a mask—but…not what Xie Lian was expecting.

Not half smiling, or half crying.

It—

It has no face at all.

Just eyes, and no other embellishments to speak of.

“Your highness,” the cultivator—Bai…Wuxiang?—greets him calmly, bowing deeply from the waist.

The King’s reception is warm.

“Guoshi—what news do you have?”

…Guoshi?

“…The birth was a success, your majesty,” Bai Wuxiang lifts his head, dark hair slipping over his shoulders. “Just as I promised.”

“And the Queen?”

“Healthy,” the Guoshi assures him. “But…as we discussed, the circumstances…”

“We’ll discuss them later!” Jun Liang snaps, more than aware of his Guoshi’s constant warnings. “Do I have an heir, or not?!”

“…Yes,” Bai Wuxiang agrees softly. “You do.”

Xie Lian watches the Guoshi—who seems so alien to him, yet bears a familiar name—delivers news that any other father would be delighted to hear.

“Twin sons.”

But the King of Wuyong’s face immediately contorts with…

Horror.

And…

Grief.

Xie Lian reaches forward, baffled, but—

The memory quickly melts away and changes.

He isn’t in a palace anymore—finding earth under his bare feet.

He wouldn’t recognize the place by sight, but…

The slope is familiar.

And Mount Tonglu…

Looks so peaceful.

Soft sunlight filtering down from ancient oak trees, and the breeze…it smells like campfire smoke.

“Keep up, boy!” Bai Wuxiang snaps, turning his head over his shoulder to glare at his student as they climb. “And don’t drop him!”

The King walks beside him—but won’t look back over his shoulder.

Can’t bear to look at Bai Wuxiang’s student, or the babe swaddled in his arms.

“Yes, Guoshi…” the boy mumbles, cradling the bundle of blankets carefully.

He can’t be more than eleven years old, with long, dark hair—crystal blue eyes that jog Xie Lian’s memory as he walks beside them, leaning closer.

“…Mei Nianqing?” He whispers, shocked.

His Guoshi might have been eternally young, in the body of a man in his twenties, but…

Seeing him as a child, and without his trademark white hair…

Is an odd experience, to say the least.

Finally, they reach their destination—

The cliff face.

“Listen well, boy.” Bai Wuxiang glances back at Mei Nianqing, gesturing for him to come closer.

“This will be your responsibility when I am gone, and you succeed me.”

The boy nods seriously, noticing that the baby in his arms has begun to whine.

He bounces it gently, trying to soothe it, and…

Bai Wuxiang barely spares the child a glance.

“Don’t bother with it.”

He points to the bottom of the cliff—where a black stone altar awaits, leading to a temple of matching, polished black jade.

“Do you know this place?”

“…No,” Mei Nianqing admits, taking a nervous step back. “But it feels…it feels wrong, Guoshi.”

Even back then—this place had a tinge of evil to it.

“It is,” Bai Wuxiang agrees, turning to look at King Jun Liang, who won’t look at either of them.

Tenderly cradling his other son in his arms.

“Are you going to explain it to the boy, or should I?”

“…I’m not personally responsible for it,” Jun Liang points out, his eyes narrowed with annoyance, but…

It must be explained, one way or another.

“…For as long as humans have lived in this land, we have lived under the threat of Mount Tonglu.”

Mei Nianqing glances up at the mountain overhead—struggling to believe that.

People have always been raised to stay away from the mountain—knowing it as a sacred place, but…

It hasn’t actually erupted in centuries.

Many actually believe the volcano has gone extinct.

“In ancient times, people avoided its vicinity…but the land was fertile. So, people came—they settled. And over and over, a calamity would strike.” Jun Liang recalls, telling the same story his own father told him, when he was young.

“Over time…our people found a solution to that problem.”

Mei Nianqing looks over the edge, holding the baby in his arms closer, nervous.

“…A solution?”

“Souls.” Bai Wuxiang explains flatly, his voice distinctly disapproving. “Human souls.”

That's when Mei Nianqing realizes, his stomach dropping—

The altar at the bottom of the cliff isn't black at all—no.

It's stained over countless years with long dried blood—made through the sacrifices of an unknowable number of lives.

The horror on his face must be visible—enough so for Jun Liang to roll his eyes, shaking his head.

"It was never our own people. We used prisoners of war—criminals, people who didn't have a right to be here..."

"Didn't...have a right to be here?" Mei Nianqing frowns.

Bai Wuxiang crosses his arms, shaking his head.

"The Kingdom of Wuyong is forged from seven fortress cities. Expanding land—presumably—to create a barrier in case the volcano *did* erupt again. The people already living in those cities became..."

Unlawful residents.

People who had their homes taken from them by force—and those who were unlucky enough to survive the war, well...

Most of them met their end here, thrown down against the rocks.

"That's..." Mei Nianqing swallows hard, taking a step back.

"Barbaric," Bai Wuxiang agrees. "And while the rulers of Wuyong believed they were stopping an eruption...they only delayed it."

Bai Wuxiang turns his head, looking up towards the mountain's peak, shrouded in snow.

"By stopping several smaller eruptions...they guaranteed a global event would take place."

An eruption so large—so powerful, that not a speck of the kingdom of

Wuyong would be left behind.

One that would block out the sun across the continent, killing harvests, spreading mass famine like a plague.

All because of the atrocities of one kingdom.

One *family* , really.

"We stopped generations ago," Jun Liang grouses—as though that somehow erases thousands of years of unchecked cruelty. "But...it came with a price."

And Mei Nianqing can only guess...that price has something to do with the baby in his arms--now sleeping peacefully.

"Infertility." Bai Wuxiang muses shortly, crossing his arms. "Before—like any other royal family, the Royal House of Wuyong had countless princes and princesses. But, after the human sacrifices stopped...with each generation, fewer and fewer children were born."

Until, eventually—the royal line was lucky to have one child survive to adulthood at all, barely managing to continue on.

"We prayed to the Heavenly Emperor, Zhao Kong, for Guidance," The King of Wuyong mutters, turning away from the cliff, his other son cooing up at him.

"And that was when he sent us Bai Wuxiang from his Grand Temple in the Central Plains."

A cultivator who had achieved immortality, but not ascended as a god—taking place as the Imperial Preceptor of Wuyong.

"What I found, all those years ago...was a curse."

Jun Liang's expression twists with discomfort as Bai Wuxiang explains—but the Guoshi seems calm.

Explaining as easily as he would if he were telling Mei Nianqing about the weather. Military history. Any of their other lessons.

"The Mountain was given a steady diet of souls over the course of millennia—it will take what it is owed, even if on a smaller scale. And in this case...it was taking the souls of the children of the Royal House of Wuyong."

Countless stillbirths. Miscarriages. Children who never lived to take their first breaths.

Soaking the Royal Family in generations of grief and sorrow.

Now, Bai Wuxiang finally turns his head to look at the bundle in Mei Nianqing's arms.

"But never the first born."

In general—once a child is born alive and healthy—it remains untouched by the curse.

But every child thereafter is taken.

In the case of twins, however...

It poses a difficult question, followed by an even more difficult decision.

Who lives, and who dies.

"Are we..." Mei Nianqing glances back over the edge again, his heart beating faster and faster as time goes on. "Guoshi, we're not...we're not going to...?"

"Not yet," his teacher muses. "I've come here to pray to the Heavenly Emperor for guidance."

He takes one child from Jun Liang—who seems incredibly reluctant to let him go, and the other from Mei Nianqing, setting them both on the ground, several feet back from the cliff's edge.

"We wouldn't want a tragedy to take place, and kill the wrong child by mistake."

Xie Lian pauses, watching the agony on the King of Wuyong's face, and Mei Nianqing's obvious fear and discomfort with the situation.

Wouldn't killing any child, regardless of the circumstances, be a tragedy?

The Guoshi of Wuyong kneels before both children, his eyes shut in meditative prayer for several long, painful minutes.

And when he opens them again, even if Xie Lian can't see his expression beneath the mask...

There's no remorse in those eyes.

No sympathy.

No sadness.

"...The Heavens have been generous to you, your highness," Bai Wuxiang murmurs, staring down at both children. "You will not be forced to lose a son today. And, in doing so, you have been given an opportunity to protect Wuyong for future generations."

Jun Liang nearly collapses with relief, clutching a hand against his chest, exhaling a ragged breath as he looks upon his children.

"I...We have?"

"Yes," Bai Wuxiang muses, pointing to the child the King was holding before. "This is your eldest son. Have you chosen a name?"

The King of Wuyong's reply knocks the wind out of Xie Lian's chest—hoping against all reason that it must be some sort of coincidence. That there's some sort of explanation that won't shatter everything he's ever known, but—

"...Jun Wu."

But...this is too far back to be the Jun Wu *he* knows. He won't even be born for another five hundred years...

Right?

"If you and your family do exactly as I say, he will be the greatest among your lineage," Bai Wuxiang muses, watching the children.

"He will lead Wuyong to greatness, and the people will call him the 'Saint Born Under a Cursed Star.' But, if you fail...He will be the last of your bloodline, and Wuyong will be destroyed."

The King listens closely, growing paler by the moment.

"What...what must we do?"

"Your eldest son must be given the best in this life," Bai Wuxiang explains calmly, watching the infant on the right—

'Jun Wu.'

—wide, gray eyes staring up at him innocently, a shock of dark hair framing his face.

"He must never know pain or suffering."

Even raising a voice to the child would be too much. Only raising him with kind words and gentle encouragement—shielding him from the harshness of the world.

"And your youngest son...must never know a moment of joy." Bai Wuxiang levels the King with a stare.

"It will be difficult for you—but no matter how much temptation you might feel, he must never be shown an ounce of human kindness."

"I..." Jun Liang looks down at the child on the left, visually identical in every way. "How...how are we supposed to do that?"

Who can raise a child that way?

Who could bear it?

And how would it look if they treated a *Prince of Wuyong* in such fashion?

"Think of it like this, your majesty..." Bai Wuxiang lifts Jun Wu from the ground, placing him in his father's arms. " *This* is your son."

He tilts his chin down, staring at the child left on the ground.

"And that...don't even think of it as a human being. It's a parasite. One who will kill your child if you allow it into your heart. Understand?"

"I..." Jun Liang swallows hard, unsure.

“…Why would the Heavens ask this of us? What would be gained from it?”

“You will create one soul unburdened by any hardship or resentment,” Bai Wuxiang explains. “And the other—you will turn his soul black with hatred. Then, when he comes of age…”

He looks down at the altar below.

“You’ll cast him down from here, giving Mount Tonglu enough resentment to carry on for generations. What is that, if not for the Heaven’s generosity?” Bai Wuxiang points out quietly. “You need not even raise him as a prince.”

“…We don’t?”

“No,” the Guoshi reassures him, giving one disgusted wave of his hand in Mei Nianqing’s direction, gesturing for him to pick the second child up. “One of your concubines had a stillbirth recently, isn’t that correct?”

“…Yes,” Jun Liang agrees slowly. “But…how does that help?”

That would still make him a prince of Wuyong…and if he was placed with a concubine, she would be certain to treat him with some amount of affection, after having lost a child herself…

“We’ll frame her for an affair and send her away. You kept her bastard out of mercy.”

“…And what will we call the boy?” The king mutters, and Xie Lian—

He can already see the King of Wuyong averting his eyes from the child.

Trying to think of an animal—not his son.

“The name she had already selected if her child had lived, of course—Deng Shihong.”

Xie Lian watches then, as the two children are carried from the mountain—

One to the Royal nursery, surrounded by toys, servants, and family—doted upon by his mother.

And the other…

To Bai Wuxiang’s offices, high in the palace’s aviary.

Alone.

Ignored.

“…But how…” Xie Lian stumbles forward, and with every step he takes, he tumbles through memories.

Flashing forward in months, years.

Watching as a baby is never held. Barely fed.

Learns words by parroting voices—

But no one speaks to him.

Only the birds.

“…They have the same face,” Xie Lian whispers to himself, still protectively clutching the ring around his neck. “How could they have—?”

By the time Deng Shihong is old enough to walk, the answer becomes horrifically, nauseatingly clear.

“NO!” Deng Shihong screams, writing as the guards hold his arms behind his back—so small, unable to do more than cry as the mask is forced over his face, locked into place.

Terrified.

Unable to understand.

“NO!”

CRACK!

“QUIET, MUTT!”

He’s never called by his name.

Only ever insults.

Worm. Toad. Mutt.

And certain things…

“Guoshi!“ The little boy sobs, stumbling, tearing at the mask on his face. “GUOSHI!”

…Don’t make sense.

Xie Lian watches as Deng Shihong stumbles into Bai Wuxiang’s office, crying.

And the same imperial preceptor who implored the king not to show the child *any* human kindness…

Accepts him with open arms.

“I-I don’t wanna wear it!” The child sobs, clinging to Bai Wuxiang’s leg as the Guoshi strokes his back, shushing him. “W-why can’t I take it o-off?!”

“…Oh little one,” Bai Wuxiang sighs, patting the boy’s hair. “I know, I know you don’t…but you want to go outside, don’t you?”

“…Y…Yes…” Deng Shihong sniffles, shoulders shaking—

And even if Xie Lian can’t see the child’s tears beneath the mask, his heart aches for him.

“Then I’m afraid that this is the way it has to be,” Bai Wuxiang explains, stroking his fingers over the boy’s cheek, covered by a white ceramic mask.

Its own surface molded to look like a child in tears.

“But you can take it off when it’s just the two of us, I promise.”

It’s never Bai Wuxiang to raise a hand to him.

It’s the palace guards who do that.

Ordered to find and harass the child if he’s caught playing.

Beaten, if he’s caught laughing.

Forced to clean fireplaces and scrub floors—always covered in dirt and soot.

But the years go on—and as both Princes of Wuyong grow older…

Things begin to shift, somewhat.

Jun Wu is a beautiful child—bright and eager, following Mei Nianqing at his elbow like a little duckling.

Everything the older boy does, he wants to learn. Everywhere Mei Nianqing went, he had to follow—watching him with adoring fascination.

But there is one thing that the child *cannot* learn.

How to be denied.

“WHERE IS MEI NIANQING?!”

Shrieking fills the palace hallways.

“BRING HIM TO ME!”

CRASH!

An antique vase, priceless, shatters against a wall as the boy glares at the attendants around him.

“Your highness, he’s visiting his family in the east. He won’t be back until next week—“

“BRING HIM BACK! I WANT TO SEE HIM *NOW!”*

“Your highness, we can’t—!”

One of the attendants, a young woman, stumbles backwards when Jun Wu slaps her arm—hard—in his frustration.

“BRING HIM BACK!”

It’s not exactly abnormal for a six year old boy to throw a tantrum, but…

No one is allowed to correct him.

The boy isn’t naturally prone to cruelty, no—he’s just—

A normal child, from Xie Lian’s observation. One prone to boredom, selfishness, and fits of temper.

But normal children need boundaries. Guidance.

An understanding of consequences.

Without that, they…escalate.

“God DAMNIT!” King Jun Liang sweeps his hand across the table, sending goblets of wine spilling and shattering across the floor.

His wife doesn’t even react, staring at the wall hollowly—stroking a puppy sleeping in her lap in a slow, methodical manner.

“You promised if we did as you said, I would have an heir that would surpass ANY of our line, and he—he’s just a little BASTARD! He doesn’t LISTEN, he DESTROYS a room every time he has a fit—he’s nearly harassing your student to death—this is A MESS!”

Bai Wuxiang listens calmly.

“He needs to understand that there are consequences to his actions, your grace.”

“But…how can we do that if we can’t PUNISH him?! We can’t even SCOLD him under your instructions—!”

“Oh, but there’s a way to make him learn,” Bai Wuxiang disagrees.

“And to kill two birds with one stone.”

And…just like that, one of the murals Mei Nianqing painted for Xie Lian comes to fruition.

He watches with pained sympathy as Deng Shihong is told, for the first time in his life, that he’s going to have a playmate.

Watches with slow building horror as the boy lights up with happiness, for once not complaining or crying when the mask is strapped to his face, carried downstairs, and, for the first time…

He meets his brother.

Jun Wu, unaware, is just as happy to have a friend his own age.

They run together—play games, and…

At first, Deng Shihong’s fear of the guards, not wanting to be in trouble, is enough to moderate Jun Wu’s behavior, the other twin willing to go along.

But not forever.

Xie Lian watches as Deng Shihong shrinks away from his brother, cringing in the corner as Jun Wu shrieks.

“This stupid thing doesn’t WORK!” He snarls, lifting a mechanical toy, gifted by a senior minister, hurling it against the wall until it shatters.

“I DON’T WANT IT!”

“Jun Wu…” Bai Wuxiang looks up from his book, mournful. “If you break things, there are consequences.”

“…What?” The boy drawls, glaring at him. “What’s a smelly old man like YOU going to do?! I’m the PRINCE!”

“You are,” the Guoshi agrees. “But when you misbehave—someone always pays for it. Prince or not.”

The boy glares, not understanding—

Until one of the guards marches to the corner, dragging his new friend by the arm.

“…What are you doing?”

“I just told you, your highness.”

“W…wait…” Deng Shihong whimpers, dragging his feet. “I didn’t… Guoshi, I didn’t…”

“I know,” Bai Wuxiang agrees, waiting as the guards force him onto his hands and knees.

Xie Lian’s parents never struck him—only ever using their words to scold him when he was wrong.

Over the centuries, he’s encountered parents who would give their children a light slap on the wrist to teach them a lesson, or force them into time out—any number of options.

But when Xie Lian watches one of the guards pull out a whip—

“…Wait, I don’t—!”

CRACK!

…It’s beyond most of what Xie Lian has witnessed, even in eight centuries on this earth.

For large or small infractions—if Jun Wu misbehaves, Deng Shihong is whipped.

The number of lashes increasing, depending on severity.

And…

For a child who was never supposed to know a moment’s unhappiness, Xie Lian watches the shock and fear in Jun Wu’s eyes, each time it happens.

Watches as it rather effectively moderates the child's behavior, but…

The friendship that's created is painfully one sided—even if Jun Wu seems to be unaware of it.

Deng Shihong watching the other child with constant fear, terrified that the boy might do something that results in him being whipped at any moment.

And Jun Wu…

"Why do you always have to wear that mask?" He muses, leaping from one stone to the next in the palace gardens, kicking aside anthills in his path.

Deng Shihong stares at the dirt, watching the little creatures mill about in panic and confusion, their homes destroyed.

"…Guoshi says I can't go outside if I don't wear it," he mumbles, attempting to toe some of the Mound back into place, not looking up.

"…" Jun Wu giggles, stumbling as he leaps to the next rock. "What, are you really ugly or something?"

Deng Shihong presses a hand to his mask, confused by the very notion.

He's never seen his own reflection—so he doesn't know.

"Ugly…" he repeats slowly, thinking.

"Mmm…must be," Jun Wu turns to look at him, examining the mask closely. "But…it's kind of cool. Like guoshi's!"

Then, it occurs to him—and he lights up.

"I want one, too!"

Xie Lian's stomach sinks, watching as the instrument of Deng Shihong's torture for so many years is regarded as an interesting toy by his brother.

Completely un-self aware.

Watches, as a mirroring mask is made—this one molded into a laugh, Jun Wu parading around with him, the twins side by side.

Half…

Half laughing, half crying.

And Xie Lian watches something forming in Deng Shihong’s eyes.

Resentment.

Resentment, watching Jun Wu, who can show his face to the world, treat the mask that has been Deng Shihong’s cage like a fun toy.

Resentment, as Jun Wu snaps and lashes out as his teachers, apologizing when Deng Shihong is bleeding on the floor afterwards, saying—

‘But…at least I didn’t mess up last week, right?’

Resentment, as they turn twelve—and now, Jun Wu is old enough to hold the whip himself.

Ordered to lash Deng Shihong himself when he misbehaves.

There’s love, too.

Jun Wu is his only friend. His only companion.

But the hatred is just so much.

Xie Lian watches as it consumes the boy, bit by bit.

With each strike of the whip.

With every night he goes hungry, sleeping on the cold, hard floor of the palace aviary.

Birds screaming in his ears until he never stops hearing them.

With every offhanded remark that he’s probably *hideous* , that his mother was a traitor—

That he’s lucky to be alive, and everything that’s happening to him—

He deserves.

For years and years, he’s never told anything different.

Until the day the world showed him beauty.

Deng Shihong doesn't look up, his arms straining as he works to scrub an old stain from the grout between marble blocks on the floor.

His own blood, dried from the beating the day before.

If he doesn't finish before Jun Wu's lessons end, he'll be beaten again.

The Royal Architect passes by him, not saying a word—arms folded behind his back.

He never looks at Deng Shihong when he's here, but unlike the other ministers, he doesn't kick him as he passes by.

In Deng Shihong's experience, that makes him kind.

Thud!

"Oh!"

Finally, the young man looks up—

Only to see a teenage girl on the floor beside him, having slipped on the wet marble he was cleaning—rubbing her hip, which is surely going to bruise.

With long, raven hair, braided down her back—and simple, well made robes.

Not a noble—but not a servant.

And either way, Deng Shihong is more than aware that her falling over is something he could be whipped for—within an inch of his life.

"…I'm sorry!" He croaks, scrambling to her side, offering a hand to help her up.

Expecting to be shoved aside.

But, to his shock…

There's a hand on his own.

Soft, delicate, and warm.

The first time anyone ever touched Deng Shihong without lashing out, sneering, or laughing.

(Everyone aside from Bai Wuxiang, that is.)

And when he looks up…

Amethyst eyes stare back at him.

"…It's okay," she smiles, stealing his breath with a simple look, glancing around them. "I'm the one who wasn't watching what I was doing. Father is always fussing at me over that, I have a 'head full of butterflies,' or something…" she snorts, shaking her head.

Jun Wu would roll his eyes and say she wasn't very lady-like.

He'd see her sun kissed skin and work roughened hands and say she looked like a filthy peasant.

Deng Shihong doesn't care.

"…I like butterflies," he answers quickly—stiff with awkwardness. "They're—pretty."

He's wooden in his interactions—completely unaccustomed to speaking to…

Anyone who isn't the Crown Prince.

The young girl stares back at him, a quizzical smile in place, but…

She does something Deng Shihong has never experienced before.

"…Me too!" She laughs happily.

She's…kind.

"Is that a costume?" He's confused—until she nods towards the mask on his face.

Not jeering or vindictive—only curious.

"…No…"

"…Then what's it for?"

For some reason, Deng Shihong almost doesn't want to tell her, but…

"I'm…ugly."

It's the only reason he's ever been given—so, he wouldn't know any different.

She tilts her head to the side—reaching out to press her fingertips to the cheek of his mask.

“…I’m sure that’s not true,” she murmurs, and Deng Shihong—

He can barely breathe.

“Can I see?”

He could be beaten if they’re caught.

Or worse, they might never let her come back.

Still, he can’t bring himself to tell her no.

She’s careful, delicately lifting the ceramic shell from his face—and when she does, she pauses.

Confused.

Because the young boy before her eyes…

There’s nothing wrong with his face at all.

“…Well, I don’t know who’s been telling you that you’re ugly,” she muses, handing him the mask back. “But they’re lying.”

Deng Shihong looks down at the mask, then back up at her—doubtful.

“…” And something about that loneliness in his eyes, that utter sense of worthlessness—

The girl can’t seem to stand it—leaning forward to place a kiss against his cheek.

“I mean it—you’re handsome.”

The boy sits there, frozen, eyes wide.

“…And I would know,” she clears her throat, suddenly sheepish—not sure why she felt so forward all of the sudden. “Because I’m picky. I’ve never called a boy that before. So! It’s…it’s a big compliment, coming from me…”

Her cheeks are flushed and—

Now his are, too.

“Hudie!” Her father barks from the other room, irritated. “Are you wandering again?! I need the schematics!”

“…Right!” She scrambles around, picking the scrolls up from where she dropped them, tucking her hair behind her ears. “Coming!”

She straightens up, scrolls clutched in her arms—sparing Deng Shihong one last smile, glancing down at his mask.

“Sorry for messing up the floor—and…you really don’t need that.”

She hurries off before her father can shout for her again, and Deng Shihong…

He stares down at the mask in his hands—and he wonders.

Enough to sneak into Bai Wuxiang’s quarters when he’s out.

To slip in front of a mirror, and, with trembling fingers, to slip the mask from his face.

Only to see Jun Wu staring back at him.

At first, he twists around—expecting to see the prince standing behind him.

But…no one’s there.

Slowly, he turns back—watching the reflection do the same thing.

Reaches up to touch his cheek—watching Jun Wu’s face do the same.

And slowly…his expression darkens.

Xie Lian watches as he tells the one person he can—

The person who shares his face.

His only friend in the world.

And feels only dismay, watching the prince’s reaction.

The way his face lights up with excitement.

“…This means your mother wasn’t a traitor after all!”

As though that could bring any joy.

The concubine that supposedly gave birth to him is long gone now, banished from Wuyong when he was a baby.

“Don’t you understand?! This means we’re brothers!”

Jun Wu’s hands land on his shoulders—and he beams.

The same hands that have whipped him countless times.

And even if it was never Jun Wu’s choice—Deng Shihong cannot forget the sting.

“Do you think it would change anything, if they knew?” He asks flatly, and Jun Wu hesitates.

“…I don’t know,” He admits. “But I have an idea!”

Xie Lian hides his face in his hands in the corner, watching as…

Jun Wu sees a wonderful way to make *his* life easier.

“You can sit in on the lessons I don’t like…my mediation sessions…it’s better than the work you usually have to do, right?”

“…What?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” Jun Wu shrugs, “but when you’re the crown prince…there’s so much you’re not allowed to do! You could stand in for me, while I go do, well…whatever I want! Doesn’t that sound better than what we’ve been doing?”

Deng Shihong stares at him blankly.

“…Does that mean you’ll pretend to be me?”

“What?” Jun Wu shakes his head with a snort. “No—why would I want to do that?” He turns around, glancing at the window. “I’ll just wear a different disguise…hang out in the city, explore the woods, nap—that sort of thing.”

“If we get caught…they’ll—"

“Whip you,” Jun Wu shrugs. “But you’ve been whipped like…what, a thousand times? You don't even seem to notice it anymore. What's *maybe* getting whipped one more time…to be a prince for a day?"

His brother stares at the mirror, silent.

It takes practice.

The two of them sit in front of a mirror in Jun Wu's room each time they're alone, practicing reflecting facial expressions until they're seamless.

Deng Shihong practices the way the prince speaks, repeating him like one of the song birds in the aviary.

Xie Lian watches as Deng Shihong creates his first *true* mask with careful precision.

As Jun Wu sneaks him extra portions of food—something he never bothered to think of before, even though his brother was always underfed.

But soon, they have the same build.

And the first time they attempt to switch…

Mei Nianqing finds himself watching with shock as the crown prince sits for his history lesson, his expression perfectly attentive, carefully copying down every single word.

"Your highness…you've done excellent work today."

Deng Shihong glances up, forcing down his own dislike.

Jun Wu absolutely adores his teacher—to the point of near obsession.

And as they grow older, Deng Shihong has begun to suspect it's a very different kind of affection.

"…" He smiles, leaning his chin on his hand, eyes sparkling with adoration as he stares up at Mei Nianqing. "Does that make you happy, Laoshi?"

Jun Wu's feelings aren't returned.

All Deng Shihong has to do to distract him is mild flirtation—and Mei Nianqing shrinks away with discomfort, clearing his throat.

"I'll always be happy to see you succeed, your highness. If you always applied yourself like this…"

The prince smiles even wider, twirling his calligraphy brush between his fingertips.

"If it makes you happy, Laoshi—I'll try my hardest."

Mei Nianqing turns away—not examining his student's behavior quite so closely.

Deng Shihong learns so *much* .

Learns what people pay attention to, and what they don't.

What people want to see, and how to make them think that's there.

He learns that when he's Jun Wu, people listen to him when he speaks.

When he's Jun Wu, his father smiles at him.

When he's Jun Wu, no one hurts him.

And, while Xie Lian could have predicted the ending the moment the Crown Prince made his suggestion…

That doesn't make it any easier to watch.

To watch, as the Queen comes to his rooms one day while they're switched, smiling at him fondly.

"You've been doing so well with your lessons lately…" She muses, sitting beside him, brushing her fingers through her son's hair. "And everyone has spoken of how kind you've been to the servants…"

The prince leans into her touch, closing his eyes.

"…Is that such a surprise?"

"Oh…I don't know," the Queen sighs, smiling at him fondly. "You…in so many ways, I felt like I failed you as a mother…failed both of—"

She pauses—and the prince stares at her intently.

"…Failed both of who?"

"…" She looks away.

His mother is a weak woman.

Delicate of body and mind.

Obedient to a fault.

But there's a softness to her—an affection that he craves.

"…I misspoke," she whispers, shaking her head. "I just…I realized that you're growing up, Jun Wu."

Her arms wrap around him gently.

"And I'm proud of the man that you're becoming."

Deng Shihong leans his cheek against her shoulder.

Remembering many times, when he was a small child—running to her for help.

Grasping her hand, staring up at her in terror.

And the way that the Queen stared back with disgust.

Screaming for the guards to take the filthy son of a traitorous whore away from her.

It hurts more sometimes, realizing that the world isn't always cruel. People aren't universally unkind.

It's just cruel to *you* .

People only scorn you.

Xie Lian watches him later, in the aviary.

Sobbing.

Screaming.

Pounding his fists against the floor.

Saying those words over and over again.

It's not fair.

It’s not fair.

It’s not *fair* .

Remembering how many times the King came up here, holding him off of one of the ledges, watching as the little boy writhed and screamed, terrified of falling.

Saying that he wished he had never been born.

That he wished the boy would just *die* .

Deng Shihong has the same wish.

That he had never been born.

That he could just fade away.

Because he’ll never be loved as himself.

He’ll never know happiness as himself.

Only as *Jun Wu.*

And during those brief moments that they’re switched…

He just wishes he could *be* him.

Not pretend, but really.

And one day, he finally gets his chance.

When they’re sixteen years old—and Jun Wu lounges on the couch beside him, tossing a priceless glass figure over his head, catching it in his palm.

“I’ve been thinking—this time, when I sneak out…what if you came with me?”

Deng Shihong glances up at him, the mask weighing heavier on his face than it ever has—nearly suffocating.

“…What?”

“It’s our birthday,” The prince explains. “And everyone here is so boring…before they drag me off to that banquet—let’s do something together.”

Deng Shihong stares at him, but eventually…

He nods.

Between the two of them, it’s not like he has the power to tell Jun Wu no, anyway.

The prince has turned sneaking out of the palace into somewhat of an art form, both boys slipping out without being noticed.

And when Xie Lian sees where they’re actually going…

A sense of dread begins to fill him.

“…This is where you’ve been going all this time?” Deng Shihong asks incredulously, climbing the mountain slope beside his brother. “Isn’t it dangerous?”

“…Dangerous?” Jun Wu snickers.

“You’ve heard everyone say it already—the volcano is already extinct! Besides, I found something so cool—you’ve GOT to see!”

Deng Shihong frowns, but…he follows him.

Even when they pass a black stone altar, gleaming menacingly in the sunlight.

“…What’s that?”

“Huh?” Jun Wu glances over at it as they pass The temple, his gaze distant. “That? It doesn’t matter. That’s not what I wanted to show you.”

Deng Shihong sighs, looking away.

“If we’re gone too long, people will come looking.”

“We won’t be! Where’s your curiosity?!”

He has none—and doesn’t even particularly care about why they’re here.

He’d rather be going to the banquet that Jun Wu is scorning as ‘boring.’

But eventually…they reach an outcropping near the mountain's peak

—after climbing for what feels like hours.

“Here, through here!” Jun Wu calls over his shoulder, leading his brother into the opening of a cavern.

A massive, endless space—made from white stone. And, despite having no light source…

It shines just as brightly inside as the sunlight does in the valley below.

“…” Deng Shihong follows behind him—hesitant, but curious, rubbing his arms as he glances at the walls around them.

“What is this place?”

“…I don’t know,” Jun Wu admits, “but it feels… *powerful* , doesn’t it? I’ve been thinking about building a temple here, later.”

“A temple?” Deng Shihong reaches out, feeling the wall beneath his fingertips. “For who?”

“Me,” his twin admits offhandedly. “Y’know—when I become a god.”

Deng Shihong turns to stare at him, eyes narrowing.

“…What?”

“Oh my…”

Both teenagers turn around quickly—each growing pale at the sight of none other than the Imperial Preceptor of Wuyong, his hands folded behind his back—

Watching them both curiously.

“Deng Shihong…when did you stop wearing your mask outside?”

Neither boy answers, and Bai Wuxiang tilts his head to the side, walking around the edges of the Kiln, his fingers trailing against the wall.

"I'm surprised you didn't come to me with questions," he murmurs, sounding almost...disappointed. "You know you could ask me anything."

The boy on the left bites his lip, looking away—and underneath his mask, the Guoshi smiles.

Knowing exactly which one is which.

"But weren't you curious?" He murmurs, footsteps echoing against the cavernous walls around them. "About why your lives have gone so differently?"

The Guoshi looks from Deng Shihong—to Jun Wu.

Who, for once, can't seem to look up.

"Why don't you ask him?" Bai Wuxiang encourages Deng Shihong, staring his brother down. "He already seems to know."

Deng Shihong looks at Jun Wu, who...

Squirms.

"I...I don't..."

"'When I become a god,'" Bai Wuxiang quotes him coldly. "Wasn't that what you said before? If you know that, surely you must know the rest."

Jun Wu's hands ball into fists at his sides, his shoulders hunched.

"...What is he talking about?" Deng Shihong mutters, his voice low.

Bai Wuxiang waits, giving Jun Wu the opportunity to explain—but when he remains silent, he turns back to Deng Shihong, explaining calmly—

"You two have always had identical faces. I'm sure you've surmised that Jun Wu isn't your half brother at all."

Rather, his twin.

"...Don't you want to know why you were raised the way you were?" Bai Wuxiang repeats the question, his tone growing ever so sly. "He knows."

Deng Shihong looks at Jun Wu, who remains stiff, glaring at the guoshi.

"You see what he's doing? He's pitting us against each other!"

"Why would I need to do that?" Bai Wuxiag comes to a halt, his palm pressed flat against the side of the cavern—what Xie Lian is sure, the longer he looks, must be the Kiln. "I'm on his side."

He's always been the only person on Deng Shihong's side.

"Very well—I'll tell him."

Bai Wuxiang turns away from the wall of the Kiln, facing the two boys.

"For thousands of years, the Royal Family of Wuyong sacrificed innocent souls to this mountain to prevent an eruption. Creating a stain of guilt upon the land that will never be cleansed."

It's ironic to think that, a place as beautiful as this, is as close as one can come to pure evil on earth.

"Not in your lifetime. Not in a thousand lifetimes. Not until cultivation expands into regions that we cannot even begin to comprehend."

Until humans discover a way to manipulate resentment more deftly than they can at his point—and with the path that cultivation has taken in this world...

He doubts that will be soon enough to help anyone in Wuyong.

"Eventually, this took a toll on the royal family."

Xie Lian watches Bai Wuxiang tell the same story he did to Mei Nianqing, sixteen years before.

"Cursing them—and the mountain would take every child born to their bloodline...except for the firstborn."

His eyes settle on them. "But the two of you were both born alive."

Leaving the King of Wuyong with a horrible choice.

Choosing a son to sacrifice—or waiting for Tonglu to awaken once more.

"But the gods gave your father an opportunity..."

And now—

Bai Wuxiang's story changes.

"One I advised against. I found it far too cruel."

Xie Lian turns away from the boys, staring at this past version of Bai Wuxiang with horror and disgust, because—

Why is he *doing* this?

What does he have to gain?

"That your brother should be raised as a prince, never allowed to suffer...and you would live in utter misery."

And the words...

They ring so true, that Deng Shihong is already taking a step back, clutching his chest, heart raging against his ribs.

"All so they could bring you back here, and throw you from the cliffs of Mount Tonglu on your eighteenth birthday."

Two years from now.

Bai Wuxiang's eyes slide to the side, the only visible part of his face from underneath the mask.

"And *he* knows all about it."

Deng Shihong whips around to look at his brother, who stammers, staggering backwards.

"I-I didn't! I..."

But Jun Wu isn't like Deng Shihong.

He was never forced to learn to lie in order to survive—and he isn't particularly good at it.

He *knew*.

"You sounded so certain that you would become a god someday," Bai Wuxiang points out. "That was one of the promises the gods made your father the day you were born."

Deng Shihong's eyes bare down on the Crown Prince of Wuyong like a painful weight as he takes a step back from the two of them, shaking his head.

"You...! My father told me a year ago, but so what?! It wasn't my choice, what could I do about it?!"

Deng Shihong takes a step away from him, staring at him with growing...

Rage.

"You knew."

He says the words quietly—emotionlessly. But that's deceptive.

Anger is rising in his chest like a tide, threatening to crack any self restraint he had left.

"...I told my father I disagreed with the idea! What else could I do?" Jun Wu mutters, glaring at Bai Wuxiang. "I let you trade places with me plenty of times, didn't I? I've—I've been trying to make things easier for you!"

"Don't pretend you've done everything you could."

Bai Wuxiang begins walking again, slowly circling the teenagers, arms clasped behind his back once more.

"You can sneak your brother all the way to the peak of Mount Tonglu—but you couldn't help him run away from the palace, and escape his fate?"

"I..." Jun Wu swallows hard. "I never thought about it..."

"No," Bai Wuxiang agrees. "You were too busy planning where to build your temples once your brother is dead." He looks at Deng Shihong, shaking his head. "Do you really think he's ever thought of anyone but himself?"

...No.

No, he doesn't.

"Do you think he deserves anything that he has?"

That seems to snap Jun Wu out of his shock, glaring at the Guoshi as he steps forward, pointing a finger at him commandingly.

"That is ENOUGH! You forget your place, guoshi! My brother and I will discuss this privately." Jun Wu reaches over, snatching Deng

Shihong's hand in his own, "I order you to take us back down the mountain, now!"

Even now, in spite of everything that Bai Wuxiang just revealed--the Prince of Wuyong expects to be obeyed.

Bai Wuxiang does not respond.

Instead, his eyes remain on Deng Shihong.

"I have one question for you, child." He takes a step forward, ignoring Jun Wu's finger extended in warning.

"Do you want to survive?"

The teenager doesn't respond, staring back at him with eyes torn between fear and anger.

"...Do you want to know what it's like to live at all?"

And that's when it occurs to the boy—

That he genuinely has no *idea* what it feels like to feel alive.

To be on something more than borrowed time, wearing a pleasant mask until his brother returns to pry it away.

"I can help you," the guoshi offers, "but only if you allow me."

"...What are you rambling about?" Jun Wu hisses. "Filling his head with strange ideas. Unless you plan on helping him escape, or changing my father's mind–there's nothing else to be done!"

"Yes."

Deng Shihong’s voice is hoarse at first—but then, he’s able to speak a little more clearer, pulling his hand out of Jun Wu’s grip.

“Yes—I want your help.”

He wants to survive.

He wants to know what it’s like to *live* .

“…Then you shall have it, my prince.”

There’s a subtle shift in the air—one neither of the boys seem to feel, but Xie Lian does.

Magic.

Ancient, powerful magic.

There’s a brief flash of light, and when both boys look down…

Their robes are the same.

When Deng Shihong pushes up his sleeves…

His scars are gone.

Just as the lights fade, other voices echo against the walls of the Kiln.

“I SAW THEM COMING THIS WAY, YOUR MAJESTY!”

Jun Wu’s face immediately goes slack with relief.

“The guards!”

Whatever Bai Wuxiang was planning, he didn’t move quickly enough!

“WE’RE HERE! WE’RE—!”

The guards storm into the cavern, and when Jun Wu sees their confusion, his smile fades.

“…Guoshi?” King Jun Liang frowns, taking in the scene as he follows his guards into the cave. “What on earth is going on here?”

Bai Wuxiang turns to his King, somber.

“It would seem that Deng Shihong learned of his origins, and brought his brother here to kill him in order to take his place.”

Jun Wu’s jaw drops, turning to defend his brother, to say that he did no such thing, but…

Deng Shihong glares at him, backing away.

“You would do that to me?! After I wasted my time being NICE to you?!”

“I…” Jun Wu swallows hard, glancing at their father, then back at his brother. “I don’t…understand…”

Unfortunately for him—he's never needed to play a role, or project his own power.

It simply was.

But Deng Shihong has spent countless days perfecting his mask. Learning to be something he wasn't.

And now—how he *performs.*

He runs to Bai Wuxiang's side, holding the Guoshi's sleeve as his brother might have.

"TAKE HIM!"

"But…" The boy looks around, lips trembling. "But I'm not…HE'S NOT THE PRINCE!" He struggles as the guards seize him, "HE'S NOT! I'M J—!"

And now, as Xie Lian watches the former crown prince cough and struggle to breathe, Bai Wuxiang's tricks become clear.

The child can no longer say his own name.

The boy who was once known as Deng Shihong accepts his father's embrace as his brother is dragged away in chains.

He doesn't look back once.

And the greatest irony of all is.

The new Crown Prince of Wuyong plays his role so well that the people begin to adore him.

Before, he might have been viewed as spoiled or intolerable.

Now, he's empathetic. Charitable. The kind of man who stands up for the weak.

In so many ways—he reminds Xie Lian of his younger self.

But then—there are moments.

Flashes of something "Jun Wu" was taught before he knew his own name, before he could speak or take his first steps.

Cruelty.

Because it feels *good* , to hurt people who deserve it.

When he ‘accidentally’ tramples the guard who beat him the most with his horse—

It feels good.

One day, when he’s preparing for a banquet with the other nobles—his brother, masked, relegated to the corner, makes a dry comment—

“It looks like I never taught you how to lace my boots properly.”

“…”

The Crown prince straightens, turning to regard his brother coldly.

“You’re right,” he muses, his eyes narrowed. “You see, up until I was sixteen, I used to have my servants lace them for me. I usually stepped on their fingers while they did it. I never paid much attention to the things that were beneath me.”

He taps his foot.

“But now, I’ve outgrown such things.” He lifts a glass paperweight from his desk, examining it. “You see—I’m kinder than I used to be. I pay attention.” He glances up at his brother, the light refractions from the glass making his eyes burn dangerously.

“But I suppose I’m still not perfect.”

With a flick of his wrist, he hurls the paperweight against the wall, shattering it.

Like his brother did to countless toys when they were children.

“Oh my…” he sighs, looking at the mess. “I lost my temper.”

Slowly, he looks at his brother over his shoulder, eyes glinting with vindictive satisfaction.

“There are consequences for that, aren’t there?”

Without a word, one of the guards offers him a whip.

In the months since he took his brother’s place, the prince hasn’t lashed out at him.

Hasn't misbehaved, or had him whipped once.

"No matter how much this hurts," he muses, watching as the guards force his brother to his knees,

"Remember, it's my punishment—not yours."

That was something the old Jun Wu used to say to him.

'This hurts me more than it could ever hurt you.'

And when the boy screams louder than he ever has during previous beatings—the guards assume it's because it's been so long since he was whipped.

Not that it's the first time

When it's finished, the prince hands the whip off to the guards once again, glancing down at his brother coldly.

"You know—I think I've grown too old for this sort of thing," he muses, watching as his reflection trembles and bleeds on the floor.

"I think it's time Deng Shihong was returned to his rooms. Permanently."

He watches his brother struggle weakly as the guards begin to carry him from the room.

"You can't do this! YOU CAN'T LET THEM DO THIS TO ME!"

"But what can I do?" The prince asks with wide eyes. "I've already told our father I hate the arrangement. I don't let the guards beat you anymore. Don't you remember how it used to be? You're far better off than you were before."

And Xie Lian can't say that the prince is wrong.

Since the two switched, conditions have been far better for his brother than they were when the show was on the other foot.

And neither of them chose to be placed in this position.

He honestly can't say that either one is to blame.

And yet.

The original Jun Wu was thoughtless, selfish, and childish.

But never cruel.

The new prince is thoughtful, generous, and controlled.

When he hurts someone, it’s intentional.

And it always rings with a sense of righteous justice—

Because he was hurt first.

He locks his darkest secret in the aviary, left with only darkness and birdsong for company.

And from there—

His new life begins.

Xie Lian watches as he rises higher and higher.

Beautiful, brilliant—and so self righteous.

Watches, as he meets the girl with Amethyst eyes and a kind smile again.

This time, in a garden—surrounded by the butterflies she always adored.

Watches, as Mei Nianqing is forced to watch the girl he loves slip away.

Believing that Jun Wu cannot be denied what he wants.

But Xie Lian sees something that Mei Nianqing didn’t see. That Tonglu Hudie didn’t see.

That those who would view her memories later did not see.

The child who was given the name Deng Shihong at birth, who later took his brother's name and title as a means of survival…

He distrusted the world. Human nature. Possessed a gravely cynical view of what mortals were capable of, under the right conditions.

But his love for Tonglu Hudie was genuine.

To the point of adoration.

Or, like his brother with his own Guoshi before him—

Obsession.

The girl who showed him kindness when he was nothing.

The girl who dared look beneath his mask, and tell him that he wasn't a monster.

Determined to give her the life that she deserves.

The life a *prince* can give her.

There's just one loose end to tie up first.

On his eighteenth birthday, The Crown Prince of Wuyong comes of age in a blood soaked baptism.

Riding up the mountain on horseback, while his brother stumbles behind in chains.

Brought to the same cliff they visited on the day they were born.

Watches, as the child who was born Jun Wu is forced to his knees, his brother's foot against his back.

He no longer argues that the Prince of Wuyong can't do this.

He's painfully aware of the fact that he can.

"…No matter how high you climb," he whispers, lips dried and cracked. "No matter how many names you take, or how many masks you wear," he looks back at the prince over his shoulder. "You will always be my brother."

Mirroring eyes stare at one another.

"…Don't damn me for flipping the coin back in my favor," the prince hisses, his fingers tight in his brother's hair. "Neither of us had a choice."

Through suffering, one brother became cruel.

The former prince smiles.

"We always have a choice, didi."

Through suffering, another brother learned.

The Prince of Wuyong leans down, whispering next to his ear.

“It won’t be that bad, gege. You’ve been whipped what…like, a thousand times?”

His brother doesn’t flinch, hearing his own careless words parroted back at him.

But his eyes hold remorse, and Xie Lian realizes…

He thinks that he deserves this.

“What’s one more moment of pain, compared to that?”

Deng Shihong lifts his head.

Watching the sun rise over his kingdom, one last time.

“…You’ll have to tell me, when you follow.”

Jun Wu jerks back, his teeth grinding together—

And with a solid kick against his back—his brother falls.

Landing on the altar hundreds of feet below with an awful thud.

Blood spreading around him—eyes lifeless and unseeing.

And now, Jun Wu’s secret is perfectly kept.

That’s the trick—one as old as time.

Or, as old as the cuckoo bird.

You never know that a foreign hatchling has taken the place of a newborn.

Not if it kicks the other eggs out of the nest—allowing them to shatter on the ground below.

‘Do not fall for the cuckoo’s tricks…’

And when Xie Lian looks down—

There’s a ghost fire in his hands.

Small, burning brightly.

"…No one caught me, dianxia."

The voice is so small—so frightened and alone.

Xie Lian hugs the light close to his chest, ignoring the chill that runs through him.

A ghost fire always burns cold, after all.

"I tried," the ghost fire whispers.

Just like Xie Lian's teenage self, weeping in his mother's arms.

"I tried so hard, dianxia."

Not speaking of what the prince has already seen—but what he will see.

Still, Xie Lian hugs him close.

The original Jun Wu died here—and while Xie Lian isn't seeing his memories now—

His echoes remain.

Whispering words of sorrow and remorse through time.

"I know," Xie Lian whispers, tears streaming down his cheeks as he accepts the truth.

Watching the Prince of Wuyong grow into a man.

Marrying the girl he fell in love with, when he was so very young.

Having a son of his own—one he adored.

Being praised as the greatest prince Wuyong has ever known.

His face maturing into one Xie Lian knows so well.

The same face of the man who embraced him, when he ascended to the Heavens.

His mentor.

One of his oldest friends.

The man who comforted him, as his kingdom fell.

The man who held him as he wept for Wu Ming.

The man who gave Xie Lian cursed shackles, then asked if he thought that he deserved them.

The Heavenly Emperor.

Jun Wu.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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"No one caught me."

[image]

CREDIT: MECHAMISH

Chapter End Notes

> DISCLAIMER: This arc is not intended to redeem Jun Wu or make his actions excusable, but more to fill in gaps as to his motivations and how he became the way he is.
>
> EXPLANATION: For any who are confused -- After the name switch in this chapter, Jun Wu and Deng Shihong completely switch identities. The one who we know in the canon as "Jun Wu" was the tormented child, born Deng Shihong, and the ghost Pei Ming encounters in the chapter titled "The God Slayer" is the child who was raised as the Prince of Wuyong. They switched identities with each other at 16 and have never switched back. For any of those wondering who the Bai Wuxiang posing as their Guoshi is in this chapter, you'll have to wait and see! But all will be explained.

Thank you so much to mechamish for the beautiful artwork!

xoxo, Evie

The Further They Fall

Chapter Summary

> Xie Lian watches, clutching the ghost fire in his hands, as the Prince of Wuyong obtains everything he ever wanted.
>
> But it isn’t enough.

Not a distant relative, or tyrant who happened to bear the same name.

His Jun Wu.

Xie Lian watches, clutching the ghost fire in his hands, as the Prince of Wuyong obtains everything he ever wanted.

But it isn’t enough.

Clans from the central plains won’t stop attacking their border.

Trying to reclaim lands that were once theirs.

To avenge their slain ancestors.

Children are dying. Soldiers aren’t coming home.

Fathers are saying goodbye too soon.

And Jun Wu can feel his father’s eyes fixing on him with suspicion with each failure.

Because he isn’t *supposed* to fail.

They made an agreement with the gods.

He isn’t *supposed* to lose.

“…Darling,” his wife’s voice is thick with sleep, her hand gentle on his shoulder. “Why are you sleeping on the ground again? Come back to bed.”

Jun Wu is silent, eyes dark and contemplative.

But still, he turns his head to kiss the inside of her wrist.

Adoring.

"…I can't sleep," he admits, turning his head to press it against her leg, tired. "I can't stop thinking about tomorrow."

Both of his wife's hands press against his cheeks.

"Could we not make peace with them?"

He stares up at Hudie, eyes bleary with confusion.

"…Peace?"

The Crown Princess of Wuyong kisses his forehead.

"The land was theirs. Wouldn't it be better to negotiate with them?"

He grimaces, seeing her rationality as softness.

Her pragmatism as shortsighted.

"They would see that as weakness."

His wife sighs.

(His father would see it as a failure.)

"Come with me."

He's gently pulled to his feet.

Into their son's nursery.

His dresser scattered with small toys that Hudie made—with all of the wealth in the world, still insisting on building their son's crib and toys for herself.

Zhang Wei is sleeping peacefully, delicate lids shut over eyes just like his mother's, cheek resting against a stuffed rabbit as he breathes in and out.

"What's the point," Hudie asks him softly, "in fighting wars of pride—if we don't leave behind a world that keeps him safe?"

She takes her husband's hand, guiding it down to cup the back of their son's head—feeling how soft his hair is.

How small, defenseless, and beautiful he is.

"…How can the world keep him safe if we don't keep our enemies at bay?" He murmurs, eyes filled with fear.

Jun Wu loves his family.

Adores his wife.

Wants nothing more than to leave a legacy for his son—a kingdom that he can rule with pride.

"…I believe we get out of the world what we put into it," Hudie murmurs, looking up at her husband. Pushing his hair behind his ear.

If you're brave enough to show the world kindness—then you help make it a kinder place.

"And all we can do…is prepare our children to face it."

But Jun Wu doesn't see the same world that she does.

He sees a world that doesn't care for what's just or fair.

He sees a world that will decide your fate before you're even born—and doom you to a life of misery.

To fail, before you're even given a chance.

Jun Wu *can't* fail.

And he won't give his son the chance to experience that, either.

In his desperation, he looks to the one person who has always had the answer.

The one who, even in his earliest days, always gave him a sympathetic ear.

His first Guoshi.

And, despite having retired many years ago to make way for his student…

Bai Wuxiang answers.

Meeting Jun Wu on the same cliffs where they ended the struggle between two brothers, when he was just a teenager.

When the world was a different place.

When he was becoming something.

Before he became afraid that someday he too, would fall.

"…Do you think it was a mistake?"

He sits on the edge of the cliffs, watching the same spot where his brother died.

"…Do you think all of this is happening because I took his place?"

There are worse things than border skirmishes—but…to the Kingdom of Wuyong, it may as well be a disaster.

They've known nothing but prosperity for centuries, shielded from strife by the bloodshed sacrificed on their behalf.

When you aren't allowed to fail—any failure, big or small, can seem like a calamity.

"You told my father his heir would be the Saint Born Under a Cursed Star."

The greatest prince Wuyong had ever seen.

How can he be that, if he can't even defend against clans from the central plains?

"…And who says you cannot be?" Bai Wuxiang muses, standing behind him.

"You told me yourself," Jun Wu mutters, scowling. "The gods wanted him."

The oldest brother.

The one who was chosen.

No one—

No one would ever choose *him* .

"…That's not your fault, child," a hand rests on Jun Wu's shoulder. "That was a matter of fate."

"…But if my fate was to die here…have I doomed them all by defying it?"

Doomed his wife.

Doomed their son.

Doomed everyone in Wuyong.

“…And what if you don’t?”

Jun Wu stiffens—not with fear exactly.

You stop fearing death the moment you crave it.

But for what the alternative would be.

“If I go now—my son…he’s not even a year old. Who—?”

“I don’t mean anything so drastic, child.” Bai Wuxiang’s hand squeezes his shoulder gently. “Would it surprise you to hear that your brother has not quite left this world?”

“…What?”

“His soul lingers on.”

In Xie Lian’s arms, the ghost fire trembles.

“He already died the way you were meant to—and you have his name.”

“…Yes,” Jun Wu agrees, “But I don’t understand what you’re suggesting.”

Bai Wuxiang kneels behind him, both hands on his shoulders.

Not pushing him off of the cliff before them—but a far more dangerous ledge.

“…What if he could have the rest of your fate, too?”

Xie Lian takes a step back from them, holding the ghost fire tighter in his arms as he watches them weave the spell.

“…He didn’t warn him…” Xie Lian whispers, knowing—

In an effort to make things right…

Jun Wu has doomed himself.

Doomed everything he aimed to save.

The punishment for meddling in fate is a harsh one.

And while Jun Wu succeeds in rebuking the border skirmishes…

Before long, Xie Lian is listening to the pained screaming of his wife.

Finding their son in his crib.

Not sick.

Not hurt.

Just gone.

He watches Jun Wu holding his wife in his arms—listening as she sobs and howls.

Experiencing the most unnatural form of grief.

But not him.

Not because he didn't love his son.

But because his only way of interpreting it is to deny it.

To say that this *shouldn't* be happening.

He switched his fate with the fated prince of Wuyong.

His first born should have been safe.

So, it couldn't be right.

It *must* have been a mistake.

A trick.

An attack.

When he finds his wife in their son's empty nursery, weeks later, and he tells her that their enemies in the central plains must have cast a spell to kill their son…

He believes it.

He tells himself that he *believes* it.

The alternative…would be unbearable.

Xie Lian watches as the Princess of Wuyong takes to her forge…

Realizing, when she draws out her hammer, muscles in her arms coiling and tensing as she brings the hammer down—he's heard this story before.

And it doesn't have a happy ending.

Even as the prince of Wuyong is revered, beloved as a powerful martial god.

And his wife grows more and more distant, arms placed protectively around her stomach, holding the child growing inside of her.

A beautiful, gentle child.

With hair similar to his parents, but…

Clear blue eyes.

Eyes similar to Hudie's father, as the Queen of Wuyong points out—having succeeded after the passing of Jun Wu's parents.

Relatives he mourned—but in a distant way.

Jun Wu doesn't see her lingering gaze when Mei Nianqing leaves the room, but…

Xie Lian does.

All Jun Wu sees is a living child.

One he can barely bring himself to visit, descending from the Heavens on occasion to see his family, but…

Still unable to bear to see the room that was once Zhang Wei.

Toys abandoned.

The crib his wife refused to allow anyone to touch.

And within the heavens…

Xie Lian watches as he walks among the gods who cursed him with hateful eyes.

Never forgiving them.

Completely unable to.

Even as he is lauded as the most powerful among the martial gods.

Adored. Admired.

That resentment is a seed—one that grows.

"…I'm sorry?" The Heavenly Emperor, Zhao Kong, raises an eyebrow. "You'd like what?"

"An audience with the Martial God of the central plains," Jun Wu crosses his arms, glaring down at their game of Weiqi. "Why is it easier to get a meeting with you, than him?"

"Well," the emperor smiles affably. "That would be because I like you, Wuyong."

When the prince does not respond to his flattery, the Emperor sighs, looking down to make his next move.

"Why would you want to meet with him, anyway?"

To Xie Lian's surprise…

Jun Wu's predecessor does not look like the cruel, unfeeling god that would order a man to choose between his children, subjecting one to endless torture.

He looks like a kind, gentle old man.

Xie Lian could see him as someone's grandfather.

And from the lack of armor and no sign of a sword…

Xie Lian realizes the former emperor is no martial god, either.

Rather, from the scrolls and texts carefully stacked around, maps and inventions all over the place—

It would seem he was a civil god.

Or…

Xie Lian looks behind his head, noticing a crimson fan displayed on the wall—the character Huo painted across the front in gold ink.

…The former fire master?

Was that why one was never appointed in the current Heavenly Dynasty?

And...how different did the Heavens used to be?

When Xie Lian glances out the window of the Imperial Hall--the streets look completely unfamiliar, and...

More life.

Gods gathered and laughing together.

Martial gods sparring. Civil gods giving lectures.

Far more lively and communal than the Heavens that Xie Lian has come to know.

His attention is torn away from the unfamiliar Heavenly Capital when Jun Wu speaks again, slamming his own piece down with a passive aggressive *click* .

"Surely...he has sway among his own believers?"

Zhao Kong sighs, leaning back on his hands—and Xie Lian can't help but also notice...

How different this emperor's manner is, compared to the one he grew up with.

"You two cannot resolve mortal political disputes among yourselves, Wuyong."

"...Why not?"

Xie Lian waits for Zhao Kong to give him the warning he received, when he was just nineteen years old, but...

"Because that completely cuts the mortals out of the equation," Zhao Kong frowns, sending Jun Wu a skeptical stare.

"We're their partners, Wuyong. We aren't here to deprive them of their free will."

Jun Wu grits his teeth, glaring at the board game beneath them.

"...But what if they choose wrong?"

"Then they will learn," Zhao Kong answers gravely.

"History is a valuable teacher."

"Then why does it so often repeat itself?" Jun Wu glares.

"In my experience?" The emperor places down a final tile—winning the game. "Young men think they know best and charge forward on emotion, not looking at the wreckage that lies behind."

But, before Jun Wu can retort—the old man smiles, lifting his hands amiably.

"But that's just my experience. And it is a reflex of old men like me to resent the young—they possess what we covet most."

Time.

"...So, you won't allow me to meet with him?" Jun Wu mutters.

"It's not a matter of allowing you," Zhao Kong hums, clearing their game pieces. "He descended to the mortal realm long ago, and lives among his people. He's likely helping them in their war efforts now—which is why I doubt he will be open to making peace with you."

"That's..."

Xie Lian and Jun Wu speak in unison, echoing the same words across time.

"...allowed?"

"If the mortals pray for your assistance? Of course it is," Zhao Kong shrugs, pouring himself a cup of tea. "We aren't in the business of ignoring prayers, are we?"

Jun Wu takes a cup when it's offered, thinking.

"If your people have prayed to you for help—you're welcome to go to them. Or to visit your wife and son--I'm sure they must miss you dearly. Bolin is...three now, isn't he?" Zhao Kong smiles kindly.

"He seems like a lovely child—you must be proud. I remember when my own son was..."

He trails off, watching the distracted manner in which Jun Wu nods, sipping his tea thoughtfully—clearly a thousand miles away, thinking.

"...But you must be careful, Wuyong." He warns softly. "You are there to guide and assist the mortals. Not control them. You renounced your mortal titles when you joined this court."

Emphasizing, as he already stated, a belief in free will.

"Do you understand, Wuyong?"

A foreign concept, to a child who grew up in chains.

"Jun Wu."

"Yes," the young god answers, distracted. "I understand, your majesty."

He descends not long after that, visiting his wife and son—walking the same halls that used to be his cage.

Standing in the same aviary where he used to sob and beg, pleading with the guards not to force the mask over his face.

Begging his Guoshi for help.

But now...

Now, he finds himself sitting cross legged on the floor, listening to the bird song that he used to loathe.

Meditating.

Unable to look to the other gods for help--limited in means by which he can interfere, but...

He looks to the future, hoping that, by opening the door a crack—

He'll see how to protect his people.

But that's the thing about looking into the future.

It's like walking in the dark blindfolded, fumbling for a doorknob—and opening it just a hair.

You don't actually know what will be waiting for you on the other side

—and you have no control over what you'll see.

And when Jun Wu looks ahead...

He sees a time far beyond that of Wuyong.

A world completely unrecognizable to him, then.

And he sees—

Golden flower petals, falling like snow.

A dragon that seems to swallow the sun.

And...

A blade, buried in his own chest.

And when he looks up, to see the man that killed him...

He doesn't actually *see* his foe's face.

Rather, he sees a flash of the image of his son.

Bolin.

"No..." He rasps, squirming under the image, only to hear the whispers echoing in his head, ringing with truth.

That his demise will come at the hands of Bolin's bloodline.

"That..." Xie Lian frowns, watching as the young god descends into fits of paranoia and confusion. "How could that be true, if all of his son's died?"

They must have, in the fall of Wuyong...

...Right?

But the story Xie Lian watches tells a very different tale.

He watches, as Jun Wu begins to crumble under the weight of pressures and fears...

Watches, as the clans in the central plains begin to gain ground.

And one day, finally—

They make an offer for peace.

With one cruel condition.

The clan leader's wife can no longer bear children—and he has no other consorts or concubines.

And, if they're to adopt an heir...

What could be better, in that case, than a demigod?

Xie Lian knows what Jun Wu's answer will be, but his heart aches.

Watching, as he tells Hudie that she must lose another child.

Knowing that it isn't *true.*

That the words he offers her about sending Bolin away to save his life —

They're all lies.

That he's only sending him away to protect himself.

Or, if anything, so he won't have to kill his own son to ensure his progeny won't kill him down the line.

But that's the danger of trying to change the future.

Xie Lian watches as Hudie says goodbye to her second son—clutching him to her chest, holding back wails of grief.

Wishing, more than anything, that he could spare her from the pain that she, who should have been a bystander, has been forced to endure.

Knowing how unnecessary it was.

But his sadness quickly turns to shock when he sees the clan banners approaching to take him away.

That the clan Bolin was given to, thousands of years ago—

Was the *Xie* family.

That the land he was taken to—

Would one day, in the not so distant future, become *Xianle* .

"...Was that why?" Xie Lian whispers, his throat aching now, knowing what this man will do later.

That he'll destroy Xie Lian's family.

His country.

Murder and curse the boy who gave him hope—who would grow into the man that Xie Lian fell in love with.

Who shut every single door in his face, then *gloated* when Xie Lian turned to him.

All for a *maybe?*

For a glimpse of a future that might not even happen?

And yet—in his steps to prevent it, like so many other people who try to change the future...

Jun Wu ensures that it *will.*

But even through all of his rage, hurt, and confusion—

He grows silent and wide eyed when he sees memories of Jun Wu's third and final child.

The last Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Wuyong.

San Lang.

Not *his* San Lang, no.

But there's a familiarity to the child that makes Xie Lian's heart ache.

A mischievous smile. Wild, dark hair, braided over his shoulder.

Eyes like two falling stars, glimmering with excitement as he runs through the palace of Wuyong, bringing joy back into Hudie's life—like a sunrise after a long, endless night.

And Xie Lian can't understand it.

Jun Wu spends his days haunted by failures and calamities that might come—

And loses the time he could have had with his Wife and son.

His wife who, in spite of all the grief he forced her to endure—and her own complex feelings towards Mei Nianqing—loved him still.

The son who burned so brightly, showing all of the talent and potential a father could have craved in an heir.

But Xie Lian watches as Jun Wu wastes the years he could have had—dreading the very possibility that he could lose it all.

Xie Lian never got the chance to marry, or have sons of his own.

So many opportunities long gone—most of it by this man's doing.

And when he had those opportunities—he let them slip by.

Until it was too late.

Until, in spite of every sacrifice…

Mount Tonglu awakened.

Small eruptions, at first.

Only small hiccups, compared to what was to come.

Zhao Kong descends, at the request of Jun Wu and the Guoshi of Wuyong…

And Xie Lian sees the Fire Master standing at the volcano's rim, his expression grim.

"Wuyong…" He shakes his head, stepping back. "Tell your wife to order an evacuation of the Imperial City."

Jun Wu stands a few feet below him, his jaw slack.

"…Excuse me?"

"I've suppressed it," the emperor explains. "But that will only last for a few months at most."

"…What do you mean?" Jun Wu stares at him like he's grown a third head. "It can't—we already did everything we were supposed to do! Why would this be happening to begin with?!"

Zhao Kong snaps his fan shut, staring at the martial god in confusion.

"What?"

"What you told my father about my brother and I!" Jun Wu glares, infuriated that now, the emperor pretends he doesn't even know. "My family did exactly what you said! And now…you're saying it didn't even stop the eruption from happening?!"

The emperor stares at him blankly.

"…I don't know what you're referring to, but I wasn't even aware that you had a brother, Wuyong. And I never spoke to your father—much less gave any instructions."

Jun Wu falls silent—numb, as he listens to the emperor speak.

"But I can tell you this—you can't stop a volcano from erupting," Zhao Kong warns him sternly. "You can only delay it. I've done all I can without making the eventual outcome even worse—"

"But my people will be left without a kingdom! What could be worse?!"

Zhao Kong glares. "Tonglu has already been pushed dangerously far out of balance. Take it past the point of no return—and it won't just destroy Wuyong. It will destroy everything. Your people won't even have anywhere to flee to."

"But—"

"Consider this time a gift," Zhao Kong shakes his head, walking away from him. "And use it to save as many lives as you can."

And Xie Lian—

He wishes he couldn't understand *why* Jun Wu was so agonized by this.

Why it enraged him so much.

Because everything he had been through—everything he had lost, everything he had done—

He was raised to believe it was for one purpose. One final goal.

And now, after seemingly having done *everything* he was asked—

It was all for nothing.

Xie Lian almost can’t fault him for what comes after.

Watching years of slowly building denial and self delusion manifest itself as, under extreme distress and pressure—

Something in the God’s mind begins to crack.

He really *does* believe the bridge is possible.

He really *does* believe that he can do it—all by himself—when the other gods refuse to offer their help.

Because what other option is there?

Other than admitting that, after having gone so far—after becoming this *thing* —

He would still lose anyway?

It’s not as though he didn’t resort to other acts of desperation.

Like falling into the old ways of sacrificing criminals to the volcano—

Only for his wife to refuse out of horror.

And then—

He tried it anyway—only to be caught in the act.

His atrocities start as small, private affairs—then grow outward, like ripples in a puddle.

It was easy to keep the secret of Deng Shihong when the only man left who knew was an accomplice.

And it was easy to hide what he had done to the other Guoshi.

Because he threw every single witness into the volcano with them—walking away, and telling himself that he hadn’t wanted to do it.

That not wanting something to happen is the same as being blameless for it.

Then comes his greatest crime.

One of negligence and ego.

Not intending for it to happen.

And yet, even if Xie Lian hadn't already been told about the murals…

Even if he didn't already know there was no more Kingdom of Wuyong…

He knew, the moment Jun Wu ushered his citizens onto the bridge—it would fall.

His own son—his last son—

Would fall.

That doesn't make Hudie's screams any easier to hear.

The same screams Xie Lian heard before, slipping underneath the avalanche that came crashing down the mountain.

Horrible, profound agony.

More than any human being could bear.

And once it's done—

There's only one way to erase the blame for what he's done.

Only one way to soothe the rage in his chest—cultivated through so many years of lies and manipulation.

Only one way to not lose the one thing he has left—

His wife.

By turning her grief, her rage—against the only people who could contradict what he's already told her.

Not realizing that he has already begun to use the oldest trick ever used against him.

Telling her that it wasn't *him* who failed.

It was the *gods* to blame.

The *gods* who lied.

The *gods* who killed their son.

Because blaming them—

Blaming them was so much easier than blaming himself.

And Xie Lian watches, the realization slowly dawning on him as Tonglu Hudie works in her forge—

He's seen every single one of those weapons before.

Wielded by his fellow gods.

Kept in Jun Wu's personal collection.

Except for one.

A small, seemingly un-intimidating dagger.

Not by choice, no.

But because it was forged from the bone ashes of the souls who fell from the bridge that day.

A material so powerful—so steeped in resentment—making a sword from it would make a weapon that could corrupt minds and souls.

But just a dagger is plenty.

The most dangerous weapon she ever forged—

And Jun Wu never lays a finger on it.

She gives it to him one day, barely casting a glance away from the flames of her forge. Barely even acknowledging the way his hand squeezes her shoulder.

Uncharacteristically gentle.

When her husband asks after it later—all she can offer is blank confusion.

A mystery that she will later amount to one of his many, many lies.

When the truth is far more simple.

The thing that took the dagger *looked* like her husband. Sounded like him. Smelled like him.

But over the sound of her hammer, she—

She didn't notice the lack of a heartbeat.

Xie Lian holds the ghost fire close to him, feeling it shiver with remorse.

“I tried,” it whispers, even as Xie Lian sees so much destruction, it—

“I tried.”

“…I know,” he whispers.

Deng Shihong was barely more than a ghost fire back then. And, while he couldn’t stop Jun Wu from doing what he did…

He did *try* .

But—even without the god slayer—

Xie Lian watches as Jun Wu and Tonglu Hudie slaughter every single god.

One by one.

Without mercy.

But, finally—there are only two left.

The Wind Master—who has survived not by being powerful, but by having powerful friends.

None of which are left alive.

And the God of the Central Plains. Ancient and enigmatic.

Hudie goes to the Wind Master, and Jun Wu…

Tracks reports of the only god left alive.

A white robed cultivator who lives among the people.

And the strangest part of it is—

After so many years of Jun Wu looking—before his fall, before the war —

He isn’t even hiding.

He finds the god sitting beside Yi Nian river.

Facing away from Jun Wu—not seeming particularly bothered when he hears the martial god approach.

"…If you hadn't spent so long hiding behind your worshipers," Jun Wu mutters, gripping his blade tightly, "Things could have been different."

The god does not look back at him.

If Jun Wu could have found him before the war escalated—maybe he—he would have—

"I never hid from you, your highness."

And when he hears the martial god speak—in such a familiar voice—

He goes very, very still.

Finally seeing the mask sitting on the ground beside him.

White—with no face.

Someone Watching Over Him

Chapter Summary

> The mask he wore only hid one thing;
>
> That he was human.
>
> With graying hair, eyes dark—unbearably cold.
>
> But nothing monstrous.
>
> “...What are you talking about? After everything you’ve put me through—you OWE me an explanation!”
>
> “Why do you think I waited for you here?” Bai Wuxiang murmurs. “I’ve been dying to tell someone. Who better than you?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You…”

Ever since the emperor confessed to having never heard of his brother—Jun Wu *searched* for his former Guoshi, never finding him.

Assuming he must have died in the calamity that followed.

“How did you…?”

Bai Wuxiang smiles, watching the sun set.

“You don’t have to ask me how, child. It’s not some great mystery.”

He reaches down, his fingertips dragging through the water.

“I used the greed, fear, and pride of your people against them. Against you.”

He glances back over his shoulder.

“But I never forced you, did I?”

No—he never technically forced Jun Wu’s hand—or his father’s, but he—?

"…Why?" he rasps, one hand pressed against the side of his head, struggling to process the shock.

Bai Wuxiang simply smiles.

"Because Wuyong took everything from me, first. I only returned the favor."

And when Xie Lian sees the face of the original Bai Wuxiang—

He's just a man.

As handsome as one would expect of a god—but still.

The mask he wore only hid one thing;

That he was human.

With graying hair, eyes dark—unbearably cold.

But nothing monstrous.

"...What are you talking about? After everything you've put me through—you OWE me an explanation!"

"Why do you think I waited for you here?" Bai Wuxiang murmurs. "I've been dying to tell someone. Who better than you?"

Jun Wu bites back screams of rage in the face of such calm.

"You want to know why? After everything you know, you can't guess?"

Jun Wu bites down any response, and Bai Wuxiang raises an eyebrow.

"Or have you taken up your brother's tactic of weaponizing your own ignorance?"

"How DARE you—!"

"There is nothing I don't dare to do."

Bai Wuxiang stares back at him, as though they're still teacher and student.

As though no matter how much time passes, he'll always be a child—

stumbling around in the dark.

“You can’t guess why a god of the central plains would want to destroy Wuyong?” He tilts his head to the side. “What do you think your ancestors did, once they had captured all of the land they desired? Once there were no more locals left for them to sacrifice for their own wealth and prosperity?”

“You said—”

“Raids,” Bai Wuxiang answers his own question. “Your Kings would send battalions into the desert oases and central plains—wait until the able bodied men were gone and preoccupied—and take the women and children.”

He recalls such horrors calmly, like any other lesson he’s ever taught.

“And these souls had to be agonized, to satisfy the mountain’s fury. So, before they cast them down—those men did what soldiers do.”

What soldiers always do, when they are raised in a society that values certain lives above others.

“No one believed the stories about Wuyong,” Bai Wuxiang recalls. “No one thought human beings could be so vile. Everyone assumed those who were taken were being used for slave labor—or sold as concubines.”

As grim as it is, such outcomes were less horrible than the truth.

“When I came back to my city, and found that my wife and children had been taken—I was horrified. But I was also pragmatic.”

As pragmatic as any man could be, in such a situation.

“I was a swordsman with financial means. I presumed I could find them, and buy their freedom.”

The idea of holding Wuyong accountable at that time never occurred to him.

Because what could anyone do?

“But when I arrived—told them who I was, where my family was taken…”

Bai Wuxiang’s voice grows quiet.

"All they could give me was my wife's jewelry, and my son's boots."

Even now, centuries later, his voice is hoarse with emotion.

"They offered no explanations. No apologies. They thanked me for my sacrifice—and told me they never would have taken Jia Huan and the boys if they had known I was a *cultivator."*

The memory of that actually makes him laugh.

"To them, my line of work was the only thing that gave their lives any value. And they—" he exhales harshly. "When I asked them why they saved the jewelry and the shoes—they said it seemed like a waste."

Xie Lian covers his mouth, struggling with the nausea overtaking him.

"I was compensated fifty gold pieces for each of them—and sent on my way." He recalls faintly.

"I had three sons. They took my family, and gave me two hundred gold pieces."

A small fortune back then, maybe.

But what difference could that make?

What could that even compare to what had been taken from him?

"I was one of the lucky ones," he looks Jun Wu in the eye. "Because I had something as meager as a pair of shoes to remember my child by."

He was a cultivator. A wealthy one. A man of influence, back in his home.

And there was absolutely nothing he could do.

"Then…I walked out onto the streets of Wuyong…and they were holding a festival. The last one before winter—you know the one."

He glances out over the rivers and fields of the land he has guarded all of these years.

Peaceful, now.

Safe— *now* .

"And I saw so many healthy, happy children—living upon the ashes of my own. Singing, dancing, laughing."

"They couldn't have known," Jun Wu finally says, his voice strained.

"You're right," Bai Wuxiang agrees. "And I don't care."

Jun Wu balks at that. The blithe admission of being wrong—accepting it—

And expressing that hatred anyway.

"Did that ever stop you from hating your brother?"

His breath stops in his throat.

"He found out eventually. He admitted it, in the cave that day—"

"He grew into someone who knew." Bai Wuxiang corrects him. "Just like the children in that festival did. And their children. And so on, and so forth."

"They—"

"People in Wuyong knew not to go on the mountain."

Jun Wu falls silent again, unable to speak on what his ancestors knew, but—

Even generations later, it was considered a forbidden place.

"We weren't allowed—"

"By what law? You can't even name one, can you?" Bai Wuxiang presses him, and—

He can't.

"You know how far the smell of burning flesh carries on the wind by now, surely."

Jun Wu grinds his teeth, his fist flying out, a solid blow landing on his face.

Bai Wuxiang takes it without complaint.

Bai Wuxiang looks him in the eye—filled with rage, sorrow, and agony.

“…There are no innocents in a society that has been built upon murder.”

Agony that Xie Lian used to feel.

Xie Lian, who genuinely did loathe the people of Yong’an, for a time.

“If you accept a reward in exchange for your silence in the face of evil—you aren’t a bystander.” Bai Wuxiang hisses. “You’re an accomplice.”

Wuyong was a Kingdom of accomplices.

“After I ascended, I spent centuries waiting for them to change. For justice to come. And it never did. Not until the Royal family started feeling the consequences of it. Such a small thing, on the scope of what they did. That their line should simply end.”

But that wasn’t enough for them.

And it wasn’t enough for Bai Wuxiang, either.

“The other families who lost…who lost people to that mountain—they’re all gone now. I was the only one left. And I had no peace. No justice. So,” he looks up. “I decided that no one was allowed to benefit from the deaths of my wife and children. Not anymore.”

No one would live on the land soaked with their blood again.

No one would hold festivals in their graveyards.

No more gardens would grow from fields of murdered children.

“…So—what, you avenged one genocide with another?!”

“No,” Bai Wuxiang corrects him. “You and your brother were my victims. I used you two—and your arrogant fool of a father—to push the volcano out of control. But you slaughtered your own people, Jun Wu.”

Jun Wu balls his fist up—like he might strike him—

But instead, he takes a staggering step back, his hands trembling.

“IF IT'S OVER NOW, WHY ARE YOU STILL LYING?!”

“I’m not,” Bai Wuxiang shakes his head. “I only wanted to make the land uninhabitable.”

Xie Lian can see it now—in his eyes, his voice, the peace he seems to feel.

Bai Wuxiang is telling the truth.

“I’ll never say what I did to you wasn’t cruel.” Bai Wuxiang shakes his head. “Or that you deserved this. But I gave you so many chances, Jun Wu.”

“SHUT UP!”

Then, Xie Lian watches him say the words that make something behind Jun Wu's eyes break in two.

"If you had done nothing—everything would have been absolutely fine."

"...What?" He whispers, lips trembling.

"I only told your father one lie," Bai Wuxiang smiles. “And it wasn’t about being forced to choose one of his sons. Or how he should treat either one or you,” he explains.

“I lied to him about which one was the *eldest* brother.”

Xie Lian’s jaw drops, just as Jun Wu stumbles to the ground, backing away in shock.

"You..." He chokes, struggling to wrap his mind around that truth, trying to tell himself it's a lie. "You..."

But it isn't.

Bai Wuxiang has no reason to lie about anything now.

"You were always the eldest brother, Jun Wu."

"But—then—why did you lie about it?!"

"Because you were the first Prince of Wuyong to ever understand what it felt like to experience the oppression your family inflicted over the generations."

Bai Wuxiang's words are cruel.

They're unfair.

But they're *true* .

"You could have been different from any of them."

"Is there any way a child is SUPPOSED to react to being tortured?! Should I THANK you for the opportunity?!"

"I never forced your father to beat you, Jun Wu. Or your mother to turn away from you."

"SHUT—!"

"They barely even questioned me. They didn't even ask for proof."

Bai Wuxiang isn't lying now, either.

Xie Lian saw.

Jun Liang questioned Bai Wuxiang at the time.

Vaguely.

But he took the man on words alone, waiting for no evidence other than that to commit such heinous acts.

"I told them a scary story, and they believed it."

Believed it enough to treat their own child like an animal.

Like *less* than an animal.

"But, when you turned eighteen—I was always going to tell them the truth. You were always going to take your rightful place. But..." He tilts his head to the side, eyes glinting. "When I saw the two of you in the Kiln...Why do you think I pointed out that your brother could have helped you run away?"

Because, in that moment—they *both* could have fled.

Run from Wuyong. From everything.

Together.

"I gave you a choice between that, and revenge."

And Jun Wu made his choice, without his hand ever being forced.

(Even if he believed that it was.)

Revenge.

Over and over again, he chose revenge.

"Your brother didn't have to die, Jun Wu. Neither of you did. If you ran—I would have let you both go."

He gave them chances.

"You were always the eldest. Always meant to be the Crown Prince of Wuyong. And if you hadn't switched fates with your brother...everything I told your father would have come true."

Jun Wu would have been the greatest ruler of their line.

The Saint Born Under a Cursed Star.

"...Then why would you even give me that choice?!" Jun Wu snaps, clutching his hands on either side of his head, and—

"Because you were becoming just like your parents, and your brother before you," Bai Wuxiang regards him with such—

Such disappointment.

"I gave you the chance to prove me wrong."

Another chance.

Another missed opportunity.

Another...

"Your sons would have lived, Jun Wu."

A horrified, grief stricken sob rips from the man, forced to his hands and knees on the ground, shaking violently.

"LIAR!"

"Your father could have said no, when I made the god's offer. He could have moved the Imperial Capital to the eastern half of Wuyong. But he didn't want to give up the most fertile land."

"THAT'S NOT MY FAULT!"

"You could have listened to your wife, and entered peace talks."

When the conflict with the clans of the central plains were only border skirmishes.

"You never needed to switch fates with your brother."

"You—you never told me the truth—I—I thought I *HAD* TO!"

"Zhao Kong gave your people plenty of time to leave."

Jun Wu falls silent.

"But you made the same choice as your father. Even though you *knew* why the land was cursed."

He *knew* that the threat of Mount Tonglu was created because the land he was fighting to save had been built on centuries of theft, abuse, and murder.

But he still fought to stay.

"...But now," Bai Wuxiang sits forward, finally tilting his head down, shoulders slumping.

Prepared to rest.

"It's over. Hate me for my part in it. Do what you will with me. I have no regrets. Wuyong didn't deserve to continue to exist."

Jun Wu rises to his feet—sword clutched in his hand.

"But you—you will have to face what you've done, just as I have."

Bai Wuxiang certainly never forced Jun Wu to slaughter the gods. Hadn't expected that, since the prince would have known by then that they were uninvolved.

But in all of Bai Wuxiang's careful planning and manipulations...

Even he never could have understood just how far the Prince of Wuyong would go in order to keep his secrets.

In order to maintain that it was *not his fault.*

Jun Wu feels nothing when he kills Bai Wuxiang.

There's no satisfaction in killing someone who has already beaten you.

Completely and utterly defeated you.

Even devouring his soul, the way a ghost would—ravenous, trying to fill a void inside of him where a sense of *self* should be—

There's no relief from his regrets.

And the price for what he's done—

It comes far sooner than he ever could have guessed.

Returning to his wife's side. Shell shocked, lost.

Unsure of what is left of them.

Where they can go.

Part of him is desperate to go back to the garden where he introduced himself to her.

Before the eruption. Before the bridge. Before the wars. Before switching fates.

Back when he had chances. Choices.

Part of them wishes that they could start over, but—

He remembers now, in some far off, distant way, that Hudie is dead, too.

That she took her own life after her ascension to the Heavens, following San Lang's death.

In his anger, grief, and fear of being caught in his own mistakes—

Her fate became an afterthought.

They can have no more children. They—

They can't start over.

Not anymore.

He finds her, kneeling beside the corpse of the Wind Master, her bloody hammer discarded beside her, head hanging.

Hands empty.

Hair loose, like a prisoner on death row, blowing gently in the breeze.

Blood staining her cheeks in small streaks.

Wearing the robes of a queen underneath battle worn armor.

The Martial Goddess whose statues adorn the pathways in Paradise Manor.

Xie Lian kneels beside her, gently holding the ghost fire in his palm, seeing—

Seeing her clutching a small, stuffed fox in her hands.

He knows that look.

Because she's fought to the end of the line.

Won every battle—slain every enemy.

And her San Lang isn't coming back.

He knows that pain in her eyes—the desire to rest in peace, to move on, but—

Something won't let her go.

Then, when her husband approaches—Xie Lian sees something else in her gaze.

Tonglu Hudie always brought out the best in her husband. She was the more compassionate of the two. Fiercely loving. Devoted.

But they married one another for a reason.

Hudie might have kindness in her heart. She might love fiercely, and be capable of great compassion.

But there's a wildness to her, one that she shares with Jun Wu.

A ferocity.

A ruthlessness.

One that he taught her.

Her claws are long—and her teeth are sharp.

Convenient, when Jun Wu used her as his final weapon against his enemies.

His downfall, now, when all of her children's would-be killers are slain—and the only one left to blame is the one actually responsible.

When she looks up, Xie Lian can see it in her eyes.

She *knows* .

But Jun Wu doesn't. He only watches the back of her head, reaching to place one hand on her shoulder—to comfort her.

To try and fumble for the last thing he has.

His last believer.

“...San Lang would have been—”

Thud.

Jun Wu falls silent, looking down at the blade sprouting from his chest.

Shining black steel. Forged to avenge his own child.

The blade Zhu Xin.

One Xie Lian recognizes now, with grim finality, as the blade he has carried for centuries now.

Fangxin.

When he looks up at his wife, his expression is one of utter shock.

"You..." He rasps, his lips trembling as he stares up at her.

The girl who smiled at him so kindly once.

Who told him he wasn't ugly.

The beauty with a head full of butterflies.

"You..."

The woman who was once the Crown Princess of Wuyong, Tonglu

Hudie.

Now, reforged through grief and dishonesty.

Broken and reshaped in ways that make Xie Lian ache with sympathy.

Into the Executioner of the Heavens.

The ghost story that Jun Wu will come to tell.

Zhao Beitong.

The blade is yanked from his chest without mercy.

Only to be returned once again even more viciously.

“You don’t get to say his name.” She whispers, shaking her head, pulling the blade from his chest again, watching as Jun Wu drops to his knees, gasping from the pain.

“Not to me. Not ever again.”

It's a final link in a fraying chain of sanity.

That one thing—the final thread holding a seam together before it bursts.

Because the one person he assumed he would never lose...

“You...” he whispers, his eyes narrowing. “Even you?”

The one person who never, ever hurt Jun Wu. Who was always on his side. Who always showed him kindness...

Zhu Xin trembles in her hold, but Zhao Beitong doesn’t falter. “Even me.”

...Has turned against him, in the end.

“Even when everyone else burned my temples, and prayed to others, you...”

Jun Wu parries her third attack, but is too wounded to deflect her fourth.

She knows every gap in his armor, after all.

She was the one who forged it.

“…You never turned against me. And now—!”

“It wasn’t that I prayed to someone else, Jun Wu.” His wife whispers, yanking the blade out for the third time, his blood spattering across the ground.

Shattering the belief that his experience was universal.

That she only existed to be a part of *his* story.

A romantic partner to carry his character development through the necessary subplots in his hero's journey.

A grieving mother whose pain he could avenge.

She always considered herself to be more of a mother than a wife, but —

Mothers are frightful creatures.

There is a world for her that exists outside of him. Thoughts he has never known. Emotions that she has never shared with him.

She exists without him.

She does not *need* him.

“I stopped praying to anyone, long ago.”

He is the cause of her pain, not her savior.

“And now, there’s only one god left that’s responsible for the death of my son,” She whispers, hitting him again, and again, and again.

“You’ll be patient with me, won’t you? You said I could avenge him, didn’t you?!”

Xie Lian has seen this scene before.

Or no—

He's *felt* it.

Heard it.

She pierces him over and over again.

Once for every layer of hatred that she forged into the blade.

Once, twice, three times. A dozen times.

A hundred times.

Until he's just another bleeding, broken thing.

Like the world he created.

Xie Lian was that bleeding, nearly shapeless form once.

Broken. Begging for death. Finding a place beyond pain in his mind.

Somewhere between hell and oblivion, experiencing such suffering, his mind couldn't comprehend it.

And now, he knows that was a choice.

That Jun Wu—Bai Wuxiang—Deng Shihong—whoever that man *is* —

He knew *exactly* what it felt like, when he chose to do that to him.

He knew exactly what it would mean, to have his own former believers do that to him. And that—

That makes it even more cruel, somehow.

Zhao Beitong kneels before Jun Wu, whispering by his ear—

“You aren’t better than anyone.”

Even through the pain, his eyes widen slightly.

“I want you to know that.” She continues, her eyes narrowed. “You are selfish, arrogant, and greedy. And now—look at you.”

Now, look at him.

The boy who sought power not for the sake of it—but simply to escape the pain and fear of the world he was born into.

“You are just as broken, and frightened as anyone else.”

Only to end up exactly where he began.

“Everyone has left you, and you blame the world. Scream and cry about how unfair it is.”

She leaves the sword Zhu Xin buried in his chest, stabbing deep into the earth beneath him.

“They left you because you weren’t worth following any longer.”

Zhao Beitong turns her back on him.

The last god she ever tore down—unaware of what she, in doing so, had forged.

“Everything you have done—you did it to yourself.”

And from her point of view—he certainly had.

That's the painful thing about being human.

Life gives you a small fragment of a view of the world, and expects you to make sense of it.

Sometimes, you're a boy screaming from behind a mask.

Or a girl, with a head full of butterflies.

An orphan, falling from the city walls.

A prince, who isn't allowed to be anything but perfect.

A guard who doesn't know what to protect.

A servant, who needs a friend.

You might be a good man, who couldn't fix it.

Or a little sibling, always hiding behind your brother's sleeves.

A scared child, watching the world through the crack in the doors of a wardrobe, wondering if you should ever come out.

A general who doesn't want to fight anymore.

The world might call you a princess turned saint, when all you wanted was to be flawed.

Or you could be the daughter of a shoemaker, fingertips stained with ink—desperate to climb so high, that no one will ever look down on you again.

Each a small, fragmentary piece of a broader perspective—the omniscience that is, ironically enough, supposed to be for the gods.

Zhao Beitong saw the monster that the Prince of Wuyong became—but only through his inadvertent destruction.

Her monster is entirely different from Xie Lian's.

Or Hua Cheng's.

Or, though Xie Lian does not know it yet, someone else's.

But there is no one who will ever struggle to reconcile the truth of the situation more than the man at the center of it all.

The man who, Xie Lian is now realizing, has simply kept spinning the same wheel he himself was placed upon at birth—because he doesn't know how to stop.

Or maybe he does—but if he admitted that, then that would mean admitting that all of this is his fault.

And he can't.

He can't, he can't, he *can't* .

It's in that struggle to reconcile, bleeding and writhing where his wife left him, that Xie Lian watches it happen.

A rare phenomenon—one he's read about, before, but never heard of a witnessed occurrence.

Not one where the victim survived, at least.

As Jun Wu hovers somewhere between god and ghost, his body struggling to put itself back together, he...his soul...

Splits in two.

A cruel imitation of what he once was—

A twin brother.

One half, a god. The other, a calamity.

The world's first.

One, everything Jun Wu *wants* to be. Everything he allows people to see.

Brave, generous, and strong. The man who would rise again as emperor of the Heavens.

And the other...

The other is as cruel and vindictive as the world that forged him.

As the guoshi who doomed him.

As the family who discarded him.

And when Jun Wu regains consciousness, seeing his lesser self for the first time...

He shrinks away in fear.

Because the man doesn't…

Xie Lian grows silent, remembering what he saw, through Shi Qingxuan's eyes.

Remembering what Ren Song said about the creature that attacked them on the Terrace of Cascading Wine.

He doesn't have a face.

Not really.

There's smooth skin in the place where features should be—thinning in places—showing where the real him is straining to break through.

Like overgrown scar tissue.

And Jun Wu—

He trembles, staring at the worst version of his own reflection.

And he can't—

He can't look at it anymore.

He falls back, palms bracing him against the ground, and—

Looks down, when his hand comes into contact with something solid.

A white, blank mask.

The face that tormented him.

"…NO!" He screams, smashing his first down against it.

Instead of shattering, it simply changes.

Into the face he was forced to wear, shaped into someone weeping.

"NO!"

He tries to smash it again, but…

Now, it's the mask his brother wore.

With a smile he used to think was mocking—never seeing its naivety.

"…NO!"

He smashes it over, and over, and over again.

Until, by the time he's too exhausted to fight back—

A broken, mismatched version of himself remains.

One that feels far closer to the truth than his real face ever has.

Half laughing—

Half crying.

Jun Wu lifts the mask with trembling fingertips, looking from it, to the blank, horrifying image of his other half.

…Placing it over the face of the new "Bai Wuxiang."

"… *You* did all of this," Jun Wu chokes, face smeared with blood and ash.

Filled with desperation.

Sobbing.

Clutching a body that feels so foreign to him, as it knits itself back together.

Xie Lian understands that sensation.

How so much of you can be cut away, that when your true form starts to grow back—

You wonder how much of you is real, when there's none of your original self left.

Jun Wu lays collapsed like that for countless hours, screaming—and Xie Lian knows that it hurts.

It hurts.

It really, really hurts.

He knows what Jun Wu is thinking.

Help me.

Help me, help me, help me.

Help me, help me, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help me!

Jun Wu curls in on himself, screaming until his throat turns raw, bloody tears dripping down his cheeks.

Because—

It hurts.

It *always* hurts.

It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts...it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS!!!

Why can't he die?!

Why could he have JUST DIED?!

But the world doesn't break or shatter. Not the way that he does.

It's still there when Jun Wu lifts his head—broken and teetering.

A white masked figure watching over him—kneeling in the ashes of the Heavenly Capital.

Xie Lian watches as the fallen god rises to his knees—half demon, half heaven—

Taking Bai Wuxiang's face between trembling palms, whispering;

"You'll never hurt someone else again."

A promise that he's doomed to break.

"We'll—we'll be *better* , this time."

Xie Lian stands in the distance, that ghost fire still flickering in his palms, as he watches Jun Wu try to devour the broken half of his soul.

Knowing that, once a soul is truly split in two like this—there is no mending it.

That, no matter how hard he tries, he will fail.

But Xie Lian watches him try.

Watches as Jun Wu lives among the mortals for centuries—slowly forging the story Xie Lian would be told over a thousand years later.

Becoming a famed mortal General, bringing peace to a warring era—ruling for a time, then ascending.

Xie Lian watches a child that was once so alone, unloved, and without hope—grow into a man who is constantly trying to heal himself.

To rebuild the Heaven he once knew from the ashes of his former friends.

Leaving behind a warped version of what once was.

Watches, as he punishes the lingering spirit of his wife for her perceived betrayal.

Stealing her name. Locking her in the same Kiln where he made his first mistake, so many years ago.

When he was given chances.

When he could have been something different.

Turning her into the villain of his past, allowing himself never to read what's actually on the pages.

And when he seals her inside the Kiln, trapped in the dark with all of his other mistakes—

He tells himself that it's over.

That the past belongs to ghosts and memory.

Watches as the world begins to forget, learning to repeat the story that he's been telling.

As his believers return.

And slowly, but surely—Jun Wu begins to believe the story, too.

That he is a kind, merciful god.

A mentor to the other officials who ascend.

Walking the halls of the Heavens with two hounds trotting at his sides.

Ears perked, watching him with unquestioning affection.

Xie Lian bears witness when he comforts a young, worn down general.

Sitting in the grand martial hall by Pei Ming's side, playing rounds of Weiqi.

And—

The affection that Jun Wu once had for Pei Ming was genuine.

Watching them talk and laugh like old friends.

Irritation flashes in the emperor's eyes when Pei Ming, who seems the opposite of intellectual, always wins in games of strategy.

But he enjoys it, all the same.

And then, finally—

Xie Lian sees himself.

Kneeling on the ground beside Yi Nian bridge, pouring dust over lily seeds.

Uttering words that he now knows, to Jun Wu—must have sounded like a mocking curse.

"Body in abyss, heart in paradise."

Kneeling in the same place, where Jun Wu's heart was shattered.

And—

Xie Lian's lips tremble as he takes a step back, realizing how arrogant and childish those words seem now.

Because what did he know of *suffering* , back then?

A prince, who had been loved and adored every moment of his life.

Who, at that time, had never known what it felt like to fail.

Had never been blamed for something that was beyond his control.

Had never been forced to suffer on someone else's behalf.

If Xie Lian had lived this life, and seen a young, spoiled princeling utter such words—

He would have felt hatred in his heart, too.

"No..."

He looks down, as the scene begins to change—and the ghost fire in his hands flickers up at him brightly.

"You didn't know."

Xie Lian feels his heart in his throat, watching green flames dance before his eyes, welling with tears.

"You didn't know, your highness."

But Jun Wu doesn't look at Xie Lian and see an innocent.

Because if that was true, then so was *he* .

If that was true, then why did Bai Wuxiang have to put *him* through so much pain?

No, no—the Prince of Xianle cannot be an innocent.

In a world so cruel and lopsided—there are no innocents anymore.

Only spoiled, entitled children.

Princes who need to be taught lessons.

And as Xie Lian watches the scene change, he sees what truly happened.

Watching his own life fall apart from a bird's eye view, seeing—

There was no drought in Yong'an.

There was Jun Wu, casting spells to stop the rain.

Blocking prayers to Yushi Huang, to bring it back.

And just like the White Clothed Calamity, the Heavenly Emperor's goal wasn't necessarily to destroy Xianle.

Not in the beginning.

Only to *push* Xie Lian. To make him see that the world wasn't kind, or fair.

Pushing the people of Yong'an, through drought, famine, and prejudice, to give into their worst instincts.

To show Xie Lian how cruel human beings truly were.

And watching, to his thrill, as Xie Lian did the same thing he did.

Descending to Xianle to try and save his people.

Propping up golden palaces that were always doomed to fall down.

But—

But his temper never snapped.

Even in battle, he was noble. Even when he couldn't cut down Lang Ying—he didn't resort to dirty tricks.

He just tried.

Over and over again.

In an almost infuriatingly pointless way, he tried.

Even when Jun Wu unleashed a plague upon the people, offering a way to save them—

Xie Lian didn't take it.

As frightened and pained as he was...

He didn't change.

Even when Xianle fell, and he became listless and angry as he watched his future burn.

Even when Jun Wu sat in the Palace of the Prince of Xianle with him, and offered the prince a way to escape his punishment—

Just as he had, over a thousand years before.

To become the masked, nameless martial god of the central plains.

The one who slayed the god of misfortune.

And to be without a name—that makes one *Wu Ming* .

Now, Xie Lian can see something behind Jun Wu's eyes begin to crack once more, when he hears Xie Lian's reply.

"...No," he croaks, shaking his head. "I can't do that."

Jun Wu raises an eyebrow as the crown prince wraps his arms around himself, taking shuddering breaths.

"I would never see my parents again," Xie Lian whispers. "Or Feng Xin, or Mu Qing. And even if I could...w...wouldn't taking a new name...be running away from what I did?"

Now, the emperor goes rather still.

And Xie Lian can see—

Jun Wu can't even begin to comprehend that.

He doesn't *want* to.

"If this is my fault..." Xie Lian swallows thickly, wiping at his tears. "Then let me suffer for it. Let me be punished for it. My—my people's loss isn't so cheap, that I could just walk away from the blame."

For a moment, there is no reply.

Only his ragged, pained breaths.

A teenage boy, left all alone with the pieces of a war that was never of his own making.

Still, desperately trying to put them back together.

Finally, Jun Wu asks—

“...You think that’s cowardice?”

Xie Lian couldn't have known then, how much hid behind that question.

Back then, he didn't apply with an affirmative, too lost in his own sorrow.

“Even if that means you will be sealed with a cursed shackle?”

“...If that’s what I deserve,” the prince replies quietly, his head hanging low. Then, after a pause—

“...Then Xianle will accept the emperor’s punishment,” he whispers, his voice trembling.

Jun Wu stares him down.

“You will suffer,” he reminds him coldly. “It will be hard.”

“...I know.”

Oh, but he couldn’t have known.

Watching now, Xie lian sinks to his knees.

Seeing his eyes clouded with the blacks and golds of his cursed shackle as his trial comes to a conclusion, and he is exiled.

Knowing, now—that they weren't the punishment he thought he deserved. A penance for the pain he thought he caused.

They were a *cage* .

But soon, he's cast back down to the mortal realm.

Where he will wander, to avoid becoming a burden on his friends, on his parents.

(But what he didn't know then, was that there was someone watching over him.)

(*Always* watching over him.)

And Jun Wu is left alone.

Standing in the martial hall, his head clutched in his hands.

It will be years before the Kiln opens again, but—

In the distance, it rumbles.

Filled with resentment, as the earth became stained with blood and suffering once more.

And now, after centuries of rattling the bars of his cage—

Xie Lian watches the shattered half of the emperor's soul wrench free once more.

Climbing free, long white sleeves dragging across the floor.

Streaks of white staining jet black hair.

Xie Lian couldn't tell you which was true.

If Jun Wu's acts of cruelty were caused by the strain of building pressure in the Kiln, and Bai Wuxiang trying to break free.

Or, if they were his own.

The only thing that seems clear is that, once the other half of his soul wrenched itself free—

Jun Wu had no control over him anymore.

Or how far he would go.

But now, standing in the Grand Martial Hall—Bai Wuxiang turns his head.

Up until now, Xie Lian was an observer in the memories—silent and unseen.

But now…

Bai Wuxiang is looking straight at him.

Trembling.

"…You think you're so clever, don't you, Xianle?"

He marches toward him, staggering as Xie Lian backs away.

“Don’t you realize…” He launches himself forward, hands wrapping around the prince’s throat as the ghost fire flares—

“…This goes both ways?”

And just like that—everything is dark.

A Painful, smothering kind of darkness.

One that never lifts.

And Xie Lian hears himself.

“…I know you’re there.”

And—

The sound of feet shuffling away from him.

“Wait!” He cries, stretching out his hand, lonely, so, horribly lonely, whispering—

“…Don’t go.”

No.

Xie Lian claws around him blindly, struggling to gain purchase on something, anything to hold onto.

Because Jun Wu—

He doesn't get to see this.

This isn't his to see.

And—

Xie Lian thrashes helplessly, feeling them tumble from memory to memory, Hong'er's voice flashing in and out, lashing against his heart every single time.

If he lets it go too far—

Bai Wuxiang might have guessed how important the ring was before, when Xie Lian reacted so violently to the hammer hitting it.

But if it gets to that memory—

He'll *know* .

He'll know where Hua Cheng's ashes are.

But Xie Lian—

He crashes down to his knees, and his hand—

Lands on a pair of boots. And Xie Lian—

He trembles, even now, so many years later, his cheeks wet.

He knows those boots.

He *made* them.

And he just—

He just wishes the screaming would stop.

Horrible, gut wrenching screams.

He turns his head, numb, ready to beg whoever it is to stop, but—

Oh.

That's just him.

...He's screaming.

Xie Lian sinks forward, convulsing with grief, crying, screaming until the sky might shatter from the force of it, his forehead pressed against Hong'er's legs, unmoving.

...He can't do this.

His hands clutch at Hong'er's knees, breaths speeding to the point of hyperventilation.

He can't do this.

He's going—

He's going to lose him again.

He's—

Xie Lian is going to *fail* again.

He—

He can't protect him.

"Dianxia..."

A voice whispers, faint and flickering, like a breath on the wind.

"Dianxia..."

Xie Lian can barely lift his head, cheeks swollen and tear soaked as he stares into the endless darkness, but—

There's one point of light there.

Wavering before his eyes.

A ghost fire.

"...I can't," Xie Lian croaks, straining under the weight of the one thing that makes him weak.

"I *can't!"*

Failing.

Losing him again.

"You can," the ghost fire whispers. "You already have."

And Xie Lian—

He remembers Hua Cheng's hand, pressing against his chest.

'You have always kept me safe.'

Xie Lian bites his lip, eyes shining with tears, kneeling alone in the darkness.

"...I don't know what to do," He admits, feeling like a child again, crashing back down to earth.

"I haven't learned—I haven't learned ANYTHING!"

"Yes, you have."

That ghost fire flickers brighter and brighter, smoldering in the darkness—until finally, it takes form.

The false prince.

The child who was cast aside, after being raised to believe he was destined for greatness.

Forever a teenager—and through suffering, he learned.

He reaches forward, grasping Xie Lian's hand—pulling with all of his might—

Until they both fall backwards, tumbling through a tunnel of endless memories—between the three souls, there's thousands upon thousands of years of them—an ever shifting kaleidoscope.

One of pain, loss, joy, and sorrow.

But all of it is just—

Just *life* , in the end.

THUD!

And when they land, Xie Lian sits up—dust in his hair, finding—he can see.

See himself, laying in a pit, with a sword through his chest.

And he knows this place.

Knows the figure in dark armor, watching from a distance.

And his heart aches, seeing the way the soldier's hands tremble.

"...Oh, Wu Ming," he whispers, aching to go to him.

Xie Lian was so unfair to him.

But—

This memory isn't from his point of view.

And it isn't from Bai Wuxiang's, either—

He's standing by Xie Lian's side—slyly mocking him, until the prince tells him that he's boring.

(And, that he's blocking Xie Lian's sun.)

No, this is...

Xie Lian turns around, staring at the ghostly figure beside him.

"...You were here?" He whispers, lips trembling.

The one who spent the last two thousand years living as Deng Shihong smiles at him, half in acknowledgement—half in apology.

"I tried, your highness."

That was what he was saying from the beginning, but—

It takes on an entirely new meaning, now.

And it had been so long, Xie Lian *almost* forgot.

There—

There was a merchant who, several times during the three days he waited, tried to give him water.

To go down, and help him.

Xie Lian always thought he changed his mind because the woman with him—one he assumed was his wife—

But now, watching the scene again, from a different point of view...

Deng Shihong hid each time Bai Wuxiang returned—knowing he would be devoured if his brother saw him.

And when he...

Xie lian turns his head, tears silently falling down his cheeks as he watches the sun rise and set, the rain pouring down, and...

He sees Deng Shihong turning a man back, saying the road ahead was no good, and he'd have to go back through the city to get home.

A rice merchant in a bamboo hat.

One who, under Bai Wuxiang's irritated gaze, stumbles upon a prince in the street, curled up, alone in the rain like a beggar.

Who, after scolding the child for feeling sorry for himself—

He gives him his hat.

Shielding him from the rain.

"...You..." Xie Lian swallows thickly, clutching the chain around his neck as he looks to the teenager, trembling faintly. "...You saved me..."

If he hadn't convinced the rice merchant to turn back…if the man with the bamboo hat hadn't stopped then, showing him kindness, Xie Lian would have…

"No," Deng Shihong whispers, pointing back to the scene below.

Xie Lian, casting his hatred aside.

Xie Lian, willing to face ten thousand years of curses, just to protect the city that destroyed Xianle.

Xie Lian, facing Bai Wuxiang without powers.

Xie Lian, willing to be stabbed by every person in the square, just to protect them from the plague that was looming ahead.

Xie Lian, screaming—

"I WAS NOT A GOD OF XIANLE, I WAS A GOD OF THIS WORLD!"

And—just as the people began to consider it...

It was the merchant who tried to help him before who spoke against it.

"How could we let him bleed for us now, when we wouldn't help him before?!"

He looks around, seeing what his brother never did.

That humans *can* be selfish, greedy, and cruel.

"It isn't right! How could we live with ourselves, if we did that?!"

But, if you lead by example—

They can also be kind, brave, and *decent* .

"My brother has never been able to beat you," Deng Shihong whispers, watching the same "Because he always looks for an excuse to see the worst in people."

Xie Lian watches himself ascend for the second time, surrounded by a halo of golden light.

"...You show them that they could be better."

And that, if you ask Deng Shihong, is what gods are for.

Aspirational.

To *believe* there could be a third path, no matter how hopeless it might seem.

That, by a Heaven Official's Blessing...

No Paths Are Bound.

Xie Lian falls to his knees—not with sorrow, not anymore.

Numb.

Shellshocked.

Realizing now, that every moment he thought he was alone, every moment he thought he failed, even when he *did* fail—

He was never alone.

He had Hong'er, Wu Ming, and Hua Cheng.

He had Feng Xin— *and* Mu Qing.

He had his parents. He *still* has his parents, holding him tight each and every time Ruoye catches him when he falls.

And he—

He had Deng Shihong, too.

"...Were you always listening for me?" Xie Lian murmurs faintly, still reeling.

The teenage boy sits beside him, wearing torn, filthy rags, but—

When he smiles at Xie Lian, it's lopsided—eyes glinting with the simple satisfaction of helping another person.

"...Did you really think that construction crew just decided to dig in the middle of nowhere?"

Xie Lian strains, his mind stretching back to two centuries ago—

The men who discovered his coffin were too terrified to give him much of an explanation, but...

"...I thought they were building some sort of inn..."

"For workers on a diamond mine," Deng Shihong explains. " *Someone* went and lied about there being a mineral vein nearby..." He winces, puffing out a breath. "They wasted a lot of money, but...they did end up digging up something, at least."

Xie Lian laughs thickly, wiping at his eyes.

"I...I don't even know how to thank you—"

"Don't," Deng Shihong shakes his head, his eyes gleaming with tears of his own. "I..."

He turns his gaze towards Bai Wuxiang, being cut apart by Jun Wu.

"I'm as much to blame for this situation as anyone."

Xie Lian frowns, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"...You tried."

The prince reminds him gently. "Sometimes, that's even more important than succeeding."

Deng Shihong laughs—not unkindly—shaking his head again."...When are you going to start listening to your own advice, Xie Lian?"

The prince falls silent, eyes round--and the ghost looks up towards the sky, thoughtful.

"...I've held his consciousness back as much as I can—but I'm not strong enough to keep him at bay much longer. You..." He looks at Xie Lian, resolved.

"You've always had what you needed to win against my brother." Deng Shihong tells him firmly, even as the memory starts to waver. "Just do...what you've always done."

Xie Lian frowns, reaching for him as his vision starts to fade. "But...what does that mean?!"

Even as he falls through darkness—he hears Deng Shihong's voice in his ears, ringing clear.

"Do what you think is right, your highness—no matter how hard it is."

That, in the end, is what Xie Lian has always done.

And now, as he continues to fall—he sees that light again. Fluttering overhead, plunging down with him, following him into the dark.

His arms outstretched, feeling countless souls streaming past him. Some broken, lost, and alone.

Others reaching, just like him, towards the light.

But sometimes—a soul...

Is a butterfly.

Chapter End Notes

> This has taken us up all the way to the beginning of TGCF Book 5 in the canon timeline! From here, the plotline diverges pretty significantly, so if you haven't read all the way through Book 5 you are (mostly) spoiler free from now on!
>
> Thanks, xoxo
> Evie

Hell Hath No Fury

Chapter Summary

> There's a faint voice in his array, trying to calm him down—
>
> Warning him that, at this rate, he might bring the entire mountain down.
>
> Hua Cheng doesn't care.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

BOOM!

BOOM!

BOOM!

There's a faint voice in his array, trying to calm him down—

Warning him that, at this rate, he might bring the entire mountain down.

Hua Cheng doesn't care.

He returns to his true form, sinking to his knees, smoke pouring out with every breath.

Huge portions of Mount Tonglu have been gauged out from the side of the mountain—boulders the size of temples cast down onto the hills below.

But the Kiln itself—

BOOM!

Hua Cheng slams both fists against the door, the ground trembling beneath it.

It can't be breached.

Not from the outside, at least.

Hua Cheng really will tear the entirety of Mount Tonglu, and the Kiln will still remain intact—like an iron egg, refusing to hatch until something from the inside bursts out.

But he—

He can't wait that long.

Hua Cheng places one palm against the ground, sending his butterflies pouring down, scouting the inner tunnels of the volcano, finding the magma chamber.

"...You feel that, you big, ugly bastard?" He snarls, eye flaring dangerously. "You want me to blow the whole thing?"

In his communication array, there's an irritated sigh.

'Shuo is still in the fields below. And even if he wasn't, you might incinerate half the continent if you force an eruption.'

He Xuan is right—

But Hua Cheng is *desperate* .

A living being can't break through the Kiln.

If Xie Lian does break through, that would mean he—he—

And if he *doesn't* .

Hua Cheng felt that blow earlier.

A strike that reverberated straight into his core, making his teeth rattle.

Pain he hasn't felt since he died.

Xie Lian *never* would have let something touch the ring, even before he knew that Hong'er remained in this world.

If something managed to strike it, even if only once—

Xie Lian's been incapacitated by Bai Wuxiang.

And he's *alone* , with Bai Wuxiang.

Hua Cheng presses both palms against the door again, claws digging into the volcanic rock, fingers straining.

When he's inside the Kiln, he can control it. But outside—

Outside, he might as well be on the opposite side of the planet.

He gave Xie Lian a significant amount of spiritual power when they were falling—

But to defeat a Calamity?

It's not enough.

The only way he could have a chance would be if he had an ally inside, but it's just them, and Hua Cheng can't—

The Ghost King's head snaps up, eye wide as he stares at the Kiln door, fingers going slack.

'...Are you being quiet because you've decided to destroy the world?' Blackwater questions, his tone suddenly tense. *'Because that's not—'*

'No.'

'...Then what are you going to do?'

Hua Cheng rises to his feet, covered in soot, hands nearly black from it, all the way to the elbows.

He turns his head, glancing over his shoulder--evaluating how much space there is between the Kiln door, and the cliff.

'...Hua Cheng.'

Thirty meters, give or take.

Hua Cheng breaches that in one leap, turning to face the Kiln doors once more.

Unsheathing E'Ming from his hip, bringing the blade up—

And slicing deep into his right palm, blood pouring down.

'What are you going to do?'

One eye snaps up, glaring at the entryway of the Kiln with the force of a fading star, one that explodes upon its death.

Fangs extending, thighs tensing—

As he charges.

'Something really fucking stupid.'

'...Hua—!'

BOOM!

Deep, far down within the depths of his soul, the ground rattles.

The flute stops.

A child stops singing a lullaby.

And now, from a long, merciful slumber—

A sleeping god opens her eyes.

BOOM!

Inside the Kiln, Bai Wuxiang slams against the opposite wall—feeling ancient stone fracture and crumble beneath his form.

He sits forward, shaking the dust and rubble from his hair, smirking beneath the mask.

"...Not a bad blow, Xianle," He muses. "Crimson Rain must have given you an extraordinary amount of—"

He looks up—and falls silent.

Xie Lian pushes himself up onto his hands and knees, breathing hard, shaking his head.

"That wasn't...that wasn't..." He looks up—and he, too, grows quiet.

He can't see Bai Wuxiang's actual form—or the walls of the Kiln around them.

But he *can* see the silver light burning overhead, realizing after a moment—

It's not just one large light, but rather thousands, no— *hundreds* of thousands of smaller ones.

Wraith Butterflies.

And surrounding them—

An intense aura, one that he hasn't seen before, but more powerful than any he's seen so far, aside from Hua Cheng's.

A vivid shade of amethyst—burning like alchemical flame all around him.

Click...

"My, my..."

Click...

Heeled boots click ominously against the stone floor of the Kiln, robes of black, crimson, and gold silk gleaming menacingly under the light.

A hammer, long forlorn, finally finds its way back into the hands of its master.

Twirled between expert fingers, wielding it far more deftly than the Prince of Pretenders ever could.

Bai Wuxiang's wife stares down at him, head tilted to the side, eyes burning brightly under the light of her wrath, given form.

"You've aged terribly, my love."

"...You're *dead* ," Bai Wuxiang snarls, scrambling away from her. "CRIMSON RAIN DEVOURED YOU CENTURIES AGO!"

CLANG!

He cuts himself off with a choked cry when her hammer, the same he used to attack Xie Lian before, lands in his chest.

"I was *waiting."*

He staggers back to the ground—and Zhao Beitong yanks her hammer from his chest, his blood spattering across the floor around them.

“EVEN AFTER SO MANY YEARS, HOW ARE YOU STILL THIS PATHETIC?!” She snarls.

CLANG!

“YOU HAD TWO THOUSAND YEARS, OUT IN THE WORLD!” She snarls, slamming the hammer down again. “TWO THOUSAND YEARS, TO MAKE SOMETHING OF YOURSELF!”

CLANG!

A porcelain mask slams down to the floor, and after countless centuries—

It shatters.

“THIS WAS THE *BEST* YOU COULD DO?!”

She yanks the hammer back again—

Staring down at his face.

Her husband’s face, after all of these years.

His hair now streaked with gray—

His expression so twisted with hate, she can barely recognize him anymore.

“YOU KNOW *NOTHING* OF WHAT I’VE BEEN THROUGH!”

Bai Wuxiang snarls, rolling away from the next blow before it can land, snatching Zhu Xin off of the floor, lunging toward her with murderous intent.

"YOU NEVER HAVE!"

CLANG!

She parries his blow with her hammer, holding her own against his strength, muscles straining.

"...And yet," She takes a step forward, pushing him back. "You still haven't found a weapon that I didn't forge for you, have you?"

The Queen of Wuyong smirks, shoving him back until he stumbles, breaking his stance—and nearly strikes him again.

"You've never managed to beat me in a battle where you didn't take me by surprise," Bai Wuxiang sneers, parrying her blow, but—

He can't seem to get one in, either.

"You've never beaten me at all," Zhao Beitong replies, her tone filled with ice.

"And you speak of what I don't know—" She shakes her head, pointing back to Xie Lian with a trembling finger.

"I saw ALL of San Lang's memories—I SAW WHAT YOU DID TO THAT CHILD!" She snarls.

"HOW COULD YOU HAVE CALLED HIM SAN LANG?!"

Xie Lian has seen too many of Bai Wuxiang's memories by now, to not recognize the grief in his voice.

"..." Zhao Beitong looks down at her hammer, streaked in blood. Xie Lian's, and now Bai Wuxiang's.

"...Every mother has her favorites," she murmurs, quietly lethal.

"...You met my youngest, didn't you?" Her eyes slide back over to him, surveying him with...

Utter disgust.

"He returned my dagger to you personally, I heard." Her butterflies swirl overhead—shrieking dangerously. "But not before he saw everything *else* you did."

Her fingers tighten around the hilt of her hammer—finally witnessing a brief flash of shame in her husband's eyes.

As much shame as this half of him is *capable* of feeling, anyway.

"...And if I could," She murmurs, her voice trembling with rage.

"I would give *all* of it back to you tenfold."

Every. Single. Bit.

"..." Bai Wuxiang somehow manages a snort, his teeth streaked with blood.

"What happened to the naive little girl who said she believed we got out of the world what we put into it?"

"You murdered her."

Before he can say another word, the Wraith Butterflies from the ceiling descend upon him, forming gleaming silver chains of spiritual power, hoisting his arms over his head, chaining his feet to the floor.

Zhao Beitong lifts Zhu Xin from where it's fallen to the floor.

"...I gave the world the best of me," She mutters, looking up at him with angry, hate filled eyes, her face illuminated by silvery light.

"And all it gave me in return was *you."*

"...Do you honestly think I'm afraid of pain anymore, Hudie?" The calamity drawls, unimpressed.

It's the first time anyone has called her by her name in millennia, and —

It had to be *him* .

Her lips tremble before she forces them shut, slowly curving into a smile as she runs her fingertips over the edge of Zhu Xin.

With the loving touch of a bladesmith.

"...You forget," she looks up at Bai Wuxiang through her lashes. "I was *your* Guoshi. Not the other way around."

There are things she knows, pain she can cause, that Bai Wuxiang was never taught.

Slowly, the metal begins to glow.

Crackling with spiritual power.

"If you think there isn't a way I can cause you pain," Zhao Beitong pulls Zhu Xin back, "then you are a *fool."*

The sword plunges into the calamity's chest, and—

Xie Lian can hear it.

A faint, punched out sound of pain.

And it makes him freeze with shock.

You grow up afraid of the monster in the dark. Asking your parents to check every shadow before you can fall asleep, but—

You never expect that monster to whimper when it bleeds.

Zhao Beitong yanks Zhu Xin out, staring up at him grimly.

"It's time we finished this."

The younger generation has been left to live with their mistakes for far too long.

It stops, now.

Xie Lian listens as she strikes Bai Wuxiang over and over again.

Just as *he* was cut before.

Just as the prince of Wuyong was slaughtered, before him.

And he...

He doesn't know what the right thing to do is, doesn't know what he should do, even after Deng Shihong's words, but...

When he hears a hopeless, broken sob—

He knows this isn't the right thing.

Because Zhao Beitong, even in all of her rage—

She's weeping.

Not for Bai Wuxiang.

Not for herself.

Just—

She sags, crying even harder when she feels arms wrap around her from behind, hugging her tightly.

Reaching up to clutch Xie Lian's forearm with trembling fingers, whispering.

"Did...Did I make him into...?"

The prince shakes his head, hugging her even more tightly.

"No," Xie Lian whispers, not letting go, even when the princess falls to her knees, sobbing. "This wasn't your fault, Hudie."

And hearing—

Hearing her name spoken with kindness, it—

Zhu Xin falls to the ground with a clatter as she turns her head, crying against his shoulder.

"I...I am *so* sorry," she chokes, clutching the front of his robes. "If...If I had stopped him, back then...You...you never would have..."

Xie Lian keeps one arm wrapped tightly around her back, stroking her hair.

"If you had stopped him, I would have remained the Prince Who Pleased the Gods until the end of my days," he admits, feeling her shudder with guilt.

"...And I might not have ever met San Lang again."

If Xie Lian had to choose between those two things, well—

That makes it easy.

"...I have to finish this," She whispers, catching her breath as she looks up at Bai Wuxiang—bloodied, held back with her butterflies.

For now.

"...No," Xie Lian shakes his head. "You don't."

He rests the side of his head against hers, squeezing her shoulders tightly.

"He's already taken enough from you, Guoshi Tonglu. You don't owe anyone anything else." Xie Lian whispers.

She shudders, and--turns to the side, wrapping her arms around him in return.

Xie Lian falls silent, breathing in through his nose, trying so hard to remain composed, because—

Being in her arms reminds him of being held by his own mother.

"...You remind me so much of my Bolin," she whispers, hugging him fiercely.

"He was good natured, too."

It's strange for Xie Lian to remember that now.

It might have been more than two thousand years ago, but...

Xie Lian is her last living direct descendant.

He might have expected her to find that a little disappointing, but...

That certainly doesn't seem to be the case.

And...

That makes her the last blood relative *he* has left that isn't...Qi Rong.

Even if the link is distant, and they've never met before today, he...

Xie Lian finds himself hugging her back just as fiercely, his own throat suddenly tight with emotion.

Eventually she lifts her head, sniffing. "I...I have to take care of him, I can't hold him like this forever...and he...my boys..."

Xie Lian nods, squeezing her reassuringly.

"He'll be held responsible for what happened to them. I promise. But..."

Xie Lian looks towards the doors of the Kiln, staring blankly through the dark.

"You have children that are still out there," he reminds her quietly. "And they need us."

Zhao Beitong turns her head towards the door, lips trembling.

Hua Cheng and He Xuan.

She was so jaded and distrusting, when Hua Cheng first came to the Kiln. Refusing to ever forge another ghost king again. Believing that he would only become another weapon in Jun Wu's arsenal.

But...he changed her mind.

He *beat* her.

And in the centuries since...he's proved her wrong.

So, so wrong.

He changed the sky itself, making it pour tears of blood.

He forged a safe haven for their kind, a place where all lost souls can find shelter.

And he protected children who died too young.

Just like *hers* .

Zhao Beitong, in all of her life, has never been so proud of anything.

"...Once...once he exits the Kiln again, he'll be even stronger," she whispers, her voice hoarse with emotion. "If I let you out, he'll..."

"This is only a shard of his soul," Xie Lian whispers back. "If you kill him here, he'll just merge with Jun Wu again."

Which, in turn, would also make him stronger.

The only way to deal with the two halves now is to keep them separate—and kill them at the same time.

If they do—he might be finished for good.

"...When you leave here..." Zhao Beitong glances up at Bai Wuxiang hatefully. "You'll forget any connection between this thing and the Emperor. He's cursed his own name."

Xie Lian grimaces.

He guessed that might be the case.

But...

He glances down at his palm, thinking.

"...I’ll figure it out," he answers confidently, leaving her startled.

"...How do you know that?"

"I figured out who Hong'er was, despite the curse," Xie Lian explains with a shrug. "I'll figure this out, too."

But...how could he be so certain?

He squeezes her hand.

"Trust me."

Besides—he's already got a decent hint.

Zhao Beitong stares at him long and hard, before taking a deep breath.

"I can't leave the boundaries of the Kiln—not unless I'm inhabiting someone else's body. I'll try to keep him here as long as I can, but once he gets past me..."

Xie Lian tilts his head to the side.

"...Could you possess me?" He asks, completely willing, despite the fact that he's only known her for a matter of minutes.

Zhao Beitong smiles faintly, biting back a fond chuckle.

"No, child—you're living. It would damage your soul."

She takes a deep breath, her butterflies tightening around Bai Wuxiang as she rises to her feet, lifting her hammer.

"I won't leave this place again until the curse is lifted."

And for that to happen...

Jun Wu and Bai Wuxiang would have to be defeated.

"And...I can't control what he releases to the outside world, once the Kiln is re-opened. You'll have to be quick."

Xie Lian nods, feeling around for Fangxin, lifting it off of the ground—then hesitating.

"...This should be yours," he mutters, handing it to her.

Zhao Beitong stares down at her first celestial weapon—among the most dangerous.

And the blade she has regretted forging the most.

"...I have no need of it," She shakes her head, handing it back. "But you..." She pats the top of his head. "You should have San Lang make you something more suitable."

Xie Lian pauses, smiling back at her.

The idea of a sword from Hua Cheng...actually makes his heart skip a beat.

"Well...if he wants to make me one...then..."

"He will."

She turns back, lifting her hammer.

"You'll have to move quickly. San Lang is just outside. Understand?" She guides him by the shoulders to stand in the correct spot, giving him a direct path forward.

"...Yes," He agrees, reaching up to squeeze her hand.

And then—

He makes the same promise that another young man did, centuries ago.

"When this is over—I promise I'll get you out of here."

"..."

Zhao Beitong smiles faintly, stepping away.

"I hope you are right, taizi dianxia."

CLANG!

Her hammer slams into the ground—and with a slow, violent rumble, the doors of the kiln begin to open once more.

Xie Lian almost smiles, remembering the old saying.

'From the Kiln, only one supreme shall emerge.'

It should be amended now.

To something more like—

'** Or, one Heavenly Official who stumbled into the wrong place at the wrong time.'

"NOW, YOUR HIGHNESS!"

The sound of Zhao Beitong's shout sends him charging out, his head aching as he crosses over the Kiln's barrier.

…Parts of his memory blurring.

Just as Zhao Beitong said they would.

But, with his last instance of awareness before the curse takes over—

Xie Lian isn't worried about that.

And once he's out, before he can take a single breath—

Thud!

Arms wrap around him so tightly—he can barely breathe.

"Gege!"

Xie Lian’s feet aren’t actually touching the ground anymore—but he doesn’t care.

Not when his arms are around Hua Cheng’s neck, and they’re holding each other close.

“I did everything I could to get to you,” Hua Cheng’s voice is hoarse, “I thought I was going to go insane…”

“It’s alright,” Xie Lian assures him, craning his neck so he can press their foreheads together. “I wasn’t alone. And Zhao Beitong—she protected me.”

There’s so much more he needs to tell him, but—

Hua Cheng leans back, looking him over—and his expression darkens.

Xie Lian isn’t mortally injured, but…

He’s certainly worse for wear.

One cheek is badly bruised—a split lip, cracked ribs, a stab wound in his torso…not to mention where he was hit in the chest…

“…I’m sorry, your highness, I—”

He falls silent when Xie Lian’s mouth presses against his—a soft, gentle kiss. Far more shy than he was when he first confronted Hua Cheng about his identity, but—

The point of it is more to reassure Hua Cheng, than anything else.

“Don’t apologize, San Lang—you saved me.”

It’s funny—back in the old days, he used to be the one promising Hong’er that, if he worked hard enough, he could be the one protecting Xie Lian one day.

And now that they’re here…

His heart swells with pride at the thought.

Hua Cheng only seems slightly mollified, pressing his lips against Xie Lian’s cheek to heal the bruise there, one of his butterflies swooping down to deal with the wound in his stomach.

Xie Lian jumps slightly, arms tightening around his neck—and the ghost king pulls back.

“…If that’s too much for his highness, we can wait until you get back to Xuan Zhen,” he mutters, sounding slightly bitter about the idea—

But Xie Lian shakes his head, smiling sheepishly.

“No, no—I’m just…I think I’m a little…”

“What?”

“…Ticklish,” he admits.

He doesn’t think there particularly odd—not when Hua Cheng quite literally has a butterfly on his stomach at the moment—

But something about it makes the ghost king chuckle—half amused, half exasperated.

“…Even when you’re wounded like this?”

“Well—”

A low rumbling starts behind them—growing rapidly until Hua Cheng has to tighten his grip on Xie Lian’s waist to keep him standing.

“…Is that Bai Wuxiang?” He mutters, hands against Hua Cheng’s chest. “Is he escaping already?!”

Hua Cheng shakes his head, the empty socket where his right eye once sat flaring with light as he looks around.

“No—Zhao Beitong’s strength is on par with my own. She can hold him for a little while.”

“Then what is it?!”

“…Just because she can stop Bai Wuxiang from exiting the Kiln…” Hua Cheng mutters, pulling Xie Lian away from the Kiln doors, “Doesn’t mean she can stop everything.”

“…Is it going to erupt?” Xie Lian stumbles beside him as Hua Cheng guides him down the path.

“He’s trying that, too—but he won’t be able to breach the main magma chamber—I made sure of that.”

Even if the volcano does erupt—he can’t trigger another eruption like the kind that destroyed Wuyong two thousand years ago.

Not while Hua Cheng is holding it back, at least.

Xie Lian’s mind flashes back to being in one of Bai Wuxiang’s temples, and Pei Ming making a comment about Hua Cheng being adept in fire magic—only for the ghost king to shrug it off.

‘I dabble.’

Enough to hold back a *volcano?*

Xie Lian opens his mouth to ask, but before he can—there's another violent tremor, this time so strong, Hua Cheng has to jump, briefly lifting them both into the air in order to avoid it.

"...Then what is it?"

"The Souls of Wuyong," Hua Cheng answers grimly.

Watching as a different kind of eruption begins to build.

One of resentment.

"...He's releasing them."

Xie Lian's stomach drops as they descend low enough to find one of the travel arrays that forms the escape route, passing through.

"What will happen when he does?!"

"They'll spread across the continent like a disease," Hua Cheng keeps glancing back over his shoulder as they run, keeping an eye on the mountain. "Attacking cities first. Possessing and corrupting mortal souls, spreading sickness..."

"...Like human face disease?"

Hua Cheng hadn't wanted to say that specifically—knowing how it would make Xie Lian feel.

"It's possible, your highness."

But he doesn't deny it, either.

"...I have to report this to the emperor," he mutters frantically. "He'll have to descend, this time..."

Hua Cheng scowls at the mention of Xie Lian returning to the Heavens —to *Jun Wu* in particular.

"We'll have to discuss something before you go. But for now—we need to focus on getting out of Tonglu in one piece."

BOOM!

Which is easier said than done.

Hua Cheng is remarkably quick, moving Xie Lian as they flash from one travel array to the next—

But for the magic to be effective, there has to be at least a kilometer between each entry and exit.

And at this rate, they won't...

"HUA CHENGZHU!"

Xie Lian's chest lurches with relief as he turns his head in the direction of the shout.

"SHUO! ARE YOU ALRIGHT?!"

Hua Cheng looks over, finding the demon barreling across the plains behind them—

And, conveniently enough, he's brought their ride.

"I'M FINE!" They have to scream to be heard over the rumbling of Mount Tonglu, the air becoming so thick with resentment, Xie Lian almost chokes on it. "WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU GUYS DO?!"

"IT WAS BAI WUXIANG!"

The mention of that makes Shuo, a child of Xianle, grow ashen.

"...HE'S BACK?!"

"I'LL EXPLAIN WHEN WE GET OUT OF HERE!" Hua Cheng barks.

(If they get the chance, that is.)

"...WHERE'S LANG QIANQIU?!" Xie Lian cries, looking around for his aura, suddenly twisted with worry for his student, but—

"HE CAPTURED QI RONG!"

There's another loud rattle from Mount Tonglu, and he screams—

"HE DIDN'T LIKE BEING AROUND DIAN DIAN WHEN HE'S LIKE THIS, SO HE WENT AHEAD—HE SHOULD BE OUT BY NOW!"

"YOU SHOWED HIM THE ESCAPE ROUTE?!"

"I DIDN'T THINK DIANXIA WOULD BE HAPPY IF HE GOT FRIED!"

Shuo glares at Hua Cheng, the darkness in his cheeks coming purely from the exertion. "I WAS BEING CONSIDERATE!"

(Obviously.)

"...WHAT'S WRONG WITH DIAN DIAN?!" Xie Lian cries out, suddenly concerned for the panda spirit, until—

Hua Cheng wraps an arm around his waist, and with a single leap, they land behind Shuo, riding on the panda's back.

Now shifted into his true form—

The Vengeful Forest Demon, Sen Dian.

Larger than two elephants, fangs bared, roaring as it charges ahead.

Barreling across the plains faster than Hua Cheng could run—

(Run while guiding a blind man and respecting his dignity just a *little* too much to carry him.)

And devouring any resentful spirits in their path with a snap of its jaws, roaring ferociously.

Shuo glances at Hua Cheng over his shoulder, covered in soot like the rest of them, and in spite of the situation—

He smiles impishly.

'What did I tell you, gege?'

Hua Cheng rolls his eyes, holding Xie Lian close as he keeps them both steady.

'...That a pet would be useful.'

'I guess you could say he made this situation more... bearable ?'

Hua Cheng stares back at him flatly, sliding his eyepatch back in place, unimpressed.

'We'll see if you still think it's worth it when Tai Hua and Heaven's Eye end up in a duel.'

'...SHUT U—!'

BOOM!

Behind them, a black column of cursed energy spews from the caldera of Mount Tonglu, forcing Sen Dian to take a winding path to avoid falling boulders.

Xie Lian's hands both fly up, covering his ears to protect them from the sudden, sharp explosion of sound.

'Hold on, your highness,' Hua Cheng's arm tightens around him, allowing Xie lian to press one side of his head against his chest, more effectively dampening the sound against the thicker material of his robes, covering the other ear with his free hand.

'We're almost there.'

Shuo glances back over his shoulder, looking the two of them over.

It's not like they weren't all over each other before—they were—but now, there's something far more...comfortable about the intimacy between the two of them.

Like...there's an understanding, almost.

Does...

Shuo's gaze turns to Hua Cheng, who is far too focused on Xie Lian's discomfort to notice.

...Does Xie Lian *know?*

They slip through the last array, and now, with all of those authorized to activate it exiting range—it shimmers and disappears behind them.

Xie Lian lifts his head as Hua Cheng helps him down, breathing the air curiously, finding that...

This place feels so...familiar.

"YOUR HIGHNESS!" The sound of Feng Xin's voice makes Xie Lian sigh with relief, squeezing Hua Cheng's hand before he goes to him.

"Did you manage to deal with Bai Wuxiang? Were you hurt?" He places a hand on Xie Lian's shoulder, looking him over.

"...Not badly," Xie Lian shakes his head. "It's a long story—he's trapped in the Kiln for now, but it won't last. Did you send word to Jun Wu?"

"We tried, but no communications have been going through," Mu Qing's voice drifts over as he walks up the forest path, looking the two of them over with faint relief. "We couldn't even ascend to the Heavens—something is blocking entry and exit."

"...What?"

"I don't know how long it's been going on," Mu Qing mutters, scratching the side of his head. "But ever since we got out of Mount Tonglu—it's been silent. And that was more than a day ago."

...An entire day?! Xie Lian was really in the Kiln for that long?

There were benefits to the delay—Mu Qing was able to heal all of Pei Ming's injuries, and they were able to purge Pei Su of whatever *foul* concoction he'd ingested, but...

Xie Lian turns back to Hua Cheng, fretful.

"If we can't get a hold of the Emperor—which cities will be targeted first?"

"...Anything with a high enough concentration of humans," Hua Cheng explains, stepping in behind him. "Places like the Imperial City, Qinghe, Gusu...maybe as far north as Langling."

Xie Lian stiffens at the mention of Gusu, his thoughts flashing to Shi Qingxuan, but…

"…How can we possibly defend that wide of an area?" He mutters.

"You don't," Hua Cheng's answer is simple—and seemingly brutal, until he explains.

"The only way you can actually stop it would be by eliminating Bai Wuxiang—anything else would be a temporary measure."

Xie Lian frowns, thinking.

"...If that's the case...then it's more complicated than just having the emperor descend..." Xie Lian mutters. "I...when I fought Bai Wuxiang inside the Kiln, I saw..." He winces, rubbing the side of his head—straining to remember it clearly.

"...The Bai Wuxiang we know...is half of a split soul," he explains carefully, making Mu Qing and Feng Xin stiffen with shock.

Pei Ming, who has been relatively quiet up until this point, looks up.

"How did you learn that?"

"...It would take too long to explain right now," Xie Lian sighs, still struggling to remember. "But...I don't remember who his other half is, I..." He winces. "I don't know..."

Hua Cheng eyes him for a moment, watching the strain it's taking on his god—and squeezes his shoulder gently in reassurance.

"We'll figure it out, your highness."

He says that—but how could he be so *sure?*

Xie Lian bites his lip, still visibly worried.

How can they even begin to assess the situation, when they can't even reach the Heavenly Emperor, much less figure out the identity behind that mask.

A face blurred in Xie Lian's memories, but…why?

That's when he pauses—remembering there was something else. Something he had to do, the moment they got out.

Hua Cheng reaches down, tucking a piece of hair behind his ear.

"Don't worry, your highness. Give yourself a moment. Whatever it is…"

"It's not that."

Xie Lian frowns, twisting his head around.

"I was supposed to ask…"

Then—

BOOM!

BOOM!

BOOM!

BOOM!

BOOM!

There's a series of loud bangs—no, almost like the tolling of a bell—followed by flashes of blinding light.

…Heavenly light.

And when it clears…

All of the heavenly officials who were once standing around are gone.

Leaving only Pei Su and Banyue sitting on the ground some distance away, staring at the now empty clearing around them in shock.

"…He…really used that?" Pei Su mumbles, shocked.

Hua Cheng, by comparison, is notably less curious.

More like *enraged* .

Stomping over and grabbing the fallen official by the front of his robes—giving him a harsh shake.

“WHERE ARE THEY?!”

Pei Su swallows hard, rattled by the harsh treatment.

“His majesty—Jun Wu used a spell to summon the entire Heavenly Court,” he answers hoarsely. “But he…he’s never resorted to that before.”

A tactic he would only use in a desperate situation.

But Hua Cheng isn’t afraid. Not the way Pei Su is.

He’s *livid* .

“H…Hua Chengzhu,” Banyue murmurs, watching as the Ghost King turns away from them, E’Ming slicing into the ground furiously—

Forming a new travel array.

“Where are you going?”

E’Ming flies back to his waist as he begins to step through.

“He wouldn’t summon *every* official.”

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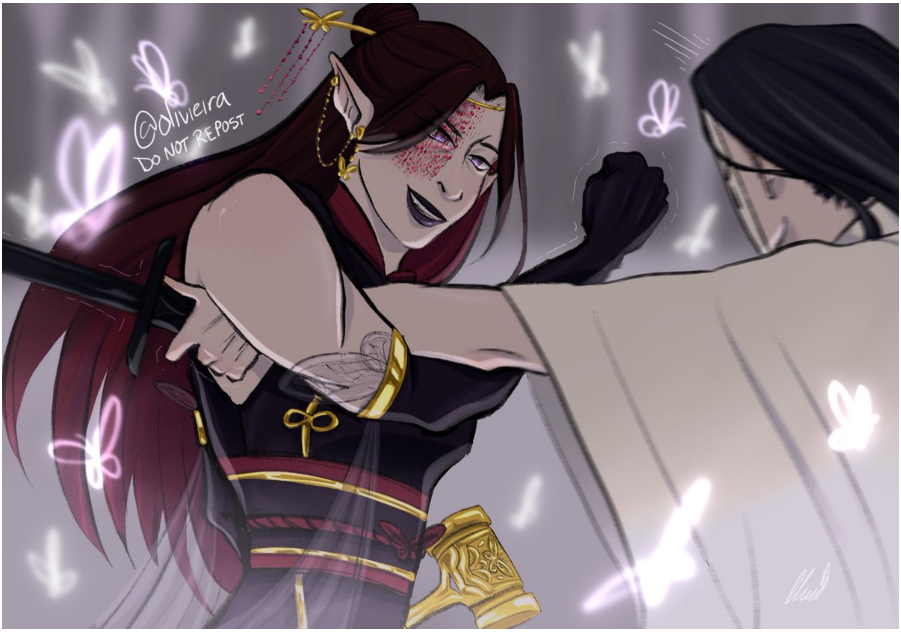
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Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Olivieira for their beautiful artwork!

xoxo, Evie

Unmasked

Chapter Summary

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> "A series of critical matters came up at once, and I'm afraid the full court will be required to address it."

“Lessons are dismissed for today.”

Such words seem odd, coming from the mouth of a man who is barely older than most of the students in the room—

But he speaks so sagely, none would question his authority.

And yet, as the students begin to clear out—one remains.

“Master Lan?”

His teacher glances over at him, raising an eyebrow as he oils his Guqin.

"What is it?"

His disciple squirms slightly, half in discomfort, half in righteous indignation.

Which means whatever he has to say—it's bound to be interesting.

"It's about the new student."

Lan An's other eyebrow raises to join the other as he sets down his oiling cloth, waiting.

"I've been training her privately for some time. She's only new to you."

"...But what's the point of her even *being* here?" His student glares.

"Explain yourself clearly."

"...I understand that you train men and women," he grumbles, crossing his arms. "Which makes no sense to me, given that we're a martial sect—but whatever."

"Then what has bothered you so much about this?"

"...I had to train for YEARS to be accepted to the advanced level!"

He throws up his hands, exasperated. "And I would UNDERSTAND if she was some sort of prodigy—but she ISN'T!"

"...Given that she only started with the basics when I began training her, she's actually doing passably well."

"Well enough for the advanced group?!"

He glares at Lan An, balling his hands up into fists. "I came here to train with the best—not spoiled girls from rich families, who just wanted to learn cultivation to pass the time!"

"..." Lan An sighs, shaking his head.

"If I only accepted the best in the advanced group, I wouldn't be teaching you."

That stops the young man in his tracks, his jaw going slightly slack.

"If you make assumptions about that which you cannot know, you are doomed to fall flat."

The student falls silent, staring at him in faint, dazed surprise.

"...You...but...she doesn't..."

Lan An stares, watching as the young man flails to find a complaint to latch onto, his pride searing from that comment.

"...Could you at least make her dress appropriately?!"

"Appropriately?"

"She dresses like a MAN!" He snaps, shaking his head. "It's ridiculous!"

"...Have you tried on women's clothes?" Lan An raises an eyebrow. "I imagine they would be difficult for training."

"Have you, sir?"

No—but Xiong Li...

Lan An shakes his head.

"Regardless of your opinion—she won't be here for more than the rest of the year, one way or the other. Until then, I expect all of my students to be treated with respect."

Outside--the very student in question has taken to a rooftop on the west side of the city.

Knees pulled up against her chest, twirling a closed fan between her fingertips.

"I thought you'd be at your own temple around this time," Xiong Li comments, dropping down onto the roof ledge to sit beside her.

Shi Qingxuan shrugs, spinning the fan a little faster.

"I said hello to gege this morning."

There's no grave she can visit now—instead, she visits his divine statue at least once a day.

To tell him how the day before went.

To tell him that she misses him.

To tell him that she's sorry.

"Then what brings you out here?"

"...It's away from the other students, I guess."

They don't particularly *like* her—not that Shi Qingxuan can blame them.

Her getting lumped in with the other advanced students is just another example of people making exceptions for her, even now.

"But..." her eyes drift toward the city square below—one of the areas most damaged by the rampage before Xie Lian's third ascension.

However, one part of the square remains untouched.

"I've never seen a statue like that, before."

"Oh?" Xiong Li follows her gaze.

There's an old, long dried well—the top of it piled over with stone, sealed away from the world.

But, kneeling beside it is a hooded figure of stone.

One hand on the edge of the well—shoulders hunched.

Like a man in mourning.

"...That is a very, *very* old story."

One that their people had forgotten, in the years that the people of Gusu lived in chains, the name of the city changed to Daqing.

But now, with their freedom—old stories are being retold, and lost things...have a way of finding their way back.

"...You've heard about how, during the days of Xianle, my ancestors were sent to rule the city of Gusu?" Xiong Li murmurs. "I told you about that, right?"

"I think so," Shi Qingxuan agrees. If he didn't—then she heard it somewhere.

"...Did you ever think that was odd?" Xiong Li swings his legs slightly. "This far north? Solidly in what should have been Xuli's territory."

Shi Qingxuan never thought about it, no—but suddenly, General Pei's historic campaign seems a bit more...sensible.

"I suppose so," She admits crossing her arms. "I always assumed it must have meant the people of Xianle were there first."

Xiong Li nods, looking at the city around them, bustling, full of life—so different from one year ago.

"Before Xuli unified into one kingdom—Gusu was founded by travelers from the central plains." He looks down toward the statue, lonely, faceless, hunched next to the well.

"And one of them was a martial god."

Shi Qingxuan perks up, curious. "Which one?"

Xiong Li smiles—having forgotten that Shi Qingxuan was a goddess herself for several centuries. So, for her, the odds she might have *known* the god are quite possible.

"It was before your time—so long ago, we don't even remember his name."

But his name was never necessarily the most important part of the story.

"Back then, there were raiders from the west—constantly abducting women and children from the central plains, never to be seen again. The martial god of the central plains founded Gusu to protect them."

But as the old stories go—the founder of Gusu was a Vengeful god. A widower, whose children had been taken from him.

"...That doesn't look like any divine statue I've ever seen," Shi Qingxuan murmurs, puzzled. "It's so...it looks like..."

"A normal person?"

Xiong Li nods. "That was the intention. In all of the stories—it's always said that he lived among mortals, rather than as a god. And that he made an enemy of the God of Death. He built the Great Walls of Gusu to keep the people safe—but the city has been tested ever since."

That's what they tell themselves, anyhow—and Shi Qingxuan can understand why.

After countless centuries of being targeted by wars, plagues, and most recently being held hostage for over a century by the likes of Wen Jiao—

It can begin to feel like Gusu is somewhat cursed.

"...Why is he sitting beside the well like that?"

"No one really knows that part of the story anymore, I'm afraid." Xiong Li shrugs. "Some people say his child was thrown down a well. Others say it has something to do with his ascension, but...we'll never know for sure."

Shi Qingxuan stares down at the figure, feeling almost...

Similar, in a way.

Lost. Separated from the ones she loves. In a new city, far from everything she's ever known.

Sometimes...grief can feel like sitting beside a sealed well.

"...Lan An says you've been doing well, lately."

Well—yes.

Well enough to save her own life? No. At the beginning of this process, Shi Qingxuan thought she was incapable of cultivating to that level.

Now, she believes she's able to, but that would take...years.

At most?

She has five months. Probably less than that.

"If you ask the other students, he's playing favorites. And..." Her hand drifts down to her stomach. "I think one or two of them have guessed."

She isn't showing through her clothes yet, but...there are signs.

And once those become obvious—she doesn't know if she'll even be able to train with the others anymore.

Lan An wouldn't stop her, no—

But the other students are already...

She looks up at the sky, forlorn—then grows silent and wide eyed.

"...Xiong Li..."

"Yes?"

"...What's..." Shi Qingxuan rises to her feet, taking a step back, her eyes fixed on the darkening horizon. "What's...what?"

The prince moves with her, following her gaze...and when he sees the cloud forming in the distance—his expression grows somber.

"Get inside."

"Wh—?"

"Go to the palace, and don't come out!" Xiong Li orders her firmly, hand flying to the sword at his waist, leaping down from the roof.

"BUT WHAT IS IT?!" Shi Qingxuan calls after him, slightly panicked.

"...TROUBLE!" Xiong Li shouts back.

His sword catches the wind beneath him, carrying him through the streets—and with one signal, the city bells begin to ring, sending citizens running inside.

Gusu might be a city of rebuilding ruins—but it's also a city of survivors.

Xiong Li lands atop the new battlements—some of them still in construction, and in an instant, his cultivation partner lands beside him.

"...Do you know what it is?" He mutters, gripping his sword tightly.

"I tried communing with the Heavens."

"And?"

"Complete silence."

That's never comforting.

"...Did you try Xie Laoshi?" They rarely reach out, given that he's always...tragically busy, but when they do, he always—

"Nothing."

And *that* makes Xiong Li's stomach sink faster than anything.

"It would seem, whatever this is—we're on our own."

Normally, this is where Xiong Li would make some wry joke about pitying anyone who has to deal with Lan An after throwing off his afternoon meditation routine, but...

As he watches the swirling cloud grow closer and closer, even he doesn't have room for any jokes.

A swirling mass of resentful souls, twisting around the gates of Gusu in a small vortex—

Until one figure steps out, smirking up at them—wearing robes of red and white, his sword gleaming like black jade.

"Well, well, well..." A familiar voice calls out to them.

"It's good to see you managed to crawl back from the dead, Xiong Li."

Lan An stiffens, stepping in front of his cultivation partner protectively—and Wen Sicong smiles.

Son of Wen Jiao, banished from Gusu after his father was killed by Xie Lian.

"You'll be useful, later."

One who saw taking over the leadership of Gusu as his birthright.

"..." Xiong Li's eyes narrow as he steps around Lan An, glaring down at their former captor—the man who watched a city of hundreds of thousands live in chains.

"I told you to stay out of my city, Wen Sicong."

"...Ah, but you see, it's not *your* city," the would-be prince smiles, leaning against his sword. "I'm afraid I've been told I can take the entire thing."

"Over my dead BODY!" Xiong Li snarls, drawing his sword.

Wen Sicong smirks, eyeing Xiong Li's throat.

As though he's already imagining a new iron shackle there.

"That can be arranged, little prince."

With a roar, and the notes of a guqin—

A new battle begins in Gusu.

Xie Lian struggles to push himself onto his hands and knees, his head spinning—and to his surprise, one of his arms gives out, sending him crashing back down onto the marble underneath him.

Thud!

"Your highness!" Feng Xin cries, staggering to his feet, hurrying to his side. "Are you alright?!"

"I...I'm fine," Xie Lian mutters, taking his friend's arm gratefully as he helps the prince rise to his feet. "Just... dizzy..."

"All of that noise was probably too much," Mu Qing mutters, standing beside them with his arms crossed. "What the hell is this?!"

They're in the Grand Martial Hall—surrounded by countless other Heavenly Officials, all of them disoriented, loudly voicing their shock, when—

"I would like to apologize to all of you for bringing you back so abruptly."

Finally, the emperor's voice breaks over the crowd.

"A series of critical matters came up at once, and I'm afraid the full court will be required to address it."

The rumbling din of voices grows silent—and Mu Qing finds himself stepping closer to Xie Lian's side—

Watching Jun Wu, sitting upon his throne.

Looking down on every single one of them—all like this is some sort of game, and he’s the only one aware of the fact that it’s being played.

Xie Lian rubs his temple, preparing himself to speak up, but—

“First, I would like to congratulate General Tai Hua.”

That gives everyone pause—including Lang Qianqiu himself, staring over at Jun Wu in a clueless state of shock.

“…Me?”

“On capturing Qi Rong,” Jun Wu explains calmly. “No doubt he’s had a role to play in this mess.”

With a snap of his fingers, the jar under Lang Qianqiu’s arm opens—revealing the green ghost in a puff of smoke—

But before he can scream and shout, or start any of his usual nonsense—he’s gagged and chained with spiritual bonds.

"Given that he's responsible for the death of your family...as you requested before, his fate is for you to decide," Jun Wu muses, eyeing the creature at his feet, head tilted to the side in an almost morbid form of curiosity. "Though I'm assuming you'll want to execute him."

Xie Lian winces—not sure if *now* is the best time to deal with Qi Rong, who is the least of their worries, but certain that his former student would agree—

And yet...Lang Qianqiu frowns, his expression...

Conflicted.

"No, your majesty. I'd prefer to keep him in custody."

True to his word—Jun Wu doesn’t overrule the decision, but he does seem mildly surprised.

“I must admit—after your prior outbursts in court, I’m surprised by this change of heart.”

“…Spending more time in the mortal realm can reshape your priorities,” Lang Qianqiu mutters. “And I was lucky enough to have a Guoshi who taught me the value of mercy when I was young.”

Xie Lian wasn’t expecting the praise, especially not at a moment like this, but…

His lips twitch into a small, soft smile.

Jun Wu’s eyes flicker between the two, wheels turning.

“…I’m glad to see that you and Xianle have gotten on better terms,” he smiles. “It’s always heartwarming to see a student and his teacher mend fences.”

However heartwarming the moment might be—

Pei Ming is uncharacteristically unwilling to go along with the theater.

“Did you drag all of us here to deal with a creature like Qi Rong?” The general speaks up, raising an eyebrow. “Because in that case, it seems like overkill.”

“…Hardly,” Jun Wu replies flatly. “The moment Xianle returned from Tonglu, I realized how dire the situation was.”

While the two of them are caught up in their discussion—Pei Ming showing a rare stroke of defiance—

Xie Lian's attention returns to something else.

Someone who has been standing beside him this entire time—but...

Also, someone who is used to not being seen.

Used to having nobody look his way, when there's something more important going on.

And in that moment—

Mu Qing forgot to hide the fact that his hands were trembling.

Not until Xie Lian reaches for one of them, squeezing tightly.

Mu Qing grows still, looking up—seeing Xie Lian staring at him intently, and even though he can't actually see the look on Mu Qing's face...

The weight of that spiritual shackle as it gleams up at him feels so heavy.

It must be because Mu Qing told him that they needed to talk before Xie Lian returned to the Heavens, but now...it's too late for all of that.

But, before Mu Qing can tell him they should talk later—

After so many years, he finally asks.

"...Did someone hurt you, Mu Qing?"

The question Xie Lian wished he had asked for centuries.

The question someone *should* have asked, back then—

And all the more, now.

When Mu Qing is oddly stubborn about not returning to the Heavens, despite being cleared of all charges.

When he seems *terrified* to be here.

"...I..." Mu Qing stares at him, his voice turning slightly hoarse—eyes flickering towards the throne.

Only to find Jun Wu staring right at him.

Calmly—with no malice in his gaze.

And yet, Mu Qing grips Xie Lian's hand even more tightly, swallowing hard.

"...Xianle," Jun Wu's voice calls to him now—and Xie Lian is hesitant to turn his attention, but...

Mu Qing lets go of his hand.

"It's my understanding that you came into conflict with Bai Wuxiang in the Kiln."

"..." The prince takes a deep breath, turning to him. "Yes."

That sends a wave of terrified whispers throughout the Martial Hall.

Gods who remember the terror that the first calamity unleashed upon the world.

What it could mean, that even *Jun Wu* could not eliminate him completely.

"And I've learned something important."

Xie Lian steps away from the crowd, approaching the throne, speaking loudly enough that everyone in the room can hear him.

"The emperor did disperse Bai Wuxiang eight centuries ago—but he's reformed."

More whispers echo across the hall, petrified.

'...Is that possible...?'

'If...if he can just reform...how can he be stopped?'

"No matter how many times he's dispersed, he'll just reappear," Xie Lian explains. "Because he's one half of a split soul."

Now, the entire hall goes silent with shock—and Jun Wu raises an eyebrow.

"That's quite a shock."

After all—souls like that are a rarity. Only an object of myth and theory.

The suffering and agony someone would have to go through, for such a thing to occur...is almost beyond human comprehension.

"Are you sure, Xianle?"

"I witnessed it myself," Xie Lian confirms. "His other half is likely unable to control Bai Wuxiang's actions—but as long as he lives, the White Clothed Calamity will reform, over and over again."

Pei Ming crosses his arms, taking that in—trying to think of a way around it, but—

There's something odd.

Jun Wu looks... *sorrowful* .

"...Then I suppose there's only one person we can ask regarding that matter."

Xie Lian raises an eyebrow, but before he can ask who—

Crack!

With a snap of Jun Wu's fingers, a pair of minor martial gods step forward—

Dragging a man in chains.

Mu Qing and Feng Xin both gasp, stepping towards him.

"...Guoshi?!"

Xie Lian's stomach drops as he rushes forward, "Mei Nianqing?!"

But, before he can get to him—

Pei catches him by the shoulder, holding him back.

"Your highness...it's best if you keep your distance."

"...I thought..." Xie Lian tugs at Pei Ming's grip, but doesn't seriously try to get away, trapped in a daze of shock. "I thought you were in Mount Tonglu?! How did you get captured?!"

"Because," Jun Wu clicks his tongue with disappointment. "He followed you to Mount Taicang."

Mei Nianqing locks his jaw as he's forced to his knees before the emperor, his face streaked in grime and cuts.

As though he's already been viciously beaten.

"Why...would he have followed me there?" Xie Lian mutters, confused. "After all of these years, he finally..."

After eight centuries, why would he try to make contact with Xie Lian now?

Clearly it's because of his past connection to Bai Wuxiang—but why wait until it got this far? He—

"...Your highness, do you really want to know the truth?" Jun Wu asks softly—his tone...cautious.

"No matter how painful it might be?"

Xie Lian blinks, taken aback by the question, but...he nods, and Jun Wu sighs...

As though he takes no pleasure from this.

"When we interrogated him, he told us he had come to slay the other half of Bai Wuxiang's soul."

Confirming what Xie Lian had already said, but...

If that was true, why would he have come to Mount Taicang?

“But now, since we have him here…” Jun Wu rises to his feet, boots clicking as he descends from his throne, kneeling before the once proud Guoshi of Wuyong.

His fingertips slide under Mei Nianqing’s bruised, bloodied chin—gently tilting his face up towards him.

And Jun Wu looks so gentle.

So *merciful* .

As he asks—

“Are you an ally of the White Clothed Calamity?”

And oh—how those blue eyes stare up at him.

With such wrath.

“…Bai Wuxiang has no allies.”

Mei Nianqing stares back with no fear in his gaze—his shoulders straight, even as two martial gods hold his arms behind his back.

“He only has slaves.”

The grip on his chin grows tighter—however subtle the movement might be.

“And what are you?”

Mei Nianqing almost smiles.

He was never the right sort of person for the role he’s been given.

Never the sort to step forward or speak his mind. And of all of his years, he has only enjoyed two of the roles placed on his shoulders.

A father, and a teacher.

If it had been his choice, he would have married the girl from the garden.

Raised their son together.

Died a happy man.

Instead, he is the narrator of a story that was never of his own making.

The one who survives.

The one who goes on, and on, and on.

If there was someone born to speak truth to power, it was not him.

If there was someone with the strength to topple tyrants—that was never his role to play.

If such a person lived in Wuyong, it was Hudie.

But not him.

And yet, life is not so methodical.

It doesn't look into a man's heart before it assigns his fate, and debate whether or not he has the strength to bear it.

If it did, things would never have come to this.

"…I am the one who failed him," Mei Nianqing replies slowly, his gaze never wavering.

"Many times."

But Jun Wu is just one of his failures.

And at the end of the horizon now, having traveled as far and as long as he can—

Mei Nianqing knows enough to understand that he was an inherited failure.

That he was barely a child that day, standing on the cliffs with his own Guoshi.

That the Princes of Wuyong—and their fates—were an atrocity that never should have been laid at his feet.

But it's been over two thousand years—and just as long since Mei Nianqing has been a child.

And if he can't stop it here—

Then the burden will only grow.

And land on the shoulders of someone even younger.

Even more blameless.

He looks toward Xie Lian, his eyes filled…

With so much guilt, regret, and shame.

“…I’m so sorry, your highness.”

Xie Lian grows still, surprised to find his Guoshi addressing him, rather than Jun Wu.

He’s sorry for so many things.

For thinking he was protecting Xie Lian—when all he ever did was fail him.

For not being there, when his student needed him most.

For—

For running from his past; and abandoning the boy in the process.

“…You’re sorry?” Jun Wu muses, curious.

"That's an interesting choice of words."

Mei Nianqing pales, and Xie Lian's stomach drops.

"I didn't—"

"You came to Mount Taicang to slay the other half of Bai Wuxiang," Jun Wu forces Mei Nianqing to look away from Xie Lian, turning his eyes back to him. "Is that true?"

"...Yes..." The Guoshi of Xianle spits out between clenched teeth, almost like he's been forced to.

Jun Wu nods—and then his face turns sorrowful again, asking the next question as though it pains him—

"Is he in this room right now?"

Xie Lian—like nearly everyone else in the room—takes a startled step backwards, practically paralyzed with shock—

"...Yes..."

Jun Wu sighs, hanging his head.

As though this is one of the most *difficult* things he has ever had to do.

"...I see."

"I don't..." Xie Lian swallows hard, heart rattling in his chest. "I don't...understand..."

"Xianle," Jun Wu lets go of Mei Nianqing, straightening as he turns away from him. "There's nothing to be afraid of—we already have him in custody."

It takes Xie Lian a moment to understand what he means—at first, thinking they have the other half of Bai Wuxiang in custody, but...

Really, he means they have *Mei Nianqing* in custody. Almost...

As though he's trying to reassure Xie Lian that Mei Nianqing won't hurt him.

Something that had never even occurred to Xie Lian—not until now.

But why would he? Unless...Unless he was...

Nausea swells in Xie Lian's stomach—and if not for Pei's grip on his arm—

His knees would have given out.

"...If the other half of Bai Wuxiang's soul aged and passed—what do you think would have happened?"

Xie Lian shakes his head, every horrible memory he's ever had flashing through his mind, but—the worst of him—

Could any part of him have *ever* done that...done that to...

"I...I couldn't..." Xie Lian mutters, but—

He doesn't sound sure.

"Mei Nianqing could have gone anywhere," Jun Wu points out quietly. "But he followed your family. When Bai Wuxiang returned—he sought you out."

Xie Lian shakes his head, lips trembling.

Trying to think of a reason—that what Jun Wu's saying couldn't be true, but—

If he's the reincarnation of the other half of someone's soul—how could he prove that he *isn't?*

And—what other reason could there possibly be for Bai Wuxiang's obsession with him?

Xie Lian shakes his head, color rapidly fading from his face, his shoulders beginning to tremble—

"He isn't." Everyone looks back to Mei Nianqing, kneeling on the floor, in chains--with absolutely no reason to lie.

"What—?"

"It isn't you, your highness." He repeats firmly. "In a thousand years—you could never come close to being anything like him."

Xie Lian falters, his lips parted—and as Jun Wu's gaze turns back to Mei Nianqing, eyes unreadable—

The prince feels someone rush to his side, grabbing his hand—and whispering into his ear.

"It was him."

Xie Lian grows still, his eyes widening as he hears his friend's voice.

"It was him, dianxia."

Answering the question Xie Lian asked nearly a thousand years too late—

'Did someone hurt you, Mu Qing?'

An act of faith, from the most cynical person he knows.

Someone who has *never* been believed.

To the point where he would rather lash out, run away, or outright lie to avoid...

To avoid that horrible feeling.

Of telling the truth, and having no one believe you.

For a moment that feels like a lifetime, Xie Lian is silent.

Then—

Mu Qing stumbles as the prince pulls him back—moving him behind Pei Ming and Xie Lian, not...

Not saying a word. Not asking a single question.

Mu Qing bites the inside of his cheek, eyes flickering to the back of Xie Lian—to Feng Xin, watching them both in confusion.

"Your majesty."

Jun Wu looks up, in the middle of trying to wrestle a new answer from Mei Nianqing, who has remained stubbornly silent, coughing blood onto the floor.

Only to find Xie Lian standing in front of him.

Back straight, hands at his sides.

"...Yes, Xianle?"

"For many years, I suspected exactly what you did."

Many of the gods stop, turning their attention to the shackled, twice exiled god.

The Laughingstock of the Three Realms.

Startled, because they never...

Realized how naturally his presence could command a room.

When he desires to.

Having become so accustomed to Xie Lian's unassuming, laughable nature for so long...

They forgot it was a choice.

"When I was young, I was arrogant, entitled, and naive," Xie Lian admits. "Not so different from the mindset of Bai Wuxiang."

Xie Lian cannot see it—

But Jun Wu's pupils narrow—just a fraction.

"In many ways, I thought his destruction of Xianle was punishment for my arrogance--just as you told me. That I had caused all of this pain, but..."

Xie Lian lifts his chin.

For centuries, when standing before the emperor, he has only ever bowed his head.

"If I am not the reincarnation of the Prince of Wuyong, as Mei Nianqing just said—after everything I saw in the Kiln...It..."

Saying the words feels like pulling teeth.

Going against everything he has ever told himself.

Everything Xie Lian was ever *taught* to believe.

"It wasn't my fault."

But the moment he does say it—

This weight, one the size of mountains, one Xie Lian never even knew he was carrying...

Begins to ease.

Jun Wu stares at him, eyebrows slightly raised.

"...That's an inspiring display of growth, Xianle," he replies, half encouraging, half confused. "But I don't know if now is the time or place to discuss—"

Xie Lian, for the first time in his life, dares to interrupt him.

"And if it wasn't my fault," He murmurs--somehow, even without his sight, able to look Jun Wu directly in the eye.

"I don't deserve these shackles anymore."

That was what Jun Wu asked him, months ago—standing in this very palace.

Not if Xie Lian had learned his lesson. Not if he needed the shackles anymore.

If he *deserved* them.

And now, he has the nerve to raise his eyebrows in surprise.

"...If that's a discussion you would like to have, of course I would be happy to, Xianle," Jun Wu murmurs. "But now isn't the time."

"...He would be an asset to us fighting Bai Wuxiang," Pei Ming finally speaks again, still standing by Xie Lian's side. "It isn't rational to keep him in chains when facing such a threat."

"...That's what he did last time," Feng Xin says, slowly.

Remembering how infuriating it was, fighting a war with their hands tied behind their backs.

Almost as if there was something placing pressure on them from above.

Something that wanted them to lose.

Something that wanted *Xie Lian* to lose.

"...Taking the shackles off after this much time would be a delicate process," Jun Wu replies calmly. "It's possible that it could harm him. And for now, we need to focus on who we're going to deal with—"

"If it was dangerous, why keep them on him for so long?!" Mu Qing glares.

Jun Wu's eyes snap to Mu Qing, the one who seemed to set Xie Lian off in the first place—his eyes narrowing sharply. But before he can say a word—

Xie Lian lifts one hand, silencing everyone.

"I think I know why," his voice is calm—nonthreatening. "I just have one question."

Of all of those involved--he's the only one who hasn't been accusatory to Jun Wu.

Not yet.

And his tone is calm—enough so for the emperor to ease, finally turning his gaze back to him.

"What is it, Xianle?"

"Where is the Godslayer, right now?"

Jun Wu grows still.

It's the first time he's hesitated, answering a question—but when he does, he sounds as calm as ever.

"I would assume it's in the armory, with the rest of the Heavenly Arms."

"Why don't you have one of your deputies fetch it, then?"

The silence that follows is deafening.

"...I don't get it," Feng Xin frowns, stepping forward to join the rest of them. "What does that have to do with this?"

Jun Wu's expression is smooth, his brows pinched in faint confusion. "I was thinking the same thing."

"Because it's not there." Xie Lian concludes firmly. "Bai Wuxiang had it, in the Kiln."

With a snap of his fingers—Ruoye unwinds.

Not from around his neck, no—but from around his *hand* .

Showing a gaping stab wound in his palm—one that is still bleeding, however faintly.

"When I left, San Lang healed all of my injuries."

Including the wounds in his stomach and chest—which were far more serious, and would have taken more time and energy to address.

"But this won't heal."

"...That's quite a leap, your highness," Jun Wu replies calmly. "Perhaps he didn't notice it."

"There's no way."

Pei Ming is the one to say it—and when everyone looks at him, the general just shrugs, throwing both of his hands up.

"I'm sorry, but there's just no fucking way."

He traveled with Xie Lian and Hua Cheng for days in Mount Tonglu—and the ghost was healing his *scrapes* .

Before Jun Wu can respond to that, Xie Lian shoves his hand behind him wordlessly—

For Mu Qing to examine.

The martial god places his hands over the wound for a moment—palms glowing with spiritual power, but...

"...He's right," Mu Qing concludes, pulling back.

"So," Xie Lian shrugs as Ruoye wraps around his hand once more, sealing the wound. "What I'm wondering is—both times that you were supposed to have the Godslayer in your possession, it turned up in the hands of a Calamity, and a god ended up injured—or worse."

Hearing that—Pei Ming goes still, his own gaze returning to the emperor, turning to stone.

Jun Wu glances around at all of them, wheels in his mind turning—

And there's one person in the room who knows him better than anyone.

Who knows that, if there's an explanation—Jun Wu will find it.

He'll make it someone else's fault—and while everyone is distracted, licking their wounds, he'll perfect the edges of his mask once more, sealing it around his flaws once more.

Like a snake, shedding its skin.

But at this moment—he's unguarded. Thinking.

In this moment, under growing pressure, demanding more and more of his concentration—the mask has slipped.

Now—

He's vulnerable.

"I was protecting my family."

Jun Wu pauses, looking down at the man before him.

Genuinely confused.

"...What?"

Mei Nianqing lifts his head once more, blood streaking down his chin from how many times he's tried to say it.

To tell the truth.

But there's at least one secret that Jun Wu can't stop him from telling.

"I stayed in Xianle for thousands of years," Mei Nianqing rasps. "I inserted myself into countless positions in the royal household over the centuries, I trained his highness, and looked after him—because I was protecting my family."

The only family he had left.

Xie Lian stares at his teacher, his jaw slack, and—

His throat is tight.

Jun Wu hasn't reacted—hasn't processed what Mei Nianqing actually means, not until he says the words:

"Xie Bolin was my son."

The only surviving son of the Queen of Wuyong.

Born under a star of solitude.

Because his parents loved one another—deeply.

And they always have.

Jun Wu doesn't move.

Doesn't take a single breath.

His eyes never leave Mei Nianqing, who still has the nerve to look him in the eye—without an ounce of shame.

"You...always thought he was your legacy!" Mei Nianqing spits, pointing towards Xie Lian, his arm trembling from the strain of defying him. "But he has ALWAYS been the BEST of her—and NONE of you!"

Everyone else watches in confusion—not knowing who Xie Bolin was, but...

"...You're lying..."

Pei Ming looks back towards the emperor, who has taken one step away from the former Guoshi of Wuyong, his—

His expression is still blank with shock.

"She..."

"...Didn't let her husband touch her, after Zhang Wei died," Mei Nianqing reminds him.

"I wonder if he found it strange, when she suddenly invited him back into her bed."

Now, the general's jaw drops—and Jun Wu—

BOOM!

Does exactly what Mei Nianqing knew he would.

Launching himself forward in an instant—pinning his old teacher to the wall by the throat.

So violently—the wall of the Grand Martial Hall cracks beneath him.

Mei Nianqing doesn't express any pain, his feet dangling slightly as Jun Wu's grip on his throat tightens.

"Temper, temper..." He rasps, offering a bloodstained smile. "You used to have such self control."

Jun Wu's grip tightens, and he barely winces.

"That's...why you tortured that poor child, isn't it?" Mei Nianqing's eyes drift to Pei Ming. "You just...can't keep someone's attention on you...for very long..."

BAM!

The punch cracks his jaw—sending blood splattering.

"...I already sent someone to deal with him," Jun Wu replies, his voice dark.

Slowly, he lifts his head—surveying the shocked, horrified faces of the gods standing around him.

Scales of Retribution

Chapter Summary

> "Well," He lets Mei Nianqing go, letting him fall to the ground, his tone...
>
> Completely different.
>
> "It was a good run." He glances around at the lower officials, all of them pale and horrified, rolling his eyes. "Oh, don't look so scandalized. Do you think half of you would be here if there was some sort of moral requirement to entry?"

Chapter Notes

> CONTENT WARNING: there is a moment at the end of this chapter that could be triggering to those who have experienced sexual assault, please continue with caution.

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Completely different.

"It was a good run." He glances around at the lower officials, all of them pale and horrified, rolling his eyes. "Oh, don't look so scandalized. Do you think half of you would be here if there was some sort of *moral requirement* to entry?"

He pulls a white cloth from his sleeve, carefully wiping Mei Nianqing's blood from his hands—making sure to pick it out from underneath his fingernails as he walks away.

"Guoshi, Guoshi..." he sighs. "What did you think was going to happen, provoking me like this?"

He tosses the bloodstained cloth down on his throne, rolling his shoulders, letting out a heavy sigh.

As if all of this has been so exhausting, and now—now he gets the chance to relax.

"It was actually rather cruel, if you think about it. Before..." Jun Wu shrugs, twirling his fingers, working the numbers in his head. "I would have gotten rid of maybe...eight of them. But now..." He leans against the arm of his throne, crossing his arms.

Staring at Mei Nianqing with a look of cold pragmatism.

"I'll have to kill them all."

He tilts his head to the side—finally letting that old smirk come through.

The same look he had on his face the first time he looked his brother in the eye, and called for the guards to bring him a whip.

"But not you, Guoshi. I'll let you watch."

He flexes his fingers, mentally preparing himself—then straightens, eyes fixed on one thing.

Xie Lian.

But--before he can take another step towards him—someone grabs his arm in an iron grip.

Stopping his wrist before he can reach for the prince.

"...Ming Guang," Jun Wu sighs, almost irritated as he turns to look at the general. "How is it that you are *always* so loyal until the most inconvenient moment?"

"You don't want to hurt the prince," the martial god reminds him carefully—his eyes like steel. "Let him go."

Jun Wu tilts his head to the side, watching everyone else in the room —martial gods reaching for their weapons, civil gods backing away...

And he smirks even wider.

"I never said that I included Xianle in that head count, did I?" He shakes his head, laughing softly.

"I never necessarily wanted to hurt you, either...but at a certain point," He shrugs, "It became a matter of convenience."

It was only a *little bit* personal.

"Besides," his eyes return to Xie Lian, emotions unreadable.

"I have plans."

Several martial gods seem to take this as a sign, all of them lunging at once, but—

DONG!

A loud, overwhelming sound cuts through the air, golden light flashing through the windows as every single god in the Grand Martial Hall falls to their knees, clutching their ears.

DONG!

Even Pei Ming—his teeth clenched—hand trembling as he still clutches onto Jun Wu's wrist, his strength fading.

DONG!

And with the third toll of the bell—

Xie Lian sees every single aura around him suddenly go dark.

As all of the gods have their powers sealed.

"Xianle, Xianle..." Jun Wu clicks his tongue, disappointed. "You're so, so clever, I'm shocked you never thought of such an important detail..."

His boots thud gently against the marble floors as he walks toward him.

"You've spent so much time with Crimson Rain...I'm certain he's told you all sorts of things about Calamities, so," Jun Wu comes to a halt in front of him, using his boot to press under Xie Lian's chin, lifting his head from the ground.

"This was the worst place to expose me."

And now, Xie Lian has the slow, sinking realization...

Jun Wu is right.

He's at his *most* powerful in his own territory.

Which, for him—would mean the heavens.

That's exactly why he summoned all of the gods here.

Every possible person that could stand against him is now trapped and powerless in a space where Jun Wu is omnipotent and invulnerable.

Jun Wu stares down at Xie Lian's face, contemplative—then, lifts his head, calling the last name anyone would expect—

"Ling Wen."

Pei ming twists his head around—

And to his shock, there his friend is.

Striding forward, kneeling before the emperor.

"Your majesty."

"There's been a sudden influx of openings in management," Jun Wu sighs, almost bored.

"And I don't think there is anyone who would enjoy eradicating general incompetence than you. Would you like your old position back?"

Ling Wen glances around, surveying all of the gods who mistreated her.

Used her.

Never thanked her.

Undermined her.

She looks at everyone—except for Pei Ming.

"Nothing would please me more, your majesty," she smiles—rather unkindly—rises to her feet, then turns to Jun Wu's deputies and underlings, commanding them as if she never left.

"Imprison the officials in their palaces for now."

They immediately go to do as they're asked—the other gods helpless to move—to even say a word as they're dragged from the room.

Except for Pei Ming, writhing furiously, even as he's too exhausted to stand.

“LING WEN!”

She doesn’t reply, facing away from him.

“You won’t even look me in the EYE when you betray me?!”

The civil goddess crosses her arms behind her back, tranquil.

Not even batting an eye.

“That would defeat the point of stabbing you in the back, Pei-Xiong.”

One of the deputies goes to remove Xie Lian—but Jun Wu holds up a hand, shaking his head.

“I’ll escort Xianle myself. Leave him here.”

Mu Qing and Feng Xin struggle at the sound of that, but—

It’s no use.

Within a few moments, the doors to the Grand Martial Hall shut.

Jun Wu kneels down, almost considerate as he lifts Xie Lian into his arms, carefully setting the god down on his throne.

The prince flinches away when he feels Jun Wu grasp at his hand, only for him to receive a warning squeeze.

“Don’t be difficult, I’m being patient.”

Xie Lian swallows hard, locking his jaw—feeling Ruoye coil and hiss with disgust—but orders it to stand down, slithering back up his sleeve as Jun Wu examines the wound on his hand.

“…He’s always been prone to unnecessary violence,” the emperor sighs. “I’m sorry for that.”

The apology…

Actually seems sincere.

Even if Xie Lian’s skin is still crawling with fear—for the other gods, for Mei Nianqing…

For whatever Jun Wu plans to do next.

“…What are you going to do now?” He whispers.

“…” The Emperor looks up, staring at Xie Lian’s face.

Taking in that fear. The sadness—the shattered trust.

Remembering how it felt, when he was on the other side of this.

“That is entirely up to you, my dear prince.”

Xie Lian doesn’t reply—only swallows hard, sitting stiffly.

“See, I know you don’t want any harm to come to your San Lang,” Jun Wu sighs, always considerate in that way. “But, I also know that you must be worried about your friends, too…so, I’ll give you extra motivation to be convincing.”

“…What are you talking about?”

“I know as much about the Kiln as anyone,” Jun Wu explains, tilting his head. “And I know how clever you are. Do you really think it never occurred to me that you might figure it out?”

Xie Lian doesn’t reply—but—

From Jun Wu’s perspective…

It’s rational.

“You heard five bell chimes when I summoned you,” Jun Wu points out calmly. “Isn’t that right?”

He watches the growing horror on Xie Lian’s eyes.

“But there were only four gods present.”

Xie Lian, Pei Ming, Mu Qing, and Feng Xin.

Yushi Huang took her people home—and Lang Qianqiu wasn’t with them at the time.

“You should know me well enough by now, Xie Lian.”

Crack!

With a snap of his fingers—there’s the sound of rattling chains.

“I always have a contingency plan.”

Xie Lian can’t see the way the figure is dropped down from the ceiling, suspended in spiritual shackles—

But he recognizes the aura.

Vividly green, with a burning core-almost like a flame.

Trembling in pain and fear.

“…SHUO!”

Xie Lian lunges forward—only to be slammed back against the back of the throne, and arm locked around his waist.

“Ah, ah, ah…” Jun Wu tsks, watching the demon with morbid curiosity. “Don’t be difficult, your highness. I’m being *patient* , remember?”

“…Just let him down,” Xie Lian whispers, unable to stand listening to the ghost’s terrified, pained gasps.

Knowing—

That’s how he was hung before.

“Please—let him down!”

“Hmmm…” Jun Wu strokes his hair. “Will you do as I say?”

“I…”

Crack!

Shuo screams—and Xie Lian—

“YES!” He cries, his voice breaking. “Yes, I’ll do whatever you want—just don’t hurt him!”

Jun Wu releases his fist, and the ghost falls to the ground with a sharp *thud!*

“Good, now—call him.”

Xie Lian hesitates, his ears turning slightly red.

“…Do I need to give you a little more motivation?”

Xie Lian shakes his head vehemently—and, in spite of everything—

Ren Song pushes himself up on his hands and knees, glaring at the emperor.

“It’s because his password is a proposition, you sick, senile old FUCK!”

Before Jun Wu can lash out in response, Xie Lian squeezes his eyes shut, speaking into Hua Cheng’s private array.

“…San Lang!”

His cheeks are bright red, and almost immediately, he hears Hua Cheng’s response—

Half frantic, half delighted.

‘…Gege? Where are you?’

“The…the heavens,” Xie Lian explains breathlessly—knowing Hua Cheng won’t question it.

Not when Xie Lian had to say that.

Twice.

‘Why bring you up in such a violent fashion?’

“…The situation seemed dire,” Xie Lian swallows hard. “His majesty thought I was hurt.”

“You were,” Hua Cheng points out. “If he was so worried, why did he send you to Tonglu with me in the first place?”

“That’s…a good point,” Xie Lian mutters, swallowing hard. “I’ll ask him when I get the chance.”

There’s a pause, then—

“Is Shuo with you?”

“What?” Xie Lian asks innocently, trying not to think about the fact that Shuo is, indeed, trembling in the corner. “Is he not with you?”

“He disappeared when the rest of you did.”

“…Oh,” Xie Lian lets his worry drip into his tone. "Well...Lang Qianqiu was transported here with Qi Rong...maybe Shuo panicked, thinking Lang Qianqiu would execute him, and now he's trying to find a path up here...?"

Hua Cheng's tone shifts ever so slightly. "...Maybe. But he isn't answering me."

"Well...I'm sure he knows you wouldn't approve," Xie Lian points out gently. "He can be a bit head strong."

"Perhaps..."

"But...if you do get a hold of him, Lang Qianqiu said he didn't want Qi Rong killed—knowing that might calm him down."

"Really?" Hua Cheng asks, surprised.

"That's unexpected."

"...It's impossible to predict what anyone will do in a situation of life or death," Xie Lian points out. "I never would have expected you and Mu Qing to get along so well on Mount Tonglu. People surprise you."

There's a brief, pregnant pause.

"...So, there's really not an emergency?" He whines, sounding absolutely petulant. "I was excited to come and steal you away..."

"I mean, there *is* an emergency," Xie Lian reminds him with an indulgent, if not slightly stressed laugh. "But Jun Wu is making a plan very soon."

"How soon?"

"...San Lang..." Xie Lian's ears turn an even brighter shade of red as he reaches up, twirling a lock of hair around his index finger. "Don't be impatient, it's a serious situation...be good..."

"...But I only got one kiss from gege before he stole you away."

Xie Lian claps a hand over his face, and in spite of everything, his cheeks are on fire.

"Well...when this is over you...I'll..."

He can practically hear the smile in Hua Cheng's voice.

"You'll what, your highness?"

"I...ah..." Xie Lian clears his throat.

He's more than painfully aware of the fact that Jun Wu is listening closely—and that he's suddenly gotten rather...

Rigid with annoyance.

"Kiss you...again..."

"What a breathtaking offer," Hua Cheng replies breathlessly.

Xie Lian doesn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"Maybe we should talk about this later..." The prince mutters, not sure how much longer he can keep this up—though he has to admit, Hua Cheng making him feel like he might die *does* help take his mind off of the all consuming existential terror.

"Maybe," Hua Cheng agrees. "But, if gege used his San Lang's password more often, we could talk about this all the time."

Now that Jun Wu has heard that password, he finds the idea infinitely unamusing.

"I, ah...I'll reach out when I'm leaving the heavens again."

Xie Lian promises. "You should go to Ghost City until then...since that's where you would be the safest."

"...Gege is kind to worry about me," Hua Cheng replies softly. "But don't keep me waiting long, your highness."

"...I won't," Xie Lian whispers—his voice just as soft.

Just like that, the connection is severed, and Jun Wu rolls his eyes, pulling Xie Lian to his feet.

"Well, that was absolutely charming," He says, sounding vaguely disgusted. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised."

He pauses, looking down at Shuo, who hisses in retaliation.

"...And I can certainly tell he was the one who raised you," Jun Wu concludes, staring at Shuo like he might at a poorly trained house pet.

"You said you wouldn't hurt him if I did what you said," Xie Lian points out quickly, standing between them.

"And I won't. For now."

Jun Wu reaches forward, grasping Xie lian by the shoulder as he leads him away, towards the exit of the Grand Martial Hall.

"What happens next is dependent on you."

Shuo tries to start after them, but is stopped by a heavy, stubborn chain around his ankle—glaring at Jun Wu.

Knowing perfectly well that, if Jun Wu harms a hair on the prince's head, Hua Cheng will tear him limb from limb, but...

He isn't in a position to push his luck, watching as the two disappear out the door.

The minute they do, he rolls over, yanking at the chain in frustration.

Then—he realizes something.

Turning his head out the window, listening as the bell tolls.

Suppressing all of the Heavenly Officials across the heavens, but...

The sound isn't hurting *his* ears at all.

"...I'm not a..." he mutters slow at first, then—

He smiles.

Because Jun Wu can only work off of the information that he has—

Which is that Shuo lost most of his resentment after being attacked by Bai Wuxiang on the Terrace of Cascading Wine.

Which *was* true.

Until Shuo consumed most of the remaining Ghosts in Mount Tonglu.

Now, he's just as powerful as he was before—if not more so.

And he *isn't* a Heavenly Official, which means...

Shuo leans down for a moment, pressing his ear to the ground—making sure no one else is coming—then he straightens up, clicking under his breath.

Something small wriggles underneath his robes--crawling down one of his sleeves—

Then, a small, furry little head pokes out, staring up at him curiously.

"Qi Qi," he whispers, looking from the Red Panda Spirit, to the chain around his ankle pointedly. "Hurry!"

The animal squeaks softly in acknowledgment, scurrying down to gnaw at the spirit chains, but...

Even with Qi Qi using all of his force—they don't budge.

Jun Wu must have predicted that he would still have some spiritual power left, it seems.

...But he couldn't have bound everyone in the Heavens like that, and if he summoned every official...

"...look at me, look at me!" he whispers urgently, prompting Qi Qi to look up at him, tail twitching. "...Find Yin Yu, and bring him back here!"

The creature tilts its head to the side, as if to silently ask—

'What if I can't find him?'

And Shuo sighs.

"...If you can't, bring Lang Qianqiu—but that is a LAST resort, okay?! Look for Yin Yu! He probably has snacks!"

And *that* is all of the motivation Qi Qi needs.

Shuo huffs, laying flat on his back as the red panda scampers off, glaring at the ceiling of the Grand Martial Hall.

He can absolutely see why He Xuan left the first chance he got—this place is *miserable* .

And...for Xie Lian's sake, he hopes Hua Cheng is quick.

The door of the Palace of Xianle slides open with a soft *swish* , the Emperor's hand firm in his as he leads Xie Lian to take a seat.

"...You can't really plan on killing all of us," the prince points out quietly. "The mortals would start to notice."

They already have.

The death of the Water Master, the most widely worshiped god aside from the emperor himself, was a once in a generation shock for the mortal realm—

But removing every single god?

"Believe it or not," Jun Wu muses, fingertips trailing down his arm, "This wasn't my plan."

Xie Lian sits silently, his lips pressed together tightly, almost to the point of going numb—

And Jun Wu sighs, leaning back.

"We can both pretend your curiosity isn't getting the better of you, or you can go ahead and ask me whatever it is that you're thinking, Xianle."

"...I saw all of Bai Wuxiang's memories, up until the fall of Xianle." Xie Lian blurts out, almost loathing himself for not being able to hold it back. "I saw...that you swallowed him after Zhao Beitong forged the two of you."

Albeit unintentionally, but she did.

“Yes,” Jun Wu rolls his eyes, hand resting on the back of Xie Lian’s chair. “Lovely woman. What’s your question, Xianle?”

“...I don’t know if you’ll answer me honestly,” Xie Lian admits, hands gripping the arms of his chair tightly.

“That’s fair,” the emperor shrugs. “I don’t really trust myself to answer honestly most of the time either.” He drums his fingertips against the chair’s back, thinking. “How about we make a deal?”

Xie Lian doesn’t decline—waiting for the emperor to explain.

“I’ll answer you honestly, if you do the same.”

He leans down, speaking directly next to Xie Lian’s ear, breath tickling in a way that makes the prince lean away.

“A question for a question. Do we have a deal?”

“…Fine,” Xie Lian mutters, gritting his teeth.

“Then ask away, Xianle.”

“…I know you can’t control what he does when you two are separated,” Xie Lian admits. “But when you have his soul contained in your body…who is in control? Him, or you?”

“…” Jun Wu blows out an annoyed sigh.

“You said you would answer me honestly if I agreed to the deal,” Xie Lian reminds him.

“Yes, well, that’s before I knew you would ask the worst one!” Jun Wu, always tranquil, always reasonable—

Sounds almost childish, snapping at him now.

“Why does it matter?”

“…How could it *not* matter?”

“Because it wouldn’t make a difference, unless…” Jun Wu tilts his head to the side, watching Xie Lian with a curious light in his eyes.

“…Goodness, Xianle—you’re trying to assess my accountability, aren’t you? How noble. How fair.”

“Wouldn’t you want me to be?”

“…It makes no difference,” Jun Wu steps away from his chair. “If you, by some cosmic joke, manage to defeat me—I’m too dangerous to be kept alive. The threat of Bai Wuxiang’s continued existence guarantees that.”

He isn’t wrong. Xie Lian sees flashes of humanity in Jun Wu, but Bai Wuxiang—

He will never stop. Not until he’s put down.

“I was sentenced to die the day I was born,” Jun Wu recalls coldly. “I don’t care how blameless I may or may not be if the outcome is the same.”

“…It’s not the same,” Xie Lian murmurs, eyes flickering around the room, tracking the sound of his voice as he moves. “Not when you care so much about how people perceive you.”

Jun Wu manages a bitter laugh, staring out the window.

“You mean how they remember me.”

Xie Lian falls silent.

“The only merit in this conversation is over whether or not you’ll execute me like a criminal, or put me down like a dog.”

Jun Wu places a hand on the glass, delicate.

So easy to break.

But he can *choose* whether or not to do so.

“We made a deal.”

Jun Wu pulls his fingers back from the glass, curling them into a fist.

“…The truth would be that I have no idea how to answer you.” The emperor mutters, turning back towards Xie Lian.

“How much of an explanation do you *actually* want?”

“All of it.”

He—

He *laughs* .

“No—no Xianle—you don’t.” He wraps an arm around his middle, hunched over for a moment as he composes himself.

“If you knew everything—you wouldn’t want me to explain myself.”

His stubborn silence is answer enough.

They agreed.

“…Fine,” the emperor sighs, losing his mirth.

“…The person you saw two thousand years ago—the man Zhao Beitong assassinated—he wouldn’t have done any of this.” Jun Wu admits, avoiding the reflections in the mirrors around him.

“But that doesn’t mean he wouldn’t have *thought* about it.”

Xie Lian can’t really see where Jun Wu is going with it, but he listens.

“…When I was about…five, maybe younger—memories are so blurry, when you’re that age—there was a guard, I’m sure you saw the one—with the hunting knives?”

Xie Lian grimaces, nauseated from the reminder.

“…Yes, you remember,” Jun Wu concludes. “So—when he was doing what he did, I just…couldn’t be here anymore. Sometimes I would be lucky, and I’d pass out—but if I didn't…”

His eyes drift to the side, remembering.

“I would imagine hurting him.”

Xie Lian can’t blame him for—

“But that wasn’t good enough.” Jun Wu mutters. “Because I couldn’t hurt his *body* more than he had hurt mine. But as I got older, my imagination grew. I thought of ways I could torture him, how he would scream and beg—and it felt good.”

The prince doesn't react—and Jun Wu almost smiles.

"I know you understand that much. I've seen you with Qi Rong."

"...I think anyone would understand that," Xie Lian admits. "It's human."

"No, no..." Jun Wu shakes his head. "When someone hits you, you want to hit back. *That* is human. When someone hits me, I..." He falls silent, staring down at his hands.

"I want to cut off their hand."

Xie Lian's lips press into a thin line, and the emperor slowly circles the room.

Like, if he's going to be forced to explain it all, he can't be expected to stand still, too.

"It's like...there's a perfectly balanced scale between you, and every other person."

As he speaks, he conjures one up between his fingertips—made from pure spiritual power.

All so Xie Lian can see it.

"And when someone hurts me," the scales tilt to one side, "there's this natural desire to push back. To seek justice. To bring those scales back into balance. But when you do..."

Xie Lian's eyes track the golden scales as they shift back into place.

"Do you notice something?"

The prince eyes them silently, thinking.

"...The other side of the scale never dipped below the balancing point."

"Exactly," Jun Wu breathes, staring at the scales in his hand. "And that's why it can't be enough."

Because even if things were restored exactly to the way they were before, that person never knew what *Jun Wu* felt like.

They were never brought *low* .

"Even Blackwater's form of revenge wouldn't go far enough for me."

And that—is admittedly brutal.

"I'm not whole again, while the scales are just even." He explains quietly. "I'm not happy. I'm not better. Not until I take it...just a little bit too far. Until *I'm* the one who committed the greater crime."

Now, the scales tilt in the opposite direction.

"Because in that moment, they're the one who is weak. At that moment, I become powerful. In that moment—I'm not the *victim* anymore."

And hearing that—

It doesn't make Xie Lian feel angry or disgusted, even if it should.

It makes him...

Horribly sad.

Because that aspect of Jun Wu—it's by design.

The one who set him on this path in life...

Created a scenario where a child felt that his only way of escaping victimhood was by *becoming* his tormenter.

In the most literal sense of the word.

"So, when I say I imagined torturing that guard...It wasn't just what he had done to me," Jun Wu snaps his fingers, and the scales disappear. "Physically, he had already done the worst—short of permanently maiming or killing me."

Imagining simple physical trauma wasn't enough.

"I imagined myself killing his daughter."

Now, Jun Wu watches the look on Xie Lian's face beginning to change. Unsurprised—knowing that this is the point where it always gets to be a little too *far.*

"I imagined myself making him watch."

Because then, he would know what it felt like to be helpless. He would feel the reality of what he did to Jun Wu. What it *meant* to torture a child.

"And it's not that I hated the girl," Jun Wu shakes his head. "Or that I *actually* wanted any harm to come to her."

He had no opinion of her one way or the other, back then.

"It was just...she wasn't even a person, when I was imagining it. She was just...a means. I gave her no depth. No consideration to what the broader loss of her life would actually mean—I just wanted to hurt *him."*

Her personhood was only relevant because her father loved her. And through that love, Jun Wu could cause pain.

More pain than what he had felt.

And when he did, he would feel *powerful* .

"...But you didn't kill his daughter," Xie Lian recalls quietly.

"No, I didn't."

Jun Wu shakes his head. "I knew it was wrong. And I wanted to be a good person."

But Xie Lian is starting to see his point.

Even back then, Jun Wu always had those thoughts.

He saw it, when the prince whipped his brother for the first and only time after they switched lives.

He chose not to hurt him more than necessary.

But he gave into that urge once—and when he did...it felt good.

He *enjoyed* it.

"And all through what happened to me, to Wuyong, I always held myself back," Jun Wu recalls quietly. "Maybe if I hadn't, things would be different."

He rests his hands on the back of Xie Lian's chair, contemplative. "But I think it begs an interesting question."

He drums his fingertips—and the prince can feel the movements against his back.

"Say you're a sadist, like me—one with decent self restraint."

Xie Lian is almost ready to debate that last point, but—

"What do you do, if you're immortal?"

He closes his mouth, suddenly brought to silence once more.

Because what *do* you do?

"If I had lived a normal amount of time, I would have died a normal person, I think."

Because in the first century or so of his life—Jun Wu made mistakes. Mistakes with horrible consequences.

But most of them were manipulations by Bai Wuxiang—and very few of them were ever malicious.

"And in the twelve hundred years that followed—I still tried to be good."

To some extent, he really was successful.

Bringing peace to a warring era.

Raising a new generation of gods—even if it was more of a hollow echo of the Heavenly Court that existed before.

"And then...I met you."

Xie Lian has to fight the urge to snap, closing his eyes.

"Was it...really because of that *one* thing I said?"

Jun Wu actually snorts, covering his mouth and shaking his head. "Oh, no—no. That phrase may have drawn my attention, but..." He looks Xie Lian over. "A spoiled child using a phrase he doesn't understand...is nothing to me."

Of course—it angered him, but it wasn't the only reason.

"Every...every single thing about you reminded me of *him."*

Xie Lian doesn't need to ask who he means.

His brother.

"And as I watched you succeed, how beloved you were, I couldn't stop myself from thinking..."

Jun Wu stares at the windows again.

Scowling at the faint, warped image of his own reflection in the glass.

"...Was my entire life meaningless? Could he have succeeded all along? Was my survival Guoshi's last cruel joke?"

Ah.

Xie Lian's hands tighten on the chair.

"It was almost as if...If I could make *you* fail, I would validate...everything I had been through." Jun Wu turns away again.

"I don't *know* if the other half of me influenced me to do that. I just know that I've always had those thoughts, even before I was split in two."

"If you've always had those thoughts...then how do you not know?"

"Because—" Jun Wu rubs one hand against his temple. "I already told you—when I was young, I would fantasize about horrible things, and I *knew* they were wrong, but I never struggled to control myself."

And even after the collapse of Wuyong, when he swallowed the other half of him—trying to erase his own failures—he didn't struggle to control his darker impulses.

"But I...ever since that day, I've...gone through phases," he admits.

Ebbs and flows.

Following a noticeable pattern.

"His voice gets louder over time. My temper gets worse. Those thoughts are more frequent—until they're all I think about—and then, Mount Tonglu opens. He goes his separate way, and I...it's quiet again."

Jun Wu's hand still goes to his temple, slowly sliding down his face.

"That's all there is to tell."

His influence might thin Jun Wu's restraint. Might make him slightly less stable—

But he doesn't think he ever lost the ability to *choose* .

"...Do you think you would have done all of this without him?"

"I don't know."

As Jun Wu promised—he doesn't *lie* .

"I couldn't know. But...I know it got easier over time."

Because after spending so long trying not to give in to his worst impulses...

It felt *good* , just doing what he wanted, no matter how horrible it was.

And the next time that barrier began to thin...the next time he was faced with another familiar, young, talented, beautiful god—

He didn't try to fight it.

He told himself crossing those lines didn't matter anymore—because Bai Wuxiang had already done it.

And if he was going to cross that barrier no matter what Jun Wu did—why waste the effort in trying to hold it back?

"But it doesn't matter if he pushed me or not."

Jun Wu walks back around Xie Lian's chair once more, standing in front of him.

"Because he isn't some alien creature that sprung into existence when my wife cut me apart, Xianle." The emperor murmurs, looking down at him, watching as Xie Lian shrinks back from the truth.

"He's just...the worst part of me, given autonomy." Jun Wu shrugs.

And sure, maybe he could twist himself into knots trying to decipher if he had a chance. If he had been given the childhood he deserved, if life had been fair—

Maybe, he would have been a good person.

Or maybe, he was just always meant to be cruel.

There's no way of actually *knowing* , but...

Jun Wu looks over Xie Lian's face, watching the way his expression contorts with sadness, disappointment—

And resentment.

...He always has a chance at trying to find out.

"Have I appropriately answered your question, Xianle?"

Xie Lian turns his head away, his jaw locked—but he nods.

Jun Wu bends down before Xie Lian's chair now, bringing their faces level as he looks the prince over, taking in every change in his expression.

"Now, what about my question?"

Xie Lian remains silent, waiting, tense—his knuckles white from where they grip the edge of his chair, terrified that he'll ask something, anything about—

"Do you hate?"

Xie Lian's shoulders hunch, and his eyes grow wide.

It sounds so similar, but—

To both of them, who remember the first and only question he asked eight centuries ago, standing on a battlefield of fallen soldiers of Xianle.

The day he met Wu Ming.

The day Xie Lian gave into *his* worst impulses.

'Do you hate?'

In asking that question—he's already proven part of his point.

That there's a seductive side to anger.

It wouldn't be hard to control your temper if losing it didn't feel so good.

It's hard, being a merciful god.

Easy to project martyrdom, more difficult to actually embody it.

Xie Lian felt good, being a wrathful god.

He felt strong.

And there are moments when he still almost falls back into his old habits.

Like he did in the Sinner's Pit.

Like he did on the Terrace of Cascading Wine.

Like he *almost* did, in the Kiln.

"...No," he admits, letting out a shaking breath—not seeing the way Jun Wu's pupils shrink in response. "I don't."

Hatred can't coexist with humility. Not really.

Xie Lian feels anger. He feels hurt. He feels wrath.

And sometimes, he acts on it.

But, nearly every time that he has, he has regretted it.

Maybe, back when he thought he knew everything, that he could do anything, he was capable of real hatred.

But all Xie Lian learned from failing so much was that *everyone* does.

Everyone gets hurt. Everyone gets angry.

Everyone is right, and everyone is wrong.

And when you know that—

It doesn't mean you forgive every single time, or that you stop feeling angry.

It just means blind, utter hatred is something that you've outgrown.

"...Then I take that to mean that you don't hate me?"

Xie Lian leans away until his shoulders hit the back of the chair, but...he shakes his head.

"Because you know the part of me that was kind to you was genuine too, don't you?" Jun Wu murmurs, watching the agonized twist of Xie Lian's mouth.

"You know why I won't kill you."

"...I really hope I don't."

Xie Lian doesn't actually mean to say that out loud—but it does make Jun Wu pause, raising an eyebrow at him.

"...Then I won't waste any more of either of our time, how does that sound?"

Jun Wu grips him by the chin, so quickly, Xie Lian doesn't even have time to react or respond, forcing him to tilt his face upward.

"Believe it or not, I really don't like wasting time or energy," Jun Wu continues, staring down at the prince as he squirms.

"If I could spare myself--and the other half of me, I suppose—the effort of murdering or undermining every single person you love in order to bring you to heel, that's all the better for me." His thumb strokes over Xie Lian's cheek.

Just under his eye.

"...It's interesting that you think you could undermine everyone I love," Xie Lian replies, his voice calm.

But if his hands weren't tightly gripping the sides of his chair, they would be trembling.

"One of them is usually the one undermining you."

Jun Wu's grip turn's bruising—but his thumb is still gentle.

Tenderly stroking the skin just beneath his lid.

"You know, it is remarkably easy to control someone when they don't try to hide what's dearest to them," Jun Wu explains softly. "And I'm sure, the moment he learns the alternative, he'll hand his ashes to me without a second thought."

Xie Lian grows silent and still, his heart hammering against his ribs.

"See, you actually *are* a bit of a headache for me, Xie Lian."

His thumb drifts just a little bit higher, brushing over the corner of his eye.

"And if you ever *really* decided to cause trouble, or got out of these shackles...I would have quite the mess on my hands."

"...You just said you wouldn't kill me," Xie Lian whispers.

And out of everything Jun Wu has done...short of killing him...

Xie Lian can't imagine anything he would do that would be so—

"I don't need to."

His next movement is small, almost innocuous in any other situation.

But it triggers a memory in the recesses of Xie Lian's mind.

One hand drops down, not even touching his skin.

Just resting over the prince's knee through his robes—guiding it ever so slightly to the side.

Reminding Xie Lian of that day.

Blinded by pain, not even a human being anymore, just a mass of screams and tears.

That those men almost did.

What Bai Wuxiang almost *let them do.*

Watching with morbid curiosity until the ghost fire intervened—knocking one man down the temple stairs, snapping his neck.

Xie Lian grows absolutely still—snapping his knees shut.

And he trembles.

Seeing that his message was heard— *loud and clear* —Jun Wu keeps his hand there firmly, not moving, not forcing anything.

Just a small, horrifying reminder.

"There is one perfectly easy way for me to ruin your cultivation before those shackles come off, Xianle."

Then, he lifts his hand.

He tucks one strand of hair behind Xie Lian's ear, leaning away.

"But I don't *want* to do that, understand? So—don't force that decision on me."

He reaches up to touch his temple—clearly hearing something in his private array.

"...I'll leave you to rest, you've had such a distressing few days..." He turns away, walking towards the doors.

"I hope you behave yourself. For your sake."

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CREDIT: RENHUI

I Just Need You

Chapter Summary

> Xie Lian sinks beneath the water with a heavy sigh, pushing his robes to the side.
>
> He's tried opening the communication array over and over again, mortifying as it is, but...Jun Wu sealed communications again.
>
> He's sure that Hua Cheng must have gotten the point, he left enough clues when they were speaking—and his light hearted reaction was enough for Xie Lian to know he knew something was wrong.
>
> But what if he didn't?
>
> Or, worse—what if he's walking into a trap?

Chapter Notes

> content warning: there is no sexual assault or anything of that nature in this chapter, but there is internal dialogue on grooming and the fear of sexual assault that might be triggering

The doors to the Palace of the Crown Prince slide shut behind them—and when they do, Xie Lian crumples.

Clapping a hand over his mouth, his entire body trembling.

Remembering what Jun Wu said, just now.

That things get easier for him, if he's already crossed certain lines.

And the way he made that threat right now, it was so—so obvious—

He's done it *before* .

And in that scenario—given the memories Xie Lian did see—

It would have to have been after his second banishment.

And that—with everything he now knows about Jun Wu, how he operates, the real power structure of the Heavens—

It's not hard to guess who.

Xie Lian pulls his feet up against his chest for a moment, wrapping his arms around his legs—

And for just a few minutes, a few, quiet, lonely minutes—

He mourns.

The friendship he once had. The mentor he admired.

Everything he thought he *knew* .

It's hard to say goodbye to something that used to make you feel safe. A part of your life that always felt like a source of security and comfort.

It's hard, letting that go—and realizing that the only person left holding the reins is you.

That you have to decide from now on.

And no matter how old you are, or what you've been through—

That makes the world just a little more terrifying than it was before.

But, eventually—after shedding more than a few tears—Xie Lian pulls himself out of the chair.

He wipes off his face.

And—given how long it's been since he was actually able to rest, or even clean himself...

He strips down, pulling his hair over his head as he slips into the bath. One that he's never bothered to use until now, but...it's there, and the water is magically heated.

If it's there, and he's as filthy as he is—he might as well use it.

Xie Lian sinks beneath the water with a heavy sigh, pushing his robes to the side.

He's tried opening the communication array over and over again, mortifying as it is, but...Jun Wu sealed communications again.

He's sure that Hua Cheng must have gotten the point, he left enough clues when they were speaking—and his light hearted reaction was enough for Xie Lian to know he knew something was wrong.

But what if he didn't?

Or, worse—what if he's walking into a trap?

As he's contemplating that possibility, he goes to fold his robes, sitting on the floor beside the baths—and when he does, something slips out of his pocket, clacking across the floor.

A set of dice.

"..." Xie Lian feels around, scooping them up into his palm.

Remembering what Hua Cheng said, ages ago—

That if Xie Lian threw a set of dice—no matter what he rolled...Hua Cheng would appear.

The prince rests his chin against the edge of the bath, allowing the dice to delicately slip from his fingers, rolling slowly against the floor.

He has no reason to expect it to work, not when Jun Wu has blocked off nearly every other form of communication—but he has to try.

The water steams pleasantly against his skin as he turns back around, sinking down until only his head is exposed, thinking.

About what he can possibly do to get out of here, if Hua Cheng didn't get the message, what...

Xie Lian shudders, hugging his arms around himself even tighter as he shrinks against the back of the bath, tense with disgust.

What he can do, without risking Jun Wu's threat.

Or...

His stomach sinks as he dunks his head under the water, holding his breath.

Xie Lian might just have to risk that as a personal consequence.

Given how high the stakes are—he can't cower away from doing anything just—

Just to avoid his own suffering.

No one deserves to be forced to risk the possibility of going through something like that—even *he* doesn't, Xie Lian can admit that—

But if the alternative is doing nothing, and watching as the rest of the Heavenly Court is slaughtered—

That isn't really a choice.

So, if that's the case...

Xie Lian presses his hands to his face, head pounding as he forces himself to think.

The only way they can do anything is if the gods—the useful ones that haven't sided with Jun Wu, at least—escape from the Heavens.

But how?

How are you supposed to escape a space where someone is all powerful, when that's the person who is refusing to let you leave?

And he—

Xie Lian pauses, goosebumps tingling unpleasantly down his spine as he remembers one horrible, nauseating fact;

All of the baths he took with Lang Ying, when the child was staying in Puqi Shrine.

Something that seemed absolutely harmless at the time—but now, knowing who it was the entire time, what his intentions were...

Xie Lian tightens his hands around his head, stomach churning.

And, oddly enough—

It isn't his choice to lift his head above water, suddenly coughing and wheezing, trying to suck down air.

"Y-Your highness!"

And...to his shock...it isn't his voice that comes out of his own mouth, either.

"...Shi Qingxuan?"

"Hahaha, it WORKED!"

"How..." Xie Lian sputters, wiping at the water dripping down his face, "How are you doing the soul switching spell right now?!"

"Well..." Shi Qingxuan trails off, scratching the side of Xie Lian's head.

"What?"

"If I tell you..." Her voice turns...sheepish. "You'll judge me."

Xie Lian pauses, his eyebrows knitting together.

"I'm not exactly a judgmental person."

She can't argue with that, he never has been, but...

Shi Qingxuan turns his body around, crossing Xie Lian's arms over his chest.

"...He Xuan visited me before I left the Heavens."

"..."

It must be a comical sight, watching Xie Lian visibly have a conversation with himself, gasping and pointing at his own chest indignantly.

"See! You're JUDGING me!"

"No, no—!" Xie Lian waves his hands frantically. "I was just—surprised you sounded so familiar!"

"...I'm having his child, dianxia," Shi Qingxuan points out, her tone just a little bit dry, even if she's far too fond of Xie Lian to actually needle him.

"I know—"

"You know how those are made?"

"I—obviously—!"

"We're on a familiar basis!"

"I just—!"

Xie Lian coughs, shaking his head. “I thought you two weren’t on good terms after what happened!”

That finally seems to calm Shi Qingxuan down, and after a moment…

“…We weren’t. But he came to see me after gege…” even now, her voice cracks, saying the word, “…died.”

She takes a deep breath, trying to shake off the sadness before it can settle in.

“…He told me that he didn’t kill him, and I believed him. He…wants to make things right.”

And to her shock—

“I believe that.”

Xie Lian accepts it—immediately.

Without question.

“…You do?”

Xie Lian was never convinced that He Xuan was the main culprit behind Shi Wudu's death.

"I saw him in Blackwater Manor, when I was trying to help you talk him down," Xie Lian reminds her quietly. "I don't think his first act after learning he was a father would be... *that* ."

Murdering his child's only uncle would be a bad place to start.

But that's not the only reason.

When Xie Lian looked back on the events leading up to that day...

There were so many moments where Blackwater very clearly hesitated, with only one clear explanation for it.

He was in love with Shi Qingxuan—and as much as he hated her brother, he didn't want to hurt her.

And even if he could set that aside, knowing what. he does now...

There's one person who had far greater motivation to displace Shi Wudu from power than Blackwater ever did.

That's the one thing that never really occurred to Xie Lian before.

It's easy to forget, because he wasn't a martial god—but in terms of Spiritual Power, Shi Wudu was only second to Jun Wu himself.

More powerful than Mu Qing and Feng Xin—

Even General Pei, in some ways.

By getting Shi Wudu out of the picture before he passed a third Heavenly Calamity—Jun Wu...

He would have been acting in his own self interest.

"...Well...After he explained as much as he could, he gave me these black little spiritual candies for emergencies, and I—"

"Is there an emergency?" Xie Lian cuts her off, suddenly fretful—remembering what Hua Cheng said before, when Bai Wuxiang began to release the souls from within Mount Tonglu.

That *Gusu* would be one of the targets.

“…Sort of,” Shi Qingxuan agrees. “That’s why I took one of the candies—I can only have a few, y’know—though I don’t think they could possibly make the baby turn out any stranger than—“

“Shi Qingxuan.”

“RIGHT, sorry! There’s a horde of demonic souls attacking the city!”

Xie Lian sits forward, water sloshing over the edge of the bath.

“Are Lan An and Xiong Li there?”

“Yes, but your highness—they’re completely outnumbered. We really need assistance from the martial gods!”

Xie Lian’s face falls into his hands. “There isn’t any help coming.”

Shi Qingxuan pauses, her excitement fading. “…What?”

Xie Lian fights the urge to dunk his head underwater all over again.

“The emperor has gone crazy—or—” he winces. “I suppose he’s always been crazy.”

“What are you talking about?!”

Xie Lian knows he can't tell her the exact truth—not with regards to Jun Wu's identity.

It might seem pointless, given how the entire Heavenly Court knows—but the curse is still active.

"…Jun Wu is allied with Bai Wuxiang."

The curse doesn't mean he can't tell Shi Qingxuan which *side* Jun Wu is on.

"He's sealed off the Heavens—none of the martial gods can escape right now. And, he…"

Now might not be the best time, but Xie Lian isn't sure he'll get another chance to tell her.

"…I think he was the one who taught your brother how to switch fates."

After all—now Xie Lian knows Jun Wu *knew* the spell.

And it would explain something else that Jun Wu told him once before —

'The Water Master protects our secrets.'

What else could that have meant?

Shi Qingxuan falls silent, and after a moment—

"…You're sure, your highness?"

"Almost positive," Xie Lian agrees, almost startled by how tightly Shi Qingxuan balls her hands into fists.

"…Why would he ruin all of our lives?! What was the point?!"

Xie Lian suspects he might know the answer—but is too guilty to say it.

While they might be very different in personality…

Shi Wudu probably reminded Jun Wu of *him* .

"…Nevermind," Shi Qingxuan mutters darkly. "Someone called in my communication array just now."

Impressive, since it’s only been active again for a matter of a few minutes, but—

“Who?”

“Crimson Rain Sought Flower.”

Xie Lian sits up again, even more water sloshing out of the bath next time.

“San Lang?! What is he saying?!”

“He wants me to tell you that he’s coming.”

Shi Qingxuan pauses.

“…And he asked if you could please get dressed before he arrives.”

A shocked shriek escapes from Xie Lian’s lips as he sinks down, the water all the way up to his chin.

“He can SEE?!”

“No,” Shi Qingxuan replies, a little smug.

“I just warned him that you were in the bath right now. I didn’t think you’d want to be caught on unawares.”

But Xie Lian’s mortified reaction clearly amused her endlessly.

“…Tell him Shuo is here,” he mutters, his cheeks hot. “He’s imprisoned in the grand martial hall. And—“

His eyes light up with an idea, standing up as he feels around for a towel, wringing out his hair.

“…Can you still contact Blackwater right now?”

“I couldn’t before, I didn’t have enough spiritual power,” Shi Qingxuan mutters. “But while I’m using the candies, I could…why?”

“…I never reported the array in Blackwater Manor to Jun Wu,” Xie Lian explains. “He wouldn’t have known to seal its access to the Heavens. If you can tell him to open it at the right time—we might be able to open an escape route for the gods!”

“…Oh! Okay! Okay!” Shi Qingxuan agrees quickly, bobbing Xie Lian’s head eagerly. “I can do that, your highness!”

Then, after a moment, she adds—

“And don’t you worry about Gusu, either! Just—KICK THE EMPEROR’S ASS!”

“…What?!” Xie Lian shakes his head frantically.

“Shi Qingxuan, I—you just said you needed—!”

“A god!” Shi Qingxuan agrees. “A fake one will have to do!”

“Wh—?!”

Before he can say anything more—

The spell ends, and his head is quiet again.

“…Just what on earth is she going to try to do?” He mutters to himself quietly.

If he had any spiritual power left, he would use it to use the spell again—

But most of it was burned up fighting Bai Wuxiang in the Kiln.

The best he can do now is pull himself out of the bath, feeling around for a fresh set of robes, and when he does…

Xie Lian has an idea.

The Palace of Ming Guang has never been so desolate.

“…Pei Ming, Pei Ming…” Jun Wu sighs, hands clasped behind his back. “After so many years of dedicated service—this is rather disappointing…”

The General glares back at him, struggling against his chains.

“Service to who?”

“The Heavens, of course,” The emperor shakes his head. “Ling Wen here made such a passionate case to keep you on as Martial God of the North…such a waste of her persuasive talents for you to spurn the offer without a thought.”

“There is *nothing* to think about,” Pei snarls. “I wouldn’t be serving the Heavens—it would just be your psychotic vanity project!”

Jun Wu winces, clutching his heart in over exaggerated hurt, shaking his head. “That’s so harsh, General—I was even prepared to sweeten the offer…”

Pei Ming rolls his eyes, wrists bruised black and blue from how fiercely he’s been tugging at his bonds, but—

“I had assumed you would want to see him again.”

The general pauses, glaring distrustfully.

“…See who?”

Jun Wu stares back, eyes wide and earnest. “Your Shui-Xiong.”

Pei Ming freezes, his arms going rigid for just a moment—and Jun Wu watches.

Watches his face go through the rise and fall of hope and despair, only to settle on rage once more.

"...That was real fucking low. Even for you."

"What?" He tilts his head. "I'm not lying."

Ling Wen doesn't say a word either, watching Jun Wu from the corner of her eye—and the emperor shrugs.

"I've been around far longer than either of you can imagine. I know spells about summoning souls. It's possible I could reshape his spirit for you."

"...Right," Pei Ming mutters flatly. "And what would I have to do in exchange for this kind, generous gesture?"

"There's a particularly stubborn group of cultivators staving off the assaults on Gusu and Yunmeng," Jun Wu shrugs, examining his nails.

Some of Mei Nianqing's blood is still there—having dried already.

Pity.

"..." Pei Ming shakes his head with a disbelieving laugh. "Oh, so I just go down and slaughter a couple of cities for you, and I get to keep being worked to death by a genocidal maniac? I'm sold."

Jun Wu shakes his head, clicking his tongue with disappointment. "That's rather harsh, Pei Ming. He certainly would have done it for you. He was rather...cold blooded, that one."

The general smiles.

Wracked with grief, but still—he smiles.

"You didn't know him at all."

Or he thinks Pei Ming didn't know him—and he isn't sure which one is more offensive.

"That's quite an assertion."

"Maybe he would have done it for me," Pei Ming admits. "But if I did that for him?"

Especially if it meant putting Shi Qingxuan in danger?

"He'd skin me alive."

He already told Pei Ming as much, the day he lost him.

That, if it came down to it, and Pei Ming could only save one of them —

Shi Wudu would *never* forgive him for choosing anyone but Shi Qingxuan.

"But it doesn't matter either way, because you're a goddamn *liar."*

Pei Ming turns away from Jun Wu, glaring at Ling Wen. "Is this how he dragged you into this? Promised he could bring Shi Wudu back? What? Would that ease your conscience?"

Ling Wen doesn't look at him, bowing her head to the emperor.

"...I'm sorry, your majesty—it seems that this was a waste of your time."

"No, no..." Jun Wu shakes his head, sending Pei one last, almost disappointed look. "I wanted him to say yes, too. You never realize how useful someone is, until you have to let them go..."

But—no matter how long you've kept a hound, or how fond of it you might be—

If it isn't going to listen to you anymore, there's only one thing left to do with it.

"But we do what we have to. Then we move on. You understand that, Ling Wen." He glances toward the door.

"I have to deal with the others. I'll give you two a moment to say your goodbyes. Join me in the Grand Martial Hall when you're finished."

With that, he leaves the two of them alone—the Palace doors slamming shut behind them.

"...You couldn't have just played along?"

"What, and agreed to slaughter two cities?" Pei Ming glares at her, squirming in his chains. "Yeah, no—that's not my style."

She glares at him for a moment before turning away, rubbing a palm against her forehead. "You think I like this either?"

"You don't hate it."

"Obviously I don't hate watching those other incompetent idiots suffer," Ling Wen mutters. "But not you. Not the mortal realm."

"Then why are you helping him?!"

"Because what is the ALTERNATIVE, Pei Ming?! You tell me!" She whips around to glare right back at him. "You expect me to be sorry for not dying a hero?!" She points to the window, at the countless other palaces down the rows of the Heavens. "You think ANY of them would have done it for me?! What's the point in being noble about it when they aren't worth *dying* for?!"

"She is."

Ling Wen falls silent, growing pale, her cheeks a splotchy shade of pink—mostly from the frustration and the stress, but...

"I don't know what you're—"

"You know Jun Wu will spare her, because she's the only goddess of agriculture, right? You factored that in."

Ling Wen doesn't bother denying it—because Pei Ming knows her. Knows the way she thinks, but--

"...You mean to tell me the two of you actually spoke to one another?"

"We did," Pei Ming acknowledges stiffly. "Thanks for letting me know you were lovers, by the way."

"...It was recent," Ling Wen grumbles, arms crossed tightly over her chest—to the point where her ribs almost ache. "Was I supposed to ask your permission?"

"That's not the point, and you know it."

Ling Wen doesn't reply, her stance rigid—but Pei Ming doesn't look away.

"If you do this, you'll lose her."

She still won't look at him, but Pei Ming can see the muscles working in her jaw.

"She's been able to look past quite a bit about me so far."

The Brocade Immortal, for example—something everyone else was eager to ostracize her for.

"You think she'll look past Jun Wu killing *all* of us?" Pei Ming shakes his head. "Even if she doesn't blame you—you'll still lose her."

"The Emperor won't—"

"She won't stand by and do nothing, Ling Wen. You know she won't. Even if she's the only one left to oppose him."

And if that's the case, goddess of agriculture or not—

Jun Wu will be forced to kill her.

"...Okay," Ling Wen's nails bite into the meat of her palms. "What, you think just because I love her, I'm willing to die for her? Not everyone is a romantic hero like *you.* "

And why should she be blamed for that? How unfair is it, to be expected to just die instead of trying to save her own skin? When none of them would—

"You'll lose me."

Finally, Pei Ming sees her flinch, lips pressing together into a thin, tense line.

"...You're practically begging the emperor to kill you at this point—that's not exactly shocking."

"No," the general shakes his head. "If Jun Wu wins, I'll die—but if we win, and you chose to stand beside him...You'll lose me, Ling Wen. I won't forgive that."

Pei Ming, her oldest friend.

Pei Ming, who for so long, was her only friend.

"...We can't beat him, Pei Ming. Maybe Crimson Rain could take care of one half of him, but you heard the Crown Prince. We don't have a way of getting them *both."*

“And you think you’ll have a better shot somewhere down the road when the rest of the martial gods are dead? You think he’ll risk promoting anyone who has a shot at taking him down again?” Pei counters, “Ling Wen—you’re smarter than that.”

“I’m also smart enough to understand that being *alive* later gives me more options than being *dead* later,” she mutters. “Not everyone is ready or willing to make their peace with the idea of going down in a blaze of glory—”

“I know what you did on Mount Tonglu.”

Ling Wen turns away from him again with an annoyed grunt—but Pei Ming doesn’t let up

“When Bai Wuxiang was coming towards the two of you—you gave Yushi Huang and her Ox a chance to escape, and allowed yourself to get injured.”

Her shoulders hunch.

"You can't tell me that you wouldn't do it for her. Or that you'd be standing here, listening to me if you wouldn't do it for me." Pei Ming glances out the window, the same avenue of palaces she's been glaring at so viciously. "They might believe what you're saying, but I don't."

"...If I didn't know it would be for nothing—"

"It's not."

Ling Wen turns her head, finally—

Finding her friend looking up at her earnestly—eyes burning with an honesty that has learned the truth all too well.

All too painfully.

"You don't want to be the last one standing, Ling Wen." Pei Ming tells her sorrowfully. "You don't want to be standing over the graves of your friends, and asking yourself if you made the right choice."

Because no matter what you do—it always feels like a mistake.

In a way, she's already standing over Shi Wudu's grave now.

Wishing she could retrace her steps, like walking backwards through the snow, avoiding making new tracks.

That she didn't have to spend the rest of her life thinking about all of the things she chose to look past.

And Pei is right.

She can't think of anything she wouldn't give to avoid feeling like *this* .

Living with the things that she could have and should have said, the countless possibilities of how they would have been different.

Or, the ability to live without this weight on her.

"...I know you would do it for me," Pei Ming presses her gently. "Because I would do it for you."

So often in life, the bonds that draw the most attention from the poets and writers of history are the romances. But...

Ling Wen drops to her knees beside him with a heavy *thud* .

Sometimes, when you find yourself at the edge of the world, on the verge of losing everything—

The one most likely to be sitting beside you is your friend.

Bruised and shackled, his hand finds hers.

Your friend, who stood beside you not for lust, or power...

But for you.

Not seeing you for the overworked deputy of a Civil God, or another beautiful woman to conquer—

But someone of value.

Someone worth fighting for—and dying for.

There's a difference between being a necessity, and being respected.

"...Can you really expect a habitual coward to change her stripes at so late a date?" Ling Wen whispers, staring at the ground with wide, tired eyes.

"You've never been a coward, Ling Wen." Pei shakes his head.

"You're a pragmatist—people usually can't tell the difference."

Her lips curve at the corners tiredly.

"And how do you get a pragmatist to join a suicide mission, then?"

His answer is swift—and certain.

"You tell them it won't be meaningless."

Ling Wen looks up at him, wary—and Pei Ming sits forward, chains rattling.

"I can't promise that we'll beat him, Ling Wen," he admits. "And I know we probably won't make it—but I *do* know a way to make sure he doesn't have a future in this world." His hand squeezes hers tighter, all warm skin and old scars—familiar.

"But I can't do it without you."

His old friend hangs her head—takes a long, uncertain breath, then lets it out.

Slowly lifting her head to stare at the ceiling, resolving herself.

Then, she turns—fumbling at the locks to Pei Ming's chains.

"Then you had better start explaining, because we don't have long."

Yin Yu slams his head back against the wall, staring at the ceiling.

Of course, he got snatched up here—he had a certain Daruma doll in his pocket at the time.

But of all of the places to imprison him—why did it have to be *here?*

“Are we not gonna talk?”

“…” Yin Yu wipes his hands down his face with a sigh, chains rattling. “About what, Quan Yizhen?”

From his perspective, there really isn’t much to say.

His shidi stares back at him owlishly, one eyebrow raised.

“Where have you been? I looked for you everywhere.”

“…Yeah,” Yin Yu mutters, some of the irritation leaking into his tone. “I know you did.”

He’s had to *avoid* him everywhere.

“…I was in Ghost City,” he finally admits with a harsh sigh, curling his legs up against his chest as Quan Yizhen stiffens.

“Working for Hua Cheng?”

Given everything he witnessed in Daruma Doll form, it’s not a huge jump, and Yin Yu doesn’t bother to deny it.

“You think anyone else is willing to take on an exiled official?”

“Me.” He answers bluntly, his eyes always so overwhelmingly sincere.

“…” Yin Yu bites back a groan. “Yeah, well—besides you, he was the only one.”

And that—

That draws a rare scowl from his shidi, sitting back against the opposite wall with a sharp grunt, his curls bouncing with every movement.

“Oh.”

“…”

‘Don’t ask,’ he tells himself.

Don’t ask.

Don’t ask .

Don’t a—

“How long?” His tone is short, clipped—and Yin Yu is the one arching an eyebrow now, feet sliding just a little against the marble floor.

“…Blackwater got me an interview three months into my exile. I’ve been with him ever since.”

That seems to make Quan Yizhen’s expression even darker, bafflingly enough.

“That’s over one hundred and fifty years.”

“Give or take,” the former official agrees, watching him in vague confusion.

“And you’re okay with it?”

“…Okay with what…?”

He couldn’t have guessed at his answer before—but when he hears it, Yin Yu’s mind comes to a screeching, mortifying halt.

“Him and the Crown Prince.”

Him and the—?

On one hand, he’s surprised Quan Yizhen was astute enough to notice that, but—

Why wouldn’t he be okay with it?

"...In case it wasn't obvious, I have no interest or say in what Hua

Chengzhu does in his personal life," Yin Yu mutters, staring at Quan Yizhen like he's speaking gibberish.

"That isn't healthy."

"...What? He's my—" Yin Yu freezes, his eyes nearly bulging out of their sockets

"Wait—you think I'm—you think we're—"

If it were possible for him to have a stroke, he would.

"YOU THINK HUA CHENGZHU AND I ARE LOVERS?!"

"...You're not?"

"HAVE YOU LOST YOUR MIND?!"

It's a rhetorical question, Yin Yu is almost certain Quan Yizhen was born insane.

"No."

"I—"

It's the most ludicrous thing that Yin Yu has *ever* heard.

"What would make you think that?!"

"You never came home."

"I—?" He shakes his head, half baffled, half infuriated. "Quan Yizhen, I was EXILED!"

"That's not what I meant."

Yin Yu is beyond listening, his head spinning out with the sheer *mention* of that possibility—how infuriatingly stupid it is to even THINK—

"Okay—first of all, Hua Cheng has always, always, ALWAYS been after the Prince of Xianle. Got it? Anyone else may as well not exist."

Yin Yu has spent most of the last century and a half catering to Hua Cheng's every possible need. And every single day, there was ALWAYS discussion of Xie Lian, where he might be, and how to find him.

And once he was found?

Hua Cheng has hardly left his side since.

"And even if he wasn't—you think he would go for ME?"

Quan Yizhen looks up at him with a frown.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"You've MET the man, haven't you?!"

Part of following Hua Cheng around for a hundred years is seeing just how many people fell to their knees to get the *chance* to crawl into the man's bed, only to be rejected every time.

"Let me make this clear—if Hua Chengzhu WASN'T obsessed with Xie Lian, he'd probably go for any one of the dancers in Paradise Manor first. Or a princess. Maybe an actor—"

"—But—"

"Hell, he might even go for BLACKWATER, or pretty much any other consenting adult on earth—"

"—Shixiong—"

"—maybe even a few Heavenly Officials, he got on with the Wind Master well enough, so if we're bending the rules of reality to the point where he ISN'T fixated on the prince, sure, he might bend his distaste for them at that point—"

"—you—"

"—Then, he'd PROBABLY just try celibacy until he couldn't stand it anymore, and if he got bored with his clones and we were the LAST TWO HUMAN BEINGS ON EARTH, he MIGHT, just MIGHT resort to THINKING about getting into bed with me!" Yin Yu concludes, his chest heaving.

It might be the most depressing display of self awareness in existence, but at least he is perfectly aware of the fact that he is behind the last possible choice for someone who doesn't even want or *need* options.

"...Why?"

Yin Yu catches his breath, staring.

"What do you mean, why?!"

"...Is he stupid?" Quan Yizhen's brow pinches with confusion. "You're the best."

Yin Yu stares at him, jaw hanging open, feeling like he's been kicked in the head by a horse, but—

He sighs until he feels completely deflated, head against his knees.

"...Have you still not been with anyone, Quan Yizhen?"

The martial god frowns, not understanding why that matters—but he shakes his head.

"You have to be attracted to someone to have that kind of relationship with them, okay? And there are rules about how that works."

Yin Yu holds up a finger. "First—some people aren't attracted to anyone at all, or only attracted to certain genders. That's the most basic part."

Then, he holds up another finger.

"Second, attractive people like *other* attractive people. Especially if they're selective."

Hua Cheng is, just objectively speaking, one of the most desirable people there is—and it makes *sense* that he would be with Xie Lian, someone equally interesting and attractive.

"...I don't get it," Quan Yizhen frowns.

"You—"

"Is he stupid?"

"No—"

"And what about you?"

"...What about me?" Yin Yu mutters, clearly not understanding how that is supposed to factor into any of this.

"Are you attracted to people?"

"I—" The former official pauses, hugging his knees tighter. "—Yes, but that's not—"

"What kind of people?"

"I...Men...I guess?" Yin Yu mutters, half distracted.

It's something he would have been mortified by, when they were teenagers—but after over a century in Ghost City, that's the least scandalous thing about him.

"Have you been with anyone?"

"...I...I don't see how that's relevant—"

"You're the one who asked me the same thing."

Yin Yu closes his mouth, and Quan Yizhen notices something interesting.

He blushes from the tip of his nose first, then it spreads to his cheeks, all the way to his neck.

...Cute.

And then, all of that pleasant realization is wiped away by one statement--

"...Sort of?"

Quan Yizhen stares at him—long enough for Yin Yu to squirm, chains rattling lightly.

"I don't know if it counts, really."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't think I want to get into the weeds with you on that one, Quan Yizhen." Yin Yu mutters, shaking his head. "I've had an encounter."

"...What kind of encounter?"

"THAT kind of encounter, what do you want me to say?!"

"Then how have you not been with someone?"

"Well—because we didn't do that MUCH!" He grumbles, "I think he realized pretty quick that he didn't actually want to get information out of me—"

"Who?"

"...What?"

"Who was it? Did he do anything strange to you?"

In an instant, Quan Yizhen's tone has turned menacing.

"...What? No!" He shakes his head, his face having turned a deeper shade of Crimson than most of Paradise Manor. "I mean—nothing I wasn't curious about, and it was really mostly the other way a—"

"Who?"

"...Blackwater, okay?!" His voice cracks with mortification.

Quan Yizhen doesn't react at first, his face blank as he takes in that information.

"...You mean the one pretending to be Ming Yi?”

"Ah...yes," He groans, covering his face with his hands. "But it was before all of that! It was a couple of months into my exile!"

And to be brutally honest, considering just how many people in the ghost realm—all three realms, really—that Blackwater has taken into his bed for one reason or another...

Honestly, it isn't particularly *strange* that Yin Yu was almost one of them.

It wasn't bad. Actually, it was really rather nice, until He Xuan pulled him up by the hair, sounding vaguely bored as he asked—

'Actually...how would you like a job, instead?'

A few hours later he was mortified, depressed—but employed.

And has been ever since.

They laugh about it now.

Well. Blackwater laughs. Usually while Yin Yu is in the middle of feeding his demonic fish skeletons, paid with the money that Hua Cheng loaned him in a strange, never ending cycle of debt.

Yin Yu prefers to pretend that his continued status as a virgin is a choice, rather than simply a result of the beginning of the most humiliating—and only—job interview of his life.

Quan Yizhen is silent for a moment, digesting that information.

"...I still don't get it," he finally mutters—his voice pointedly annoyed—to be expected, after what he just learned, but—

"Get what?"

"That doesn't explain why he wouldn't want you."

"I—!" Yin Yu looks up, only to choke and fall silent when he sees Quan Yizhen so close.

"…" He averts his eyes quickly, swallowing down the heartbeat in his throat. "…I don't know what you're trying to say—"

"You're beautiful."

The only sounds that come out of Yin Yu's mouth after that are strangled and incoherent as he shakes his head vehemently.

"You…Quan Yizhen…" his voice trembles.

Filled with so many years of insecurities, an utter belief in his own lack of worth.

"I didn't say all of that because I wanted you to try to make me feel better."

"I'm not—"

"I'm not special!" Yin Yu croaks, shrinking away from him.

"I know that might be hard for you to accept," his voice wavers slightly. "I know it's hard to grow up, and realize the people you looked up to weren't that great. But that's the truth, okay?" His eyes shine with tears in the dim light, shining in through the palace windows.

"I…I've never been special. Not like you. And—" His voice cracks as he hugs himself tighter, shoulders trembling.

"If I couldn't have been the smartest, or the strongest—I wish I could have been the kindest," he whispers.

But he wasn't even good enough for that.

"But I'm…I'm *so* jealous of everything, and everyone all the time," he croaks, knuckles aching and stiff from how long he's been clutching his shins, throat aching, nose burning from holding back the urge to burst out crying.

"E-Especially you."

Quan Yizhen stares back at him, round eyes from shock.

"…Me?"

"Yeah," his Shixiong rasps, burying his face in his arms. "Because—everything is so EASY for you! You're strong, you're—YOU'RE the beautiful one—and brave—you never get scared of anything! And I—!"

A small, choked sob tears out of him.

"It doesn't matter how hard or how long I try, I'll NEVER be like you! Don't you—?!"

He looks up, a tear slipping down his cheek, ready to look him in the eye, but—

Now, he can't speak at all.

Not with the mouth pressed against his.

And in spite of what he might have expected—not that Yin Yu ever imagined this before, or even wondered—

Quan Yizhen is *so* careful, kissing him so gently, it aches.

He doesn't pull back very far—and Yin Yu is too dazed to react when he says—

"I don't need you to be strong."

His forehead rests against Yin Yu's, their noses bumping together as he speaks.

"I'm strong enough for both of us."

Just as the fallen god's mouth twists with dismay—

Quan Yizhen kisses him again—just as gently. Whispering;

“I don’t need you to be brave.”

He can be brave for both of them.

Yin Yu makes a small noise in the back of his throat, heart pounding as the shackles around them rattle, his shidi lifting his hand to cup the back of his head, fingers knotting in his hair.

“I don’t need you to be kind.”

But between the two of them—

Yin Yu has *always* been the kindest.

“You…” Yin Yu gulps, hands trembling as he shakes his head, breathing hard. “You’re don’t know what you’re—“

The next kiss isn’t quite so gentle—lingering—and Yin Yu’s eyes widen, then…slide shut.

Almost irritated that, like everything else—Quan Yizhen is a natural at *this* , too. Even if it’s to Yin Yu’s own benefit.

“You’re beautiful,” Quan Yizhen repeats firmly, pulling back to look him in the eye.

“And I just need you.”

Not the person he wishes he could be.

Not the person everyone needed him to be.

“You…” Yin Yu’s eyes are half lidded, lips still parted when Quan Yizhen pulls back. “You had a childhood crush, Yizhen, this…this isn’t…”

He’s silenced again, and this time…he doesn’t even try to fight it.

His eyes shut again, the tension in his posture growing slack as Quan Yizhen’s forearms rest on the wall on either side of Yin Yu’s head, caging him in with his arms.

“You don’t have to want me back,” the words are so…self aware, coming from him—they take Yin Yu by surprise.

"But that's how I'm always going to feel."

Not a childhood crush. Not something that once brought comfort and stability, that he craves out of nostalgia.

Yin Yu swallows hard, eyes out of focus as they drift to the side, looking at Quan Yizhen's arms around him.

"J…just how long are these chains, anyway?" He mumbles faintly, shivering when Quan Yizhen's cheek presses against his. "They really aren't that good if you can just cross the entire room—"

"I pulled it out of the wall."

Yin Yu eyes the chunk of stone on the ground behind him, the chain still attached.

"…Of course you did," he mutters, shaking his head. "You…you're really so…"

He looks up at Quan Yizhen through his lashes, unsure.

For the last century, every time he thought of his shidi, it was like his stomach turned into a resentful, agonizing pit.

Lost in his own disappointment, loathing his own ineptitude, but…all this time…

Was he missing *him* , too?

And Yin Yu—

He doesn't know how he feels.

But he—

His arms slide around Quan Yizhen's neck as he pulls him in, knees falling open as they lean against the wall.

He just knows that they're probably going to die tomorrow.

That Quan Yizhen's curls feel so familiar under his fingers.

He just knows—if he's going to go—

He wants to know what it feels like, kissing someone who thinks he's special.

Even if it's just once.

"You're so stubborn," he mutters between breaths, shuddering when teeth lightly pull at his lip. "You…should've…moved on…"

The next kiss is deeper than the others, a little clumsier—their inexperience finally catching up with both of them, but—

It has Yin Yu's toes curling inside his boots, regardless.

Quan Yizhen's mouth is heavy against his jaw, the side of his neck, his voice raw with feeling—

"I just want to come home."

The words, like everything else about Quan Yizhen, sound so simple—but they aren't.

Still, deep waters.

"…But I was the one who was—"

Yin Yu stops, eyes wide, lips swollen.

And Quan Yizhen was looking for him.

"…You—"

He falls silent, pulling back and jerking his head to the side, staring over Quan Yizhen's shoulder, which just makes the Martial God lean closer to him, protective.

"…Qi Qi?" He whispers.

Quan Yizhen's eyebrows raise. "Who?"

"…Here! Come here!"

A small shape prances forward, crawling into Yin Yu's lap, nose twitching.

"…Is Shuo here?" Yin Yu whispers, pressing his fingers to the spirit's forehead. "Why isn't he with—?"

Then, as he listens to The message it has to tell him, he grows pale.

"…We have to hurry," he mutters, squirming to hold his wrists out to

Qi Qi, offering him the chains. “Can you chew through these?”

“Who’s Shuo?”

“Hua Chengzhu’s ward,” Yin Yu mutters, watching as the red panda starts gnawing in the metal links. “He’s been captured.”

“Is it that important?”

Yin Yu looks up, his eyes burning in a rare instance of passion.

“…He’s a brat—but he’s a good kid. And during my exile—he’s the only one in Ghost City who has always been willing to help me.”

Even if Ren Song was, admittedly, a lot of work.

And the moment Quan Yizhen hears that the demon was good to him—

That’s really all he needs to hear, yanking his other wrist free, allowing Qi Qi to gnaw off the rest.

“Alright. Let’s go.”

Yin Yu stands up, and…

As he walks beside his shidi, there’s a new warmth in his eyes.

Bravado

Chapter Summary

> "Ah, Qi Rong."
>
> The Green Ghost falls silent, for once—snapping to attention when the Emperor's voice echoes from the door.
>
> "I see you've made yourself comfortable."
>
> Qi Rong bows his head, hands clasped behind his back.

"...My, my, my..." A jeering, all too smug voice cackles, his voice echoing through the grand martial hall. "You feeling alright, Ren Song? You look a little...torn! HAHAHA!"

It takes a moment of the demon slowly revolving, suspended upside down, before he's facing him head on.

"See, that was just weak."

Even hanging upside down, his expression manages to be completely unimpressed.

"...Huh?"

"Throwing that pun back in my face when it doesn't work isn't *funny* , it just makes you look stupid," Ren Song explains, rolling his eyes.

"See, back when I used it, it worked, because Lang Qianqiu had ACTUALLY cut you in half. You using it now just doesn't work."

"...Okay, you know what? FUCK YOU, you LITTLE SHIT! Look how the tables have TURNED! How's THAT?!"

The demon wrinkles his nose, thinking.

"...No, that doesn't exactly work either," he shakes his head. "You'd have to make some sort of joke about me being upside down. OH!" His face lights up. "You should have asked me how I'm HANGING IN THERE! Now THAT would have been funny, HAHAHA!"

"WELL NOW YOU'VE ALREADY SAID IT!"

Qi Rong snaps, crossing his arms. "How am I supposed to fucking use it?!"

Ren Song snorts, rolling his eyes. "You were never gonna come up with that, Qi Rong."

"What the fuck are you—?!"

"Because you're not *actually* funny," the demon explains, slowly revolving around again. "You're just loud, and you swear a lot. That doesn't make you funny. We talk about it all the time at the yearly meeting."

"...The fuck are you on about now?!"

"Oh," He winces. "The yearly meeting of ghosts people actually give a fuck about. At Blackwater's place…No invite?"

"Oh," Qi Rong rolls his eyes right back at him, "I'm gonna go cry my eyes out, I didn't get invited to the moldiest, most DEPRESSING place on earth!"

"You mean your bed?"

"YOU SON OF A FUCKING—!" Qi Rong's hands ball into fists, cocking one back, but—

"Don't!" Guzi cries.

"Don't hurt him, dad!" He grabs Qi Rong by the sleeve, holding him back. "Shuo gege is a good person! He took care of me!"

"He's a fucking MENACE!"

"You're just mad at me because I'm funny and you're not," Ren Song drawls, revolving back to face him again.

"Last time I checked, you're loud and you swear TOO!" Qi Rong glares. "We're the SAME!"

"No, no," Ren Song shakes his head. "I've got personality. Flair. Sarcasm. *Layers* , y'know? Face it. Every ghost has to be one of two things: Scary, or funny."

The most basic rule of being undead, you can ask anyone.

"Hua Cheng and He Xuan? Scary. Me? Funny. You? Annoying," Somehow, even suspended upside down, arms chained behind his back, Shuo shrugs. "Ever heard someone say, *'Oh no, this ghost is haunting me, he's so annoying!* ' ?"

Qi Rong balls his hands up into fists once again, looking like he STILL wants to throw a punch at him, but—

"Ah, Qi Rong."

The Green Ghost falls silent, for once—snapping to attention when the Emperor's voice echoes from the door.

"I see you've made yourself comfortable."

Qi Rong bows his head, hands clasped behind his back.

"Yes, yes, your majesty was very generous for setting me free!" He simpers, all while Ren Song rolls his eyes.

"...And I see you've been talking with your old acquaintance," Jun Wu muses, his eyes sliding over to the demon.

"Oh," Ren Song wiggles a little, prompting himself to revolve until he's facing the emperor. "You're back! Good. You know, I've just been...hanging around, had time to think—"

(The use of the aforementioned pun makes Qi Rong wince in regret that he didn't think of it.)

"—and I've realized something."

Jun Wu raises an eyebrow, waiting patiently. "Go on."

"Thank you—see, I just don't think I'm important enough to be here," Ren Song explains evenly. "I mean—gods, calamities? All of that is above my paygrade."

He can't really gesture with his hands the way he's used to, which just leaves him wiggling his feet for emphasis.

"And the manipulation you used on the prince earlier? Sublime—very toxic, I was *so* impressed...but since that's all done with, I think I should go home now—"

"See, if I did that..." Jun Wu tilts his head, crossing his arms. "I'd be giving up another bargaining chip against your father."

Ren Song nearly gags, shaking his head. "He's not my—! Okay, you know what? I see your train of thought there, but he's not gonna care! Really!"

Shuo would be surprised if it was even factored in at this point, honestly.

"You've already got the prince, he's really not going to care about anything else besides that! You really haven't got a reason to keep me around—what's the worst that could happen if you send me—?"

Jun Wu reaches up, grasping the demon by the hair—stopping him from rotating any further as he looks him in the eye.

"I think I'll take my chances. Besides—I've promised you as a gift to Qi Rong here, when this is all over with."

Slowly, Shuo's expression turns sour with annoyance.

Then he smiles, saccharine.

"...You know, from this angle? I don't care what everyone else says, the receding hairline isn't that noticeable at all."

Qi Rong nearly falls over with the effort not to let out a shocked laugh.

“…Oh, I see what this is,” Jun Wu muses, his grip tightening in the boy’s hair until he winces. “You’re trying to get me to disperse you, rather than draw out the torture. Or is it because you think it will motivate your master even more?”

He tilts his head.

"I don't know if that's noble, or pitiful."

Ren Song breaks character for a moment, lips pulling back over his fangs.

"I suppose you'd have more experience with the latter, wouldn't you?"

Something about the man just makes his skin crawl.

He reminds Shuo of his father.

His *actual* father.

Jun Wu doesn’t say more—but seems to have lost his patience with indulging the conversation any further.

Crack!

With one snap of his fingers, the demon’s screams echo across the hall—cries of total agony.

"...Say, Qi rong," Jun Wu looks down at the green ghost, raising an eyebrow. "Why don't I go ahead and reduce him to a ghost fire for you? That would be karmic justice, don't you think?"

Qi Rong is abnormally quiet—eyes sliding from Jun Wu, to Shuo—trembling in his chains.

Then, to Guzi—whimpering and hiding behind his sleeve.

Tears welling in his eyes.

"...Nah," he shakes his head, reaching up to pick at something between his teeth with one of his claws. "I'm planning on eating him, see? Loses all the flavor if you turn him into a ghost fire."

Jun Wu shrugs, not seeming to particularly care either way.

“Suit yourself. I have one more visit to make—and a delivery to receive. Do with him as you will.”

Leaving the two ghosts glaring at one another.

“…Aren’t you gonna eat me now?”

“I’m saving you for LATER!”

Jun Wu walks away as their voices fade, taking in the tranquility of the streets, devoid of any other gods.

He almost thinks he might prefer it this way. And now, he’s close to having the Heavens to himself once more.

As for the mortal realm, well…He’s set things into motion.

WHACK!

“Ow!” The teenager grumbles, dropping down onto one knee, rubbing the back of his leg. “Why do you always have to hit me like it’s for real?!”

The older cultivator takes a step back, twirling a wooden sword between his fingers.

“Training should be realistic.”

“…I thought martial gods were supposed to be the ones who used swords,” Jin Feng grumbles, rising to his feet.

“There are exceptions to every stereotype,” the cultivator shrugs. “Especially if there’s a martial god willing to teach you.”

Jin Feng shakes his head, rolling his shoulders to work out a day’s worth of bruises. “And you did?”

Shi Wudu smiles faintly.

“The best.”

For once, it’s a quiet day in Lanling—the sky a pale shade of blue—the wind crisp, but clear.

One of the few days in the winter that has everyone in the city venturing outside. Children playing, parents drying their laundry—

Or, in their case, training.

“Couldn’t I have…a cultivation path with more meditating…and less swords?” Jin Feng pants, exhausted.

“…Maybe four centuries ago,” Shi Wudu rolls his eyes. “But cultivation has been going in a more martial based direction. Ever since…”

He trails off, losing his train of thought—staring at something over Jin Feng’s shoulder.

“Ever since…what? Pei Yuan? You listening?”

The wind starts to pick up, reading through the loose strands of his hair, blowing past his face.

Chimes hung on roof eaves begin to ring—and Shi Wudu’s expression turns dark.

"…Get inside."

Jin Feng pauses, sword half raised. "…Huh?"

"Find your sister, and get inside!"

Since arriving in the city of Lanling, the cultivator known as 'Pei Yuan' has kept a relatively low profile. Always keeping his voice lowered—his hood pulled up and over his head.

Now, he throws it back—barking out orders with a commanding air that has Jin Feng rushing to obey.

At first, one of the alarms in his array was tripped on the south western section of the city border.

That could be disrupted by something as minor as a ghost fire—not something to worry about.

Now? It's the entire western half.

And the sky…is growing dark.

"…Shit…" he mutters, turning on his heel, running back towards the Temple of Ming Guang—trying to figure out how to warn them as best as he can—

They're the only trained group of cultivators in the city, aside from the temple of the Heavenly Emperor.

And he *won't* go there.

The majority of the citizens just stop and stare at the clouds forming overhead, unsure of what to make of the sudden change in weather, and—

Given that he's known as the local exile who tried to drown himself twice, Shi Wudu knows they won't heed his warnings to go inside.

BANG!

The temple doors slam open, banging against the walls as he charges inside, startling the group within—deep in the middle of their afternoon meditation.

"...Excuse me, young man!" The head cultivator rises to his feet, "What is the meaning of this?!"

"The city is under attack!" Shi Wudu shouts, pointing out the door. "If you don't force the civilians to get inside now, EVERYONE is going to die!"

"...Uh..." Deng Su laughs awkwardly—but not really.

More like in the sense that he wants to seem affable—but he's really snide.

"...It looks like someone's been hitting the wine a *little* too hard again, kid—HEY!" He shouts when the teenager grabs him by the front of his robes.

"I've had just about enough of you, you incompetent fucking brat," Shi Wudu hisses, eyes flaring.

"I'm—" Deng Su sputters, attempting to writhe away from him, "I'm OLDER than you!"

"No," Shi Wudu shakes his head. "I'm over four HUNDRED years old, and as far as I am concerned, I am SURROUNDED by ignorant children."

"...He's really lost his mind..."

"Did he ever have it?"

"Look," Shi Wudu whips his head around, glaring at the head priest. "You're out in the hinterlands, so odds are word hasn't reached you yet—but Mount Tonglu opened weeks ago. Every single time that happens, the Emperor opens a blockade. This time—it failed."

"...How would you even know that?!"

" *Because* ," the teenager snaps, shouting over them, "Ming Guang was sent to Mount Tonglu personally. He said as much to Jin Feng when he visited the temple a few weeks ago. That would be a *last* resort for the emperor."

Or, an attempt to get Pei Ming killed.

"He would have sent the General there to prevent the birth of another ghost king—but there is a *massive* cloud of resentful souls over the city, which means...it failed."

And that could very well mean...

"...And we're just supposed to take a madman at his word?!" One of the disciples mutters, staring at Shi Wudu distrustfully. "I know General Ming Guang ordered us to give him assistance, but he's clearly INSANE!"

"You don't have to take me at my word," Shi Wudu mutters.

"Yunmeng would have been alerted first based on its location, and they probably sent riders out to warn all of the other heavily populated cities. Since we're the furthest out, our warning would come last, but it should be getting here at any—"

BANG!

Speak of the devil.

The doors slam open, just as they did before—with a young cultivator in purple robes staggering through—

Clearly, as Shi Wudu predicted, a junior from the Yunmeng Sect.

"M-Message for the Head Cultivator of Lanling!" He cries, falling down in exhaustion.

A scroll is clutched between his fingertips, quickly handed over as one of the disciples from the Langling sect runs to fetch him water.

"I...I'm sorry, I ran as hard and f-fast as I could, but—I...think it's too late," He rasps, lips dry and cracked. "T-They're already here!"

"W...what on earth...?" The Head Cultivator mutters, his own face going gaunt and pale as he looks over the scroll—and Shi Wudu ignores him kneeling beside the boy from Yunmeng.

"Kid—look at me, have you heard anything about Gusu?" He presses, grabbing him by the shoulder.

"Do you know what's happening in Gusu?!"

"I..." He takes several gulps from the flask of water offered to him, trembling. "I think...they were the first city in the east to be hit...they should be under siege by now..."

His eyes drift to the side, where the other cultivators are just finding their bearings—but Shi Wudu snaps his fingers in front of his face, drawing his attention back.

"Don't look at them, they can't help you. Look at me. The cloud—could you see faces inside of it?"

"N...No..." He rasps, shaking his head. "It...It's just...dark..."

"...It's not a plague cloud then," Shi Wudu mutters, turning to the other. "Look—that thing outside is a mass of resentful souls. How many of you are proficient in exorcisms?"

The group turns to look at one another, then, finally, one of the older priests raises his hand.

"When that thing comes down—those souls are going to possess any human being who isn't at a high enough cultivation level, and they'll start killing each other." He explains.

"Your best bet is to get people inside and try to exorcize the rest."

"Wait, you—" the head priest finally looks up from his scroll, just in time to see Pei Yuan march back out the temple doors. "Where are you going?!"

They swing shut—and he receives no answer.

Outside—chaos is already beginning to unfold.

Dark clouds of smoke pouring down from the side, the people of Lanling running through the streets in a panic, screaming.

Shi Wudu elbows through them, pulling his hood back up as he makes his way through the crowds, focused.

With everyone else running in the opposite direction, it's easy for him to make it to the stables, finding an abandoned horse—and just as he starts to toss the saddle over it's back—

"Pei Yuan gege?" He freezes, his shoulders hunched. "Where are you going?"

Standing just behind him in the doorway of the stables, gripping the door frame tightly—

Is Jin Feng's younger sister, Jin Qing.

Hair in two braids, eyes wide and frightened.

"...Your brother was supposed to get you inside," he mutters, not turning back to look at her.

"He..." She swallows hard, glancing back over her shoulder. "...There's something wrong. Are you leaving?"

"...It's nothing personal," Shi Wudu concludes, tightening the straps on the saddles. "But my little sister is in Gusu—and she needs me."

"...But we need you, too!"

Shi Wudu grits his teeth, squeezing his eyes shut. "And that sucks, kid—but you already got one divine rescue. That's more than most mortals get, and I'm fresh out of miracles, understand? She's pregnant, and I can't just—"

"Gege helped you!" Jin Qing croaks, pleading.

"We both did! Every single day since he found you here! You can't just leave him to die!"

"...I'm sorry," Shi Wudu mutters, his voice rough with emotion. "But there are cultivators here, you can pray to—”

"They're useless, and you know it! And—!"

Her voice cracks.

"And you're the only god who's ever answered me!"

She can't see it with his back turned—but his fingers tremble where they grasp the reins.

"If you don't do something—he'll die. Please, you—you don't understand, he's—!" Jin Qing whimpers, tears pouring down her cheeks.

"He's all I have *left!"*

"..." Shi Wudu's jaw is clenched so tightly—it aches.

He lowers his head for a moment, pressing it against the surface of the saddle.

Two tears falling down his face, silent.

Because he know, even if he moved as quickly as he could—

He probably wouldn't make it to Gusu in time to make a difference.

Because he *does* understand what Jin Qing is saying.

And he also—

He also knows that, for things to be like this—

Pei Ming is probably dead.

Knowing that—it's like he can't breathe.

He takes two slow, deep breaths, thinking—

This is probably exactly what he deserves.

Exactly what He Sheng felt, all those years ago.

But he...

He exhales, pulling the last strap on the saddle into place.

"Please!" Jin Qing cries helplessly. "You can't—!"

She falls silent, however, yelping in surprise when Shi Wudu turns around, lifting her up onto the horse—climbing into the saddle in front of her.

"You hold on tight—and you do /exactly/ what I tell you to, understand?"

She barely has time to nod, wrapping her arms around his waist before he urges the horse forward, barreling down the chaos of the city streets—

Returning the same way he came.

The Temple of Ming Guang.

"Do you know where Jin Feng is?"

"N-Near the Temple of Wind and Water!"

She presses her face into his back, arms tightening around his ribs—frightened by the sight of people around them, collapsing to the ground, clutching their heads and screaming.

"H-He was acting strange!"

"Okay, okay—don't lift your head, alright?! Keep it down!"

She does as he says, not lifting her face from the back of his robes until they reach the temple steps—and when he dismounts, he keeps an arm wrapped around her head as he carries her inside, covering her nose and mouth until the doors are shut behind them.

Only—

Only to find all of the Cultivators he warned earlier exactly where he left them.

The disciple from Yunmeng is practically passed out on the floor, and the others...Seem to be gathering materials to barricade the doors.

"...Oh my god..." His voice is faint. "...You were really just going to hide in here and let EVERYONE outside die?"

"You..." One of the younger cultivators sputters, shaking his head, "You heard him, it's too late! They're already here!"

"So what, you're not even going to TRY?! This is YOUR city!"

“If we just had to perform a few exorcisms, that would be one thing!” Another disciple cries. “But only one of us even knows how! We aren’t prepared for this!”

“And neither are your FAMILIES!” Shi Wudu snarls, shaking with anger. “They’re the ones DYING OUT THERE!”

And who knows how many will even be left by the time the smoke clears.

“You think we like this?!” The Head of the Cultivators spits. “We don’t have a CHOICE but to wait for assistance!”

“Did you not hear the kid?! There isn’t anyone COMING!”

“If we die here—who will protect the survivors?!”

“SURVIVORS?!” Shi Wudu roars, watching as the men before him shrink in fear.

If Pei Ming was here, this is where he would make a speech.

Something about bravery. Nobility being found in sacrifice.

He's a leader, that way.

Shi Wudu isn't. And he never has been.

He isn't kind. He's loved good men, but he's never been one of them.

"…You think I want to go out there and die for strangers who don't even know who I am?" He mutters, his voice cold. "I'm going out there because it has to get done."

One way or the other. No matter how badly he wants to try to get to his own family.

"And as far as I am concerned, I am surrounded by worthless COWARDS!"

A few of them have enough shame to flinch.

"You better hope I die out there," Shi Wudu growls, fists clenched. "Because if I don't, I'm going to make sure your wives, your children, your parents—ALL of them know EXACTLY where you were when they NEEDED you!"

He looks toward the Head Cultivator, sending him a withering gaze of disgust.

"And I'll find the body of every single person who died on YOUR watch—and I'll make you dig their graves."

"…Forgive us for not being a crazy, suicidal FREAK like YOU—!"

BAM!

The punch lands squarely on Deng Su's nose, breaking it with a loud *crunch* .

When the cultivator tries to lash out and hit back—Shi Wudu catches him by the wrist, hanging his head with a faint, bittersweet smile, shaking his head.

"I've never been crazy," he mutters, shaking his head. "I'm just stubborn. It takes me a long time to stop and listen."

He lets Deng Su go, closing his hand tightly around something in his palm as he turns away.

It took him a long, *long* time to listen to the words an old friend once told him.

But once he did—

The world didn't look the same as it did before.

"…Sometimes better to get hurt, or to fail, than become something that you can't live with."

He walks back towards the temple doors, giving Jin Qing one last glance.

"Don't come out until it's over—no matter what you hear. Understand?"

She nods—wide eyed as she watches the fallen god exit the temple—

Standing tall.

And to his surprise…

Someone follows behind him.

Not the cultivators from the Temple of Ming Guang, no—they were a lost cause.

But the messenger—the teenage cultivator from Yunmeng.

"…Aren't you too tired to fight?"

"Maybe," the boy mutters, gripping the hilt of his sword. "But I'd rather go down fighting than hide in there like some rat. Do you… have a plan?"

"…Somewhat," Shi Wudu mutters, running down the steps. "What's your name, kid?"

"Jiang Ning."

Inside the temple, Deng Su sits up, struggling to staunch the blood pouring from his nose—and finally, he notices something.

His ring finger—

It's bare.

"Well, Jiang Ning," the dark haired teenager murmurs, slipping something onto his hand. "You know how to use that sword?"

"…Not as good as my brothers," he admits, hurrying down the steps behind him. "But pretty decent!"

There are countless people running in the streets now—the whites of their eyes and veins in their necks turned black.

Screaming.

Ripping each other apart.

"…THEN DO YOUR BEST TO KEEP THEM OFF OF ME!" Shi Wudu has to shout now, to be heard over the screaming.

"I'LL DO THE REST!"

Not because he's ready, or because he wants to.

Simply because someone has to.

In the streets below, a small boy runs around a corner, only—

Only to find he's met a dead end.

"…"

He turns around, biting his lip as he stumbles backwards, falling to the ground.

"J-Jiejie…" He whimpers, eyes filled with tears. "W-What are you doing?!"

His sister staggers forward, a broken shard of glass clutched in her hand, blood dripping from her fingers.

"Just…stay…still…" She whispers, lips twisting into a lopsided smile.

But it's not *her* smile.

Not anymore.

"D…don't…" He pleads, trembling as she comes closer.

"J…Jiejie, please…!"

He screams, his back hitting the alley wall as he throws his arms up, eyes shut—

“JIEJIE, STOP—!”

CRACK!

Even behind his lids, the boy can see the flash of light.

And when he opens them, he…

Sees his sister on the ground.

Disoriented, but—

Her eyes are clear again.

“Jiejie!” He sobs, crawling to her side, “Jiejie, it’s me!”

She groans, turning her cheek into his hand when he reaches for her, and…

When the child looks up—he sees a man running away from them.

A cultivator, dressed in black.

And in his hand—is a whip.

One that curls and thrashes like a living thing—a snake that falls down thunder with every flick of his wrist.

And when he brings it down again—

Purple streaks of lightning paint the skies of Lanling.

Shi Qingxuan has never been much of a fighter.

Her brother made efforts here and there, taught her methods of self defense—how to play dirty, if she needed to.

But most of the hard work was always left to him. Shi Qingxuan has learned more about actual fighting in the last months than she has in four centuries.

That being said, there is *one* thing she has always excelled in.

Running away.

Which she is doing now, to great success.

Leaping over stall counters, sliding through alleyways—dodging demons—rats the size of people in some cases, horrifyingly enough—

And all the while, she pops another black piece of candy into her mouth, wincing at the bittersweet taste, calling out—

'HE-XIONG!'

She doesn't actually know what she expected, calling out for him like this, but—

'Shi Qingxuan?!'

It wasn't for him to answer immediately.

'...Oh...Haha...you actually answered...Hi!'

She dives around a corner just before a giant set of teeth sink into the wall.

'Of course I answered, you—!' He almost calls her a moron, like he normally would, but—

Their dynamic is still a little too tense for that at the moment.

'...What's wrong?'

'Well...hahaha...it's...haha...'

Shi Qingxuan!'

'THE EMPEROR!' She shrieks. *'He's gone crazy! Lost his mind! He's working with Bai Wuxiang!'* She repeats everything Xie Lian told her in a messy jumble, running into an empty building—only for the creatures to charge in after her. *'All of the gods are imprisoned in the Heavens right now!'*

'...But you're safe?' He Xuan asks slowly—and Shi Qingxuan knows him. Better than he'd ever want to admit, and she—

She can hear that he isn't surprised. Able to move on from that news without asking any questions.

'Uh...haha...yeah! I'm fine!'

'...Shi Qingxuan...'

'But—Xie Lian said you could use the array in Blackwater Manor to open up an escape route for them!' Shi Qingxuan recounts breathlessly, hurrying up the stairs. *'Is that right?!'*

'...I could,' He Xuan agrees cautiously. *'But that means it would take me more time to get to you.'*

'...That's fine!' Shi Qingxuan bursts through a door leading onto the rooftop, pumping her arms. *'I don't need you! We're fine!'*

'...We?'

She takes a running leap, /barely/ catching the next rooftop with her fingers, arms trembling as she pulls herself up.

'Yes, we!'

She rolls onto her back, breathing hard, one hand on her stomach.

'We are FINE! Haha...'

His silence is doubtful—and Shi Qingxuan is already winded, but she forces herself to sit up.

The rats chasing her don't dare to make the leap, left snarling and flailing on the ledge of the opposite roof, eyes gleaming.

'...Look, you know me,' She mutters. *'I'm the biggest crybaby ever. If I was in danger, don't you think I'd be begging you to come save me?'*

He still doesn't seem particularly convinced, and she gives up on that.

'And even if I wasn't—saving me is kind of pointless if our son is born into a world ruled by a psychotic god in cahoots with Bai Wuxiang, don't you think?'

'...cahoots?'

'YEAH, HE-XIONG! CAHOOTS!'

Shi Qingxuan pulls herself to her feet again, using small amounts of spiritual power in her feet as she leaps from one rooftop to the next.

'I've got Lan An and Xiong Li here to keep me safe—you focus on getting his highness and the others out of there!'

He Xuan can't say that isn't the best plan–-because it *is* , and they don't have another choice.

If Jun Wu manages to wipe out all of the martial gods—then that's it.

Game over.

'...I just...before you go, I need you to tell me something.'

'What?'

'...What did Jun Wu do to my brother?'

The silence on the other end of the communication array is long—and telling.

And it's so conflicting.

All of the pain and distrust she feels towards him. The anger and shock she has about Jun Wu.

Her grief for her brother.

Every single bit of it is pulling her in a different direction, and yet—

She can't help but feel an ache in her chest, when she hears He Xuan's voice. A reluctant sense of longing.

Some part of her that, in spite of everything, feels safe when he says her name.

But even if this might be the last time they ever speak—

Shi Qingxuan needs to know.

'...There are things I can't say, Shi Qingxuan,' He Xuan's response is quietly remorseful. *'I promised.'*

For just a moment, she stops running.

'...Then what can you tell me?'

'I...can tell you that your brother was in a lot of pain.'

He said that before, when he came to her in the Heavens—but...now, she knows who was causing it.

'I can tell you he felt trapped. And...that the emperor hurt him…badly.'

She flinches, holding a hand over her mouth.

'But I can't say any more than that.'

She knows, but—

It's telling to herthat even if it meant risking his own life, with every single god hunting him...the first thing He Xuan did was get Shi Qingxuan *away* from Jun Wu.

No matter how risky it was.

And knowing that, all she can think of is—

'He'd never let me go.'

How hopeless her brother sounded that day in their palace, when Shi Qingxuan suggested that they could just go, leaving the Heavens and everything else behind.

And she—

Shi Qingxuan can't stop thinking about what she said.

Words she's desperately wished she could take back ever since—and now, she never can.

'I wish he wasn't my brother.'

He probably died believing that.

And—knowing He Xuan wasn't the one who killed him—that her brother did that to *himself* —

Was it her fault?

Did he leave…because he thought she didn't want him to come back?

The guilt is gnawing and heavy—and she—

Shi Qingxuan doesn't know how to live with it.

Other than being…

The sort of person he would have wanted her to be.

'…Shi Qingxuan?'

'…Right,' She lets out a shaky breath. *'Okay—I just have one other question.'*

After her first, he's a bit wary.

'…What is it?'

'So…the bracelet you gave me…'

She wipes her hands down her cheeks, looking at the black bangle sitting on her wrist, veins of gold running through it.

'What about it?'

'Is it…like…pretty durable?' She mumbles, spinning it round and round.

'…What?'

'I mean—it's sturdy, right?'

'…As sturdy as anyone could reasonably expect? Why are you—?'

'So…stronger than your average metal, right?'

'Shi Qingxuan.'

'He Xuan.'

'Why are you asking me this?'

'Why aren't you answering the question?'

'Because it's a bit nerve wracking for OBVIOUS FUCKING REASONS?!'

'I'm obviously not asking because I WANT to break it!' Shi Qingxuan whines. *' Think of it as more of a precaution!'*

'Against what?!'

'He-Xiong!'

'…FINE, it's sturdy, happy?!'

'YES, THANKS, GOOD LUCK ON THE ARRAY IGOTTARUNBYE

HAHAHA—'

'SHI QING—!'

The connection goes dead.

"…Okay," Shi Qingxuan mutters, pressing a hand against her stomach. Barely able to feel the small swell there, but—

It grounds her.

"It's just you and me, baobei," She mutters, pacing on the rooftop. "I need you to be a team player, so don't make me throw up again, okay?"

She's honestly shocked that she was able to get this far without getting sick already. The moment Shi Qingxuan found out about her baby—everyone immediately treated her as though she had, in an instant, become incredibly fragile.

But…weirdly enough, since coming to Gusu—she's actually in better physical condition than she was as a goddess.

Xiong Li made the point that this didn't make her helpless, and…

Shi Qingxuan locks her jaw, taking a deep breath.

…Maybe he was right.

With three more leaps, she makes it onto one of the balconies leading into the Palace, reaching up to press her fingers to her temples once more.

'Xiong Li?'

'…Shi Qingxuan? Did you make it to shelter?'

'Yes—barely. How's the fight going?'

'We…we can't keep up for long.'

She can hear it in his voice—

Cultivators are dead. A lot of them from the sound of it.

'Okay, I…' She swallows hard, running through the halls. *'I have a plan—no one else has to die today.'*

‘…What? How?’

‘You’ll see, just…wait for my signal. Oh—and Xiong Li?’

‘…Yeah?’

‘Xie Lian was imprisoned here for over a year, right?’

‘…We both were. Why?’

‘Which room was he in?’

Once the connection is severed, she skids around the corner, running to the room Xiong Li described, and…

“…Holy *shit* .”

Shi Qingxuan isn’t prone to swearing.

Her brother always said it was classless—though when he wasn’t in public, he was as prone to cursing as anyone.

But in Shi Qingxuan’s entire life—she has never been surrounded by so many beautiful clothes.

Of every color, pattern, and style.

“…Okay, Okay…” She takes a shaky breath, looking around. "Just...just..."

Her fingers tremble slightly as she pushes her hair back, centering her focus.

"Just try to do it the way he would," she mutters to herself, pulling the back of spiritual candies from her pocket—

Taking three more.

An hour later, outside of the city walls—a battle is waging.

Smoke from dispersed spirits pouring through the air—cultivators strewn across the battlefield, dead and bleeding.

"...I'll admit it," Wen Sicong smirks, wiping the blood from his sword. "You fight well for a dog."

Lan An stares him down, not stained by a single drop of blood.

"It's funny...a few months of freedom, and you people start to think that you actually *matter* ," he sneers, shaking his head. "You were born to serve my father—to serve ME!"

Lan An's reply is one of utter calm, in spite of the death and destruction around them.

"Even a dog would never serve a jackal."

Wen Sicong's eyes widen, his mouth twisting with rage.

"You..." He hisses, shaking his finger in front of him. "You're *funny* , you know that?"

The pained moans and screams of humans and demons alike echo around them.

“But you know this is pointless, don’t you?” He sighs. “No matter how many you kill, Bai Wuxiang will just send me more.”

Until eventually—even the great city of the north will fall once more.

Lan An’s eyes narrow slightly, prepared to say—

“Then so be it—“

“NO!”

Both men fall silent, looking to the right as Xiong Li dives between the fighting, waving his arms.

“No need for that!”

“Wh—?”

“WE SURRENDER!”

Just like that—everyone around them grows still.

“…What?”

Lan An’s eyes narrow. “Xiong Li—”

He’s the one with the most at risk. Wen Sicong will just kill the rest of them, but Xiong Li—

He’ll use Lan An’s partner to imprison the city again—keeping him alive as the lock to a cage.

“You were right!” He pants.

“We’re outnumbered—and we—we could never rule Gusu,” he explains, face flushed with exertion as he stands before Wen Sicong—the exiled prince watching him curiously.

“That’s why—our leader has granted you an audience!”

Wen Sicong raises an eyebrow. “…Leader? Isn’t that you?”

"You...you said it yourself, right?" Xiong Li lifts his head, raising an eyebrow. "We...we wouldn't have any idea how to rule *ourselves* ...we're just..." His eyes slide over to Lan An, silently speaking into his array.

'Trust me.'

"...Born to obey."

In a matter of minutes, the screaming across the city grows silent—the hordes of monsters retreating behind the city gates, watching with beady, hateful eyes as Lan An and Xiong Li walk through the streets, leading Wen Sicong and his officers.

"...I have to admit," Lan An mutters, watching the men following behind them. "I didn't realize the Ghost Realm had any military structure."

"Oh, they don't," Wen Sicong sighs. "They're all disorganized savages I'm afraid. But that's going to change with new management."

"...I wonder if Hua Cheng might have something to say about that," Xiong Li mutters under his breath, leading Wen Sicong up the steps of the palace he once called home.

"Oh, he won't have a choice," their enemy drawls, kicking the double doors aside.

"Before all of this is over, Bai Wuxiang is going to string him up and leave his spirit out to fade into nothing...fitting, isn't it? His symbol is the butterfly, after all...and those are so short lived." Wen Sicong muses. "He's lasted far too long."

"...Butterflies are just as often considered a symbol of freedom," Xiong Li points out.

"And rebirth from death," Lan An recalls faintly. "But if you find them so frail, I'm sure they won't frighten you when he comes back."

Wen Sicong freezes in mid step.

"...What?"

"Oh," Xiong Li glances over at him, his eyes round. "Did your master not warn you? Crimson Rain is good friends with our leader. He's here all the time. He might be on his way here now, with all of this mess going on."

"He..." Wen Sicong sputters, his face blotchy. "You...!"

He shakes his head, stomping ahead of them. “You’re both BLUFFING—where is this leader of yours hiding, anyway?! Or are you just stalling for time—?!”

BANG!

The doors directly ahead fly open, a powerful gust of wind bursting forth with a—

WHOOSH!

A few of the men standing nearby are blown off of their feet—leaving only Lan An, Xiong Li, and Wen Sicong standing, gripping onto the doors.

“WHAT THE HELL WAS—?”

“Oh my…”

Wen Sicong grows silent, turning his head to look inside the Grand Hall, and—

Thud!

Perfectly manicured hands grip a gilded fan, snapping it against her palm—painted nails gleaming red.

“I wasn’t expecting such an interesting guest to wind up on my doorstep…”

Thud…

Wen Sicong falls silent, his mouth hanging open as he watches the woman approach him.

Even Xiong Li has to do a double take, because…

He met Shi Qingxuan when she had lost everything. When she was as low as she had *ever* been.

But now, wearing fine robes, hair delicately arranged, dripping with jewels—

He remembers something rather important.

For centuries—

She was worshiped as the most beautiful woman in the world.

Thud…

She continues walking along one of the surfaces of the long tables—conveniently placing her two feet above the rest of them—

And Wen Sicong swallows hard, clearing his throat.

Half tempted to slap himself—just to shake himself out of it.

"Who…who are you supposed to be?! How are you ruling my city?!"

"Your city?" She raises an eyebrow, snapping her fan open, holding it in front of her face with practiced poise. "It was a gift from Crimson Rain."

"Hua Cheng?!" Wen Sicong sneers. "And why would he give a city to you?!"

"He didn't," she shakes her head, fanning herself. "He gave it to my husband. A reward for their alliance. My dearest isn't fond of it here—so he allowed me to use it as a little getaway. Quaint, isn't it?"

If there's one skill you learn, growing up rich—it's how to make something, even a *very* desirable fortress city—feel cheap.

"…Who the hell is your husband?!"

"The righteous hand of retribution," she answers softly, watching as Wen Sicong grows paler by the moment.

"When you sit in the middle of the open sea, so terrifyingly vast and alone—he is the fear that you feel.”

She takes another step forward, and Wen Sicong…

He actually takes a step back, watching her distrustfully.

“When you slip under water just a little too long, and you realize that you can’t breathe—he is the pressure that you feel in your lungs.”

Each snap of her fan is crisp and smooth, lightly stirring the air around them, stirring her curls.

And when she finally speaks his name—Wen Sicong’s knees almost buckle.

“He is the Blackwater that Sinks Ships—the Demon He Xuan.” She steps down from the table.

“And I am the *only* thing in this world that he loves, so,” she tilts her head, eyes glinting dangerously.

“You want to be my friend.”

Wen Sicong’s nostrils flare as he struggles to compose himself, standing up straighter.

“That still doesn’t tell me who *you* are.”

“Oh, me?”

Red lips curve into a glittering, indulgent smile.

“I’m just the Wind Master—Lord Shi Qingxuan.”

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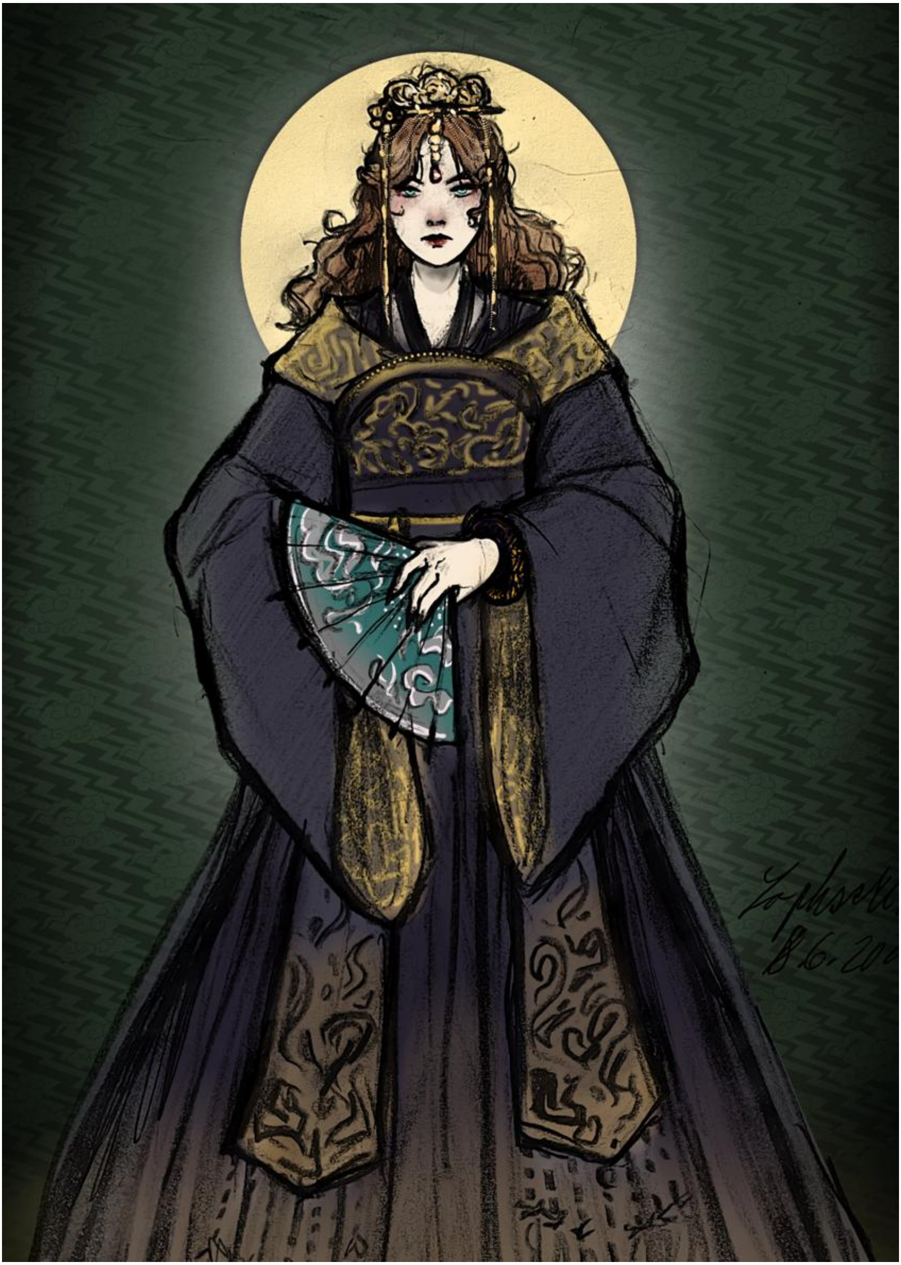

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For a brief animatic of Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan dealing with the giant spider, look here

Special

Chapter Summary

CLANG–!

“It’s no use.”

A voice echoes from the other end of the hall, tired and ragged. “You won’t be able to break out of that without a spiritual device.”

Shuo looks down at his ankle with a grimace—swollen and bleeding, but the chain is left undamaged.

“…I thought you were still out cold.”

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings for this chapter: lots of violence and existential crises

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CLANG!

Shuo shudders, almost nauseous from the pain—

But still, he keeps trying.

Using a broken chunk of marble from the wall—slamming it into the spirit shackle around his ankle.

Over and over again, to no avail.

CLANG!

CLANG!

CLANG–!

“It’s no use.”

A voice echoes from the other end of the hall, tired and ragged. “You won’t be able to break out of that without a spiritual device.”

Shuo looks down at his ankle with a grimace—swollen and bleeding, but the chain is left undamaged.

“…I thought you were still out cold.”

“I…I was,” the older man winces, rubbing his jaw. “I only just came to. I take it you’re the one they call Ren Song?” The teenager nods, facing away from him on the ground. “I see. I’m—“

“Mei Nianqing. Royal Preceptor of Xianle,” Shuo recalls flatly. “I know who you are.”

“…I suppose you overheard everything from before, then.”

“Sure,” Shuo agrees. “But my parents used to talk about you, so I already knew your name.”

Mei Nianqing raises an eyebrow curiously, watching as the boy continues to struggle against his chains, then—

He realizes.

“…You were from Xianle,” he breathes, watching the boy with fascination. “I thought Xie Lian and his friends were the only survivors.”

“Thanks to people like you.”

That response catches him off guard.

So cold—and *bitter* .

“But my family wasn’t rich, and my parents weren’t nobles,” Shuo mutters. “So I guess you wouldn’t give a shit.”

“…The situation back then was complicated,”Mei Nianqing mutters. “But that doesn’t mean I didn’t care—"

“If that’s what you tell yourself to sleep at night.”

Shuo rolls his eyes. “And I didn’t survive, by the way.”

“You—"

The demon looks back over his shoulder.

“My brothers who didn’t die fighting in the war? The plague got them. I came from a big family, and I was the last one left.”

Left to a father who just…

Didn’t want him anymore.

“I used to blame the King for letting us down. Or even his highness. But now…it’s pretty obvious they had no fucking clue what they were up against. But you,” his eyes flash. “You did.”

Mei Nianqing sags with a heavy sigh.

“You knew, and you left us.”

“…I couldn’t have stopped him if I had. I just wouldn’t have survived long enough to expose him now,” Mei Nianqing admits. “Defeating him has never been my destiny.”

Shuo snorts disbelievingly.

His smile is sharp.

“Destiny.”

"You don't believe me?"

"I think destiny is an excuse people use to get away from taking responsibility for anything," The ghost mutters, pushing his fingers between the shackle and the swollen skin of his ankle, wincing. "Like old men who want to justify outliving people who died for their mistakes."

It's been eight centuries, and every night when he closes his eyes—

Shuo still remembers the death. The pain. What it's like to watch the end of the world, and realizing it can go on after the loss of everything you had ever loved.

Almost like you never existed at all.

"…You wouldn't credit your surviving until now as a matter of destiny?" Mei Nianqing asks him softly, wiping the dried blood from his chin.

"Ha!" Shuo barks out a laugh. "He'll no."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because I'm not special." He mutters.

"If I had a destiny, it was to die in any sleep, and have my own father throw my body in a ditch like yesterday's garbage."

Left to rot there, his bones abandoned and forgotten.

Until years later, when someone came looking.

Shuo's spirit had still been that of a six year old at the time, barely twenty years since his death.

And he had been so, *so* scared.

Trembling like a leaf, hiding behind Hua Cheng's leg as he stared at the ruins of his family home.

Telling his gege that he didn't want to go back. That it wasn't important.

That it didn't matter.

Only for the Hua Cheng—a newborn calamity, one the entire world had learned to fear—

To kneel down beside him, hands heavy on his shoulders as he looked him in the eye.

‘It matters.’

Shuo’s corpse wasn’t grotesque by then—just bones, covered with years of leaves and grass.

And he couldn’t stand to look.

Because that would make all of it—the fact that he was *dead* —real.

That he was never going to grow old. To have a family again.

Hua Cheng never said a word about it—building a small pyre.

No one ever tells you how lonely it is, to have a funeral attended only by ghosts.

To sit in front of your own pyre, watching it burn, and know that no one is mourning you.

Because you didn’t matter.

There was no family plot for a tombstone of any kind—his is in Ghost City.

Next to Bao and Yanlin. With all of the other children who were rescued from Mount Tonglu that day.

But as hard as Hua Cheng looked, he was never able to find Bao’s ashes.

Buried in a mass grave of plague victims. Unable to distinguish him from hundreds of other souls lost there.

If he hadn’t died that way, Qi Rong wouldn’t have been able to disperse him by destroying the entire field of ashes.

If it wasn’t for the plague, he wouldn’t be gone.

And if there was such a thing as destiny—

Shuo was born to rot on a forgotten hill, never to be remembered again.

“…People like Xie Lian and Hua Cheng—no matter how awful things get, they always land on their feet eventually.” He mutters.

That’s just how it works.

Because they have to.

"People like me just...die in the background. You don't even think about it," he shakes his head, glaring at the growing bruise on his leg. "It's an afterthought. Maybe there's a plaque commemorating it somewhere—but you don't know our names."

That's why Shuo doesn't trust men like Mei Nianqing. The ones who claim to be righteous, but abandon the helpless without a fault.

Unlike Hua Cheng—his hands covered with blood, but...

He remembers the name of every single child he's helped move on to the next life.

"But you didn't stay in that ditch, did you, boy?"

Shuo doesn't look back at him, and Mei Nianqing sighs, his feet sliding across the floor in a fruitless attempt to push himself up against the wall, but–

With his hands bound, and his ribs broken—there's no use.

"Only because Hua Cheng found me and felt sorry for me."

"...And from what I hear, he's a bit of a patron of lost children," the Guoshi observes quietly. "But none of them have lasted the course. Not like you."

Shuo doesn't look up, glaring at his own reflection in the polished marble beneath their feet.

"...Sometimes, destiny is an excuse," Mei Nianqing admits slowly. "I won't say that I haven't used it to bring myself comfort more than once. But..."

He glances toward the throne.

Empty now, but remembering the man who once sat there.

Destiny can also justify acts of incredible cruelty. Injustice and obscenity.

"Sometimes, believing in destiny can make us capable of things we would not be otherwise."

Sometimes, an excuse isn't always a *bad* thing.

"Moments of immense bravery and personal sacrifice—all because we believe it's our destiny. That might be an excuse—but it's also a comfort. It brings courage."

Giving up your own control over the outcome—in order to give yourself the strength to see it through.

"I don't like my role in this story any more than you do, boy. But I couldn't think of another way to save Xie Lian's life."

Shuo stiffens, shocked.

"...Save his life? You watched him suffer and you—"

"Did nothing," Mei Nianqing agrees. "Because I was weak. I *am* weak, compared to Jun Wu. *Everyone* is. But if I had told the prince the truth back then—what do you think would have happened?"

At that point, Xie Lian would have known far too much.

He would have *died* .

He was barely more than a teenager himself at the beginning of his banishment. If Jun Wu had wanted to kill him *then* , it...

Would have been like leading a lamb to slaughter.

"...How is it any different now?" Shuo mutters, pulling his knees against his chest. "And if it was to protect him—why did you leave him alone to suffer for eight centuries? Do you even know what he's *like* now?"

"I—"

"He doesn't feed himself." Shuo presses his cheek against his knee, glaring at the wall. "He doesn't remember to, because he's been hungry for so long, he doesn't notice it anymore. He doesn't cry. Not even when a normal person would. He won't say anything when he's injured."

Not out of pride or toughness, but simply because he just doesn't notice.

"...I haven't even known him for that long, and I *know* that isn't normal," Shuo looks back at Mei Nianqing, shaking his head. "I doubt that is *anything* like the prince you trained, is it?"

Mei Nianqing stares back at him, pale and weary.

Because—

He knew a boy who would push away his plate—not because he wasn't hungry, but because he was a picky eater.

Who cried over playtime cut short, or a scraped knee.

"...And I would get it if he was just some awful brat that you were eager to get off of your hands," Shuo swallows hard, pushing off thoughts of his own death once more. "Not your family, not your problem."

"I—"

"But you said he WAS your family!" The demon glares.

"THAT'S what you told Jun Wu! That you were protecting your family—BOLIN'S family. How is abandoning them protecting them?!"

"...I didn't mean to—"

"What?!"

"I didn't MEAN to abandon him!" Mei Nianqing cries, his voice cracking. "I LOOKED!"

Shuo falls silent.

"I couldn't interfere with the war in Xianle," Mei Nianqing shakes his head. "I tried to steer the King away from the path he went down, but...Jun Wu was always one step ahead. It was like being a rat in a maze. By the time the war began—there was nothing else I could do."

If he had, Jun Wu would have discovered him—then killed him.

And then, there would be no one left who knew the truth.

The curse on his name wouldn't even be necessary if there was no one left who remembered it.

"What happened to his highness was..."

Mei Nianqing cringes, closing his eyes from the horror of just remembering it.

"It was profane. Cruel. Every single thing you want to call it. But I *still* believe that's better than Jun Wu killing him. When he let him go into his second banishment, I thought..."

He exhales sharply, with years of built up frustration. "I thought I could find him again, and help him train until he was ready to face him."

With the emperor's attention off of him—it should have been easy, but—

"But the shackle on his ankle, it..."

It hid Xie Lian from him at every single turn, just as it had from Hua Cheng.

Just as it had from Xie Lian's friends.

Mei Nianqing wasn't able to find him until he ascended again, and after that, well…

He always had gods and ghosts around—making approaching near impossible.

"…And as for how it's supposed to be different now, well—" Mei Nianqing shrugs. "He's been in the unique position to cultivate without interruption for eight centuries. Most gods are distracted by duties indulgences—but not him."

Making him *far* more powerful.

"But…" Shuo frowns, "He can't use any of that with his cursed shackles, can he?"

"…No," Mei Nianqing admits. "I'm still working out the kinks in that part of the plan."

"…" Shuo sinks back against the wall with a groan. "VERY comforting!"

"At least it's better than—!"

Thud!

Both of them turn their heads, shocked to find a small hole opening in the floor of the grand martial hall—and after a moment—

Shuo's face breaks out in relief.

"Yin Yu!" He half whispers, half screams as a familiar face appears, the exiled official crawling out.

The moment he sees that Shuo is uninjured, Yin Yu seems to be just as relieved as he is—

Rushing to Shuo's side, pulling the boy into a tight hug.

"Are you alright?!"

For a moment, he doesn't respond. Eyes wide with shock, and—

Just a little wet.

"Y-yeah!"

He clears his throat. "A little banged up, but most of it was my fault, I…" he glances over Yin Yu's shoulder, only to see a broad, curly haired young man staring at him curiously, "…You brought back up?"

"General Qi Ying, martial god of the west," Yin Yu mutters.

Shuo's lips part, eyebrows raising in surprise. "You two worked things out?!"

"Ah…sort of—"

"We're getting married."

Shuo stares, his jaw hanging open as Yin Yu nearly falls over, dropping the earth master's shovel before he can smash Shuo's spirit shackle.

"We—we are NOT, we never even talked about—!"

"Doesn't seem like a terrible outcome," Shuo mutters, not quite able to take his eyes off of Quan Yizhen's forearms.

Yin Yu sends him a sour look, but the martial god glows from the compliment.

"We—we're not even—this isn't the time to be discussing that!" He hisses, smashing Shuo’s shackle. “It is WAY too soon.”

Quan Yizhen crosses his arms with a shrug.

“I didn’t say when we were getting married.”

“He’s got you there.”

“BOTH of you, just—!”

He pauses, turning his head to stare at the man chained down the hall, raising an eyebrow. “Isn’t that…?”

“Mei Nianqing,” Shuo confirms, all of them having already seen the confrontation that led to this entire debacle, and…

“…We should take him with us.”

Yin Yu hesitates, glancing back at the tunnel leading out.

“We might not have enough time—”

“He has a plan for helping the prince get rid of his cursed shackles,” Shuo explains, amending—

“Sort of, it’s got some kinks.”

Yin Yu lets out a reluctant sigh, but…

That really isn’t a possibility they can just ignore.

He crosses the distance to Mei Nianqing, taking the earth master’s shovel to the guoshi’s chains as the older man eyes him curiously.

“…You used to be martial god of the west as well, didn’t you?”

Yin Yu looks up, his face darkening for a moment—then shakes his head.

"That was a long time ago."

Nothing seems that long ago to Mei Nianqing—not anymore, but he doesn't argue.

"Crimson Rain took a former god into his service," he muses, surprised. "What a strange man."

Strange isn't the word Yin Yu would use—not for that reason, anyway.

"...He's been generous to me," He mutters, helping the Guoshi to his feet once his shackles are broken. "Let’s go."

And that's the part that hurts, later.

The thought that will leave the ones who walk away lying awake in bed at night, eyes tracing the divots in the ceiling as they rewind this moment over and over again, trying to think of what they could have done differently.

Because...they were so *close* .

Close enough to almost be in arm's reach of the tunnel—

Until they hear the doors to the Grand Martial Hall open.

And after that—everything happens so fast.

Shuo feels the floor sweep out from under him—landing on something hard and flat with a quiet *thud* .

His eyes fly wide open as his arms scramble, trying to wrench himself free, ready to scream, but—

A hand locks over his mouth, forcing him to be silent, an arm wrapped tightly around his middle, keeping him still.

Mei Nianqing.

Crouched behind the throne with him—hiding.

"Ah," Jun Wu's voice echoes across the martial hall—and in spite of Shuo's pointed attempts to seem so fearless before, now, clutched in Mei Nianqing's arms...

He trembles with fear.

Only comforted by the silence of his lungs and heart.

The living aren't so lucky.

"Yin Yu," His eyes slide to the earth master's shovel, still clutched between the Martial God's fingertips. "As inconvenient as ever, I see. Did Crimson Rain order you to do this?"

The exiled official doesn't reply, stone faced—and Quan Yizhen steps in front of him.

"Oh..." Jun Wu raises an eyebrow, lips curving into a wry smile as he looks between the two of them. "Did you two make nice?"

He takes a step forward, watching the way Quan Yizhen doesn't budge, and his smile widens.

"Qi Ying—you don't even have a *sword* , what are you doing?"

The Martial God doesn't respond, not dropping his defensive stance, and Jun Wu...

"Well, isn't that adorable? So protective of your shixiong...but doesn't it bother you," the emperor muses, "That he would never do the same?"

Yin Yu flinches, growing pale. "I—!"

"I don't care."

Jun Wu and Yin Yu look at Quan Yizhen at the same time, shocked—but the Martial God's expression is unchanging.

"That's not why I protect someone."

The answer is so jarring to Jun Wu, visibly taking him aback, but also —

It takes him back to many, many years ago.

Watching a prince standing on the shores of Lang'er Bay. Streaked with blood and grime, beaten down nearly beyond recognition, but—

'That isn't why I help people.'

His face contorts for a moment, his hand balling into a fist at his side.

"...And what exactly can you *do?"* He sneers, lifting his head.

Yin Yu looks up, heart leaping into his throat as he grips the earth master shovel a little tighter, but—

Before he can move, say a single word—

BOOM!

It takes one palm strike.

Quan Yizhen is sent flying, his shoulder slamming into the wall—cracking the marble underneath him, coughing up blood.

"YIZHEN—!"

"You don't have your powers," Jun Wu reminds him coldly, shaking out his fist. "Without them, what *are* you? What can you do?"

His eyes flicker to Yin Yu, then back to Quan Yizhen, struggling to get up.

"...You know, you released two very valuable prisoners, Yin Yu," he muses, sending another blast of spiritual power Quan Yizhen's way, forcing him to stay down.

"I'm sure you know that either one of them was more valuable to me than *you."*

Yin Yu doesn't reply, eyes flickering around—clearly desperately trying to think of some sort of clever trick or escape, but—

There isn't one.

"However, I could be convinced to spare your life."

Yin Yu swallows hard, looking back at the emperor—

Startled to see how close Jun Wu is now, not having even noticed the man moving.

"W...What?"

"See," Jun Wu's eyes slide to the side for a moment, taking in Quan Yizhen's expression as he reaches out, grabbing Yin Yu's chin.

"It's actually a bit more convenient for me, working with someone spineless like you," he explains calmly, watching countless bouts of emotion flickering through Yin Yu's gaze. "So, you tell me—would you like an end to your exile?"

Yin Yu grows still, almost speechless.

“…What?” He croaks, staring up at Jun Wu with wide eyes, shaking his head. “You…why would you do that?”

“You weren’t useless, back then.” Jun Wu rationalizes. “If I don’t have any other martial gods…I need someone to step in and fill their place."

Someone obedient.

Someone who couldn't get such an opportunity fairly. Who is bound to Jun Wu from a sense of obligation—but also dependent on him as a source of relevance and power.

Yin Yu grows silent, fingers gripping the earth master's shovel tightly.

And he—

He can't look at Quan Yizhen.

Bleeding on the ground, still struggling to rise to his feet—even after a blow from someone as powerful as Jun Wu.

Still struggling to protect him, after not even trying to argue with the emperor when he said that Yin Yu wouldn't do the same.

'I don't care.'

Because he—

(He doesn't need Yin Yu to be brave.)

"…What…" He swallows hard, his voice hoarse, forcing him to clear his throat. "What would my role…be?"

"…If Ling Wen is my right hand, you will be my left," Jun Wu assured him quietly. "It's a generous offer, Yin Yu."

He won't get a better one.

Jun Wu watches the hesitation in his eyes. The hunched set of his shoulders. Every sign of wavering—drinking it in with satisfaction.

"…You could be so *special* , Yin Yu," he murmurs, giving his shoulders a squeeze.

Special.

"You just need to learn how to *take* what you want. Do you know what that is?"

"…To be a god," Yin Yu whispers, his voice so fragile in its uncertainty.

As if he's struggling to resign himself to what comes next.

Jun Wu offers his hand.

“Then be a god.”

Yin Yu isn't sure what is harder.

Reaching out to take it—or the fact that Quan Yizhen doesn't even tell him *not* to.

Doesn't even seem hurt by what is nothing less than a cruel betrayal, but…

The moment Jun Wu takes his hand—a weight is lifted.

Like, for the first time in decades—he can finally take a full breath without something pushing him down.

And when Yin Yu looks down at his wrist—there's no cursed shackle.

No black ink stretching across his skin like a burning scarlet letter, telling the world that he failed.

And now, after so many years of resentment and regret—

It's just…gone.

There's something strange about it.

Even as Jun Wu lets go and begins to turn away, Yin Yu still stares at that newly bare strip of skin, feeling his strength slowly begin to return.

And it's strange. So very, very strange.

To think that so small a thing carried so great a weight. That it could be removed so easily.

That the one who put it there gives and takes freedom so easily.

Like nothing more than a cheap bargaining chip.

Slowly, his fingers curl into a first.

Behind the throne, Shuo just barely manages to peek his head around.

In time to meet Yin Yu's gaze.

And when he does—

The Ghost Officer smiles.

Not happily. Not with guilt or apologies.

Just—just—

Destiny is double edged.

Shuo watches him mouth one word, his stomach dropping through the floor as he struggles, unable to make a sound, even as he tries to scream against Mei Nianqing's hand.

'Run.'

BANG!

The earth master's shovel sparks and groans, crashing against the emperor's skull.

Jun Wu freezes in mid step, eyes narrowed—just one drop of blood sliding from his hairline as Yin Yu turns on his heel, ready to flee.

"YIZHEN, GET TO THE—!"

Thud.

Quan Yizhen blinks blearily, struggling to wipe the blood out of his eyes.

His head must have been cut when he slammed against the wall before—the blood just won't stop coming, but—

Why…

Why is Yin Yu just *standing* there?

"Oh, Yin Yu…" Jun Wu sighs, standing just behind him. "Blind bravery isn't for the weak, is it?"

He yanks something out of the God's back, and Yin Yu almost staggers, until—

Jun Wu grabs him by the shoulder.

Pulling him in, only to drive the blade into his back once more.

Thud.

“You hear it, don’t you?” The emperor whispers in his ear. “It’s still ringing.”

The bell.

Jun Wu might have given Yin Yu his godhood back, but—

The bell never stopped ringing, suppressing the powers of all of the martial gods in the Heavens.

Including *him* .

Jun Wu yanks the blade out again—a special delivery, as he had mentioned before.

Thrown from the doors of Mount Tonglu—straight into the hands of one of his underlings.

This time—he brings the dagger down into the martial god’s, striking high—

With cruel precision, rupturing the femoral artery.

“I want you to know that this was pointless,” Jun Wu whispers.

Watching the horror dawning on Quan Yizhen’s face.

“You don’t even get to die a hero. Just a miserable little footnote compared to your friends. How miserable. But…”

Seeing the familiar dagger flashing between Jun Wu’s fingertips.

“…It’s been *ages* since I killed a god.”

He says the words with vicious satisfaction, tucking the dagger back into his sleeve as he steps away.

A conscience is like a muscle. One that grows stiff and uncompromising when you don’t stretch it frequently enough.

Yes, it’s been thousands of years since he killed a god.

But now, it’ll be easier next time.

And he doesn’t think of Yin Yu, not really.

He isn't a *person* in the emperor's mind then—not so much as a vehicle of wounding his master.

If he can't use him as a traitor—he makes decent enough cannon fodder.

The moment he lets the god go—Yin Yu falls to his knees, crumpling to the floor in a broken heap.

And—in spite of the fact that he's bruised and bleeding, swaying as he rises to his feet.

Quan Yizhen *snarls* .

Staggering forward with a fury.

Even with his vision blurring with every step he takes.

Even when his body screams in silent protest.

"FIGHT ME!"

Jun Wu barely glances back over his shoulder, rolling his eyes.

"It wouldn't be much of a fight, child."

Quan Yizhen still stumbles after him, breathing hard.

It doesn't matter.

Doesn't matter if it's the emperor. Doesn't if he can win. Doesn't matter if he doesn't make it.

Because—

Because it's his shixiong.

And Quan Yizhen is strong.

Strong enough for both of them.

He said he was strong enough for both of them.

So—

Why is Jun Wu just *walking away?* Why won't he finish it?!

He—

“A…A-Yizhen…”

The martial god grows still, his eyes wide, slowly filling with tears.

Yin Yu holds a hand against his leg, trying to staunch the bleeding, but—

It’s pointless.

“D—Don’t….”

Slowly, Quan Yizhen’s lips start to tremble, a tremor that comes from deep inside—spreading through his limbs until he’s trembling all over.

“…SHIXIONG!”

He falls twice, badly concussed—but he doesn’t stop.

Not until he gets to him.

Sliding to his knees, bracing Yin Yu against him.

Holding him in his arms tight—too tight, making the god cough and wince, loosening his grip frantically as he looks him over.

“You…you…” He keeps blinking rapidly, as if at some point, what he sees is going to change.

In just one more blink, they won’t be here anymore.

They’ll be back in the temple that held childhood in its halls. Where Quan Yizhen never felt like too much.

When his Shixiong’s eyes were still so bright.

One more blink, and there won’t be so much *blood* —everywhere.

But the truth is that every blink is the ticking of a bomb, or a clock.

Counting down to the worst moment he’ll ever have.

The world doesn’t change shape or form when you close your eyes, no matter how hard you try to look away.

“…Xuan Zhen…” He mumbles numbly as the doors close. “You…I’ll… I’ll take you to…”

He starts to gather his Shixiong in his arms, lifting him, but—

A pained cry makes him stop, lowering him back down.

“N…no…” Yin Yu shakes his head, weakly grasping Quan Yizhen’s sleeve.

“He can’t…”

He can’t do anything.

Not for this.

“…No,” Quan Yizhen shakes his head, his voice dull and numb, ringing with denial. “No, no, no!”

“A-A-Yizhen—”

“Don’t do this!” He pleads suddenly, like it’s a choice.

“Shixiong—don't *do this!”*

Yin Yu tries to touch his cheek, fingers trembling—and when he can’t, Quan Yizhen catches it, pressing his face into Yin Yu’s palm clumsily, tears pouring down his cheeks.

And now, when the doors are shut, and the shadows have fallen—

Mei Nianqing’s arms go slack.

“…YIN YU!”

Shuo tears free from him, running across the hall, falling to his knees—skidding the last few feet as he makes it to the ghost officer’s side—

Terrified of how pale his friend is.

His skin ashen, lips turning blue.

“…” He looks over his shoulder, desperate.

“HELP HIM!”

Mei Nianqing hesitates, looking at the growing pool of blood on the floor in dismay.

“I…Oh, my dear boy—I wish I could, but—”

“I-If it’s about that STUPID fucking bell, just—!” Shuo reaches down, yanking up his sleeves. “TAKE MY SPIRITUAL POWER, I have plenty!”

He offers his wrists up, cheeks soaked with tears. “JUST TAKE IT!”

“…I’m not a god either,” Mei Nianqing answers hoarsely, unable to bear the sight of Quan Yizhen, rocking back and forth, clutching his shixiong as he trembles violently. “That isn’t the—”

“You’re not even gonna try?!” Shuo glares, pointing at Yin Yu with a quivering finger. “He stayed back to help YOU! He probably saved YOUR *LIFE!* You—you *HAVE* TO HELP HIM!”

“…” Mei Nianqing shakes his head with a sigh, knowing what the outcome will be.

But still—

He tries.

Kneeling down behind Yin Yu, holding a palm over the god’s leg—the fatal point of injury—his hand glowing with power.

In most cases, the power of the dagger itself is absolute.

Only one god has ever survived a fatal blow—and under very specific conditions.

When Shi Wudu cut his own throat—

He cut through a cursed shackle in doing so.

And, just before the emperor placed the cursed shackles upon his body, the Water Master attempted to renounce his godhood.

Meaning—the instant that shackle was broken—

Shi Wudu reverted back to a mortal man, severing the connection to his divinity.

Not only did the shackle absorb some of the force, leaving the wound shallower than it would have been—

The God Slayer is aptly named.

It’s designed to kill gods— *not* mortals.

Mei Nianqing had to resuscitate him—to drag the broken pieces of his soul back to his body in the minutes after his death—

But after that, he was able to use magic to stabilize him, and mortal medicine for the rest.

In this case…

No matter how much spiritual power he pours into Yin Yu's injury—the result is the same.

Because…

He's the very thing the dagger was *designed* to destroy.

Shuo and Quan Yizhen watch, hope in their eyes fading, the longer it goes on. It—

It isn't working.

"…" Shuo hunches over, fangs digging into his lip until it starts to bleed, his shoulders trembling.

Mei Nianqing doesn't comment, watching the mass of resentment in the boy's soul burn brighter than before.

Smoldering with newfound hatred.

When he rises to his feet, stalking towards the door—

Mei Nianqing follows, giving the two gods a final moment of privacy, asking;

"Where are you going?"

"…Where do you think?" Shuo mutters, drawing one of the daggers strapped to his thigh.

"He'll only kill you too."

"I don't care," the boy hisses—

The tears coming out of his right eye are streaked with blood.

"I've killed a god before."

Even if he can't kill the emperor—Shuo can make him bleed.

"It's a waste."

"HE KILLED—!" Shuo bites his lip, lowering his voice.

Not wanting to make these last moments any more painful than they already are.

“…He killed my friend,” he whispers hoarsely.

And there’s such a heavy weight of guilt that comes with that.

Knowing that, if he hadn’t been too afraid to make a break for the Kiln…

If he had *tried* , maybe he would have survived.

Maybe he would be a calamity right now. And if he was—

He could have done something. Could have protected Yin Yu. Could have helped Xie Lian. Could have done—

Done *something* .

But, after so many years of begging to grow up, when he got the chance—

Shuo ran away.

Like a scared little kid.

“…There’s no use in killing yourself in a grand gesture.”

“Unlike you,” the boy hisses, “I’m not comfortable with climbing over my friend’s bodies to survive.”

He places one hand on the door the grand martial hall, prepared to die in the streets of the Heavenly Capital, but—

Mei Nianqing grabs him by the scruff of the neck, dragging him back.

“You think I’m a coward? Fine. But this? This isn’t bravery, boy—it’s selfishness.”

Shuo flinches, baring his teeth with a hiss, but—

“He did that to protect you. To protect Qi Ying. I didn’t climb over my friends bodies—I ran. I ran as far and as fast as I could, because the only way I could stomach them dying was making it *mean* something.”

He grabs Shuo by the front of the robes and gives him one hard shake.

“If you want to die for something? Fine. But when you do—you better make it *count* . Don’t insult your friend by throwing it away so cheaply.”

There’s such intense conflict in the boy’s face. Warring against the urge to ignore him, go out and fruitlessly attempt to rip Jun Wu apart, but—

After a moment, his face just falls into his hands.

Weeping out of helpless anger.

Grief for his friend.

Because—

It’s been almost two hundred years since Bao.

And he *still* couldn’t protect him.

But his pain, his grief—

It can’t quite encompass the agony in Quan Yizhen’s ragged, trembling breaths, whispering—

Quietly begging Yin Yu not to go.

Not to *leave* again.

And it's hard—because Yin Yu doesn't sound like he's dying, not really.

He just sounds tired. Groggy, even, his breaths slowly becoming quick and shallow.

"Yizhen...listen..." His fingers twitch weakly against the martial god's cheek. "Look...look at me..."

It feels impossible to even lift his head—but he does, eyes swollen, shedding countless tears.

"You..." Yin Yu swallows thickly, dizziness overtaking him for a moment. "You...have to be good...Don't...just run off on your own, when I'm..." He closes his eyes, shivering.

"Stay...stay with his highness, okay? They'll...they'll need your help..."

"I'm not leaving you, shixiong," Quan Yizhen shakes his head, tucking his face against Yin Yu's neck once more. "N-Not ever again—"

"Shhhh..." Yin Yu's arm trembles with the effort, but...

He still strokes his fingers through Quan Yizhen's curls. Just like he always has, ever since they were children themselves.

It's almost jarring now, to think that, only a matter of minutes ago, his shidi said the words—

'We're getting married.'

Something that seemed so daunting, the moment he said it—and Yin Yu has no idea what he would have done, if he had lived long enough, but—

Right now, it feels like he would have.

"I...I'm okay," He rasps, his words sending new trails of tears down Quan Yizhen's cheeks.

"I'm...I came home."

It just rips right through him. His arms holding Yin Yu tighter and tighter, breaths bordering on hyperventilation.

It's cold. It's spinning. In and out, with Yin Yu less and less aware of what's going on. Where he is.

Just of Quan Yizhen—crying.

Whispering that he's sorry, over and over again.

And it's almost funny—because for so many years of his life, he craved an apology from Quan Yizhen. Not for anything he really *did* , but making him feel so...painfully average.

But now, it's just the opposite.

"Don't...don't be sorry," he whispers, his hand growing limp and still in Quan Yizhen's curls. "You...you were...the only one...who made me feel..."

His head drifts to the side, a faint smile on his face, and there's a small, rattling exhale.

Then—there's only silence.

It’s hard to know which hurts more to listen to—

The silence of Yin Yu’s heartbeat, or Quan Yizhen’s weeping.

Begging, but it’s hard to say who.

“It hurts…” he rocks back and forth, head still pressed into Yin Yu’s neck. “S-Shixiong, I d-don’t like it here…”

Yin Yu’s head hang’s limply, eyes unseeing, lips forever frozen in a final, bittersweet smile.

“I-I wanna go home now…It…It hurts…just…make it stop…make it stop….MAKE IT *STOP!”*

He screams, but no one answers.

Because when you’re a god…who could you pray to?

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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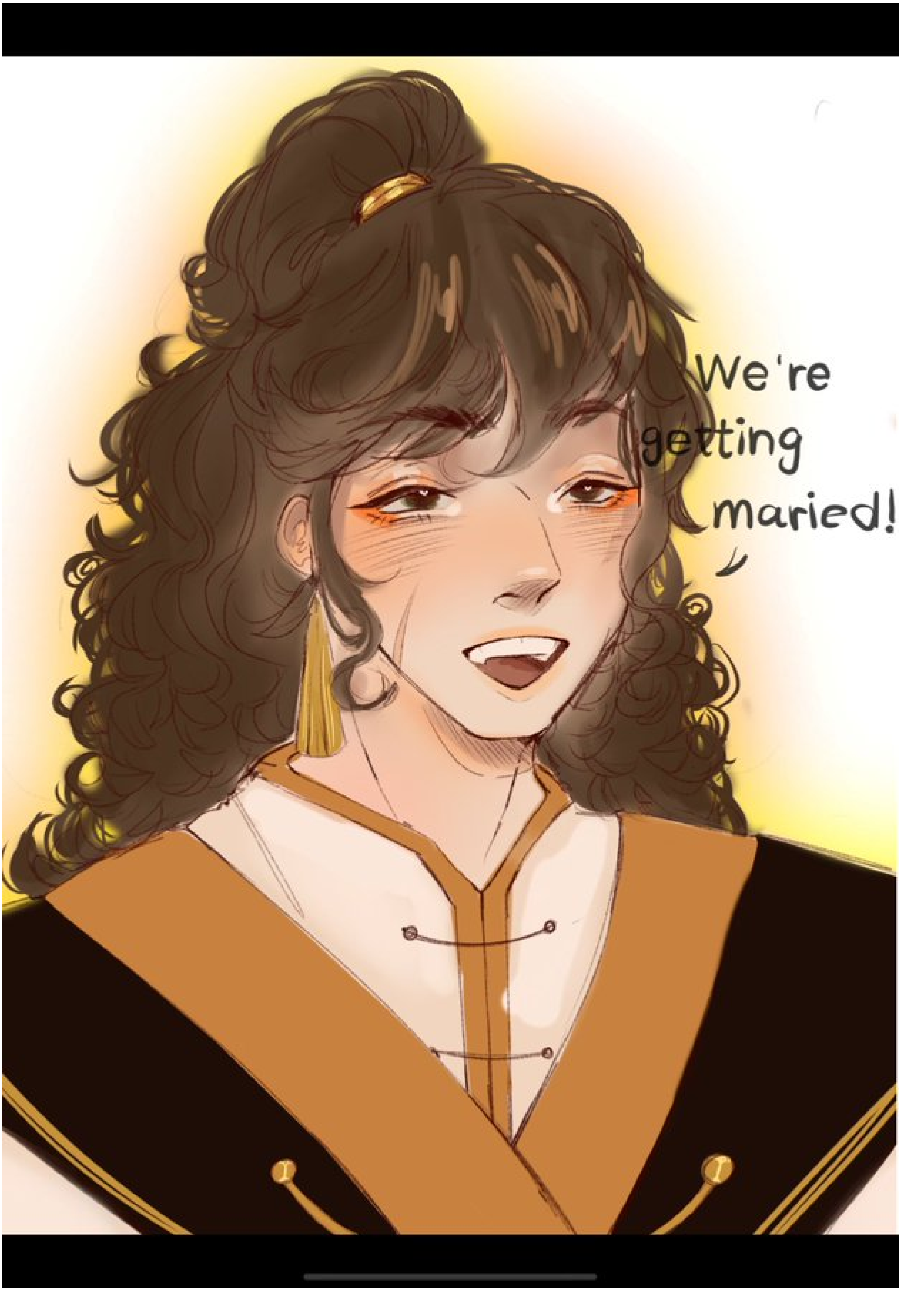
We're getting maried!

* gets killed

CREDIT: LILY

SHUO'S PYRE

CREDIT: EVE

Chapter End Notes

He did not, in fact, get the raise.

(Respectfully)

It Makes One Ache

Chapter Summary

> The Rain Master, known for being almost painfully courteous, interrupts him.
>
> “One of the boys from the village helped me bring souvenirs from the mortal realm. Do you mind watching over him while I meet with the emperor?”
>
> Xie Lian stares blindly, his lips parted with confusion.
>
> “I…I don’t see a problem with that,” he agrees slowly, baffled. “But—”
>
> “We’ll talk later,” Yushi Huang assures him, turning to walk away. “Good luck, your highness.”

Chapter Notes

> TRIGGER WARNING: this chapter deals with themes of grooming and the possibility of sexual assault, and could be triggering for certain readers. Please proceed with caution!

Xie Lian hates the quiet.

There aren’t any animals here. No natural breeze, or even the babbling of a river.

Just the sound of his own breath and heartbeat—

And his thoughts.

Endless, terrifying thoughts, slowly spinning from the worst possibility to the next.

Left to wonder where his friends are. If they’re hurt. If they’re *alive* .

When Jun Wu is coming back. What he’ll do, when he does.

If the plan will work. If Shi Qingxuan was even able to reach Blackwater at all.

If San Lang—

Knock, knock!

He turns his head, cautious.

Not sure if he should trust anything right now, but—

If it was Jun Wu, he wouldn't knock.

He pushes himself to his feet, feeling along the walls as he cautiously makes his way towards the doors, squinting, until…

A familiar spiritual aura comes into view.

Xie Lian exhales a sigh of relief, pushing the doors open as fast as he can—

"Lord Rain Master?!"

"Your highness," Yushi Huang smiles, calm as ever. "I've come to report to the emperor on my experiences in Mount Tonglu."

Xie Lian pauses, his heart leaping into his throat as he glances around, listening for any trace of Jun Wu—any glimpse of the man's aura.

"I don't…I don't think now is such a…"

But then, something strange happens.

"I don't have time to catch up, we'll have to do that later."

The Rain Master, known for being almost painfully courteous, interrupts him.

"One of the boys from the village helped me bring souvenirs from the mortal realm. Do you mind watching over him while I meet with the emperor?"

Xie Lian stares blindly, his lips parted with confusion.

"I…I don't see a problem with that," he agrees slowly, baffled. "But—"

"We'll talk later," Yushi Huang assures him, turning to walk away. "Good luck, your highness."

Xie Lian pauses again, his eyebrows knitting together as the teenage farmer steps over the threshold.

...Good luck with what?

He opens his mouth to ask as she walks away—but it only takes one sound to keep him silent as the doors to the Palace of Xianle slide shut.

Clink!

Clink!

"Gege, gege..." The youth sighs, setting a basket of vegetables down on the table.

"If someone makes you disappear one more time, this one might have to resort to something drastic—"

Before he can even finish his sentence, his prince is in his arms, hugging him tightly around his neck.

"San Lang!" He breathes out all of the tension in his body. "You came!"

Hua Cheng grows taller and broader in his arms as he shifts back into his true form, the worn clothes of a farm hand melting back into fine crimson robes—and when Xie Lian's arms don't loosen even a bit, his toes end up dangling from the ground.

(And he doesn't care at all.)

"Of course," Hua Cheng sounds a little startled at first--

Because *he's* known the truth the entire time, having grown so accustomed to keeping his distance from the prince, he—

He never considered what it would be like when Xie Lian knew.

And even if he had—he never considered the possibility that Xie Lian would return *all* of his feelings, or if so, that it would be in the same way.

But now...

His arms wrap around Xie Lian's waist, holding him close.

"There's nothing in this world that could keep me from you forever, your highness." He murmurs, pressing their foreheads together.

Xie Lian swallows hard, his heart leaping into his throat, and he—

He tilts his face up, pressing their mouths together in a brief, chaste kiss.

Hua Cheng makes a small, pleased sound in the back of his throat, raising an eyebrow when the prince pulls away. "What was that for?"

Xie Lian lowers, his face, clearing his throat.

"When we spoke before—I said I would..."

The Ghost King's eye brightens, remembering.

Xie Lian *had* promised to kiss him again, after Hua Cheng complained of not getting enough affection from him before he disappeared.

"Apologies, gege—your San Lang was teasing you," he muses, his smile widening and dimpling as he notices how red Xie Lian's ears are. "I knew something was wrong the moment you called me."

Xie Lian looks up with a frown, anxiety welling up in his chest, wondering if he had made Hua Cheng think he wouldn't want to call him—

"Why?"

But the answer is shockingly simple:

"You used my verbal password."

When the prince doesn't respond, Hua Cheng's gaze turns slightly mischievous.

"Unless that was a request?"

"...San Lang!" Xie Lian rasps, even more mortified by the part of him, somewhere in the back of his mind, that mumbles—

'Not right now.'

"Apologies, apologies..." Hua Cheng says that, but the laughter makes it hard to think his remorse is sincere. "What I mean to say is—gege is so shy, you wouldn't say it unless it was truly an emergency. And it was obvious you couldn't speak freely."

Even if that wasn't enough of a clue--Xie Lian's reference to Mu Qing on Mount Tonglu was a clear lie, something he would only say to signal to Hua Cheng that they were being overheard.

So, of course Hua Cheng was eager to ask for more affection when Jun Wu was listening.

If he could have, he would have been *far* more offensive and specific—but at that point, it would have been far too much at his god's expense to be worth Jun Wu's potential suffering.

"But," Hua Cheng amends, his voice far quieter, his fingertips rubbing slow circles into the small of Xie Lian's back. "I know gege is shy," he repeats gently. "If my teasing makes him feel like he has to—"

"I wouldn't if I didn't want to," Xie Lian blurts out, slightly pink.

Half embarrassed by admitting it, and half distracted by how excellent Hua Cheng's fingers are at working out the tension in his spine with such subtle, seemingly careless movements.

"It's just...hard for me to...It would be easier, if..."

The emotion is too difficult to describe now, not in the limited amount of time they have, but—

Hua Cheng seems to somehow understand the basic premise of it anyway—which makes sense.

He's known Xie Lian longer than almost anyone.

Xie Lian stiffens for a moment when Hua Cheng takes him by surprise—leaning down and kissing him longer and deeper than Xie Lian had dared to before, teasing his lips until the god's fingers tighten on his shoulders, trembling slightly—

"I don't mind taking initiative."

He lifts one hand from Xie Lian's waist, cupping the side of his face in his palm, gently inquiring—

"Did gege miss me?"

"..." Xie Lian turns his face into Hua Cheng's palm—then finds that to be unsatisfactory, burying his nose in the ghost king's chest instead.

"...Yes."

It was hard enough being away from Hua Cheng *before* he knew, but now?

It's only been a few hours—and they were nearly unbearable.

But when Xie Lian thinks back on what happened in that time, he lifts his head, his expression urgent. "What did Shi Qingxuan tell you?"

"...That the emperor had lost his mind, and that he was allied with Bai Wuxiang," Hua Cheng recalls slowly—and Xie Lian—

He's spent the last several hours thinking of ways he could make Hua Cheng understand without saying the name or identity of who Jun Wu *actually* is.

"...The emperor was able to bring Mei Nianqing back here with the rest of us," Xie Lian explains quietly. "And when he started interrogating him about Bai Wuxiang...Mei Nianqing admitted to being Xie Bolin's father. Then...the emperor attacked him."

And hearing that, well—

It's enough for Hua Cheng to come to the same conclusion that Xie Lian did--hands suddenly gripping the prince's shoulders as he looks him over again with far more scrutiny.

"...Did he do anything to you, gege? Are you hurt?"

Xie Lian grows silent, thinking back on it.

Compared to everyone else? Jun Wu barely did anything to him.

...Physically.

"He threatened me," Xie Lian admits. "But that doesn't matter now."

"...Threatened you?" Hua Cheng inquires softly.

"It doesn't bear repeating."

It's not that Xie Lian doesn't think Jun Wu was serious—or that he took the threat lightly—

Because how could he?

"...Dianxia, I know learning all of this must have been heartbreaking for you, but you don't need to brush past—"

"I'm not," Xie Lian swallows hard.

He doesn't want to protect Jun Wu. Not anymore. Not—

Not knowing everything that he does now.

But Jun Wu’s threat wasn’t something that began today. It existed eight centuries ago.

When he masqueraded as Feng Xin by the River.

When he chose, of all of the skins he could have worn, to wear *Hong’er’s* face that day in the temple. Watching with morbid curiosity, contemplating allowing those men to…to…

Constantly going out of his way to touch him, to make Xie Lian—

To make Xie Lian, who had already been robbed of one sense, to dread and fear being touched at all.

Even centuries later, when Lan Qianqiu reached out to touch his Guoshi’s face—

Xie Lian had felt like crying, back then. His stomach twisting and churning.

Even if he knew his student wouldn’t hurt him. That he *couldn’t* .

When Xie Lian met Wu Ming, he almost asked the ghost to go to bed with him—not because he was ready, or even wanted that at the time —But because he had been *terrified* that his first time would be…

Xie Lian doesn’t know why he’s struggled so much with admitting it. Maybe because he was humiliated—or he spent the last few centuries trying to convince himself that it was all in his *head* , that he was overreacting, but—

He can’t think of another instance when he’s ignored his own instincts like that. Pushed down the legitimate fear he had, deep in his bones—

…Of being raped.

He doesn’t know if it was well founded or justified back then. But the moment Jun Wu made that threat—

It felt *real* .

"…We can talk about it more later." Xie Lian mutters, shaking his head. "He's just worried about what would happen if I lost my shackles. But…" He sighs, pressing his forehead against Hua Cheng's sternum.

"Do you know if Shi Qingxuan was able to speak to Blackwater?"

"…She did," Hua Cheng acknowledges. "He's working on setting up the array in Blackwater Manor now."

Which means it won't be that much longer—and they'll need to be free to move when he does.

"…You aren't going to like it," Xie Lian mumbles, muffled by Hua Cheng's robes.

"But I have a plan."

That, of course, doesn't invoke confidence.

"…What sort of plan, you highness?"

"Jun Wu is going to come back here before long," he explains quietly, "when he does—I'm going to provoke him on purpose."

There's a pause.

"…Gege is right."

"I know."

"I hate that plan."

"I *know* ," Xie Lian agrees. "But there's only one person who has a chance at fighting him in his own territory, and that's you, San Lang."

"Then let *me* provoke him, I'm very good at it—"

Xie Lian shakes his head.

"Your best chance is if you catch him by surprise," Xie Lian lifts his face, his expression turning stubborn. "And that means—no matter *how* angry you are, you have to wait for the right moment. When he's completely distracted."

"Dianxia…"

"Is there a better idea?"

"I provoke him myself." Hua Cheng counters, just as stubborn, but…

Xie Lian's expression isn't wavering.

He hates the idea of relying on Hua Cheng to fight Jun Wu at all, but if he doesn't have a choice—

He's going to give him the best chance of succeeding as possible.

"He won't kill me, San Lang—no matter how angry he is. He *will* kill you."

He's done it before, in one form or another.

"He's going to say horrible things to me—he might strike me—but choose the moment *carefully."*

The muscles in Hua Cheng's jaw work silently, his gaze cold.

"There is a limit to what I can tolerate, your highness."

"I know," Xie Lian whispers.

He hasn't forgotten what Hua Cheng said in the temple of Wind and Water, when Shi Qingxuan asked him what was the worst suffering there is.

Watching his loved ones in pain.

Xie Lian would never ask him to do that—not unless he thought there wasn't another option.

"Just do your best, San Lang. That's all I ask."

Finally, with extreme reluctance—the ghost king nods, looking over Xie Lian's shoulder, seeing something behind him.

"…Is that how you plan on provoking him, gege?"

Xie Lian nods, having dedicated the last few hours to puzzling that out, and—

Even Hua Cheng has to reluctantly huff out a small laugh, shaking his head.

"…That'll do it."

"I thought so."

"…" Hua Cheng listens for a moment, ears perking just as Xie Lian hears movement on the streets outside.

Yushi Huang, speaking with Jun Wu—clearly delaying him with her slow, methodical way of speaking, detailing their current harvest of eggplants.

"…We don't have much more time," Xie Lian mutters. "He's coming—San Lang?"

He stiffens with surprise when Hua Cheng cups his cheeks in both hands, carefully examining the prince's face—then his arms.

Eye narrowed resentfully on the wound on his hand that hasn't healed.

Ruoye wiggles slightly, obviously pleased to see him, shivering when Hua Cheng's fingers stroke over it in greeting.

"What are you doing?"

"…If he leaves a scratch on you, I'm cutting something off," Hua Cheng explains calmly. "One for every mark."

And just like that, Ruoye isn't the only one shivering.

Hua Cheng leans down, stealing one more kiss from him—and when Xie Lian feels the ghost king trying to give him spiritual power, he pulls back.

"If you do that, he'll know you're here," he reminds him.

Hua Cheng *knows* , but he lets out a frustrated growl anyway—not directed at Xie Lian, but—

His god rocks forward onto the balls of his feet, pressing a soft kiss against the calamity's cheek.

"You'll be there the entire time," he reminds him gently.

Comforting Hua Cheng as much as himself, in that case.

"…" The ghost king kisses his forehead in response, gaze burning hatefully past Xie Lian's shoulder.

"I have so much to tell you, when this is over."

Xie Lian's heart is in his throat.

"…Me too," he whispers.

Then, in the flash of an instant, the prince's arms are empty.

"…" He clears his throat, pushing his hair behind his ears as he kneels on the ground, going back to where he was before Hua Cheng arrived, and—

The palace doors creak open.

"Xianle."

The prince doesn't turn his head at the sound of Jun Wu's voice, fingers working calmly.

"Your majesty."

He leans against the door frame.

Admiring the sight of Xie Lian kneeling, even if it isn't towards him.

"I've had time to think," the emperor muses, crossing his arms.

"And this change of circumstance seems a little too…all or nothing, for my tastes."

"…It must be very disorienting for you," Xie Lian agrees quietly. "After playing the same role for so long."

"See?" Jun Wu smiles, pleasantly surprised. "You *do* understand."

He takes a step away from the door. "I'm not opposed to going back to the way things were before. Not just for you—but for everyone."

Xie Lian doesn't look back at him, but his fingers grow still.

"It just requires…a small sacrifice on your part."

"…What sacrifice?"

"Well, it's logical. You and I have always gotten on so well, Xianle. It's just *one* thing that's always gotten in the way." Jun Wu explains, eyeing Xie Lian’s shoulders. “One thing that makes you so petulant.”

Watches as the god sits up straighter.

“…If you mean you’ll let us go if I let you hurt San Lang, that’s—”

“No, no…” Jun Wu’s tone is soft. Almost gentle.

A reminder of how he sounded *before* , a voice that makes Xie Lian’s heart ache.

Knowing that kindness isn’t real.

It never was.

“I know how much you adore Crimson Rain,” he soothes, even if his expression is one of disgust. “What I’m proposing is far more humane.”

“…Humane?” Xie Lian asks flatly, hands tightening in his lap when he feels Jun Wu stroking his hair.

“…What if you never knew he existed?”

Xie Lian doesn’t respond, his body going still.

“You’ve lived with such pain, such grief these last eight centuries…I could take all of that away,” Jun Wu croons. “Do you remember how brave you were before? How strong?”

He lifts one lock of Xie Lian’s hair, watching how the strands shine under the light, slipping between his fingertips.

“You could be that person again.”

If he could just be *obedient* —things could be as they were before.

"...And don't you think it would be selfish to deny such an opportunity?" Jun Wu muses. "Would you doom your friends, all three realms...just because you can't let him go?"

When put in a cosmic scale—it does sound like he's asking for something so small.

How could Xie Lian place his own happiness over the future of the entire Heavenly Court? The fate of the Mortal Realm?

Jun Wu isn't even saying he'll kill Hua Cheng, just—

Just threatening to erase him from Xie Lian's life.

Making them strangers again.

To Jun Wu, that's mercy.

"No."

The Emperor pauses, pulling his hand back.

"...What was that, Xianle?"

"I said no." The prince replies calmly, still facing away from him. "I'm declining your offer."

Jun Wu's expression darkens.

"...You should be grateful I'm giving you a choice at *all* ," he sneers. "Ungrateful child."

"It wasn't an actual choice," Xie Lian's voice is decisive—holding that same stubbornness that he tried so hard to break back then. "Not for me."

Xie Lian is capable of sacrificing nearly anything if he can rationalize that it benefits the greater good—no matter the cost to himself.

But not him.

Never him

"If you wanted me to stay out of your way, you should have left me in my first banishment."

The Emperor stops for a moment, intrigued by the thought. "...What do you mean?"

"You didn't notice?" Xie Lian mutters, slowly stroking his thumb over the red string tied around his index finger. "I was becoming content, back then."

Spending his days in his shrine with Hong'er.

"That was why Bai Wuxiang took him away from me."

Because he couldn't stand the thought that the Prince of Xianle might not need him.

Subconsciously, Xie Lian knew that. That was why he tried to make Hong'er leave. Why he felt so much guilt after he was gone.

"But if you had given me a few more years..." Xie Lian shrugs. "I would have given up my godhood. Grown old and died with him. Can you imagine how much easier your situation would be now, if you had?"

Xie Lian certainly would have been happier—he knows that much.

"...You really think I would have allowed you to live such a worthless, insignificant life?" Jun Wu hisses, his eyes narrowing.

"No," Xie Lian agrees. "You'll never stop getting in your own way."

It's almost pitiful.

"...And to think, we could have been such friends."

Xie Lian is quiet for a moment—and there’s something about his response that makes even Jun Wu falter.

“I thought we were friends.”

For so, so long.

But they never were.

Xie Lian isn’t sure if he was ever actually a *person* to Jun Wu at all.

More of a concept.

A tool.

“…Is this your way of trying to tell me goodbye, Xianle?” Jun Wu asks quietly.

For just a moment—the prince’s eyes shine with tears.

But they don’t fall.

“…Yes,” he whispers. “I even made you a parting gift.”

Finally, Jun Wu looks away from Xie Lian—

Looking past him.

To the recent installation to the palace of Xianle—one Jun Wu thought might make his favorite bird sing inside of his cage, finding home in it, instead of fear.

A loom.

And in his hours of weaving—Xie Lian has created quite a tapestry.

It's the Grand Martial Hall.

Or a slightly less filtered version of it.

The marble is bloodstained and cracked—while the windows are shattered and cold.

No Heavenly Light. No kneeling subjects.

And on the throne—

Beneath every mask, lie, and manipulation, is the man who truly sits upon it.

One with a handsome face—but contorted.

Half laughing, half crying.

Limbs curled and twisted around him sinisterly—

Half man, half spider.

And stretching out all around him is his web.

Countless faces ensnared inside.

Xie Lian. Mu Qing. Even—

Even Shi Wudu, a face Xie Lian only saw once, through memory.

Mei Nianqing. Tonglu Hudie.

Jun Wu's children.

And finally, just over Jun Wu's head, is the twisted and broken form of his brother.

Deng Shihong.

Hanging in a horrific display of guilt.

Superimposed over Jun Wu's image, like—

Like he's the one meant to sit in the throne, and Jun Wu—

Is just a monster.

A *pretender* .

"…What is this…?" Jun Wu whispers, taking one step back.

"I never remember my dreams," Xie Lian lifts his chin, defiant. "But I always remember my nightmares."

He turns his head, hair slipping over his shoulders as he slowly looks up at Jun Wu, cursed shackles gleaming in an accusatory life.

"That's the only time I saw you for what you really are—isn't it, your highness?"

And oh, what a terrifying thing it is.

To be seen so clearly—after *years* of hiding.

"…"

CRACK!

Xie Lian doesn't make a sound, crumpling to the floor, a deep cut forming in his cheek from the emperor's ring.

"Oh, Xianle." Jun Wu sighs, muted.

Eyes slightly out of focus.

"I tried to warn you."

Xie Lian pushes himself up on one hand, using the other to wipe the blood off of his cheek.

"…You know something interesting," he smiles, not lifting a hand to defend himself as Jun Wu yanks him up by the hair.

So similar to what Bai Wuxiang did, in the Kiln.

Two halves of the same coin.

"Cuckoo birds…are parasitic by choice," the prince explains. "Their parents *could* raise them, if they wanted to."

Where Jun Wu's hand grips his hair—it trembles.

"It's a choice," Xie Lian laughs faintly.

"They choose to cast their young aside."

The meaning behind the taunt isn't lost on the emperor.

And as it sinks in, rattling throughout his bones…it turns into rage.

Pure, seething rage.

"I warned you, Xianle," he repeats, dragging him forward. "When I told you about the scales."

Getting even isn't enough for him.

When Jun Wu feels provoked—he has to take it *too far.*

He has to feel power again. To feel *control* again.

Xie Lian knows.

But he—

BANG!

His head rams into the wall so forcefully, his ears begin to ring, the world spinning around him.

He hadn't expected to be so disoriented.

Not knowing which way is up or down, not until—

He feels his back hitting something soft, recognizing it as—

As the daybed in the palace of Xianle—one that he's never used.

One hand still gripping Xie Lian's hair, the other twisted in the front of his robes.

"…Every time we fight, you always look like this," Jun Wu purrs, their faces so close, Xie Lian can feel his breath against his lips.

"It makes one *ache,*" those fingers reach for his belt. "Makes one *excited.*"

And Xie Lian knows he should be terrified.

He *is* terrified.

Maybe it’s the blow to his head. Or the stress—even the exhaustion, maybe.

But the only thing that comes out of his mouth is a strained, frantic laugh—one that makes the emperor pause, staring down at him in confusion, lips parting—

Xie Lian doesn’t actually hear it, at first.

He feels Jun Wu’s body being ripped off of him, an incredible rush of wind, but—

It's so fast, the sound itself is delayed by five long seconds—and when it *does* come, the sound is so explosive, it nearly blows Xie Lian to the ground.

A roaring, thunderous impact.

Jun Wu’s body is sent flying through the wall of the Palace of Xianle—shattering the pane of glass in an instant, sending it raining down across the streets of the Heavens—flipping head over heels, rolling across the ground violently—

Slamming into the gates to the mortal realm.

BOOM!

The Great Gates of the Heavens groan under the impact, but remain firmly shut—

And when Jun Wu looks down, in place of his right hand…

He sees a bleeding stump of a wrist. But when he looks up again, he—

He just sees two gleaming, red eyes—burning like hellfire.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

Do not repost or reuse.

...YOU NEVER LEFT ME!!
martiart

CREDIT: **MARTA**

The Burning of the Heavens

Chapter Summary

> “And as far as I’m concerned—you were already a dead man.”
>
> “…A dead man?” Jun Wu shakes his head, his other hand finally beginning to grow back completely, fingers sprouting forth. “You could come at me with everything you have—and you could never kill me here.”
>
> “No,” Hua Cheng agrees.
>
> Then, he does something strange.
>
> He sheathes E’Ming, and with a snap of his fingers—his armor disappears.
>
> Leaving his arms bare, dark ink from his tattoos sticking out sharply against his skin.
>
> “You’re right,” he agrees calmly, coming to a halt. “You're invincible in your own territory.”
>
> His eye drifts upwards, evaluating the simulated sky above.
>
> “But your territory isn’t.”

Chapter Notes

> CONTENT WARNINGS: graphic violence, property damage, minor character death.

A wolf—almost completely black from head to toe—launches itself forward, jaws snapping around his other hand—severing it at the wrist.

But when Jun Wu kicks upwards towards its ribs, attempting to wrap his leg around it’s torso and crush it—

It disappears. No—

Changes.

Into a python, slithering up Jun Wu’s leg with lightning quickness—

Constricting until the bone snaps.

And when Jun Wu attempts to bring his elbow down—

It slides up his torso, over his shoulder; and behind him—

Jun Wu hears a roar, a tiger's claws raking down his back.

Jaws clamping around the emperor's neck and squeezing, Jun Wu's eyes widening as he's slammed back against the gates again, realizing —

Hua Cheng is trying to force him to choose between opening the gates to the mortal realm, or—

Losing his *head* .

Luckily for him—he embraces the virtues of a third option.

Sending a blast of spiritual energy from his body—forcing the calamity to let go, sending him flying back—and by the time E'Ming strikes out, gleaming with deadly aim—

CLANG!

It strikes armor.

"…well," Jun Wu grouses, white plated armor gleaming as he struggles to reattach his right hand. "That was effective. Classless, but what else could be expected."

He surveys Hua Cheng carefully.

Because Jun Wu isn't the only one wearing armor now.

Hua Cheng's typical silver vambraces gleam on his forearms—but the jewelry that typically adorns his chest has transformed into a breastplate—along with bronze Pauldrons on his shoulders.

But his upper arms are completely bare—making Jun Wu raise an eyebrow.

"I don't think I've seen armor with such obvious weak spots," he points out, and with one step, he flashes to Hua Cheng's side, sword aimed upwards, to strike the bare point beneath his arm, but—

CLANG!

It's an earlier Jian model—one of her starters.

Lightweight—but lacking the durability of the others.

Hua Cheng catches the blade between one of his vambraces and E'Ming in a pincer move—and with a twist of his wrist, snaps the weapon in two.

"Calamities aren't so fragile, you'll find."

The pieces fall with a clatter.

He eyes Jun Wu's full set—

Knowing every single point of it, having seen the memories of the smith who forged each plate.

"I don't need to hide behind that much steel."

His words are even as the two circle one another—but his gaze—

It's just as bloodthirsty as the wolf that took his hand.

Just as vicious as the python that snapped his leg.

Just as ferocious as the tiger that mauled his throat.

"...I must say, this is horribly romantic," Jun Wu sneers. "Throwing your life away without hesitation."

Hua Cheng doesn't rise to the bait quite so easily, instead, offering the only response that could make Jun Wu's eyes flare with rage;

"To die for the Crown Prince is my greatest honor," He repeats softly, tilting his head, fingers tightening around the hilt of E'Ming.

Knowing that the emperor must have been watching, that night.

Must know that those were Hon'ger's last words.

And even now, after so much time and effort—

Hua Cheng says them just as easily. Just as sincerely.

And for Jun Wu of all people—

It tastes so bitter.

"...Or maybe I *won't* kill you," Jun Wu breathes, summoning a new blade into his hand, twirling it between his fingertips as the two circle one another.

Limping slightly—still missing one hand.

"Maybe I'll reduce you to a ghost fire, then make you *watch."*

Watch him finish what he *started* .

Hua Cheng's eye doesn't turn back to Xie Lian, the way Jun Wu clearly intends for it to—

(The prince is only half conscious at the moment, and Hua Cheng has several butterflies watching over him already.)

"You think you'll be able to?" Hua Cheng smirks, E'Ming trembling in his grip. "How many times have you tried to get rid of me already? It drives you mad, doesn't it?"

From the way Jun Wu's jaw locks, it would seem so.

"As far as *you* are concerned, I'll haunt you to the end of your days."

There is no version of Jun Wu's future that doesn't have Hua Cheng in it, standing in his way. Stealing Xie Lian's attentions and affections.

Taking things that should be *his* .

"...You must understand that this is pointless though, don't you? Fighting me *here* of all places?"

Jun Wu gestures to the scene surrounding them. The empty streets of the Heavens. His body healing from wounds that would have killed just about anyone else.

"You took me by surprise—but what can you actually do *now?"*

Here, where the emperor is invincible.

But timing—

It’s really quite a thing.

First, he hears his communication array rumbling to life, a familiar voice uttering one word:

'Ready.'

And, further down the martial avenue, the doors to the Grand Martial Hall slam open.

"HUA CHENGZHU!"

Hua Cheng doesn't take his gaze off of Jun Wu, lifting his hand in acknowledgement of Shuo's voice, knowing that the demon would never interrupt him during a fight. But when he hears what the boy has to say—

"YIN YU IS DEAD!"

E'Ming grows still.

"THAT BASTARD KILLED HIM!"

The Emperor watches the way Hua Cheng's expression remains unchanged, eyes glittering in sadistic amusement.

"Poor thing, receiving such a cold reaction from his only ally…"

"Call me what you like," Hua Cheng replies, his tone frigid. "I don't make a habit of showing sadness in front of sadists."

He's as possessive over his own grief as he is of anything else—and he would never allow Jun Wu to take pleasure from that.

"And as far as I'm concerned—you were already a dead man."

"…A dead man?" Jun Wu shakes his head, his other hand finally beginning to grow back completely, fingers sprouting forth. "You could come at me with everything you have—and you could *never* kill me here."

"No," Hua Cheng agrees.

Then, he does something strange.

He sheathes E'Ming, and with a snap of his fingers—his armor disappears.

Leaving his arms bare, dark ink from his tattoos sticking out sharply against his skin.

"You're right," he agrees calmly, coming to a halt. " *You're* invincible in your own territory.”

His eye drifts upwards, evaluating the simulated sky above.

“But your *territory* isn’t.”

Jun Wu barely has time to process what he means, raising his blade as Hua Cheng lunges—

But the calamity simply leaps over his head.

For centuries, he’s been called Bane of the Heavens.

Hua Cheng never found the name particularly apt.

If anything, he did the Heavens a favor, slaughtering the thirty three. Trimming poisoned, diseased limbs from the base of a tree, allowing room for new growth.

But now—

Now, he intends to *earn* it.

Xie Lian lifts his head, ears ringing, nausea spilling over until he’s forced to retch, stomach heaving.

But past the ringing, and the blood rushing in his ears—

He hears what he first mistakes as thunder, or an earthquake. Or another avalanche, like on Mount Tonglu.

But after a moment—

He recognizes it as a roar—but far louder than any he’s ever heard before. From a creature he’s only heard of in stories, told to frighten him as a child.

A dragon.

Not the calm, elegant creatures associated with rain and rivers.

Not even like the ferocious water dragons Shi Wudu summoned to battle his third calamity.

Xie Lian can smell nothing but the smoke—feel the ash falling like snow.

“Is…that…?”

A shard of rubble crashes down from overhead, and the prince is too disoriented to move, but—

Boughs of iron wood stretch over him in a canopy, shielding him from the impact—and when Xie Lian smells the trees overhead, he looks around, swaying.

“Shuo?!”

“Here!” He slings Xie Lian’s arm around his shoulders. “The portal is in Ming Yi’s old palace! We have to move!”

Xie Lian stumbles along with him, struggling to keep his balance. “W…What about the others?!”

The next roar is so loud, the demon has to scream to be heard:

“HUA CHENGZHU IS TAKING CARE OF THAT!”

As he speaks, a shadow passes over them, each beat of his wings making the wind blow past them in violent gusts.

A long, serpent like body—crimson scales cladding it in near impenetrable armor—talons longer than spears, gleaming with veins of silver and gold.

Sweeping around, tail cracking like a whip with each turn—coiling its body around the largest structure in the heavens:

The bell tower.

Squeezing until it crumbles—sending the bell that’s been ringing for the past few hours slamming down with a final—

GONG!

The emperor is directly on his trail, blasts of energy missing his body by inches at point, lunging forward to stop him, but—

ROOOOOOOOOAR!

Forced to flee backwards when the square is engulfed in a sea of flame, watching as the celestial metal of the bell melts down.

Knowing what that means.

That all around the capital—

A sleeping army is beginning to wake.

In more ways than one.

“YOUR HIGHNESS!”

Xie Lian winces, waving his arm weakly. “F-FENG XIN! WE’RE HERE! IS MU QING—?”

“HERE!”

He exhales harshly with relief.

“WHAT IS THAT THING?!”

“It’s—” Xie Lian has to lean heavily on Shuo, who has been helping him across the burning wreckage without complaint. “IT’S SAN LANG! He’s creating…an opening for us!”

“What?!” His friends catch up to the two of them. “Stop for a second!”

They skid to a halt, Mu Qing immediately reaching for the blood on Xie Lian’s cheek, looking him over.

“Did you get hit?!”

Xie Lian shakes his head—then immediately regrets it, knees wobbling as Shuo braces him.

“N…Not by the blast…the emperor…”

Mu Qing pales.

“What did he do to you?!”

“I…” Xie Lian squints, “I don’t…really…”

He remembers showing Jun Wu the tapestry—getting slapped—

Then everything else was muddled, until Shuo found him.

“I think I hit…He hit my head…”

“…Sit him down for a second.” Mu Qing kneels down in front of him. “Follow my finger with y—” he stops, curling his index finger back down against his palm sheepishly, staring at the cursed shackles gleaming back at him.

So much for that—or checking the size of his pupils.

“…Squeeze both of my hands.”

Xie Lian does, and after a moment Mu Qing looks up at him, frowning.

“…Is that as hard as you can?”

“No…” Xie Lian slurs, “Don’t wanna hurt you.”

Mu Qing huffs an infuriated, reluctantly affectionate sigh. “But you’re using the same amount of force with both?”

Xie Lian n—

“Don’t move your head if you don’t need to, just say yes or no.”

“…Yes…”

Mu Qing stands up, pressing his hands to either side of his head, visibly stressed.

“His right side is weaker than his left.”

“What does that mean?!”

“…He can’t die,” Mu Qing mutters, stating the obvious. “But his shackles slow his healing rate enough…if we don’t get him down to the mortal realm fast—"

“You can’t help him here?!”

Mu Qing glances at the chaos around them, annoyed.

“Obviously *NOT!”*

"...Blackwater is opening a portal out of here in his old palace!" Shuo speaks up, blanching slightly when both martial gods look toward him, suddenly reminded of his presence. "We can escape through there!"

"...Can we *trust* that?"

"Yes..." Xie Lian mumbles. "He's...good..."

Feng Xin and Mu Qing look at one another, clearly each having their doubts, and Shuo offers:

"He promised Hua Chengzhu that he would get Xie Lian out of here safely."

"...Oh." Mu Qing nods. "Then we should go now."

Feng Xin gawks at him.

"Okay, since when are *you* so trusting of Crimson Rain?! You still haven't explained—"

"And now is NOT a good time!" Mu Qing snaps back at him. "Could you ask when we're not facing imminent death?!"

"Lately that is ALL THE TIME!"

"Okay, when his highness isn't WOUNDED!"

Mu Qing looks down at Xie Lian, thinking. "He really shouldn't even be walking on his own."

Best case would be transferring him carefully—gently—on a stretcher, but—

BOOM!

...That isn't happening.

Xie Lian feels himself being lifted up, and in a matter of seconds, even though it's been centuries, he finds himself in a familiar position.

Hanging from Feng Xin's shoulders, the martial god charging through the rubble with Mu Qing and Shuo flanking on either side.

Mu Qing keeps glancing over at them, eyeing the way Xie Lian's cheek is resting on Feng Xin's shoulder, wishing they could—

"...Ruoye!" He calls out, not expecting much, but—

When the bandage wriggles one end up, tilting—almost like it's looking at him curiously—

Well.

"...Stabilize dianxia's head!"

The spiritual device wiggles in silent acknowledgement, slithering up to wrap around Xie Lian's neck and the base of his skull, stopping his head from moving around too much as they run.

Not ideal, but better than nothing.

"YOU KNOW!" Feng Xin calls over the roaring of the battle overhead. "THIS IS KIND OF LIKE OLD TIMES!"

Mu Qing looks up at him, hair falling in his face, covered in the ash falling from overhead. "WHAT ARE YOU—?!"

Then, he sees the familiar position.

Feng Xin, carrying Xie Lian on his shoulders—the two of them, moving side by side.

Except Xie Lian is half conscious, instead of asleep—and they're escaping the heavens, rather than sneaking back into a palace. And—

And Feng Xin is looking back at him, this time.

"...YEAH," Mu Qing mutters, looking away. "EXCEPT FOR THE KID!"

Making an unusual addition to their trio, but—

"...I'm from Xianle, too!" Shuo offers, leaping over a piece of rubble to keep pace with them.

"HEAR THAT, MU QING?" Feng Xin grunts.

He lifts an arm, catching a falling chunk of marble against one of his vambraces, shattering it, rather than let it hit the other three.

"JUST FOUR KIDS FROM XIANLE, TRYING TO OUTRUN A PSYCHOPATH! THE USUAL!"

In spite of everything—

Mu Qing actually laughs a little.

"Does everyone else know to go to the Palace of the Earth Master?"

"Yeah," Shuo nods, having spoken to Hua Cheng briefly in their communication array before he went, well...airborne. "Someone spread the message!"

"...Who?!"

Jun Wu glances back over his shoulder, finding himself...figuratively and literally, caught between a rock and a hard place.

Hua Cheng can't kill him, but he's making it very clear that he can raze the entire Heavenly Capital to ash—

And Jun Wu can't seem to catch him.

Getting close here and there, but always seeming to just barely let the calamity slip through his fingers, raising another structure, making it very clear—

If Jun Wu doesn't open the gates, he'll break them open himself, eventually.

And when he looks back over his shoulder—

That is the other problem.

Watching countless gods running away from the destruction—free to move since the destruction of the bell. And leading the charge—

Is none other than the Rain Master, riding her Guardian Ox.

The beast rears back, snorting as she lifts Yulong over her head, hair streaming behind her as she guards the path, looking the emperor in the eye—not holding an ounce of fear.

"EVEN YOU, OLD FRIEND?!"

The edge of her sword gleams in the firelight.

"I keep better company."

Jun Wu wrenches his head to the side, looking at the deputies and martial gods he appointed personally—officials who have nothing without him.

"If a single one of them escapes—you're ALL going into the fire, understand?!"

The group balks, but...see no choice.

But when they start to go after their fellow gods, swords raised, they...

Round the corner, growing still at the sight of one man, blocking the path to the palace of the earth master.

Just one, but in this case...

"Well," Pei Ming crosses his arms. "How are we doing this?"

The other officials stop, looking at one another unsurely, and the General shrugs.

"You could all come at me at once, or, if that's too embarrassing for you, you can form an orderly little line, so you can tell the emperor you lost to me one on one. I'm not particularly picky."

"...You think we want this?!" One of the younger officials cries out, looking agonized. "He's going to kill us if we don't!"

"And I'm going to kill you if you do," Pei strokes his chin. "Or you throw down your weapons, and I let you pass with the others."

Most of the deputies throw down their weapons without hesitation, sprinting past Pei Ming desperately—almost relieved for the opportunity to get away, even if it means giving up whatever privileges staying might have afforded them.

It's the other martial gods who remain.

"Okay," He acknowledges those who remained, rolling up his sleeves, and asking the same question as before. "How are we doing this?"

There's still hesitation on the other side—the one in the front rolling his eyes, looking back at the rest.

"Are you idiots kidding?! He's been half dead already, ever since the Water Master went and got himself killed! He probably WANTS us to kill him—!"

CRACK!

The other gods watch in silent horror as Pei Ming appears behind him, snapping his neck in one quick twist of his hands.

The man is dead before he hits the ground, with Pei kneeling down to pick up his sword, testing the weight of it in his palm as he straightens up.

"Actually, I *am* dying to have a talk with the old man, so I'm pretty motivated right now."

His eyes glint dangerously as he looks up, pushing his hair out of his face, holding his weapon aloft with the other.

“So,” he repeats, staring them down. “How are we doing this?”

The gods look at each other grimly, then—

They charge as one.

Good.

It’s less boring that way.

The Palace of Ming Yi is mostly abandoned, covered in dust and forgotten scrolls—

And endless barrels of stored food, but that isn’t much of a shock.

In a rare show of volume, Yushi Huang shouts over the crowd—

“THE ARRAY IS ON THE LOWER LEVEL! MOVE IN SINGLE FILE IF POSSIBLE!”

“…Single file?” Mu Qing mutters, skeptical. “What kind of transportation array requires that?”

“There’s…a lot of us,” Xie Lian’s cheek is still slumped against Feng Xin’s shoulder, struggling not to fall asleep. “And if it’s like the one… San Lang used before…”

“Before?”

“He must have meant when Hua Cheng stole him away from his palace before the mid-autumn festival,” Mu Qing recalls. “Back when I…”

“Punched me.” Feng Xin nods. “I remember.”

Given how he *deserved* it in that instance, however…he doesn't complain.

"What was it like back then?"

Xie Lian can think the words, but his mouth struggles to obey, speech slurring.

"…Tunnel…"

"…Tunnel? Your highness, you—Feng Xin, don't let him fall asleep!"

"You think I have any control over that?!"

But when they step through the entrance to the array—it becomes clear.

Most transportation arrays are like doors. The minute you step through, you're already in your next destination.

But traveling all the way from the Heavens…is slightly more complicated.

In this case, there's a narrow, winding path—but not exactly like a tunnel, either.

There are steep drop offs on either side, leading down to…

Mu Qing peeks his head over, the lava pits below illuminating his cheeks.

"…Is Blackwater trying to help us escape, or kill us faster?!"

Shuo taps his fingers to his temple, listening.

"…It's not on purpose," he explains. "He says he didn't have much time to open a new pathway—and Jun Wu is actively trying to close it."

Leaving an unstable, incomplete result.

Mu Qing wants to gripe more—but even he realizes it was a nearly impossible task.

But now, it leaves them with only one choice:

Hurrying in a line down a long, uneven path—

With only certain death awaiting them below, if they're unfortunate enough to fall.

"…There's no way everyone in the Heavens is making it out at this rate."

"Nope," Feng Xin agrees. "But it's better than no one getting out."

Which was certainly the alternative.

"…Is this an every man for himself sort of situation, you think?" Feng Xin mutters, moving them down the path. "Or is someone in charge?"

Mu Qing's first instinct is to open his mouth and say of course there is, but—

That question becomes more complicated when the person trying to kill you is the person who was in charge.

"…If we go for the former, it'll be easy for Jun Wu to pick us off."

"Right," Feng Xin nods, having had the same concern. "So, who is it?"

And that—

That question isn't as easy to answer.

"…Let's just focus on getting out of here and helping his highness first," Mu Qing mutters, rubbing his temples.

Shuo keeps watching the three out of the corner of his eye, finding the experience of walking beside them somewhat…surreal.

It was strange enough meeting Xie Lian in the beginning—the famous crown prince from his childhood.

But here, with his friends…

Seeing the two famous generals of the war he grew up surrounded by, Feng Xin and Mu Qing, feels almost...surreal.

Watching them bicker and worry like normal people—all while faced with a situation that couldn't be further from mundane.

Admittedly, some of the magic of fame had already worn off from watching them scream and argue outside of the Inn over who the father of Lan Cheng's child was, who was in love with who, all while wearing disguises that no one was actually fooled by—

But still, it's surreal.

Even now, walking down a path surrounded by gods—creatures Hua Cheng historically taught him to fear, to the point where he was sick with terror after killing the true earth master—

They're...surprisingly helpless, when the cards are down.

Fleeing from the Heavens in a rushed, panicked mass—some of them more collected and dignified than others, but—

For the most part, they seem terrified. And in some places, the progress has turned into more of a stampede than a calm evacuation.

All of which he could watch with calm observation—maybe even distant pleasure, given how he was raised to dislike heavenly officials as much as fear them, but—

When he sees one face in the crowd, stumbling, getting elbowed closer and closer to the edge...his stomach drops.

"...Kid?" Mu Qing twists his head back, watching as Shuo turns around, running back the way you came. "Where are you—?"

"...GUZI!" He elbows and shoves his way through the crowd, struggling to keep sight of the boy. *"GUZI!"*

"HEY!" Someone grabs his forearm, trying to stop him, and when the demon whips his head around, fangs bared and hissing—

Lang Qianqiu glares back at him, glancing at the officials around them, tense. "What do you think you're doing?! You have to get out of here!"

And Shuo flaunting his very obvious demonic nature on a path crowded with Heavenly Officials isn't exactly smart.

"...Sorry for embarrassing you in front of your *comrades* ," He hisses, yanking his hand out of Lang Qianqiu's grip.

"That's not—!" Lan Qianqiu grits his teeth.

"Could you stop being a brat for one second and just—!"

"Guzi is here! " Shuo snaps, and the martial god's entire expression

changes. "At this rate, he's going to get shoved off of the array! He's getting trampled!"

At that point, Lang Qianqiu is running with him.

"THERE'S A MORTAL CHILD!" He shouts, far louder than Shuo could, managing to get a few of the officials in their path to move out of the way, shoving past the rest as Shuo darts ahead, but just as he manages to snatch the child up in his arms—

BOOM!

A great force presses down from above, rattling the path around them—screams echoing across the array as those unfortunate to be close enough to the edge are sent tumbling down into the fiery pits below.

And Shuo—

He feels the tug of gravity in his stomach, dragging him down.

In some distant way, he knows this means that Jun Wu must be attacking the palace of Ming Yi above—that the entire pathway is in danger. But for some reason, all he can think to do is hold Guzi tighter against him, knowing that it could be worse.

It's better than going alone.

There's nothing worse than that.

But—

THUD!

Shuo feels himself land back down on the path again—hard, eyes widening with shock, and in the span of what could only be a few seconds, nothing more—

Everything happens so fast.

He hears Guzi scream, in the most gut wrenching voice—

"DAD!"

And he just—

Feels himself lunging forward, arm thrust out, and the next thing he knows...

He has his heels braced against the edge, pulling back with all his might—gripping the hands of his worst enemy.

Qi Rong.

"...You..." Shuo stares down at him, speechless. "Why...WHY WOULD YOU DO THAT?!"

The green ghost struggles, gripping his wrist with both hands, feet kicking helplessly.

"I DON'T KNOW!" He snaps. "WHY WOULD YOU CATCH ME?!"

"...I don't know," Shuo answers hoarsely.

"Dad!" Guzi cries, rushing over, only for Shuo to whip his head around, snarling—

"He *ISN'T* your Dad! Stay away from the edge!"

The boy flinches, staring back at him with wide eyes.

"I...I know he's a ghost!" Shuo and Lang Qianqiu both stop, staring at him.

"But he's nicer to me than my actual dad was! He protected me! And he didn't leave me behind!" Guzi croaks, tears rolling down his cheeks.

That's more of an insult to his birth father than a testament to *Qi Rong* , but...

"THEN LISTEN TO YOUR OLD MAN AND STAY BACK, BRAT!"

Shuo looks down at Qi Rong, eyes round with shock as the ghost glares at Guzi. "LAST THING I FUCKING NEED IS A USELESS ASS KID GETTING IN THE WAY, GOT IT?!"

"Didn't leave you?!" Lang Qianqiu grumbles, pulling Guzi away. "He *KIDNAPPED* YOU! MULTIPLE TIMES!"

"I WANTED TO GO!" Guzi screams, trying so hard to get back to him, kicking and screaming.

"He—" Shuo shakes his head, fingers tightening around Qi Rong's arm. "He's NOT your dad, Guzi."

"HE *IS* , HE—!"

"Your dad—" the demon locks his jaw, "—he's the person who makes you feel safer than ANYONE else in the world!"

Someone who could make him feel safe in a place like this, with the world crashing down around them.

"Your dad wouldn't call you a useless brat!"

Shuo swallows hard, shaking his head. "He—He wouldn't let you be hungry, or scared—and he—he wouldn't make you feel like you had to have a REASON to stay around!"

Because when someone loves you, you don't have to justify your own existence.

You don't have to be *useful* .

He won't throw you away because of the body you were born with. He won't leave you alone.

He'll find you, no matter how many times you get lost. He'll help you, no matter how many mistakes you make.

It—

It doesn't matter how many times you fail, as long as you're still here.

"...MAYBE THAT'S WHAT YOUR DAD DOES!" Guzi shakes his head vehemently. "BUT MY DAD IS *DIFFERENT!* AND THAT'S OKAY!"

"I DON'T HAVE A—!" Shuo stops, shocked when—

When a pained sob rips from him, shoulders trembling.

Maybe it shouldn't be a shock, after everything that's happened today. Being tortured by Jun Wu. Watching Yin Yu die right in front of him, but—

Qi Rong seems just as shocked as he is when Shuo's tears land on his cheek.

Lang Qianqiu hands Guzi off, kicking and screaming, to Mu Qing, the three of them having stopped to help—then rushes forward, wrapping his arms around Shuo's waist as he starts to heave him back up, but—

But Qi Rong won't budge.

"What...what the *hell!"* Shuo grunts, veins popping in his forehead as he pulls with all of his strength, muscles in his arms straining.

"Yeah..." Qi Rong looks down, seeing—

A flood of resentful spirits lunging up from the flames, hands gripping his ankles.

"...THIS IS WHY THIS ANCESTOR DOESN'T PLAY FUCKING HERO!" he grumbles, trying to kick his feet, but—

It's no use.

"...Shuo," Lang Qianqiu grunts in his ear. "You have to let him go."

The demon freezes, his heart leaping into his throat.

"NO!" He thrashes, breathing heavily as he pulls with everything he has. "I'M NOT GOING TO OWE THIS PIECE OF SHIT *ANYTHING!"*

Qi Rong looks back down again, lingering for a moment, and when he lifts his head—

For the briefest moment, his eyes find Mu Qing.

Neither of them are particularly likable, in their own ways. Each deeply misunderstood. In Mu Qing's case, more tragically.

Qi Rong has never been a creature that was actually meant to be pitied.

But Mu Qing was the first and only person to protect him when it was needed.

"...HA!" He shakes his head. "YOU THINK YOU'D FUCKING OWE ME, YOU LITTLE IDIOT?!" His eyes snap back to Ren Song, gleaming in the fire light. "DON'T YOU SEE?! THIS MEANS I BEAT YOU! I BEAT BOTH OF YOU!" He taunts Xie Lian, blinking groggily from Feng Xin's shoulders.

"YOU WANTED TO DIE A HERO SO MANY TIMES—AND LOOK WHO'S DOING IT FIRST!" He shouts, brimming with vindication. "YOU THINK YOU'RE TOO GOOD TO BE MY FAMILY?! IT DOESN'T MATTER, I DID SOMETHING ELSE YOU COULDN'T! THIS ANCESTOR HAS A *SON!"*

Then, his eyes return to Shuo one last time.

"AND YOU—AFTER EVERYTHING I'VE DONE TO YOU, HOW MANY LIFETIMES OF PUNISHMENT DO YOU THINK I'D HAVE TO GO THROUGH?! THIS...THIS WAY I GET OFF EASY!" He cackles. "I KILLED YOUR BROTHER; I KILLED YOUR FATHER—AND I GOT AWAY WITH IT!"

In spite of everything—Qi Rong isn't a particularly spiritual person.

He's never believed that gods were all powerful and all knowing. His cousin rid him of that belief ages ago.

And he doesn't know if reincarnation is really what awaits you, when your soul moves on.

Part of him always believed there was nothing—just oblivion. And he took comfort in that fact.

That he could haunt this earth, but his actions would never haunt him in return.

That what he did didn't matter, if there were no consequences in the end.

There were things his father taught him before he was old enough to understand. Things he was complicit in before he knew what they *meant* .

And he couldn't understand it when he died, and all of the things that endeared Qi Rong to his father…

Disgusted everyone else.

The king and queen never said it with words—simply showed it with this helpless, hollow lack of affection.

Tolerating him—but never telling him where he was wrong. Presuming he was beyond saving.

There's no way of knowing at that point if he actually was.

But it felt hopeless.

And when a certain White Clothed Calamity came knocking—it felt like the world made sense again. He knew how to gain someone's acceptance again.

If the path to it was foul—he had never been shown another way.

And it didn't matter—because when you let go, you're just *gone* .

It wasn't until Guzi that part of him began to wonder. Wonder the same thing any parent does.

What kind of life your children will have after you.

The memories that you leave behind.

If there's any justice after death, he's already hopeless—because Xie Lian is right.

If he ever tried to look back and take an honest inventory of himself—of everything that he's done—

It would eat him alive.

But.

But if there's nothing after you die, you don't have to even out those scales. It doesn't matter.

It's more about who you leave behind.

How they remember you.

Giving a boy one thing to look back on, and say—

'My dad did that.'

Because he isn't going to have anything else left of you.

"…You didn't kill my dad," Shuo mutters, staring down at him in confusion.

His father died of old age.

Happy. Loved.

And for once—Qi Rong doesn't scream. Doesn't swear. Doesn't curse his enemies.

He just—

He just smiles, canines glistening in the firelight.

"Sure I did—ask my shitty cousin all about it."

Then, for a brief moment, he flexes his arm, pulling up to whisper close to Shuo's ear.

When he pulls back, Shuo—

He hates him. He *really* fucking hates him, he'll never forgive him, but —

He can't stop crying.

And he hates the fact that he's crying for him. Hates the fact that he's scared. Hates knowing that he'll never—

"Funny or scary, right?" Qi Rong looks back and forth between Shuo and Lang Qianqiu, letting out one final, howling cackle. "LOOKS LIKE THIS TIME, THE JOKE IS ON YOU TWO FUCKERS!"

But this time, in this one, solitary instance—

Shuo can see that he doesn't mean it.

"DON'T!"

Finally—

Qi Rong lets go.

Plunging out of sight as Lang Qianqiu yanks Shuo back over the edge, arms wrapped around him tightly as the two end up sprawled on the ground.

"DAD!" Guzi screams, reaching out uselessly over Mu Qing's shoulder, sobbing as the god carries him away, not allowing him to look.

"DAD!"

Shuo is frozen for a moment, looking at the spot where Qi Rong disappeared, waiting for him to burst back up, screaming that he fooled them again. Or for him to get lucky one more time. Or for this to be a dream. But—

None of that happens.

And eventually...

The demon notices how tightly Lang Qianqiu is holding him. Even when the threat of falling has passed. In spite of the fact that there are countless other gods around to see it.

He's clinging onto Shuo like—

Like he's afraid he might disappear.

But Shuo…

His body is still solid, showing no sign of disappearing.

Even though he doesn’t know why anymore.

His face turns into Lang Qianqiu’s sleeve—muffling his tears for a moment, rather than instinctively pushing him away.

Not struggling when Lang Qianqiu rises to his feet, pulling the forest demon along with him.

“We have to hurry,” he mutters, coaxing Shuo into continuing on down the path. “Who knows how many more hits this thing can take.”

And even if they did—

Xie Lian needs treatment—now.

Above—

The Heavens all around have been reduced to morning more than a burning pile of ash. With even the gods themselves having retreated.

With Jun Wu caught between smashing down the remaining foundations of the Palace of Ming Yi, or—

Stopping Hua Cheng from burning the rest

His body smashing through the windows of the Grand Martial Hall—columns of flame bursting the roof open as he rakes the walls with his claws, tearing them down.

A hall that has stood over the three Realms for thousands of years, and now—

It's just rubble.

“Well, well…” When the dragon speaks, it’s low and rumbling, filling the sky of the burning city as he climbs atop the rubble, eyes gleaming. “It seems someone built his throne on a grave.

Jun Wu knows it’s a distraction—to keep him from destroying the tunnel.

But still.

He glances back over his shoulder—lip curled with disdain.

“As victors often do.”

“Oh, but you should know better, your majesty.”

Jun Wu has never heard his title spoken with such contempt.

“The souls of the slaughtered rarely go quietly.”

As he speaks, Jun Wu sees them.

Swirling piles of ash, rising up and coiling around his ankles, dragging him down, down, down.

He can't see their faces. Can't see their voices, but—

He feels their wrath.

The old gods. Slaughtered and fallen.

Wrathful after countless years of living beneath his feet—only able to catch glimpses of the heavenly light they once enjoyed by peeking through gaps in the floorboards.

And as he struggles, obliterating their souls one by one—

Hua Cheng slams through the gates.

Leaving the false emperor alone in his kingdom of ashes, struggling beneath the souls of his murdered comrades.

Calamities are frightful things.

Wrathful spirits that could lay waste to an entire nation.

But now—

A single calamity has eradicated an entire realm in one day.

But this is not the end—not even close.

Hua Cheng barely touched the emperor—simply darted around him while he broke the gilded bars of his prison.

Now, he has no place to imprison his victims.

Now, he has no place left to hide.

The real battle—

That starts *now* .

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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[image]

CREDIT: RAUCH

[image]

CREDIT: REN

[image]

CREDIT: MECHAMISH

You Won't Go Alone

Chapter Summary

> “San…San Lang…?”
>
> They were…just in his palace, weren’t they? Or—no, no that isn’t right.
>
> There was a dragon.
>
> No.
>
> San Lang was a dragon—
>
> “He’s preoccupied at the moment.”

The first thing Xie Lian registers is the sense of dampness. The smell of salt and brine.

“San…San Lang…?”

They were…just in his palace, weren’t they? Or—no, no that isn’t right.

There was a dragon.

No.

San Lang was a dragon—

“He’s preoccupied at the moment.”

He recognizes Pei Ming’s voice—surprised by how dark his tone is, but —

“Lay down,” Mu Qing’s voice is in his ear, a hand on his shoulder as he stops Xie Lian from sitting up.

“Where…” Xie Lian swallows, struggling to get his lips to form words. “Where are we…?”

“Blackwater Manor.” The minute Feng Xin says it, Xie Lian realizes how familiar their surroundings feel—

Remembering that day.

More painful than most of his recent memories—feeling like he had failed Shi Qingxuan, and…given how it ended…

It’s no surprise Pei is angry.

Even if Blackwater had a right to take Shi Wudu's life...

If it were Hua Cheng, in the exact same circumstances—Xie Lian knows he couldn't look past that or forgive it either.

Lang Qianqiu glances around, carrying Guzi on his back. "...If this is his lair, then where is he?"

"Pretending to be a deputy civil god in the corner," Ling Wen's tone couldn't be more dry, and in the distance—they hear a quiet curse of annoyance.

"...It was worth a shot."

"Wait," Feng Xin turns to Ling Wen. "Since when were you back on our side?!"

She doesn't bother to answer, turning her attention to Pei Ming, who already has the ghost king by the front of the robes.

"We're in his territory now, Pei-Xiong. You really want to try that?"

The General pauses, his fist pulled back—arm trembling with fury.

"...And before you get any ideas of trying to repeat what Crimson Rain just did, I'd like to remind you that we'll drown if you destroy—”

"I got it." Pei snaps, his jaw clenched as he lets He Xuan go, sending him an absolutely venomous look. "I'll deal with you later."

He Xuan didn't lift a hand to defend himself when Pei first grabbed him—and doesn't attempt to do so now, answering calmly;

"We'll have a lot to talk about."

A statement that seems infuriating to Pei Meing, who wants to do anything but talk.

There's faint rumbling overhead, prompting Blackwater to look up, pressing his fingers to his temple.

"...That's not good," he mutters under his breath, walking towards the exit.

"Just where are you going?!"

"The Emperor already knows I was the one who created the escape route," He Xuan mutters. "And it wouldn't take a genius to figure out where the destination would be."

And it would seem that if he can't use the Heavenly Capital as a prison—

He'll just use it as a bomb instead.

Dropping the ruins down on top of Blackwater's territory with the intention of destroying it—and simultaneously killing any witnesses inside.

"Hua Cheng is dealing with him above," the water demon explains, cracking his neck.

"I have to assist."

Mu Qing can't stop looking between Xie Lian, and the man he once knew as Ming Yi. Already aware of the fact that the man had ascended as a god after killing the previous Water Master, but—

He never realized that Ming Yi's form was intentionally unimposing.

By comparison, the man before him is far taller—nearly as tall as Hua Cheng and the emperor himself. Broader.

Not someone who could easily melt into the background behind the bright charm of Shi Qingxuan's personality, like he could before.

"...We have to get his highness out of here," Mu Qing finally speaks up, addressing the far more pressing issue. "He needs to get back to Mount Taicang."

"Mount Taicang?" Feng Xin turns to look at him, baffled. "Why would we need to go back there?"

"The array will remain operational as long as I'm within the territory," He Xuan mutters. "Ling Wen knows how they operated back when I used to develop them for the Heavens—she can direct people as needed."

With that, he disappears through a hidden exit.

“…Do you think Hua Cheng actually needs help, or He Xuan just wanted to get away from Pei Ming?” Shuo mumbles, still a little shell shocked—and Mu Qing sighs.

“Both.”

Pei stares after him for a moment, then turns to look at the array on the ground.

Remembering.

‘ *You would have been perfect.’*

The look on his face, when he pushed him away.

‘And I’m so sorry.’

Sorry, because he knew Pei Ming never wanted to go first.

Grief bubbles up in his chest, the pain still so overwhelming, it nearly drowns him.

But it doesn’t.

He exhales harshly, picturing his face clearly.

Even after having so many loves, and living through so much grief—

Nothing ever prepares you for what it means to grieve the love of your life.

You can only breathe through it, one exhale at a time.

But Pei squeezes that feeling down. Crushing it between his palms into a small, manageable size.

He puts it in a box, locking it away, to be opened and examined later.

Then—Pei Ming does what he’s always done.

“Ling Wen—have you reconnected the communication arrays?”

“Just now,” she agrees, rolling up her sleeves. “Yours should be active.”

Pei Ming presses his hands to his temples, listening.

It’s not ideal, but at the moment—

He's the last god living with a base of worshippers even comparable to Jun Wu's.

"…Most of the deaths have been in the imperial city," he says after a moment of listening to prayers.

There are skilled cultivation sects in Yunmeng, Gusu, and Qinghe, so it isn't a shock that they could hold off longer but—

Langling is oddly quiet.

"…Anyone who isn't willing to fight, Ling Wen will evacuate you to Yunmeng." He raises his voice to be heard over the crowd of officials. "If you do, and we fail—the emperor will hunt the rest of you down. If we win—this will be considered resigning your godhood."

That causes terrified murmurs to echo through the crowd.

"…You're just hanging us out to dry either way! You're saying we can't be gods unless we're willing to die out there?!"

"That's exactly what I'm saying," Pei replies, not affected by the outrage.

"This is one of the only situations where we're expected to make ourselves useful."

"But you—! You don't even have the AUTHORITY! You can't take someone's—"

"If we get through this, there is a very short list of people who could end up in charge of whatever is left."

Pei crosses his arms. "And I can tell you that every single one of them will have you exiled for running away. Civil gods—" Pei Ming pauses, looking at Shuo. "Would they be allowed in Ghost City?"

The forest demon stares back at him, surprised that Pei would ask him, but…

Given that Hua Cheng is obviously busy—there's nobody else he could ask.

"…Yes. But I can't promise they'll be popular—"

"It's the safest place for anyone who can't fight at the moment." He nods to Ling Wen, who activates the array. "Any martial gods who aren't willing to fight—say so now."

He doesn't have to ask Yushi Huang where she stands, and, well—

There aren't any other elemental masters left.

"The rest of you will be deployed to the Imperial City to await orders. Tai Hua and Qi Ying—stay back."

Of course, giving any orders to Quan Yizhen is redundant at the moment. The martial god of the west has been quiet since they arrived, and he—

He still hasn't been willing to put him down.

Not yet.

The movement through the chamber this time around is far more organized than their rushed exit from the Heavens—with Ling Wen quickly dividing the gods into groups, calling their names and destinations as they step forward, disappearing through the array one by one.

And as he watches the chamber begin to clear—Mu Qing finds himself more exasperated than ever.

"Look—we don't have time to wait any longer, we need to get the prince to—"

"Mount Taicang," Feng Xin recalls, Xie Lian's head resting in his lap. "Why there?"

"..." Mu Qing stares at him for a moment, his lips pursed. "...Hua Cheng and Blackwater could have had that escape route from Mount Tonglu leading anywhere—but they chose Mount Taicang. There has to be a *reason."*

"And how do we know if that helps us?"

"If Hua Cheng was the one who made it—" Admitting it feels like pulling teeth, but Mu Qing spits the words out. "He did it for Xie Lian's sake."

"Heal him here," Pei Ming mutters, taking a flask from Ling Wen, tilting his head as he knocks back three deep swallows.

"But—"

"Blackwater isn't suppressing anyone's abilities, it shouldn't be an issue for you, and—" He points to Xie Lian, who has slipped back into unconsciousness. "Jun Wu could have incapacitated him plenty of other ways. He wanted his highness disoriented for a reason."

Mu Qing's guess is far worse than Pei Ming's.

"The prince implied he learned critical information about Jun Wu and Bai Wuxiang—and how to defeat them—in the Kiln. We can't plan for the situation until we know what we're dealing with."

Pei Ming already has the beginnings of a plan—but Blackwater Manor is a fortress. Jun Wu will break through eventually, but it's better than Mount Taicang, an exposed ruin.

He doesn't intend to leave one of the only defensible positions they have without a strategy.

He turns away from them, moving to help Ling Wen with the array. "Let me know when he's awake."

Mu Qing stares after him for a minute, his lips turning pale from how tightly he's pressing them together—and Feng Xin watches him suspiciously.

"What's with you?"

Mu Qing casts an annoyed look his way, pushing his hair out of his face, pulling it up into a ponytail. "The fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"You seem so worried—I don't get why you didn't start working on him as soon as we got here," Feng Xin mutters, frowning.

That's what he's always done before, when someone was seriously injured. Especially Xie Lian. He didn't even wait to completely break free from the Butterfly Silk before healing his ribs in Mount Tonglu—and that wasn't nearly as severe.

"..." Mu Qing looks around them.

Most of the other gods are focused on following Pei Ming's orders, filing to leave—or huddled together, whispering nervously. But—

Still, no one is looking their way.

Feng Xin knows that look.

That sharp, defensive expression, one that most find abrasive, but...

In Feng Xin's experience, it usually just means he's panicking.

"...Hey," He lowers his voice, leaning closer to avoid being overheard. "Did someth—? Hey—!" He starts to cry out indignantly when Mu Qing grabs him by the front of his shirt, yanking him over.

But...

Then, he's just frozen in abject shock, lost in the feeling of a familiar pair of lips against his own.

(The one person who was still looking, Shuo, turns around sharply, slinking away from the scene in discomfort.)

And while it's not necessarily the time or the place, Feng Xin is just on the verge of sinking into it, one hand drifting up longingly towards Mu Qing's hair, but—

That's when the other martial god pulls back, turning back to Xie Lian, leaving Feng Xin in stunned silence.

"Wha..." He starts, then stops, lips parted—tingling slightly. "What was that for?!"

And of course, now Mu Qing seems more than happy to get started, palms glowing as he places them on either side of Xie Lian's head.

"Shut up!"

"...The fuck?!" He sputters.

"I thought we weren't doing that anymore?!"

"...It's not like we ever had an explicit agreement one way or the other," Mu Qing sneers, glancing around again to make sure no one saw.

"I thought you DECKING me was a pretty CLEAR INDICATION—”

"I've decked you before!"

"...So, now we ARE doing that again?"

"No!" Mu Qing shakes his head vehemently, his hair slapping Feng Xin in the face—a final blow to the man's sanity.

"But you just—!"

"If the mother of your child is going to ruin my life because she thinks you've been in love with me for centuries, I might as well do what I fucking *want* , right?!" Normally, Mu Qing would shout those words at him, but given their surroundings—he's forced to hiss.

"...So...what, you needed to kiss me to work up the motivation to heal dianxia's head wound?!"

"No—”

"Then that's just what you *wanted* to do?!"

Mu Qing grits his teeth, squeezing his eyes shut. "I just needed a little help, alright?! Will you fucking *drop it?!"*

That taps into Feng Xin's prior worries, making him think back on all the strange behavior from before, suddenly staring at Mu Qing with renewed concern.

"...Since when do you need help with something like that—?"

Both of them fall silent, however, when Xie Lian stirs.

On the far side of the chamber, Pei Ming watches the final groups disappear through the array, arms crossed—deep in thought.

"...Am I staying behind with the rest of you?" Lang Qianqiu mutters, feeling...

Out of sorts.

Still struggling to make sense of recent events.

For the last few months of his life, everything he did revolved around Qi Rong.

Tracking him down. Capturing him. Holding him prisoner. Then he would escape, and the cycle would begin again.

But now...he's gone.

And for some reason, even though it's only been a relatively short period of time—

Lang Qianqiu struggles to imagine himself going back to the life he lived before.

It feels strange, looking to his fellow martial gods to decide his next steps.

...When did that start?

"No—I'll be sending you to Gusu," Pei Ming explains carefully, still listening carefully as prayers come in and out. "There aren't any distress calls coming in. You should be able to handle it on your own, but..."

He needs someone to secure Shi Qingxuan.

And out of the martial gods he can afford to spare—Lang Qianqiu is the only one he trusts.

"And what about the regions further north?"

"North of Gusu?" That only leaves Lanling, where there's been near silence. "I re-deputized Pei Su and sent him that way."

“…Are you allowed to do that?” Lang Qianqiu asks, surprised.

Pei Ming raises an eyebrow, lifting his flask to his lips once more. “Given the situation? We need all the hands we can get.”

And the punishment feels even less binding now, knowing Jun Wu’s true motives.

Lang Qianqiu falls silent, watching the others leave as he waits for his turn. And when Pei Ming turns his head…

“Hey—you.”

Shuo glances up from where he’s been leaning against the wall, his arms crossed—essentially just trying to stay out of the way.

“You were the last one to leave Mount Tonglu with Hua Cheng and Xie Lian, right?”

“…Yeah,” He agrees quietly. “Why?”

“How are they keeping Bai Wuxiang trapped there?”

“…That’s hard to explain,” he mutters. “But there’s a ghost holding him at bay inside the Kiln.”

Pei Ming rubs the back of his head, thinking. “But that won’t hold.”

“…” Shuo shakes his head in agreement. “She’s locked to the Kiln’s location. Once he gets past her, there’s nothing left to stop him from escaping.”

“If he did escape—what do you think he would do?”

It’s hard to predict a narcissistic psychopath, but…from the perspective of a ghost? Shuo knows what he would do.

“Most likely? He’ll try to join back up with the emperor.”

And once he does—defeating him will be impossible.

“…And just how strong is Bai Wuxiang on his own?”

Shuo breathes in carefully through his nose, steadying himself as he remembers the Terrace of Cascading Wine.

“About as strong as Hua Chengzhu. Probably stronger, even if it’s not by much.”

Pei Ming falls silent for a moment, thinking.

“…I have to say something to the emperor first,” he mutters, rubbing his chin. “But then I’ll have to go back to Tonglu myself.”

Ling Wen stiffens, shaking her head. “That’s a terrible idea. The other martial gods won’t follow anyone but you—”

“Sending anyone else right now would be a death sentence,” Pei Ming mutters. “And the one person who could be an asset in this situation is trapped under three cursed shackles. Unless you have a better idea—”

“That won’t work.”

The two fall silent, looking back at Shuo.

“Mei Nianqing seemed to have a plan for dealing with Dianxia’s shackles,” Shuo explains slowly. “You should speak to him. But you would never make it to Mount Tonglu in time to stop him.”

Pei Ming glances back at the travel array.

“I planned on taking the same route you did.”

Shuo follows his gaze—and the set of his mouth becomes grim.

“You can’t do that, either.”

“There’s no one else—”

“Hua Chengzhu and Blackwater designed that path so a very limited number of people could use it,” he mutters. “You aren’t one of them. It won’t open for you.”

And even if they could get him there—he’d be trapped with no means of escape.

Shuo closes his eyes.

There’s so much behind them.

Qi Rong, falling.

Yin Yu, mouthing the word ‘run.’

How tightly Lang Qianqiu held him, thinking he would disappear.

“But it will for me.”

When he opens his eyes again—there’s an icy level of calm settling across his expression, and Pei Ming…

Just stares at him, shaking his head.

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You didn’t.”

“You’d die out there, kid. Again. You wouldn’t do anything but buy us time—”

“I know.”

He’s remarkably calm, discussing it with such a pragmatism—Pei Ming is reminded of the ghost’s actual age.

“But you need time, and I’m the only one with a way in and out that isn’t already fighting Mount Tonglu outside. You can win without me. You can’t win without time.”

The rumbling outside is a painful reminder of that fact.

“…How much could you realistically give us?”

“A few hours.”

With the type of combat he specializes in, he doesn’t actually need to be stronger than Bai Wuxiang to occupy him.

He’s mentally unstable. If Shuo can distract him—then he can hold him there for a time.

Long enough for the others to be ready.

“That would be a huge risk to take without that much reward…”

“It’s not a huge risk,” Shuo shakes his head.

He's disposable. Anyone else who could go right now wouldn't be. "And I'm the best person to do it."

"That's—”

"I've spent more time on the terrain of Mount Tonglu than Hua Cheng has."

When Hua Cheng was locked in the Kiln with Zhao Beitong—the children could do nothing but wander.

He knows the mountain and the terrain surrounding it better than anyone.

His spirit was locked upon the mountain for so long at such a young age—that when Hua Cheng did start to teach the boy magic, his abilities were shaped by it.

Forests, for where he was hung by Lang Ying.

And arrays that mimicked the Kiln's magic in form and function.

"I'll try to send a message when I—” Shuo pauses, taking another deep breath. "When I go down, so you know he's coming. I wouldn't tell Hua Chengzhu or Dianxia where I went, either. If they come after me and it ruins the plan..."

Then, he died for nothing.

"I didn't say I agreed—”

"You can't stop me from going, and there's no one else." Shuo reaches down, pressing his palm to the array. "I don't need you to agree, and I don't need your permission."

Too many have died for this already.

When it begins to glow bright red in response—Pei Ming feels his stomach sink.

Knowing that he can't stop him from going, and even if he doesn't go —

If Bai Wuxiang makes it out, they'll all die anyway.

"...Is there anything you want me to tell them?"

When Shuo looks back over his shoulder, raising an eyebrow—the general explains;

"If you don't come back."

He says if, because he's kind.

They both know he won't come back.

Shuo opens his mouth, his breath hitching—then he closes it, hanging his head.

All of the things he wants to say, all of the things he really wants them to know—

He doesn't think Hua Cheng would want to hear it, anyway.

It might make him feel guilty, because—

Shuo always knows he's wanted more than anyone wanted to give him.

It's not fair for him to ask for something that his own father wasn't willing to give him. It was never anyone else's responsibility to fill that place in his life.

Especially not his.

"...Just tell him I said thanks," he mutters as the array opens.

"For everything."

It would take too long to list all of the things he has to thank him for.

With that, he leans forward—disappearing through the travel array, leaving nothing behind.

He lands on the ground below with a thud, hands tightening around the earth beneath his hands.

Shuddering when he feels a warm, wet nose pressing against his cheek, and now—

Now, the tears finally fall, gasping for air as he sits back, rubbing at his eyes.

"Y-You don't have to come with me," he chokes, shaking his head. "I-It's *okay..."*

The forest spirit rumbles quietly, his roughened tongue licking the tears off of his cheek.

But it shows no sign of turning away.

It would never.

A choked sob rips from Shuo's chest as he turns his face into Dian Dian's fur, shuddering.

Qi Qi's head pokes out of the collar of his shirt, chattering quietly as he nuzzles his face under the ghost's chin.

Of course, they won't leave.

Animals are kinder than humans, that way.

They never forget love and protection, once it's given.

They never let you go alone.

He holds them both close, shoulders trembling for a moment, before rising back to his feet.

Looking around for the next portal, following the path back—

"WAIT!"

Ren Song freezes, his foot lifted in midstep.

A hand wrapped tightly around his wrist.

"WHAT'S *WRONG* WITH YOU?!”

The ghost doesn't look back, his shoulders suddenly hunched.

Knowing that, if he looks back into those eyes, he might not be able to do this.

"Why the hell would you follow me?!" He mutters, trying to tug his hand out of the martial god's grip, but—

Lang Qianqiu won't let go.

"Because you're throwing your life away when you KNOW you can't beat him—”

"It's not ABOUT beating him!" Ren Song finally looks back at him, glaring—

And now, the Prince of Yong'an can see the tears of anger and frustration in his eyes.

"You think I WANT to do this?!"

He hisses, staring up at him. "I DON'T! I'm not a martial god. I wasn't a soldier or a trained fighter in my mortal life. Of *course* I'm fucking SCARED, and I'm PISSED! Because after all this fucking time, I'm gonna die RIGHT WHERE I STARTED! And that's so—!"

"Then DON'T!"

Lang Qianqiu's hand is still tight on his wrist, pulling him back. "No one is MAKING you do this—!"

"But that doesn't change the fact that everything I said back there was TRUE!"

And they both know it.

"Someone has to go. Someone has to do it. And if I die, it's not—”

"DON'T SAY IT'S NOT A BIG DEAL!" Lang Qianqiu snarls, his grip tightening, and Shuo—

Ren Song balks, leaning away in shock.

"DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA—?! GOD—YOU MAKE ME SO FUCKING *CRAZY!"*

"Then just LEAVE!" The ghost snarls, yanking away, but—

"I DON'T WANT TO!"

Ren Song doesn't speak, holding out one palm to stop Dian Dian before the spirit starts to snarl in defensive aggression towards the martial god, but—

"Has it ever occurred to you for ONE GODDAMN SECOND that I might UNDERSTAND HOW YOU FEEL?!"

Something about that makes Ren Song flinch.

"HOW COULD YOU HAVE ANY IDEA?!"

"...Shuo," Lang Qianqiu laughs, but there's no amusement in it. Only pain and exasperation. "We've been chasing each other around for months, and you never noticed?"

He's noticed plenty.

Like how Lang Qianqiu has a permanent crease between his eyebrows, and it only goes away when he's sleeping, or smiling. He doesn't do either often.

Or that he never goes back and forth between his dishes when he eats a meal.

He always has to eat one thing at a time, methodically, and he'll go red in the face if you mix anything together.

He's noticed the way he plays with Guzi—carrying the boy around on his shoulders, sparring with toy swords--wondering if that was what his own father did with him.

But Shuo never once thought they were alike, or that Lang Qianqiu could ever understand how he feels—or what he's been through.

Because how could he?

"...You think...what? I don't know what it feels like to have nobody? To have someone that was supposed to protect me leave?"

Shuo falls silent, shaking his head. "...You have—”

"Ren Song," his voice is raw with emotion, eyes shining. "I don't have anyone."

The ghost doesn't speak, his throat suddenly thick.

"I was seventeen when I lost everything in my life that ever mattered to me."

His father. His cousins. His friends and comrades.

"For three hundred, I thought it was done by the person closest to me. And I—I didn't have Hua Cheng, or Paradise Manor. I didn't have Yin Yu or Blackwater. I had General Nan Yang. And he did his *best* , but..."

But Lang Qianqiu didn't know how to be close to anyone anymore. Didn't know how to trust anyone.

He was so hurt, so filled with anger and loss.

Even before his ascension, he never had a wife or children. Never made friends as close as he did before.

And when he found out the truth—it didn't feel like Xie Lian had done him a mercy.

It was like learning in one moment that your oldest friend, your first love—he didn't betray you—

He just let you think he did.

For so long.

And Lang Qianqiu can't even be angry about it. Can't even resent him for the damage that was done.

Because he put Xie Lian through something so much worse.

Even if he didn't know Xie Lian was a god, or what locking him that coffin would mean.

He has to live with that.

"...And even when I found out that Xie Lian wasn't the one who did that to me, I found out it was my best friend."

And it makes him sick now, thinking of how many years he spent mourning An Le.

"It's hard..." Lang Qianqiu starts, then has to clear his throat, his eyes wet. "It's hard for me to care about anyone, or believe that anyone cares about me. So yes, I know how you feel. Even if we weren't born in the same times or places. Even if you think I'm just a spoiled prince who doesn't know anything—”

"I don't," Shuo's rasps, eyes wide.

Sure, he did in the beginning. And to be fair, that was exactly how Lang Qianqiu acted when they first met, but...

"...But that doesn't change the fact that someone has to go," he finally whispers, looking down at where Lang Qianqiu is gripping his wrist, and…

"And that doesn't mean I have to let you go alone."

The biggest difference between Ren Song and Bai Wuxiang are gaps in age and spiritual power.

Lang Qianqiu can't offer anything in terms of years.

And he knows he isn't supposed to follow him. That they drive one another up the wall. That Gods and Ghosts, despite his Guoshi's clear refusal to adhere to that rule—aren't supposed to fraternize.

Lang Qianqiu knows he isn't supposed to care about Ren Song.

But he does.

And whatever power or strength he has left, even if it comes to little in the end—

He'll give it.

Because he is never losing someone he cares about or watching them walk away again—

Not without trying to stop it.

"..." The ghost blows out a shaky breath, looking away.

"...Fine, just—here," he mutters, pulling his wrist out of Lang Qianqiu's grip. The prince frowns, worried the forest demon is about to make a break for it and leave him behind, but—

Ren Song reaches up to his neck, unfastening the choker there.

"You want to help? Fine." He ignores the terrified, wobbly feeling in his stomach that comes from the bareness of his own throat, shoving the necklace against Lang Qianqiu's chest. "Hold onto that for me. And don't let anyone else touch it, understand?"

Lang Qianqiu stares at the necklace, catching it in his palm.

Black leather, with an emerald in the face—he's never seen the ghost go without it.

"...Why?"

"Because," Ren Song bites his lip, staring pointedly over Lang Qianqiu's shoulder.

"No matter what happens to me—if that stays safe, I can come back."

If his will is still strong enough. He couldn't come back from total dispersement, only Hua Cheng has ever done that—

Even if he's reduced to a ghost fire—if his ashes are safe, he'll come back.

And the meaning of that doesn't seem to be lost on Lang Qianqiu—who can't stop staring at the necklace now, his eyes wide.

Between the emerald and the leather, there's a small locket of black steel—one that Hua Cheng forged centuries ago.

To hold Ren Song's ashes.

"...And there's one other thing," He mutters, clearing his throat and looking away. "Because if we're going to do this, we're both probably gonna *die* , and if you don't want to you can just say no, just don't fucking *make fun* of me, okay? Because I've never done it and I *just —!"*

Lang Qianqiu's fingers close around the necklace—then he reaches out, fingers grasping Ren Song's chin as he drags him forward.

Not thinking, just—

Just doing the thing he's been thinking about for months now.

The ghost is frozen when he pulls back, lips tingling, staring up at him in silent wonder. And of every reaction that might have been appropriate for this situation.

He lets out a nervous little laugh, the pointed tips of his ears turning red.

"...What?" Lang Qianqiu frowns—and he doesn't have the benefit of being dead, so his cheeks are completely red— "Wasn't that what you wanted me to do?"

"I mean, yeah, but..." Ren Song laughs again, covering his mouth. "I didn't think you were gonna do it, and..."

He shakes his head, clearly trying to shake the shyness and embarrassment off, eyes glinting mischievously. "If you're gonna kiss someone right before you face certain death, I just wasn't expecting it to be a peck, you know?"

"I—!" Lang Qianqiu's jaw drops, his face on fire.

"Hahaha, I don't know what I—HAHA!" He bends over, arms wrapping around his ribs. "You're so—!"

"I didn't want to just ASSUME, you didn't say how you WANTED—!"

"YOU DIDN'T EVEN LET ME FINISH EXPLAINING—”

"OH, SO YOU WERE GONNA ASK ME TO KISS YOU DEEPLY?!"

Shuo really never thought that, faced with a situation like this, he could ever laugh, but—

He does, until his stomach aches, and tears prick at the corner of his eyes.

"I GUESS WE'LL NEVER KN—!"

That's when a small, embarrassing yelp escapes him as he stumbles forward, yanked by Lang Qianqiu's hand grasping his hip, and—

The kiss that follows couldn't be described as a peck at all.

It's the kind of touch that makes him feel pleasantly off balance.

Like when you just start falling, and all you feel is that exhilarating leaping in your stomach.

Clutched so close in someone's arms, your arms wrapped around their neck, feet not touching the ground.

And he—

Shuo hasn't been this close to a living person... *ever* .

He never realized how warm it is, being alive.

Having Lang Qianqiu in his arms feels like holding a small sun in his hands.

The martial god breaks away briefly, both of them breathing hard, faces close.

"You're such a smart ass, you know that?"

Ren Song manages a laugh again, but this time it's more breathless than anything else, one fang peeking out as he smiles up at him impishly.

"I've been told that's a part of my charm—!"

The third kiss makes his eyes slip shut, fingers sliding into Lang Qianqiu's hair.

Part of him wishes they could leave, now. Just turn around and forget the rest of it.

And the rest of him knows that they can't, sighing when they have to break apart.

"...We should—”

Both of them stop before either one can say the words 'go,' turning their heads to stare.

Standing about ten meters behind them, arms crossed, is the last person either one of them would have expected—

Quan Yizhen.

Now that he's been noticed, he raises one hand in greeting.

"I followed you."

"...We gathered..." Shuo mutters, feeling a little faint. "...how long have you been standing there?"

"The entire time."

"He's been standing there the entire time," Lang Qianqiu repeats faintly, turning around and scratching his head, his entire face turning maroon.

"Were you going to say anything...?"

"No."

"He wasn't going to say anything," Lang Qianqiu repeats again, sounding like he might pass out.

"Are you just going to repeat everything he says?!"

"UNTIL HE STOPS SOUNDING LIKE A PSYCHOPATH?! SURE!"

"Congratulations."

Both of them turn back to Quan Yizhen, waving their hands wildly in a panic.

"That wasn't what you thought it was!"

"It wasn't what it looked like!"

He looks back and forth between the two of them, nonplussed.

"...You weren't kissing?"

"...We were. But we're not—!"

“That was because we’re going into a near death situation, and I’ve never kissed someone before!” Ren Song holds up his hands, shaking his head frantically.

“Oh.” Quan Yizhen nods, taking in that situation. “I’ve done that before.”

“…See?” Lang Qianqiu sags with relief, “He gets it—!”

“And I loved him,” Quan Yizhen concludes, arms still crossed. “Then he died.”

Ren Song turns around, his face in his hands.

That was a nice reminder.

“No offense, but that’s kind of a fucking downer…”

But after a moment of listening to Lang Qianqiu fume and protest, he turns around—getting to the heart of the matter.

“…Why did you follow us?”

Quan Yizhen walks over, his pace calm, but steady as ever.

“Yin Yu and I were going to get married.”

Last that Shuo can remember, Yin Yu didn’t exactly seem to be on board with the idea—

But he isn’t going to dispute that now, not when the poor man is grieving.

“Yeah…”

“And Yin Yu used to take care of you.”

The reminder brings a lump to Ren Song’s throat.

“…Yeah,” he agrees quietly, biting his lip—

Looking up when Quan Yizhen claps a hand on his shoulder firmly, standing beside him.

“Now, I’ll take care of you.”

Lang Qianqiu stiffens, not loving the sound of that, but…

Before he can say anything, Quan Yizhen looks over, staring him down with bright, golden eyes—looking almost like a lion on the verge of pouncing.

Stating calmly:

"Disrespect him, and I'll break your legs."

With that, he leads a visibly shell shocked Ren Song onward down the path, leaving Lang Qianqiu standing there, mouth agape, shoving the choker underneath his armor.

"...What...the fuck just happened?"

It's not like they have much of a choice to talk after that, though—not while they're charging through one portal after another, retracing the path back to Mount Tonglu.

The one place everyone else wants to get away from.

With Ren Song and Quan Yizhen riding on Dian Dian's back, and Lang Qianqiu just beside them, astride his tiger.

Not because he couldn't have ridden with them if he wanted to, he just—

He has a rocky relationship with the panda, alright?

Each time they burst through one array and into the next, the terrain shifts—growing darker, the air becoming acrid and thick with resentment—but when they burst through the last one, Ren Song holds up his fist, indicating for everyone to come to a halt.

"...Why did we stop?" Lang Qianqiu frowns, sitting up a little straighter as he looks around. "I thought we had to hurry."

Ren Song's answer, while quiet—only serves to baffle him with how certain he sounds.

"We're here."

The martial god frowns, looking around.

"What?"

That can't...that *can't* be right.

"We are," Quan Yizhen agrees, holding one arm around Shuo's waist from where he's seated behind him on Dian Dian, sniffing the air. "Smells right."

Like ash and death.

"But then..." Lang Qianqiu and Ren Song look at one another—grim.

“…Where is Mount Tonglu?”

Before, the mountain dominated the entire landscape—so vast, you could see it from hundreds of miles away.

Now, they’re supposedly right on top of it, but…

There's no mountain in sight.

"…Holy fucking shit…" Ren Song whispers.

"What?!"

"They…" he looks around, his jaw still slack. "…Destroyed it…"

"Destroyed it?!" Lang Qianqiu shakes his head in disbelief. "How?! Wouldn't that have made it erupt?!"

"No," Quan Yizhen's voice startles them both.

He's already slipped off of Dian Dian's back, kneeling down to press his palm against the earth.

"…The underground sections of the mountain are still intact," he clarifies quietly.

Including the magma chambers.

"But…where's the Kiln? Does that mean Bai Wuxiang has *already—?"*

As Lang Qianqiu spouts off his questions, Ren Song creeps up to the canyon rim—finding the new landscape that awaits him.

Huge, jaggedly sharp spires of rock—curved upwards toward the sky. Like angry black waves of a storm, permanently trapped in time.

And deep down, beneath the swirling clouds of smoke and resentment—

There's a hard, round formation—almost like an egg in the bottom of a nest.

"…Okay," Ren Song mutters, taking a deep breath. "They're still in there."

But not for much longer.

"…What's the plan?"

"…" Shuo drops his back down beside him, rolling up his sleeves. "My arrays mimic the Kiln's magic. If he bursts out and falls straight into it—he might not realize he's actually escaped."

He might think he's still in the illusion.

Then, he'll be trying to fight the Kiln's magic—Zhao Beitong's consciousness and memories. He won't be looking for Ren Song at all.

The longer they can keep that up, the longer they can hold him back.

"Okay," Lang Qianqiu mutters. "What do you need in order to do that?"

"…Spiritual power," Shuo mutters, staring down at the pit grimly. "A lot of it."

Quan Yizhen nods, leaning over to—

"Woah, woah, WOAH!" Lang Qianqiu glares, shoving his fellow martial god's face away from Shuo's. "What are you doing?!"

Quan Yizhen stares back, confused.

"…Lending spiritual power? Wasn't that what you two were doing before?"

"NO!" Lang Qianqiu barks, all while Shuo adjusts his hair, clearing his throat awkwardly.

"It was more of a 'have that sort of experience before you die' kind of thing," he mutters,

"…But you said it wasn't like me and shixiong…"

"It *wasn't!"*

Quan Yizhen seems hopelessly confused, and Lang Qianqiu pinches the bridge of his nose.

"You don't NEED to lend spiritual power like that!"

"Oh." Quan Yizhen frowns.

"Someone should tell Crimson Rain."

In an instant, Ren Song understands the source of the confusion—and his face falls into his hands, mortified.

"…Oh my *gods…"*

"What?!" Lang Qianqiu glares. "I don't—!"

Then, he remembers what he walked in on when he chased after those two escaping the heavens.

“That SON OF A—!” He rages, cutting himself off when he notices Shuo glaring at him, arms crossed, one eyebrow raised. “…Don’t look at me like that. It’s not like—!”

The ghost’s gaze is unrelenting, and he sighs, offering his hand morosely.

“Whatever.”

“Nice save.”

He holds out his other hand for Quan Yizhen to take, closing his eyes for a moment as he absorbs energy from both martial gods, his skin pulsing with power.

When he opens his eyes again, they almost seem to crackle in the darkness.

“Both of you—get behind me!”

The moment they step back, Ren Song’s nostrils flare, closing his eyes—focusing on the power under his skin. On the building resentment in his gut.

The anger and fear he felt, after Yin Yu. The confusion and loss that followed Qi Rong.

It’s a trick that Blackwater taught him, a long time ago—

Dangerous, but effective.

Stoking your rage, your grudges—and using it as fuel to increase your power.

Even if that risks allowing it to consume you.

When he opens his eyes again, they’ve turned completely black.

That’s when he reaches up, sinking his teeth into both of his palms before crouching down, slamming both hands into the earth—

And the result is almost immediate.

Lang Qianqiu and Quan Yizhen stumble back as the ground begins to violently rumble.

Before, he's either used pre-existing trees to form an array, or constructed small groves to entrap his enemies.

This time, an entire forest sprouts around them—wood jagged and black, roots gnarled and twisting, branches reaching for the sky like broken fingers.

Here, upon the world's largest graveyard—a collection of burial mounds as far as the eyes can see, holding the souls of his long dead brothers and sisters—

A child of death spins a web to catch the devil himself.

Now—all they have to do is wait.

And it won't be long.

Echoes

Chapter Summary

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

Xie Lian’s lips press together, trembling slightly.

Not like before, when he was straining to remember.

Now, it’s because he does remember.

“…I provoked the emperor on purpose,” he mutters, his throat dry, having nearly lost his voice from the screaming before. “And San Lang…”

“Burned the entire Heavenly Capital to bits,” Mu Qing pulls his fingers back.

The first thing Xie Lian becomes aware of is the fact that he’s sitting up, leaning back against Feng Xin—feeling Mu Qing’s hands against his temples.

“…That’s…better,” he mumbles, eyelashes fluttering. “Are we still…in Blackwater…?”

“Yes,” Feng Xin agrees, his voice softer than normal, letting the prince rest against him as much as he needs to. “It’s safe for now.”

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

Xie Lian’s lips press together, trembling slightly.

Not like before, when he was straining to remember.

Now, it’s because he does remember.

“…I provoked the emperor on purpose,” he mutters, his throat dry, having nearly lost his voice from the screaming before. “And San Lang…”

“Burned the entire Heavenly Capital to bits,” Mu Qing pulls his fingers back.

“…He did?”

"More or less," Feng Xin agrees, still struggling to process the fact that the Heavens—as they knew it—is just gone. "None of us had ever seen anything like it."

Mu Qing watches Xie Lian, who seems…

Oddly quiet, digesting that information.

"…Your highness, did something—?"

"Was that what you wanted to tell me before?" Xie Lian speaks over him suddenly, reaching out to—

To grasp Mu Qing's hand tightly, leaving the martial god staring at him in shock.

"That he hurt you?"

"…What?" Feng Xin stiffens, his expression darkening. "Who *hurt* you?"

Mu Qing glances back and forth between both of his friends, a lump in his throat.

Even now, with nearly all of the other Heavenly Officials having left already—

It's still so hard to say.

And part of him doesn't want to talk about any of it now.

But…

There's something about the look on Feng Xin's face—it almost has a weight to it, and he can't…

"…When I was arrested, and he interrogated me, he…" Mu Qing ducks his head, swallowing hard.

His cheeks burning with shame.

"M-made me…talk about things that…h-happened to m…me and my…it…"

Of the stuttering. The weakness. The secrets. The fear.

The tightest chains in life are the ones that you're left to carry on your own.

No one ever told Mu Qing to hide what happened back then. It was never something explicitly stated with words.

It was all punctuated with looks. Silent, judgemental stares.

Being told that it was dangerous to go around telling lies.

That he just wanted attention, because his father wasn't adoring anymore.

But silence—it felt like a chain around his neck. Tightening every single day, weighing him down.

And part of him thought—getting rid of the person who was hurting him, hurting his sister—would fix it.

But nothing ever did.

And the worst part is—Mu Qing knows he placed that chain around himself. Forged it link by link over the years.

Because he would have rather died, than admit to anyone that he was struggling.

That he had been hurt.

And after eight hundred years—he hasn't really changed.

Because his first instinct was to hide.

Which is why he—

Mu Qing is dragged out of his thoughts by Xie Lian—squeezing his hand so tightly, it almost hurts.

"It won't happen again."

And it—

It's ridiculous, really.

Because Xie Lian is covered in blood—locked in three shackles, and for the last few hours, he's barely been able to string a sentence together, but—

In an instant, it feels like they're seventeen again.

And it feels—

For that moment, it feels safe again.

Feng Xin hasn't found the words to speak.

His relationship with Mu Qing—something between rivals, friends, enemies, and something far deeper than either of them would like to admit—

It's always been complicated.

He's lost count of how many times they've hurt one another.

But this time—

When he sent Mu Qing back to the heavens, he wasn't trying to hurt him. He was trying to stop him from disappearing, but—

All he did was throw him at the emperor's mercy.

This is *his* fault.

And he—

"You're awake." Pei Ming's voice cuts through the silence.

He kneels down beside the three of them, looking Xie Lian over.

"Welcome back to the land of the living."

Xie Lian knows it's a common phrase—but highly ironic when they're hiding in the lair of a ghost.

"Yes…What's the situation?"

"Crimson Rain and Blackwater are outside dealing with Jun Wu. It seems like his plan is to slam the burning remains of the capital down on top of us," Pei Ming explains quietly. "But before we make our next move, I need to know what you learned in the Kiln."

More than Xie Lian can actually say.

"…Capturing or imprisoning them isn't an option," he mutters, trying his hardest not to remember what Jun Wu said before.

About being put down like a mad dog.

“And they have to be killed simultaneously.”

Xie Lian suspects Jun Wu really did destroy Bai Wuxiang in Lang-er bay, likely hoping that would be the end of him.

And when Zhao Beitong left him, he really was dying.

As long as one half survives, the other is bound to reform.

“…Right,” Pei mutters, rubbing his temples.

That creates a logistical nightmare.

The only being that has any level of certainty of being able to take on even one half of the two is Hua Cheng.

He can’t be in two places at once. Not without seriously reducing his effectiveness.

After that, Shi Wudu might have had a chance—

If he was still here to fight, anyway.

Which implies his destruction was of far more intricate design than what Pei Ming is willing to consider at the moment.

That leaves him.

Pei Ming is many things, but he doesn’t lack self awareness.

He knows his strengths and weaknesses, and what his capabilities are.

He can beat the emperor in terms of military strategy, or give him hell in a one on one fight—

But he couldn’t defeat him.

But—

Strategy is about more than just forming plans for attack and defense.

It’s about knowing what your enemy is thinking. What your enemy is planning.

And when Pei Ming looks at Xie Lian—

In an instant, everything is brought into stark clarity.

The words Jun Wu told him weeks ago, when it never occurred to him that Pei Ming might one day be his enemy.

Xie Lian has the largest reserves of spiritual power out of *anyone* .

And when he stood in the grand martial hall and asked for his shackles to be removed…

Jun Wu almost seemed to become desperate, struggling to explain why he couldn't grant Xie Lian's request.

"…Ling Wen, bring the Guoshi of Xianle over here."

"Mei Nianqing is here?" Xie Lian frowns, listening to the sound of their approach.

Ling Wen has the Guoshi braced with one arm around her shoulders, guiding the cultivator to kneel down beside them.

"I heard you had a plan for breaking his highness's shackles," Pei Ming cuts to the heart of the matter, wasting no time. "Is that true?"

Mei Nianqing groans slightly as he takes a seat beside the three—a strange variation on their positions from Xie Lian's youth.

"…Somewhat," he agrees faintly, rubbing his arm.

Still bleeding and bruised from his beating before—but Mu Qing makes no offer to help, watching with cold curiosity.

"There are wrinkles."

Xie Lian grows quiet and distant—listening as they discuss the matter, but far more preoccupied with what that would mean.

He's grown up with his shackles.

Tragic as it might seem, he doesn't remember what it's like to be free.

And when he asked Jun Wu to remove his shackles, before—

Part of him always knew that his request was going to be denied.

"…The most obvious ways are that Jun Wu releases him on his own, or he's killed." Mei Nianqing mutters, reaching over to touch his student's throat, examining the shackle there, but—

To his surprise, Xie Lian leans back sharply. Not exactly a flinch, but—

He's changed.

"Obviously…that isn't going to happen," Mei Nianqing concludes, pulling his fingers back. "In which case, we have two options."

"Which are?" Pei Ming prompts quietly, urged by the explosions from outside.

"…The first is the safest, if we can manage it," Mei Nianqing sighs.

Outside of that, they go from dangerous—to impossible.

"You cracked the shackle in your eyes in Gusu your highness, remember?"

Xie Lian paused, shaking his head. "…No, that was the cursed iron shackle. It damaged the shackle in my eyes when I broke it."

And that was, even by Xie Lian's warped standards, very painful.

"No—when you broke the iron shackle, you temporarily held the resentful energy inside of it. During that surge, the shackle in your eye was damaged."

Most likely because it was the most exposed.

"…It would require us to find a way for you to wield resentment again in that manner," Mei Nianqing concludes. "Which is the wrinkle."

Xie Lian only held it for the briefest moment, when the cursed iron shattered. Cultivators don't work with resentment, by design.

To do so would put the mind and body through *unimaginable* anguish—and even if it were possible, they don't have time to learn how.

If they had a few cursed iron shackles laying around, maybe they could—but even Xie Lian doesn't think he could stand doing that so many times.

"…Do we need to call Hua Cheng down here?" Pei Ming mutters, scratching his head. "He has enough resentment—"

"He wouldn't," Xie Lian shakes his head, thinking. "He wouldn't damage my body like that—he would insist on finding another way.”

Which they don’t have time for.

“…But he isn’t the only one here who deals in resentment,” the prince looks up sharply, coming to the realization.

And just as Pei is frowning, looking around for some ghost he might have missed—

“Ruoye!”

“…Your spiritual device?” Mu Qing frowns, watching as the bandage wriggles up Xie Lian’s arm. “What could it possibly—?”

“Ruoye isn’t a device,” Xie Lian corrects him quietly, revealing more about the bandage than he ever wanted to, but—

The situation calls for it.

“It’s a demon—forged from…suffering,” he concludes, remaining as vague as he can.

And even now, after centuries, it still Carries the resentment Xie Lian once felt.

The bitterness and disappointments of his father.

The regrets of his mother.

Not to mention the fact that it’s been feeding on Xie Lian’s blood for an entire day, binding the wound on his palm.

“Good, good,” Mei Nianqing examines him, thinking. “It’s better to work with the shackle on your ankle for now—in case this goes wrong.”

Xie Lian sits forward, only wincing slightly as the pain in his head begins to fade, pulling down his boot.

“Wrap the device around your fist again—yes, just like that—and try to feel for the area between your skin and the shackle—"

“There…” Xie Lian frowns. “There isn’t.”

His shackles might as well be tattoos—there’s no way to get underneath them.

“Concentrate, your highness—focus your mind. You should be able to feel the weight of it—"

Xie Lian can, he always can, but there’s no edge, no way to get under it.

“—now, just curl your fingers beneath—"

“I can’t…”

“Just focus,” Mei Nianqing pushes him, a panicked edge to his tone. “Imagine it in your mind, you’ll feel it there.”

But when Mu Qing looks down—

He just sees Xie Lian clawing into his own ankle, bleeding, with no success.

“Try channeling the energy from Ruoye into the shackle now, as much as you can.”

Xie Lian obeys his teacher, his jaw clenching, but the more Mu Qing watches him…

He sees his friend grow paler with each passing moment—and the tiniest, almost imperceptible grunt of pain.

“…Stop,” he mutters, grabbing Xie Lian’s arm as he sends Mei Nianqing a sharp glare. *“STOP!* It isn’t working!”

And if it’s that bad on his ankle—

Now on earth could Xie Lian do that to his eyes?

“…You said there was another option,” Pei Ming looked at Mei Nianqing.

The Guoshi sits back on his heels—looking just as strained as his student is.

“…Yes, I’ve seen one god use it before with success, but…”

“If you *know* it’ll work, why are we wasting our time with this?!” Mu Qing snaps, pulling Xie Lian’s arm away from his ankle.

“Because it’s far more dangerous,” the Guoshi explains softly. “And the damage is permanent.”

His eyes remain on Xie Lian's face, watching as the prince bows his head, waiting.

"…We'll have to cut them off. And there's only one device in existence that could manage that."

"…Please don't tell me he means that dagger…" Feng Xin frowns, one hand tightening on Xie Lian's shoulder. "One of them is on his NECK! That would kill him!"

"Not necessarily," Mei Nianqing looks at him, wary. "I saw one god do it by slitting his own throat—but you wouldn't need to take it that far."

Behind them, Pei suddenly grows still—watching the Guoshi closely.

"If you cut the shackle vertically at any one point—it should shatter. A doctor could do it safely."

And with Mu Qing with them…that seems quite feasible.

"…It doesn't matter how careful I am with his eyes," Mu Qing points out flatly. "It would be almost impossible to avoid blinding him permanently."

Knowing all too well where Mei Nianqing is going with this.

The idea that he instilled in them—but especially Xie Lian—when they were young.

Far too young.

That often, the truest form of service was to make great personal sacrifice.

Xie Lian is silent for a moment.

Surprised to find himself on the verge of tears.

It's not that he ever had any hope of seeing again. Not that there was ever a moment when he thought he deserved to.

But now—there's one thing in the world that he wants to see—

So badly.

More than he's ever wanted anything.

And giving that up—

It hurts.

“…Your highness—"

“It’s fine, Mu Qing,” Xie Lian’s voice is even—calm, in spite of it all. “I…”

He looks up with a smile.

“I wouldn’t remember the difference anyway.”

He says that, but…

It’s the saddest smile Mu Qing had ever seen.

“…Your spiritual power and luck are sealed in your other two shackles,” Mei Nianqing reminds him quietly. “Breaking those might be enough to create a surge that would shatter the shackle in your eyes on its own.”

He says that—but he doesn’t sound certain.

“If there’s no other way, then that’s just what we’ll have to do,” Xie Lian shrugs, steeling himself.

“…There’s just one problem,” Pei Ming glances back over his shoulder, towards the exit.

“Jun Wu has the god slayer now.”

Xie Lian’s stomach plummets.

“…He does?”

Pei Ming nods, having heard the story from Qi Ying already. “He had someone fetch it for him from Mount Tonglu—and used it to kill Yin Yu.”

The news makes Xie Lian lose the rest of the color in his face, hands balling into fists in his lap.

“…Which means someone has to go get it from him.” Pei Ming steps away from the group. “Where was it you said you needed to go, Xuan Zhen? Mount Taicang?”

Mu Qing nods, still looking thoroughly displeased with the situation.

“We’ll set the array to that destination.”

Pei Ming snaps his fingers, his robes shifting from his ceremonial wear that he can typically be found in when wandering the Heavens—

To his battle armor, gleaming menacingly in the light.

“When that thing comes down on top of this place—use it to escape.”

“…But what about you?” Feng Xin frowns, looking around them.

With Mei Nianqing and Xie Lian this state, and something obviously wrong with Mu Qing—

That leaves just him to protect the three of them.

“I’ll have to hope Crimson Rain or Blackwater gives me a ride out of here.”

He adjusts the buckles on his armor briefly, pausing to stare at the familiar scratches in the metal, his mind racing.

“…Which god?”

When no one answers—he speaks again, his voice demanding a response.

“Which god did you see break their cursed shackle with the god slayer?”

Mei Nianqing is quiet at first, seeming to wrestle with what his words should be, and whether or not they’re a mercy.

The truth rarely is.

And yet—it begs to be told.

“…I have spent the last centuries visiting the Kiln periodically, hoping to unlock its secrets.”

But over the years, he’s found far more questions than anything close to an answer.

“…That was how I saw the former Water Master use the God Slayer to cut his own throat.”

The others stiffen in shock—but Pei Ming doesn't turn back.

Doesn't say a word or acknowledgment.

And in his quiet agony, Pei Ming doesn't notice the missing detail.

The intentional gap in information—but one that Mei Nianqing cannot explain.

That he said that Shi Wudu used the blade to cut his throat.

But *not* that he took his own life.

When the general moves to leave, Mu Qing snaps out of his train of thought, shaking his head. "You'd be an *idiot* to go out there without a real weapon! You don't have a chance of getting the dagger off of him!"

"He won't be," a voice speaks up from the corner.

Xie Lian is almost embarrassed to admit it, but Yushi Huang's presence is so quiet, he had nearly forgotten her entirely.

"And he won't be going alone, either."

Pei Ming sends her a weary look. "I already told you, I could never use—"

"I know," she agrees quietly.

Yulong is still sheathed on her back, after all.

But when she holds up a small pickle jar, rattling slightly under her palms—

Pei Ming takes a step back, shaking his head.

"He wouldn't help me in a bar fight, much less go after the emperor —"

"I'd never follow a king or an emperor into battle," a voice calls out, magenta smoke pouring from the jar. "I guess in that way, I've really never changed."

Pei Ming falls silent, watching his old lieutenant materialize.

Holding the broken halves of Ming'guang in his hands.

Echoing the words he said so many years ago, when they were young

"…" Rong Guang hangs his head, his hands tightening around the blade. "If you'll forgive this foolish old man for his mistakes."

…And slowly, his General reaches out to take his arm, squeezing.

"…Only if you forgive this stubborn old fool for running away."

Rong Guang smiles faintly—finding peace in the knowledge that, after so many years, two old friends can outgrow the things that drove them apart.

His body glows for a moment, resealing itself inside of the broken halves of the blade—and as his form disappears, he utters the words—

"Death upon all tyrants, isn't that right?"

Pei Ming grasps the hilt of his old sword, staring at his unchanged reflection in cold steel.

Finding bittersweet nostalgia how, in the strangest ways, echoes of your youth always find their way back home.

"…Death upon all tyrants," he agrees softly.

And now, with a broken sword and a fallen princess—

The general walks into battle surrounded by old friends.

"Ling Wen—" he calls out without looking back. "Initiate Operation Echo."

The civil goddess doesn't even look up, pressing her fingers to her temple with one hand, resetting the travel array with the other, working in perfect synchronization.

"Operation is now in progress."

CRASH!

The sky rumbles with the force of a hundred crashes of thunder, the sea roaring ferociously below.

"What's wrong, your majesty?" A voice sneers, "Scared of getting a little wet?"

The heavens make an almost grotesque sight, now.

A burning pile of rock, suspended several hundred meters above the ocean's surface. Shards of rubble causing violent splashes when they fall into the churning current.

CLANG!

"…That's quite a blade you have there," The emperor sneers, forcing Hua Cheng back when he parries. "Maybe I'll add it to my collection once I've *scattered you to the wind!"*

CLANG!

Sparks shoot out each time they clash, smoke swirling around them in a thick haze.

"I'd say the same thing about your blades," Hua Cheng smirks, "but they never belonged to you to begin with."

And paradoxically, Jun Wu is no thief.

Hua Cheng has met many over the course of his years, dining among gamblers, thieves, and murderers--men who steal for the thrill of it. For pleasure.

Jun Wu steals because he has no other means of possession.

It's almost pitiful.

Hua Cheng has also lived in a world where nothing was ever truly his.

Knowing nothing from birth but the hollow ache of hunger in his stomach. The bitter envy of watching other children have what he did not.

It made him selfish. It made him greedy.

But he is not prone to pity.

"I'm going to enjoy this," Jun Wu's tone is deceptively calm, eyes flaring with hatred. "More than you can *possibly* imagine."

CLANG!

The Heavens sink a few feet further in a violent rattle, Hua Cheng's fangs gleaming in a murderous grin.

"You underestimate my imagination."

His eyes flash over Jun Wu's shoulder in a brief instant—lifting one leg to kick him solidly in the chest, a move the emperor dodges.

Only to slip close enough to the edge for something to wrap around his ankle, constricting tightly.

An exposed spine—one forming the end of what once would have been a fish's tail.

And the force of its pull is so great, so unrelenting, even Jun Wu cannot stop himself from being yanked over the edge, plummeting from the fiery remains of his territory.

He just barely manages to save himself from being yanked down into the treacherous waters below, reaching down to hack at the skeleton of what was clearly once a vast sea serpent—freeing himself just in time to land on one of his blades, flying back out of reach.

Looking up to find Hua Cheng circling overhead, and Blackwater prowling the waters below, his face almost impossible to catch in the darkness of the sea—

But it's there.

And that invisible presence is almost as haunting as the sight of Crimson Rain from above.

Jun Wu is more than vividly aware of the fact that, if he falls into that water—he isn't coming out again.

Which makes it feel all the more like some sort of cosmic joke when it begins to rain, fat drops landing heavily from above, pelting and rattling against his armor.

He flicks his hair out of his face irritably, drawing another blade as he whips in an out of range, snapping his fingers to make the downpour cease but—

It only seems to come down even harder in response.

"..." Jun Wu glances down, snapping his fingers again.

Crack!

And again—

Crack!

...But nothing.

His bangs begin to stick to his forehead from the onslaught of moisture, and when he looks up...there's a figure in the distance.

Calmly watching him as she rests upon her sword, the veil of her bamboo hat blowing gently in the breeze.

And it might seem harmless, but—

This type of rain will absorb spiritual power from anything it touches—a form of collection that the Rain Master rarely uses, but occasionally resorts to in times of need.

"...Oh, my dear princess," he glares, rearing back his blade.

"How you disappoint me."

CLANG!

His blade meets steel again—

But not that of E'Ming.

"I can assure you," familiar eyes glare back at him, equally soaked by the rain--but not burdened by it. "The feeling is mutual!"

Pei Ming presses down so firmly, the emperor is forced to swing backwards, sending the General a scathing look.

“Oh, has someone decided to pull his head out of the sand?” He hisses. “How brave of you, waiting until it was four on one—!”

CLANG!

“I’m sorry,” Pei Ming snarls, “I know your preferred targets are scared teenagers—but you’ll have to make due with ME!”

Jun Wu braces again, using his other arm to block a salvo sent by Hua Cheng.

“I don’t know what you’re—!”

“WHAT DID YOU DO TO HIM?!”

Pei Ming doesn't know which is worse.

The fact that he knows, deep in his bones, that something is profoundly *wrong* —

Or the fact that after everything else he has admitted to, or relished in taunting the others with—

Jun Wu won't even say it.

"…I don't know what you're talking about," he hisses, arms straining as he pushes Pei Ming back again. "That's—"

"YOU HAD SO MANY GODDAMN CHANCES TO LEAVE HIM *ALONE!"*

CLANG!

"AND FOR *WHAT?!"*

CLANG!

"HE DIDN'T *WANT* TO TAKE YOUR PLACE!"

CLANG!

And that's the part that sits in his chest like a weight, when he remembers.

Because all he wanted—everything he ever did—

Was just to keep his family safe, and happy.

And to that end, he did horrible things.

Human things.

But how could that have been a threat?

And Jun Wu's answer, when it comes—is the same as it was last time.

Maddening in its simplicity—and it's utter inhumanity.

"…Because he didn't love me as he once did."

And that answer makes Pei balk now, eyes widening with disgust.

"…He wasn't another one of your *PETS!"*

Not a hound to be put down by its master when it no longer obeys him like it once did.

“And why shouldn’t he have been?” Jun Wu glares at him, raising his voice to be heard over the rain. “How could any of your small, insignificant existences ever be *anything* but that to me?”

This time, when he strikes the general—it’s nearly enough to knock Pei off balance, barely able to brace himself.

“I could have given him everything—and he threw all of that away. For what? For you?“ The emperor sneers.

He looks Pei Ming over with something between condescension and self loathing. “You think an ungrateful child who rejected every gift I ever gave him was worthy of passing a third calamity? That any man who would sentence others to suffer in his sister’s place deserved mercy?”

“AND WHO TAUGHT HIM *HOW!”* Pei Ming snarls, wiping the blood from his jaw after they clash again. “WHO ARE YOU TO JUDGE SOMEONE ELSE’S SINS?!”

“THE ONE WHO GAVE HIM *EVERYTHING* HE HAD! WHO GAVE *ALL OF YOU* WHAT YOU HAVE!”

With each blow, he knocks Pei Ming closer down to the waters below.

“THE ONE WHO MADE YOU MARTIAL GOD OF THE NORTH! WHO MADE HIM THE WATER MASTER! WHO HAS PROVIDED THE LIFE OF LUXURY YOU WERE SO *EAGER* TO INDULGE IN, UNTIL YOU COULD NO LONGER *STOMACH IT!”*

Thud!

There’s a sharp pain in his ribs, and when he looks down—

He sees the rusted end of a harpoon sticking out from his abdomen, hooks digging into his skin.

“It’s not the lifestyle people can’t stomach,” Blackwater snarls, yanking on the connecting chain from below. “It’s you, and you KNOW it!”

Jun Wu grits his teeth, reaching down to yank the weapon from his body, but—

The barbs make that nearly impossible.

"That's why you can't even SAY what you actually did to him!"

Creeeaak…

The chain groans with every pull, dragging him down.

"Because you're vile, and that's all you've ever BEEN!"

Jun Wu can't remove the harpoon in time to stop his fall—but he does manage to snap the chain, grunting as he levels out again.

Snapping off the head of the weapon before yanking it out properly.

"…If I'm vile, what are you?" He sneers. "Lying, to get the wind master into your bed? Dooming her to the most painful death? You think you're in a place to pass judgment on me?"

Pei Ming could never, in countless lifetimes, feel tempted to defend Blackwater—

"SAYS THE MAN WHO PUT A CURSED SHACKLE ON HER *BROTHER!"*

It's all Jun Wu can do in that moment, dodging attacks from below, to the side, and above.

"It wasn't the first time."

Blackwater's words only seem to enrage Pei Ming further, making him slam forward more aggressively with every blow, Jun Wu's movements becoming slightly more sluggish under the torrent of the rain.

"You did it so often, the moment he felt them appearing again, he thought *that* was the only way out!"

After all, Jun Wu had told him enough times.

'You know how to get out.'

"WERE YOU THAT SCARED OF A FAIR FIGHT?!"

And in that moment, getting hit from all sides, dragged further towards the waters below, bombarded with accusations from He Xuan and Pei Ming—

The emperor finds himself overwhelmed.

"…ENOUGH!"

BOOM!

A violent wave of spiritual energy bursts out, knocking them all aside.

And to Pei Ming's shock, when he hits the surface of the water—

He doesn't sink.

"A FAIR FIGHT?! DO YOU THINK THERE'S *SUCH A THING* AGAINST ME?!" Jun Wu snarls, shaking his head. "I SLAUGHTERED AN ENTIRE DYNASTY OF GODS BEFORE YOUR BLOODLINES EVEN BEGAN!"

His voice roars over the churning of the sea, like a wounded lion.

"You serve at *MY* pleasure! YOU LIVE UNDER THE FREEDOM AND SECURITY *I* PROVIDE! AND THEN YOU DARE COMPLAIN ABOUT THE MANNER IN WHICH I PROVIDE IT?! I'M THE ONE WHO—!"

Then, Jun Wu stops himself.

Not because he doesn't have more to say, or because his rage has begun to ebb, no—

But because Pei Ming is laughing.

Sitting back on the water's surface, wiping the blood from his split lip with the back of his hand.

"…What's so amusing, General?" The emperor hisses, balling his hand up to deliver another strike. "Is this what they call laughing in the face of death?"

"It's really damn funny," Pei Ming looks up, blood dripping from his temple.

And what he has to say—

It makes Jun Wu grow silent, blood rushing in his ears, stomach twisting with an emotion he hasn't felt in years:

Panic.

"When a god as ancient and powerful as yourself doesn't even realize his communication array has been open this entire time.”

And now he watches with great satisfaction as the blood slowly begins to drain from the emperor’s face.

Realizing that, for the entirety of their battle, his communication array was connected to his own temples.

All *ten thousand* of them.

Hearing confused prayers from millions of believers—crying out in disbelief and outrage.

“…There’s something Ling Wen always used to tell me,” Pei smirks, his breathing ragged.

“Never cross the man who makes your shoes.”

Because if you do…

You’ll never know what’s beneath your feet.

Or in this case, never use and abuse the one who controls all of your connections to the mortal realm.

You never know when or who might be listening.

Operation Echo, it seems, was a resounding success.

“…You can destroy every single god that’s left to oppose you,” Pei Ming glares up at him with a fierce grin.

Not one or happiness, or relief—but filled with the sheer thrill of victory.

“But what about them?”

Jun Wu doesn’t need the other gods for his long term survival—

But no god can survive or maintain power without the support of believers behind them.

People will forget with time, they always do—then he can return with a new name, a new story, but…

It sets him back for centuries. Maybe even a millennia.

A blow that weakens him in the long term—and one the emperor never would have foreseen.

The quiet has dragged on dangerously long, with Jun Wu facing away from them—his face hidden.

"…That was clever, Ming Guang," his voice is low, almost lost to the roar of the sea. "But you've always been far more cunning than people gave you credit for. I was fond of you for that reason."

Fond enough to keep him around for this long.

Pei Ming rises to his feet—unaccustomed to standing on the surface of the sea—but it's as firm as iron beneath his feet.

"Your fondness has never earned anyone mercy—so I think I'll pass."

Jun Wu looks up at the storm, rain streaking down his cheeks.

"…Maybe it doesn't make me merciful," he admits. "But it does bring me remorse."

Pei Ming shakes his head, disbelieving, "As if you're capable of such a thing."

And when Jun Wu looks back over his shoulder, his eyes flash.

With such a familiar emotion.

Blunt, instinctive cruelty.

"I assure you, I am…" His face tilts, illuminating one half with a flash of lightning.

And his next words—they make the entire world seem to stop, freezing in time.

"…It broke my *heart* , watching your son die."

In an instant, there's nothing.

No breath in Pei Ming's lungs. No heartbeat in his chest.

Only paralyzing terror.

"…What?" He croaks, hair sticking to the back of his neck in the downpour. "You…when I asked to look for him, you…"

“Of course, I knew where he was.” Jun Wu muses, rubbing his chin. “I was watching that woman from the beginning.”

‘…General Pei had a son?’ He Xuan reaches out inside their array, ‘I guess that shouldn’t be a surprise, but…’

The silence on Hua Cheng’s end has never been so deafening.

“…WHAT DID YOU DO TO QING YUAN?!” Pei Ming snarls, taking a step forward, but—

Jun Wu holds his hands up innocently, a faint, satisfied smile on his lips.

“Absolutely nothing. I just watched.”

The general falters, blood roaring on his ears.

“I waited for her to pray to you.”

But of course—she never did.

“You know, now that I look back on it…you nearly found him many, *many* times,” Jun Wu points out with a wry smile. “He was a soldier in the Xianle civil war. One of the youngest in the entire army. Tell me, Ming Guang—are you proud?”

Pei Ming stumbles, pressing one hand to the side of his head.

“…Why?”

“Pardon?”

“I was NOTHING but loyal to you back then!” Pei Ming’s voice is so grief stricken—

The wetness on Yushi Huang’s cheeks has nothing to do with the rain.

“I DID *EVERYTHING* YOU EVER ASKED OF ME!”

Nothing hurts more than the loss of possibility. Knowing that a locked door once stood wide open.

“…What could you have done?” Jun Wu raises an eyebrow. “You could hardly look after yourself back then. Not only that, the boy was *hideously* deformed—"

“YOU THINK I GIVE A DAMN?!”

Pei staggers forward, and—

Now, He Xuan can see a darkness forming around the general, his eyes practically glowing red with rage.

“How could you not have? He would have been a disgrace—"

“HE WAS MY *SON!* WHAT COULD A HELPLESS CHILD HAVE EVER DONE TO EARN SUCH CRUELTY?!”

Jun Wu smirks, taking a step back as the General lunges, driven wild with anger.

“Helpless isn’t how I would put it…”

(For what a headache he’s become, Jun Wu wouldn’t say it applies.)

“You know something?! For someone who thinks he’s so clever, you are SO DAMN *PREDICTABLE!”*

‘I think…’ He Xuan watches wearily. ‘ *He might be going into Qi Deviation.’*

That might have been why Jun Wu did this in the first place, but—

“You told me you saw him die, but you won’t say HOW!” Pei Ming snarls. “WHICH MEANS A CHILD FACED DEATH MORE HONORABLY THAN *YOU!”*

If he had wept, or begged for his life—Jun Wu would have gloated about it. Used it as another means of torturing Pei Ming.

But he—

He might never know his son’s face, or even his name.

But now, he knows one thing about him:

That he was *brave* .

And as much as that aches—

It’s the first time Pei Ming had felt such a pure, overwhelming surge of pride.

Mixed in with so much pain, hatred, and regret.

Jun Wu waits until he gets closer, reaching into his sleeve with a sly smile, but—

He finds nothing.

Thud!

And when he looks down—

The all too familiar hilt of a dagger is buried in his palm.

Pei Ming twists it viciously before yanking it back.

“Looking for this, you bastard?!”

When He Xuan sees the look on his face, the panic, he…

“HUA CHENG, SNAP OUT OF IT, HE’S ABOUT TO—!”

And just like that, as if it’s strings have been cut—

The burning remains of the Heavens come plunging down, crashing into the sea with unimaginable force.

Creating waves thousands of feet tall—with the surface force of pure concrete.

Yushi Huang can’t feel which way is up or down, her body aching and broken from the force—

But somehow, she manages to bring her fingers to her temple, screaming into the communication array—

‘GO NOW!’

There’s roaring all around her—from the water, or…

Something else.

SMACK!

The general sits up sharply, hacking as he clutches at his throat, feeling a palm slap against his back with a *crack!*

At first he's almost disoriented enough to mistake it for an attack, but —

Then, he starts coughing up sea water.

One of his ribs is definitely broken, his entire body left battered and worse for wear, and when he doesn't hear Ling Wen's voice scolding him for being an idiot, he looks up to find…

Hua Cheng, of all people—kneeling in front of him, watching Pei Ming intently.

"…Did you.." Pei Ming rasps, his voice roughened from salt water and screaming. "…Save me…?"

From someone who has seemed indifferent at best to anyone who isn't the crown prince—

The idea of it seems almost bizarre.

And at first—Hua Cheng doesn't answer.

His expression strained, jaw clenched—like there's something he wants to say, but—

"…I'm sorry."

Pei Ming winces, rubbing the back of his head. "What?"

"About your son," Hua Cheng replies shortly, standing up. "Can you walk?"

It almost seems even more bizarre to Pei Ming that the calamity would express condolences, but…

It's oddly touching, in its own way.

"…Thanks," he mutters, struggling to sit up—and after a moment, Hua Cheng loses patience, grabbing an arm and pulling him to his feet.

It's not particularly dignified, carrying Pei Ming over one shoulder, and Yushi Huang over the other—but circumstances demand it.

‘Is it contained on your end?’

‘…Contained?!’ Blackwater snarls in return, not particularly happy to hear from him. *‘My lair is COMPLETELY destroyed—!’*

‘The one I paid for.’

‘—and now I’m trying to contain the largest outbreak of tidal waves in HUMAN HISTORY! SO NO, IT IS NOT FUCKING CONTAINED!’

Hua Cheng pulls a set of dice from his pocket.

‘Isn’t it within your area of expertise?’

‘Need I remind you I’ve only been in this position for a VERY SHORT PERIOD OF TIME?!’

‘Yes,’ Hua Cheng agrees flatly. *‘Seems like the former water master would be extremely useful right now. Shame someone didn’t warn you getting rid of him was a bad idea.’*

‘You KNOW I wasn’t the one who—you know what? I’m gonna need a long, long break from you after this is over.’

‘Enjoying the bliss of fatherhood, I’m assuming,’ Hua Cheng grumbles, his tone uncharacteristically bitter.

‘What was—?’

‘Nothing. You do your job, I’ll do mine.’

And for now—Hua Cheng’s one and only objective is to get back to Xie Lian.

The same place where Jun Wu will follow, the moment he gets the chance.

The place where everything started.

And with a rattle of the dice—

Clack!

Clack!

They’re off.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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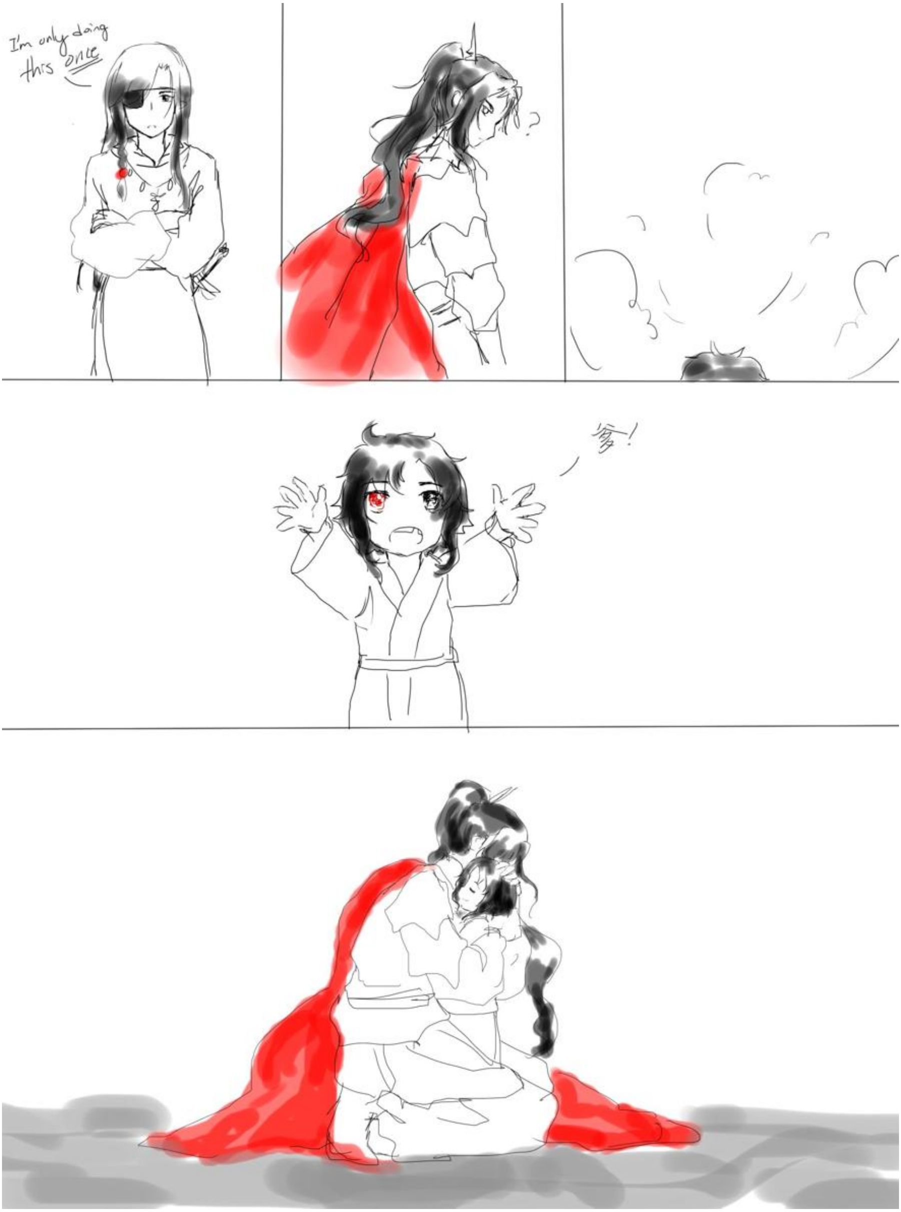
I'm only doing this once
?
爹!

CREDIT: CHOUX

And a fan animatic can be found here. !

You Can't Have Him

Chapter Summary

> "...What..." Jin Feng rubs the back of his neck, groaning. "What happened...?"
>
> Shi Wudu clears his throat, reaching down to help him up. "The city was under attack by resentful spirits. I exorcized you."
>
> Jin Feng looks around him—seeing countless other citizens of Lanling, just like him. Disoriented, slowly coming back to their senses.

CRACK!

The teenager falls to his knees, the heels of his palms scraping against the ground. His head pulses, tongue crackling with this strange, tingling sensation, and—

“A FAIR FIGHT?! DO YOU THINK THERE’S SUCH A THING AGAINST ME?!”

A voice booms through the square.

Unfamiliar to him, but when he turns to look...

It's coming from the temple of the emperor, projected at the highest possible volume.

“I SLAUGHTERED AN ENTIRE DYNASTY OF GODS BEFORE YOUR BLOODLINES EVEN BEGAN!"

Jin Feng rubs his shoulder, wincing as his bones creak.

“You serve at *MY* pleasure! YOU LIVE UNDER THE FREEDOM AND SECURITY *I* PROVIDE! AND THEN YOU DARE COMPLAIN ABOUT THE *MANNER* IN WHICH I PROVIDE IT?! I’M THE ONE WHO—!”

Laughter fills the air, just as unfamiliar as the voice from before, and when Jin Feng looks up...

He finds Pei Yuan standing beside him, face tilted upwards, listening with rapt attention.

“…What’s so amusing, General? Is this what they call laughing in the face of death?”

And when the fallen god hears his voice—

“...It’s *really* damn funny."

Tears slip down his face.

“…When a god as ancient and powerful as yourself doesn’t even realize his communication array has been open this entire time.”

When he saw that the blockade of Mount Tonglu had failed—the only reasonable explanation to come to was that...

That he was never going to hear Pei Ming's voice again.

In part, Shi Wudu always knew that, as long as the curse existed, he would never see him again. Not with his true face or name.

And even that ache of separation wasn't as painful as living in a world without him in it.

But he—

"...He's alive..." His hand trembles as he reaches to wipe the tears from his cheek, breaths slightly unsteady with emotion.

He's alive, and he—

He's done what, for so many years, Shi Wudu told himself he couldn't do.

Shown the world what Jun Wu really is.

And now, he can't stop himself from remembering every moment when his lover held him close, saying the words;

'Talk to me.'

'You can tell me anything.'

And he never did, thinking to himself—

That it would just get Pei killed, and nothing would come of it.

Now, he finds himself gripped with pride. Proud of Pei Ming's strength. His cleverness. His bravery.

And regret—because Shi Wudu should have had more faith in him.

More faith in so many things.

"...What..." Jin Feng rubs the back of his neck, groaning. "What happened...?"

Shi Wudu clears his throat, reaching down to help him up. "The city was under attack by resentful spirits. I exorcized you."

Jin Feng looks around him—seeing countless other citizens of Lanling, just like him. Disoriented, slowly coming back to their senses.

"...Was under attack?" He mutters, legs wobbling as he steadies himself. "Did you...?"

The fallen god shrugs, zidian crackling faintly against his palm. "Turns out one of your little friends had stolen a celestial grade weapon."

And in the hands of the right person...

Even without his godhood, Shi Wudu trained continuously for four centuries, passing two Heavenly Calamities, and had been in the midst of passing his third when he fell from grace.

Which means, even in this state, with the proper equipment—his technique is still unmatched.

Luckily for Lanling, these resentful spirits were low level—only dangerous because they arrived en masse.

If it had been a savage ranked ghost, that would have been an entirely different story.

"...And!" A teenager speaks up from behind Shi Wudu--streaked with blood and sweat, practically dead on his feet. "He had help!"

Jin Feng frowns, looking from Shi Wudu to the newcomer, using one arm to hold his ribs. "...Who is he?"

"Jiang Ning!"

"I didn't ask you—"

"He can tell you his own name," Shi Wudu mutters, distracted.

"Yeah," the Jiang Cultivator frowns, hunched over with exhaustion, gesturing tiredly in Jin Feng's direction. "I'm getting some very negative energy from you, considering I just saved your life."

"YOU—!" Jin Feng glares. " *YOU* didn't save my life, HE did!"

Shi Wudu snorts, shaking his head. "I exorcized your body." He pulls back his sleeve, showing how thin his arms still are, not having had time to recover since his fall. "You think I was doing the sword fighting?"

Given that Jin Feng has yet to defeat the former water master in sparring, every part of his body seems to sag at the reminder.

"See?" Jiang Ning pants, leaning against the side of a nearby house. "I'll accept your never ending gratitude for the life debt whenever you're ready."

"I think I'll have more important things to do than pay a life debt to some bumpkin from *Yunmeng—"*

"Big talk for a guy who just got rescued by a sixteen year old."

"...He's younger than me?!" Jin Feng croaks, horrified.

"Only by two years, why?" Shi Wudu mutters.

(As someone who has lived for nearly half a millennia, he wouldn't understand.)

Jiang Ning straightens up, having pushed through the initial fatigue, descending into a point of giddiness beyond exhaustion.

"Yeah, and I didn't get possessed by any of those spirits either," he shrugs. "Guess my cultivation level is just too high..." He tilts his head to the side, looking down at the older teenager.

(Who just so happens to be three inches shorter.)

"But I guess us *country bumpkins* just have more time for training, out in Yunmeng..."

Then he pauses, wrinkling his nose in confusion. "...And wait a minute, why are YOU calling me a bumpkin? It's not like Lanling is some paragon of culture or anything—"

"YOU—!"

"No, no, he's right," Shi Wudu waves them both off.

Lanling is a northern trading outpost, so it isn't exactly cultured compared to anywhere else, either.

And as someone who grew up in a cosmopolitan center like Qinghe, Yunmeng and Lanling both feel small to him.

"Who's side are you on, Pei Yuan?!"

"...You two met like two minutes ago, stop acting like there's a blood feud," Shi Wudu shrugs, turning his eyes away from them. "Besides, mortal grievances are petty to me."

"Haha..." Jiang Ning snorts, shaking his head. "You talk so strangely, gege..."

"DON'T CALL HIM THAT!"

"Jin Feng. Don't make me hurt your feelings."

The teenager balks, limping after him as feeling starts to come back into his legs, still holding his ribs. "I-I don't know what you're talking about! It's just—! Disrespectful to your little sister!"

"She wouldn't care."

Maybe Shi Qingxuan would have before—she was possessive over him, even if it was in a harmless way. For centuries, all they really had was each other.

But...after everything that's happened...

'I wish he wasn't my brother.'

He doubts she would even bat an eye.

"...You have a sister?" Jiang Ning perks up, following close behind them both, even if his legs feel like lead.

"Pregnant. And too old for you."

"...If she's *your* meimei, how could she be too old for me?" The cultivator tilts his head, looking between Shi Wudu and Jin Feng.

They look the same age, which should mean that Pei Yuan's little sister would be close to his own age.

"Besides, you didn't say she was married! I love kids!"

"Yeah, you still ARE a kid."

"A kid who saved your life. Maybe you should call me gege, huh?"

"YOU LITTLE—!"

"Little? Are we *projecting* now?"

Shi Wudu, who is currently the same height as Jin Feng, looks over his shoulder sharply—and Jiang Ning holds his hands up, laughing awkwardly.

"Sorry, sorry gege! Collateral damage, I wasn't thinking!" He tilts his head to the side, "But...is she married?"

"...Not exactly," Shi Wudu looks away, continuing to make a beeline down the street. "It's complicated."

"So...the father isn't in the picture?"

"He is."

(Shi Wudu would assume so, knowing him as he now does.)

"...You don't think he's good enough for her or something, then? Because after this experience, I think I've proven my—"

"He's a good man, so if she had to be with anyone..." Shi Wudu trails off, irritated. "Why are you so persistent on the subject? You've never met her."

"Well," Jiang Ning tilts his head to the side, looking Shi Wudu over. "If there's a family resemblance, I really can't go wrong."

Jin Feng rounds on him, his face flushing dark red, nearly incoherent with indignation, and Shi Wudu pinches the bridge of his nose.

"Oh my god, not another one..." He takes a deep breath. "Look, I'm also too old for *you* , I'm too old for *both* of you—"

"And he's crazy about this other guy, so I wouldn't even bother," Jin Feng grumbles, crossing his arms.

"Is this really the time—?!"

"Okay, okay," Jin Feng holds up his hands, now mirroring Jiang Ning's position, "But hear me out."

"I'd rather not."

"Odds are…you aren't getting your you-know-what back."

Jian Ning stares as Jin Feng gestures to…well…the cultivator's entire body.

"…What?" He whispers, slightly horrified by the amount of possibilities that leaves open. "What is he missing?"

"And your body is…nineteen? So, in that scenario—hypothetically, I don't mean me, I just mean in general—I'm not too young for you! Or any eighteen year old!"

"Yeah!" Jiang Ning agrees, baffled, but going along, "Or a sixteen year old!"

"No, you're too young."

"I'm *BARELY* YOUNGER THAN YOU—!"

"Let me phrase it like this: it wouldn't matter what age either of you were, it's just the most inappropriate aspect of it. Understand?"

"What, so it'll just be people in their sixties or something—?"

Jiang Ning, lacking context, makes a slightly horrified expression—and Shi Wudu sighs harshly.

"It won't be anyone."

"Not even in a few *years—?"*

"You've never been in love before." Shi Wudu stops, looking Jin Feng dead in the eye. "If you had loved someone as deeply or as long as I have, you wouldn't even bother to ask me something like that."

He turns around and keeps walking, leaving the two teenagers in a slight stupor.

"…You weren't kidding about him being crazy about some other guy…" Jiang Ning mutters, slightly dazed by such a romantic show of loyalty.

“…Yeah,” Jin Feng agrees, more deflated than anything else. “I know.”

“Wait…” Jiang Ning walks a little faster. “Where are we going?”

"The port," Shi Wudu explains curtly, ducking through another row of houses. The streets are relatively quiet now, the possessed having been exorcized and moved back inside.

"...But why?"

"Because," he mutters, sliding around the corner, "Something's wrong."

Shi Wudu learned one sight before any other, sitting in his father's lap as he watched the day float by through his office window.

Ship sails.

After so many years, he could tell you the cargo capacity of any vessel, just from one glance at its mast.

Even from all the way back in that square, he could tell;

The ship masts here are oddly low. Far more so than they were this morning.

And when they reach the shore, and Shi Wudu sees the exposed docks...he can see why.

The tide has retreated far further back.

And of course, Jiang Ning, being from Yungmeng, knows exactly what that means.

"...Shit..." he mutters, taking a step back. "Now, of all times?! But there wasn't even an earthquake!"

"That we know of," Shi Wudu corrects him, his heart pounding in his chest.

He looks back over his shoulder, seeing mountains in the far distance, but...

There's not a near enough point with high ground for them to reach.

He turns his head back toward the horizon, squinting.

"...Get everyone to the boats."

"What?!" Jiang Ning flinches at the thought. “Are you *crazy?!”*

“No,” Shi Wudu turns around. “The deeper the water is, the further the wave has to spread out. They don’t crest until they reach the shallows.”

Meaning if they can just move past the bay before it hits, they could ride it out.

“…What, are you some kind of sailor or something?!”

His father owned a thousand ships in his lifetime, and Shi Wudu has had a thousand times more pay tribute to him over the years.

“Something like that.”

“People won’t listen!”

“Oh, go to the temple of Ming Guang first.”Shi Wudu looks back at the building in the distance with a sharp glare. “They’ll listen to me now, I’m sure. Get everyone moving fast. NOW!”

In a larger settlement, this wouldn’t have been possible—but Lanling is a northern outpost, one with more ship capacity than people.

If they’re quick enough—there’s no saving the town structures, but the people have a good chance at survival.

The only problem is that the tide has retreated enough to leave some of the ships beached, and Shi Wudu doesn’t have time to assemble a crew to refloat them.

It’s funny—the water never used to feel cold to him.

Pei Ming used to laugh about it—seeing the younger god lounging in a stream, assuming that meant it was warm enough to swim in, only to be shocked by the frigid cold.

It’s like ice, now.

Of all of the things he's let go over the years, put aside and moved past without any thought or remorse—

He never thought there was a time when water itself could feel like a stranger. Something foreign and cold, soaking against his skin through his boots.

The wind blows harshly against his hair as he kneels down, dipping his palm beneath the retreating waves, watching the horizon with sharp discernment.

"...What are you *doing* , He Sheng?" He mutters, mostly to himself.

His oldest enemy—and now, the person that he knows best.

He Xuan wouldn't just allow something like this to happen, putting this many mortal lives at stake. And if it's happening this far north, in a protected cove like Lanling—it must be happening everywhere.

But what could have caused that?

If it was an earthquake large enough to cause something like this, they would have felt it.

Mount Tonglu is on the completely opposite end of the continent, so it can't be that either.

The only thing Shi Wudu can think of is something falling into the sea from above.

But it would have to be something absolutely massive to displace that much water—and he can't even begin to imagine what that would be. A falling star? Some sort of calamitous battle?

Even his third calamity wasn't so destructive.

And Shi Wudu doubts He Xuan can handle it.

He's aware of the fact that he ascended after Shi Wudu's 'death,' but he's only been in this position for a short time.

Even Shi Wudu, after *centuries* as Water Master, would have struggled with this.

He Xuan was most likely forced to prioritize.

And if Shi Wudu was in that position—

The north is sparsely populated, compared to the central and southern coasts.

It's a rational choice, but—

Shi Wudu grits his teeth, sweating in spite of the cold. Straining to connect to the water. To make it move.

It's more than what the average mortal cultivator could do, but—

Shi Wudu has sunk entire navies. Changed the tides. Swept the fortresses of rulers who offended him into the sea with a flick of the wrist.

Surely he could refloat a few boats?

But, when nothing comes…

Shi Wudu grits his teeth, straightening up with an annoyed glare, smacking his own wrist harshly.

Something he used to do when he was young, every time he made a careless mistake.

"You're not the water master anymore."

And, as Jin Feng oh so painfully reminded him, even if his intentions were good—

He'll probably never go back to his old life again.

Never see his *sister* again.

Never see…

He presses a hand to his face for a moment, lips trembling.

It hard, wanting one thing so badly—

And it's the only thing you can't have.

…But he's alive.

Shi Wudu has to remind himself of that, his hand balling into a fist by his side.

He's *alive* .

The ring sits heavily against his finger, gleaming when he looks down at it.

At the end of the day—weapons forged on such a level are designed to work in tandem for spiritual energy.

And rarely for a singular purpose.

Your only limitations are your skills, and your own resourcefulness.

“Don’t destroy the boat, don’t destroy the boat, don’t destroy—"

CRACK!

The whip flashes, slamming down against the shallows with deadly force—sending the waters churning and crackling with electricity.

But it doesn’t shock him, and to his relief—

It doesn’t shock the boat, either.

Saltwater is a natural conductor—when lightning strikes its surface, it spreads out like a web, or roots from the tree.

In Zidian’s case—it does the same.

But with spiritual power.

And if he can just place it correctly—

He can drag the ships from the shallows.

He breathes out harshly, eyes burning bright as the storm clouds brew in the distance.

And he gets to work.

“This is a waste of time,” Deng Su grouses, but still, he carries a child in each arm, leading the people to hurry down the streets.“Lanling doesn’t flood in winter! It never has!”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you,” Jin Feng glares, helping his own group, stopping to pound on doors and call people out of their homes. “It’s not a NORMAL flood! The tide is further back than I’ve ever seen it!”

“…If that’s true, why are we running towards it?! Are you crazy?!” Another one of the cultivators from the Temple of Ming Guang speaks up, his voice cracking with terror. “We should be going for high ground!”

“THERE’S NO HIGH GROUND YOU CAN REACH IN TIME!” Jiang Ning snaps.

“…Who’s he?!”

“THE BRAT WHO SAVED YOUR UNGRATEFUL LIVES!”

Jiang Ning might have an irritated old woman slung over his shoulder, but the smile he shoots at Jin Feng actually seems to glitter.

“I’m growing on you, aren’t I?”

“…”

“You don’t have to say it, I can tell—!”

“…How the *hell* did he do that?”

Jin Feng’s shocked utterance knocks him out of his smug gloating, and when Jiang Ning looks down towards the docks…

He’s just as baffled.

When they left—over fifteen Ships in the merchant fleet had run aground.

But now…

They're floating out past the shallows—at risk of being dragged further out as the ocean retreats even more—

But usable.

"...How did you—?"

"Start loading people up—now. You don't have any more time."

Jin Feng, Jiang Ning, and the other cultivators grow silent as 'Pei Yuan,' walks past, parting to make a path for him without a word.

Before today, he was regarded as a pitiful thing. A lost, broken soul.

Now, almost none of them can meet his gaze.

"...What about you?"

"I already said, there's another wave of resentful spirits coming," his tone is calm, watching the brewing darkness in the west, on a collision path with the storm clouds in the east. "Someone has to stay behind to deal with them."

Jin Feng almost trips over his own feet.

"What?!" He cries, handing off the children he was carrying as people start to climb onto small barges, rowing their way towards the larger boats to make their escape. "Lord—W— *Pei Yuan!* "

Deng Su walks past them, silently eyeing Zidian on Shi Wudu's hand, but...he looks away.

Hands bitterly balled into fists at his sides.

"Look—you might be stronger than the rest of us—but you're not a...y'know...anymore!" Jin Feng reminds him, practically frantic as he gestures towards the boats. "If you stay here, you'll *drown!"*

"That would be ironic."

Jiang Ning looks back and forth between the older teenager, eyebrows raised. "...Just how many inside jokes do you two have?" he mutters, baffled.

Every other sentence out of their mouths doesn't make sense.

"Go to the boats with your sister, Jin Feng."

"Not without you!"

"I won't die," Shi Wudu assures him. "But every second you waste arguing with me is one you could spend helping these people get out of here."

"But—!" Jin Feng glares, watching the fallen god's back as he walks away. "How can you *know that?!"*

Shi Wudu disappears around the corner, the breeze playing through his hair.

"...Because nothing is ever that easy for me," he mutters, just a little bit bitter.

He tried to take his own life twice in his first few weeks after arriving in Lanling, after all.

And now, with all of the citizens either already in boats or fleeing towards the harbor…

It’s so quiet.

Laundry left out on the lines—toys scattered in the street, abandoned where children dropped them in order to flee.

The breeze from the impending storm rattles through wind chimes hung from roof eaves, their tones an almost mournful sound.

Drifting through the city like birdsong through an empty nest.

Shi Wudu hears a swoop of wings from behind him, turning his head, but…

Ding…

He closes his eyes, listening to an unfamiliar chime—like the tinkling of a soft bell.

His fingers are quick, combing his hair back and away from his head, pulling it into a high, neat ponytail.

Using a familiar golden pin to lock it in place.

A dragon carved into its face.

Ding…

The bell echoes again, this time Accompanied by the sound of footsteps, each landing heavily against the earth.

He turns around, half expecting to find a possessed citizen he had missed during the first wave of fighting, but…

Instead, there’s a woman in armor.

One with long, dark hair—pulled halfway out of her face. Tall for a lady, matching his own height—

A sword gleaming at her side.

“…If someone from Yunmeng or Gusu sent you here to help, you’re a bit late,” he warns, raising an eyebrow.

Oddly enough, that seems to annoy her.

“What do you call yourself, child?” She sneers, looking up and down with a disdainful gaze.

Shi Wudu’s other eyebrow follows the other, raising sharply.

“…Pei Yuan,” he answers flatly. “And you are?”

She doesn’t immediately answer, gripping her sword even more tightly.

But when she takes in the sight of those eyes…

The Water Master wasn’t ever as known for his beauty as his younger sibling was—but his statues always had real gems in the eyes, or the most vivid of paints.

Because his eyes were said to be so sharp, they gleamed like sapphires.

The stranger’s mouth curves at the corners, slowly beginning to prowl around the edges of the square, watching him closely.

Shi Wudu crosses his arms, taking a relaxed stance.

Watching every single movement she makes from the corner of his eye.

“Poor thing…” She purrs. “A lost, broken soul…that must be so *humiliating* for such a prideful man…”

His posture stiffens, not turning around as she walks behind him—but keenly aware of where she is.

“…Though I am shocked that Pei Ming would be so besotted by a *child* like yourself…”

"...The emperor sent you," Shi Wudu concludes flatly, his jaw clenching.

For her to know his identity, and to be able to allude to it without consequence...

That would only be because the one who cast the curse was the one who told her the truth.

The one who sent her here.

"Clever, clever..." She looks him up and down, wondering if this was truly a task from Jun Wu, or a reward.

She had been slightly intimidated by the idea of attacking the Water Master himself, but...

This is just a mortal teenager.

Weak—and totally vulnerable.

"...If you know who I am, I'm surprised you would age yourself by calling someone four centuries old a child," He muses, hair slipping over his shoulder as he tilts his head to the side.

He doesn't need to see her scowl in response from behind him to feel satisfaction.

“And what of someone *nine* centuries old?” She sneers, eyes flickering about the terrain, evaluating points of escape.

A trained fighter, then.

“That gap in experience doesn’t seem to bother you.”

Just speaking of him aches—but the mortal doesn’t show it.

“He’s pretty spry.”

Her teeth come together with an Audible snap as he examines his nails.

“And if the emperor sent you here to kill me, I really don’t understand why you care about who I had in my *bed* , much less our age difference.”

“Don’t play STUPID with me!”

Finally, he turns his head to look at her—thoroughly unimpressed.

“I promise, when someone comes to kill me, being coy isn’t at the top of my priority list. Have we met before?”

He thinks he’d remember the face and the aggression—but he also likes forgetting unpleasant things.

“…Oh, I see what this is,” Xuan Ji laughs hollowly, shaking her head. “Pretending like you don’t recognize me—trying to make me think he never told you about me—!”

“Told me about you?” Shi Wudu rolls his eyes. “What, you’re a former lover of his? That doesn’t narrow it down.”

“I’m not a FORMER LOVER!” She snarls, eyes glowing red with rage. “We were to BE MARRIED!”

And once she says that, Shi Wudu knows exactly who she is.

“…Oh,” his voice might have been disinterested before—but now it turns frigid.

“You’re *that* woman.”

Xuan Ji pauses in her circling, eyes widening with satisfaction. “HA! And you tried to pretend you hadn’t heard of me! I bet he could hardly keep my name out of his—”

“He hated speaking about you, actually.” Shi Wudu strokes his thumb over the ring on his finger.

“He’s always prided himself on having good taste, it’s hard remembering such a lapse in judgment.”

Pei Ming really does pride himself on having generally chosen well with his partners, even if he’s chosen many, and often.

Beautiful, intelligent, skilled—and challenging.

That was part of what made it so hard to push him away, in the beginning.

Facing away from Pei Ming in bed, pretending to be indifferent—grumbling something about how he was exhausted, and the General should find someone else to sate his needs.

But then Pei’s lips would find his pulse point, and he would speak into his skin, leaving the Water Master shivering with every syllable—

‘Where could I possibly go that would compare to this?’

Compared to him.

‘Any other bed would be lackluster by comparison.’

Part of being desired by a man who prides himself on taste is the thrill of feeling so deeply valued.

He almost wishes he could live inside the memory of that feeling a little longer, but—

“If his taste is so wonderful, as the *love of his life* , I’ll take that as a *compliment* .”

Shi Wudu’s eyebrow raises even higher, and he shakes his head.

“Oh, you misunderstood my reaction just now,” he turns, and now, rather than her circling him—they’re circling one another. “I didn’t recognize you because you were *actually* going to marry Pei Ming.”

He flicks his hair back over his shoulder, and—

The brat has the nerve to smirk.

“You’re just the only woman he’s been with who also happens to be delusional.”

The air around them grows thick with resentment as her eyes burn with rage.

“You *DARE—!”*

“If he promised to marry you, then you would be his wife,” Shi Wudu shrugs. “He keeps his word, no matter how unpleasant it may be. But you already know that you aren’t the love of his life. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have scurried all the way here just to kill *me.”*

It’s a cruel form of irony that he’ll say such things in order to get under Xuan Ji’s skin, but he doesn’t actually believe it.

Pei Ming loves him—and their friendship has always been genuine.

But he’s *the* love of Shi Wudu’s life—and Shi Wudu is *a* love in his.

That isn’t something he would ever resent Pei Ming for, either. He understands it.

Because while he’ll never love someone in the same way as Pei—he’ll never love anyone as much as Shi Qingxuan, either.

She’s been the joy of his life.

He also knows that, at some point, she outgrew him. That Shi

Qingxuan didn't need him the way that he needed her.

And that's okay. That was his *job.*

In the most important relationships of his life—he never expects his affections to be returned with the same force or depth.

Because he can't just love someone in a mild, graceful sort of way.

It's *consuming* . It's driving.

To the point where there was nothing he couldn't do to protect someone he loved—but there's a flip side to that coin.

There was also nothing he *wouldn't* do for someone he loved.

…That's how he ended up here, in this situation.

"I suppose I can thank you for one thing, though," Shi Wudu muses, tapping his brow bone. "The scar really does suit him."

But that's also all Xuan Ji is, at this point.

An old scar that refuses to heal.

She stops walking, her knuckles white and aching from the tightness of her grip on her sword.

"…You would mock me, for what he put me through?" Xuan Ji whispers. "Have you no *shame?"*

Shi Wudu has no idea how maiming him is something Pei Ming put her through, but who can say.

"…If I was going to be tempted to mock you for something inappropriate, it would be to say that the only thing I need to do to avoid a fight with you would be climbing a flight of stairs," he looks her over. "But mocking people for physical infirmities is classless."

But Xuan Ji wasn't injured in battle. She wasn't born with a deformed leg.

She intentionally ruined her leg, all for the love and attention that a man could not and would not give.

And from the look of it—Jun Wu has already healed her leg to aid her in taking him down.

"…Bravado doesn't suit everyone," Xuan Ji admits, raising her blade. "But it suits you. I suppose that shouldn't be a surprise. This is a *relief* for you, isn't it?"

She steps toward him, metal soled boots landing heavily against the street.

"Ending your suffering, rolling around in filth with these mortals. You tried to take your own life, if the emperor's words were true…"

When she examines the angry red scar on his throat, she thinks so.

"We both know you will *never* see him again, anyway. Why fight it?"

Part of him does still crave death. Not the afterlife or relief from his suffering, but sheer oblivion.

Something beyond memory, fatigue, or regret.

He might have agreed with her yesterday.

He certainly would have, the day he arrived in Lanling.

And it's not even that he doesn't feel tempted by it now.

Saying otherwise would just be a lie.

Shi Wudu looks back over his shoulder. At the brewing clouds. The ships shrinking further and further back in the sea.

And for a moment, it looks like he's making peace with it.

Like, in the face of every other option—letting go might be the easiest option.

In that sense, Shi Wudu doesn't think there is any difference between the living, and ghosts.

You have to want to remain in this world. To live. You need a *reason* .

Without it, you fade.

His entire life, he slowly disciplined himself in the act of pushing aside his own wants, needs, and emotions in favor of whatever was most important at that time.

When he was a child, he wasn't allowed to express fear or pain. Not without putting Shi Qingxuan in danger.

After their parents died—he put his own youth aside, transforming himself from brother to guardian.

There was no room for immaturity or weakness. He let go of his own dreams—and it wasn't *difficult* for him. He can't even remember what he wanted, back then.

And when there was a chance to save Shi Qingxuan's life, even at the cost of his own conscience…

He did it. And while he knows he'll never deserve pity, not after the damage he caused—

Shi Wudu also knows that he paid an unimaginable price.

It wasn't something that he could have realized before.

Not when it was so easy for him to swallow down the ache in his chest, every time Pei Ming looked his way.

To hide the depth of his feelings like an ugly little secret, because—

He felt so *unworthy* of being loved back.

Like his love was a burden, one that the General would only grow to resent him for. And Shi Wudu would rather adore in secret than ever know what it felt like to disappoint him.

It was a fear of rejection, yes—but he also placed Pei's independence before his own happiness.

That was never difficult for him. It hurt, but the choice itself was always easy.

And maybe that's why, after so many years desperate to get out—he was so willing to take his own life when Pei Ming and Shi Qingxuan learned the truth.

Because then, they had suddenly become aware of what he had known all along.

That he wasn't strong. That his loyalty was a burden holding them back.

That he had earned his name:

A tyrant.

And Tyrants are never as powerful as they seem—they're just *afraid* .

That was when it became so heartbreakingly obvious that the best thing for them—for Pei Ming, Shi Qingxuan, and He Sheng—

Was if he just disappeared. Fading into nothing more than an old scar.

And unlike Xuan Ji, he hoped so badly that they could heal from him.

Letting go wasn't hard.

Actually—it was remarkably easy.

But now—

"…No."

Now, knowing why she's here, he can't seem to do that.

Now it's Xuan Ji's turn to raise an eyebrow, having been on the verge of attack when the former god steps out of reach.

"You think you have a choice?" Her lips pull back over her fangs, glinting in the dimming afternoon light. "I only offered to make it easy for you. A mercy—"""""

"No," he repeats coldly, shaking his head.

Mercy requires empathy.

She has none.

"You think that he'll have room in his heart for you if there's no chance I could walk back into his life. But he left you centuries before I was even born."

It's a delusion. A bargain you make, chasing the love of a man who will never change his mind.

"You're just here because if *you* can't have him, no one else can."

And he—

For the first time in so long, since he was a child, even—

He feels this angry sense of desperation in his chest.

No.

No.

'You can't have him.'

This feeling of—

Of being unwilling to let go.

"…But no matter what you do to me," he murmurs, flicking his wrist —the light from zidian's violet glow reflecting in his eyes as it flickers to life.

"He will *always* be mine."

Even if it's pitiful. Even if he's just like her, clinging to the love of a man he isn't worthy of.

Knowing that Pei Ming must be so angry and disappointed in him, for the secrets he kept. For the crimes he committed.

And even still, it—

It isn't easy this time, letting go of his wants, it's *impossible* .

Because when Shi Wudu showed that hair pin in his temple—Pei came.

Because even if the general nearly shook him to death on the docks that day—

When Shi Wudu woke up, he was surrounded by the smell of him, the warmth of a familiar cloak around him.

And in spite of how miserable his situation was, he was *so* happy.

Because Shi Wudu heard his voice today.

Because—

'He's mine, and you can't have him. '

"If you manage to kill me, I'll show you what a real haunting looks like," he hisses.

He won't leave this world.

Even if it's only to protect Pei from *her*.

"…You think you have even the slightest chance against me, in that weakened form?" Xuan Ji's expression contorts with rage. "I'm almost *INSULTED!"*

Maybe.

But he also isn't a defenseless teenage bride.

So, he's still better off than her other victims.

And when each of them launches forward, finally prepared to pounce—

Shi Wudu knows his chances are poor.

And yet…

With the thunder roaring overhead and the sea at his back, an eagle's cry piercing through the air like a call to battle—

He isn't *afraid*.

Not anymore.

My Friend

Chapter Summary

> “…Mu Qing?”
>
> “What?”
>
> The martial god pauses, stiffening when Xie Lian reaches out to grasp his sleeve.
>
> “…What’s wrong with your spiritual powers?”

Chapter Notes

> TRIGGER WARNING: mentions of implied child sexual abuse, past shaming of sex work, and violence

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THUD!

Xie Lian sits up quickly, movements quick and unbalanced from the adrenaline, Ruoye frantically twisting around his palm, trembling with fright.

“…It’s alright,” the prince whispers, stroking his fingers over the silk bandage, trying to find his bearings.

He can smell maple trees—and a faint hint of rain—but he isn’t sitting on bare earth. There’s something hard beneath him, digging into his side in places.

“You didn’t hit your head again, did you?” A voice grumbles, and Xie Lian perks with relief.

“We had to get out of there so quickly—there wasn’t time to do anything but jump in the array blindly…”

“Mu Qing,” he sighs, reaching over to grasp his friend by the wrist. “…Where’s Feng Xin?”

And his muffled reply—it comes from underneath both of them.

“Here…”

He didn't have much of a choice, when they were falling through the array—he was the only one operating at his full power, so he was the one to break the fall.

"You're so much thinner than you used to be, I thought you'd be lighter…"

"It's not me," Xie Lian explains, not taking offense. "It's the shackles."

Without them, he probably weighs little more than he did as a *child* at this point, but…

He can't help but feel a little guilty, allowing Hua Cheng to carry him so much, even if he's never complained.

But that reminds him—

If they were able to escape through the travel array in Blackwater Manor—what about Hua Cheng?

Or Pei Ming and Yushi H—?

"If you're worried about Crimson Rain," Ling Wen speaks, finally making her presence known, "he's on his way here now."

The weight of the red string on his finger is enough to tell him that Hua Cheng is still safe, but—

Now that they're separated, Jun Wu won't be coming after the ghost king—

He'll be coming after Xie Lian.

Which means they don't have any time to waste.

And now, with his head back to normal, and a brief pause in the fighting—there's something that's finally caught his notice.

"…Mu Qing?"

"What?"

The martial god pauses, stiffening when Xie Lian reaches out to grasp his sleeve.

"…What's wrong with your spiritual powers?"

He noticed before—but didn’t have the time or coherency to ask—

But he can’t see any of Mu Qing’s spiritual aura anymore—just darkness.

“…That’s—"

“This isn’t a situation where you can just push it off until later,” Feng Xin sits up, rubbing the small of his back with a wince. “That was why you kissed me before you could heal his highness, right?”

Mu Qing’s eyes snap over to Xie Lian, who has stiffened—the tips of his ears slightly red.

“…You didn’t have to bring *that* up…”

“Oh, don’t worry on my account,” Xie Lian waves his hands awkwardly. “San Lang and I share power that way all the…”

He started to blurt out that explanation as a way of making Mu Qing feel comfortable, only to realize that would absolutely have the opposite effect.

“…I just mean…well…”

Mu Qing sighs, unbuttoning his sleeve.

“When we were imprisoned in the Heavens, Jun Wu came to my palace.”

“It seems like he came to everyone’s…” Xie Lian mutters, his expression darkening.

“He didn’t come to mine,” Feng Xin looks the two of them over, adjusting his armor. “Guess I didn’t have anything he wanted.”

And hearing him say it like that—

Xie Lian’s expression darkens, reaching out to grip Mu Qing’s forearm tightly.

“What did he do to you?”

Hearing him sound like that—it catches Feng Xin’s attention, sending it sharpening in on Mu Qing with narrow focus.

“… *What?* What are you—?”

What is Xie Lian so worried about? He doesn't—

Mu Qing rolls up his sleeve, bringing Xie Lian's hand over to feel—and both of his friends understand in an instant.

All too familiar with the sight and feel of a spiritual shackle.

And when Mu Qing sees how relieved Xie Lian is, letting out a trembling breath—

He frowns.

"…What did you think he had done?"

The prince shakes his head vehemently, hair whipping around his shoulders.

"It doesn't matter."

What matters is that he didn't do *that* .

"…That's why I wanted to come back here," Mu Qing mutters, choosing to let the matter go—for now. "I knew there was a good chance the emperor would shackle me—even before we left Mount Tonglu."

Which was why he hadn't planned on going *back* .

"How did you know that?" Feng Xin frowns, reaching over to snatch Mu Qing's wrist, glaring down at the dark, twisting black pattern. "Why the *fuck* would he do that do you, if he already knew you hadn't committed a crime?!"

Mu Qing doesn't answer—just hangs his head.

"Neither of you would understand," he mutters—in a tone that is so easily mistaken for being bitter, or resentful.

But Xie Lian knows better.

"…If you don't want to say because you're ashamed—that's exactly how he wants you to feel," the prince reminds him quietly.

"That's how he wins."

Mu Qing's throat is so thick—it hurts.

And he is ashamed. So, *so* ashamed—but he…

"…He was trying to turn me against you," the martial god admits hoarsely."Ever since the mid-autumn festival."

Feng Xin's stomach twists with nausea.

Remembering a locked door.

Mu Qing begging Feng Xin to just leave him alone.

And the emperor stopping him when he came back a final time, planning to kick the door in.

"…That's why he came to see me," Mu Qing swallows hard. "He thought…if given the chance, I would…"

He freezes, his heart leaping into his throat when he feels a palm press against his cheek.

And when he looks up—

Xie Lian smiles.

"Then he doesn't know you at all."

"…" Mu Qing stares back at him—biting his lip, eyes shining with unspoken emotions.

"…Go to the lake."

Feng Xin starts, so distracted by watching the scene—he almost didn't realize that Mu Qing was speaking to him.

"Huh?"

"I already said—I knew I was going to be shackled if we went back," he mutters, clearing his throat. "I stored as much of my spiritual power in it as I could. I'll need to work on General Pei and the Rain Master when they get here."

There's no way they weren't hurt in that blast, even if Hua Cheng is probably just fine.

That bastard always lands on his feet.

Feng Xin sends him an annoyed, reluctant look—knowing that they don’t have much time to waste—

But that also means there isn’t time to argue with him, either.

And when he walks away…Mu Qing turns around, scanning the area surrounding Mount Taicang for Ling Wen, but…

She’s halfway down the slope, examining possible exits—far out of earshot.

“…I have something I want to say to you.”

Xie Lian stiffens, surprised by the quiet, unsteady tone of Mu Qing’s voice.

“And I don’t know if I’ll have the chance or the nerve to say it later.”

“…What is it?” Xie Lian frowns. “I don’t understa—"

“I’m sorry.”

The prince grows still—and Mu Qing’s hands ball up into fists in his lap, his face downturned.

He’s not sure if it means much, when it comes eight centuries too late.

But it’s…better than nothing, isn’t it?

"...Not...Not for *leaving,"* he explains carefully, refusing to acknowledge why. That he knows that—

'It was a RELIEF!'

Xie Lian wasn't sad to see him go.

And Mu Qing had his mother and sisters to look after—they didn't have anyone else to protect them.

"But...everything else..."

"Mu Qing—"

"When I realized who Hua Cheng was, I..." The martial god sits back, his chest aching with shame and regret. "I knew why I was one of the gods he challenged."

Because he was there that day.

The day that he's spent *countless* lifetimes wishing he could take back.

"I know...you've probably already guessed why I did that..." He swallows hard, "And I know it doesn't change anything, but you would be wrong."

It was never because Mu Qing hated him.

He resented Xie Lian—but he always knew that the prince had never done anything to deserve it.

Mu Qing was just—

Painfully young, scared, and alone, and Xie Lian was never cruel or unfair, but—

Sometimes, just being around him made Mu Qing feel *worthless* .

And in part, he left because he had his family to look after—that was the most important reason.

But it wasn't the only one.

The day he left, when Xie Lian was still gone, before he lost Hong'er—

It was because Mu Qing couldn't stand to be around *Feng Xin* anymore.

Because there's nothing that hurts more when you're nineteen years old, kissing the boy who took up permanent residence in your head over a bowl of congee, and—

And he says Xie Lian's name.

"…But I never told anyone," Mu Qing mutters—doubting Xie Lian will believe him.

"I never started those rumors about you. And even hearing them—"

His voice wobbles for a moment—and he has to stop, struggling to compose himself.

"You heard everything I said to Jian Lan in that Inn, didn't you?"

Xie Lian winces, biting his lip.

"…I didn't mean to."

Mu Qing knows—Xie Lian wouldn't eavesdrop on something like that on purpose.

He isn't that kind of person.

"…It wasn't just happening to my sister," he mutters, unable to look at Xie Lian.

To see the look on his face.

He doesn't know what he'll find.

"…Mu Qing—"

"It was a long time ago—and I'm *fine* now," he cuts the prince off shortly. "And I'm not saying it because I expect your forgiveness, or to make an excuse for the way I treated you, I just—"

He wraps one arm around himself, squeezing his eyes shut.

"When people told those rumors about you…you aren't actually *like* that…"

Mu Qing was the one who has to explain what impure thoughts were, during their cultivation training with Mei Nianqing, because as the prince said—

'How am I supposed to know if I'm having an impure thought if I've never had one before?'

"…But *I* was…" Mu Qing whispers.

Back then, even if the rumors could never have been close to who Xie Lian actually was—

To Mu Qing, it felt like hearing about *himself* .

Because back then—

He felt disgusting.

He felt ashamed.

And in spite of how much pain, fear, and anger he felt—he was also a teenage boy, trying to figure out what and who he wanted, and—

Mu Qing *hated* himself.

He still does.

He always has.

"…" Xie Lian knows that Mu Qing isn't like that at all, he never has been—

And it shouldn't have mattered if he was.

He's seen so much evil and cruelty in the world. Kindness, too.

And the idea of being ashamed of that—

It seems so remarkably silly, now.

And even if the worst things that Mu Qing had done were purely out of spite—

He would still be far from evil. Not even close to the worst person Xie Lian has ever met.

"And those things I said that day, when I came to see you…after…"

Mu Qing is, for once, relieved that Xie Lian can't see his face.

Because he can barely keep his voice even—but he can't stop the tears that are falling.

"…I'm *sorry."*

Now, Xie Lian is hanging his head too.

Mostly because his own throat is suddenly tight.

"It…It was fucked up," Mu Qing admits, remembering how it was the one and only one he ever provoked Xie Lian to curse at him. "And I never should have said it. I just…"

One tear slips from his cheek, landing on his hands in his lap.

"…I thought I would have been the *last* person you would have told… and when I r-realized I…"

Xie Lian told Mu Qing that he had fallen for a man first.

"It m-made me think you…used to t- *trust* …m…me…"

"I *do,* " Xie Lian whispers, but Mu Qing is too lost to hear.

To notice that Xie Lian is speaking in present tense, not past.

"…And I just…Back then…G-god, I feel so f…fucking s- *stupid…"*

"You're not—"

"I a-am!" Mu Qing snaps, pressing the heels of his palms to his eyes in frustration, trying to stifle the tears.

"Because all I w-wanted back then w-was to b-be y-your—"

It feels mortifying to even say it, given how thoroughly Mu Qing wrecked things—because that was what he always did last then, pushing everyone in his life away—

But he chokes it out, frame trembling.

"F-F- *Friend!"*

But Xie Lian—

He always deserved a better friend than Mu Qing knew how to be.

People like Feng Xin, or Shi Qingxuan. Hell, even Quan Yizhen, weird as he is—

But not Mu Qing.

…*Riiiiip.*

He looks down—only to find Xie Lian bent over, ripping a piece of cloth from the hem of his robes—surprisingly clean, in spite of the chaos of the day.

Using it to reach forward, feeling around for Mu Qing's jaw, and then —

The prince carefully dries the tears on his cheeks.

Mu Qing is frozen, almost numb with shock, having no idea how to react, and—

There's a whoosh of air behind them—and the tell tale sound of a travel array opening.

…And that makes him shrink away, even as Xie Lian watches on in dismay.

Clink!

Clink!

"…San Lang!"

Xie Lian barely gets the name out of his mouth before arms are wrapping around him, holding him so tightly, it's almost painful.

"Nice…" Mu Qing grumbles, rising to his feet. "Just drop the two injured gods like a pair of rocks, why don't you…"

"It's fine…" Pei wheezes. "I honestly wasn't expecting to get a ride to begin with, so…"

Mu Qing goes to him first, only to be waved off.

"Help…The Rain Master. She got…hit worse than me…"

For some reason, Hua Cheng snatched him up before the wave even hit—and he still isn't sure why.

Xie Lian is being gripped so tightly, he's barely even able to lift his head. "San Lang—"

"I am *never* doing that again," he whispers fiercely—and the calamity hasn't ever spoken to Xie Lian like that before, but—

He can understand why.

"I'm sorry, I know it was hard—"

"I'm sorry," Hua Cheng interrupts, leaning back to look him over, delicately placing both hands on Xie Lian's face as he examines his head. "I shouldn't have waited.'

"You did as I asked, San Lang," Xie Lian reminds him, but that doesn't ease his anguish.

"I *shouldn't* have."

And he should have taken Jun Wu's head then and there, consequences be damned.

He should have gotten there before he touched a hair on the prince's head. He—

Xie Lian's hands press against his cheeks, derailing his thoughts from spiraling further.

"If you had done anything differently, we might not have gotten out at all," his thumbs sweep under Hua Cheng's cheekbones—

Something he used to do when he was younger—whenever he wanted Hong'er to stop sulking.

"And I knew I was safe the entire time."

And it's not that Hua Cheng is sulking now—Xie Lian knows he has every reason to be upset, but…then, he leans down suddenly, and Xie Lian—

His ears are burning from being kissed out in the open, even if Mu Qing is already attending to Yushi Huang—

"…Ho ho."

It's a small little laugh—not particularly surprised, serving more as a polite reminder that Pei Ming is still present—

And it's enough to set Xie Lian's face on *fire* .

"…General!" He leans away from Hua Cheng sharply, clearing his throat. "I hope you aren't badly hurt!"

Pei Ming looks them over—from the prince's flushed face, to Hua Cheng's impassive, shameless stare—and he waved it off.

"I've had worse," he mutters, watching as Feng Xin returns, carrying a canteen, handing it over to Mu Qing as he works on the Rain Master.

"Did you manage to get a hold of it?" Feng Xin asks, kneeling down to offer some of his own spiritual power to aid in Pei Ming's healing process.

Hua Cheng glances over, just in time to see the general lift the dagger from his sleeve.

"Give it here," Mu Qing murmurs, taking it by the handle—

Surprised by how heavy such a small blade is. Tiny, in comparison to the sabers he uses.

"…I've stabilized Yushi Huang enough for her body to recover on its own. But you two are going to be easy targets for Jun Wu.”

Pei Ming winces, his left arm having gone mostly limp since he broke his shoulder—muscles aching as bone slowly knits back together.

“I agree, but it’s not as if we have anywhere to run.”

“…That’s not necessarily true,” Xie Lian speaks up, lifting his chin. “Even Jun Wu doesn’t know where the Royal catacombs are. Ling Wen should be able to get the two of you there safely—and it’s far enough underground to shield you from any kind of battle.”

When Xie Lian was small—he was sent there to take shelter with his mother, hiding with other civilians and servants from the court when the Emperor was said to be facing a Heavenly Calamity in the central plains.

And even then, the rumbling seemed distant, sleeping in her arms.

And now—

Xie Lian swallows back a new form of pain, thinking back on that memory.

Knowing that Jun Wu was behind the war that led to her eventual death.

“…Running from a fight isn’t my style,” Pei grouses, throwing an arm around Ling Wen’s shoulders as she reaches his side.

The civil god rolls his eyes, switching to his male form—giving himself enough strength to support Pei Ming, all while carrying Yushi Huang on his back.

“You’re lucky you didn’t die in that last stunt—and you’re no good to anyone until your arm is back to normal.”

She’s right—but Pei Ming still loathes it, glancing back over his shoulder at Xie Lian, Hua Cheng, Feng Xin, and Mu Qing, all crouched together.

Three children of Xianle, kneeling in the ruins of what was once their home.

And the fourth…

Pei’s eyes settle on Hua Cheng.

And for some reason, when he sees the ghost king's hair—how now, on the heat of battle, there's a slight curl to it—

The sort of texture that waves and tangles when it's wet.

For some reason, he—

He remembers sharp eyes, and a challenging smile.

The sound of music in a tavern

Dice falling across a table.

'Aren't you going to wish me good luck, my lady?'

Her words linger in his mind, as they grow further apart.

'Oh no, I don't think I have any to spare for you.'

'Why is that?'

'In my experience, those who deserve good fortune need it the most.'

'Is that your way of saying you find me undeserving?'

'Oh no, it's even worse than that.'

That was when she smiled at him—like they were two accomplices, legs delicately crossed at the ankles, shielding her face with a fan so no one could see just how close they were.

'I find you infuriatingly capable.'

He was early in his godhood, back then—with an air of sorrow and anger that hung around him like shackles.

But being near her—

He remembered how to smile again. How to laugh the way he once did.

'How is that infuriating, love?'

And she smiled then—as if she knew something that he didn't.

'I suppose I'm just a selfish woman.'

And a fierce one, at that.

He can still remember laying by her side upon a grassy hill, watching ships come and go from the harbor, when she told him her parents had found her a husband.

'…You always seemed to enjoy being a socialite. Won't marrying into a wealthy family please you?'

She barked out a disbelieving laugh at the sound of that, glaring up at the sky spitefully.

'I think being snatched away by a Fox spirit would be preferable—or a dragon. I've always wanted to see one, you know. Have you ever—?'

'…And what about a god?'

No one would ever believe him, if he tried to say that there had been a woman he had been willing to slow down for.

Even Shi Wudu seemed to struggle to reconcile himself with the idea that Pei Ming had asked someone for marriage before.

'…Not a god.'

Though, he supposes the most unbelievable part of the tale is the fact that she said no.

Kindly—with faint sorrow, her hand gentle against his cheek.

'You're a good man,' she whispered, contradicting his own self loathing, back then. *'But you're an exception among your kind.'*

She wanted no part of that life—and he could never blame her for it.

But he also couldn't have known what fate awaited her, if she remained among the mortals, and he—

Why is he thinking of her now? Just...because of what Jun Wu said about their son?

How Pei *failed* him?

Back near the mountain's summit, Hua Cheng is watching wearily as Mu Qing starts a small flame, using it to sterilize the blade of the dagger.

"Why does he have that thing?"

He can understand the value of getting it away from Jun Wu—but that doesn't seem to be the only purpose

And Xie Lian braces himself—knowing exactly what he'll say.

"You can't kill Jun Wu and Bai Wuxiang simultaneously," he explains carefully—and Hua Cheng doesn't argue him that point. "And with nearly everyone else incapacitated..."

"We need to break his shackles." Mu Qing concludes flatly—and Xie Lian was right.

"Absolutely not."

Hua Cheng's reaction is immediate.

"San Lang, I know it isn't ideal—but we don't know another way—"

"Then we'll think of a better one."

"...I really wish we *could* , but we don't have the time—"

"Couldn't we just cut his foot off at the ankle with a normal blade?" Feng Xin suggests suddenly, rubbing his chin, only to glare back when Hua Cheng sends him an acidic look.

"Hey, I don't like it any more than you do! But at least it's an idea—!"

"Oh, you're right, and *thank you* for your contribution," Hua Cheng sneers. "What was your plan for his throat? A little decapitation?"

"Obviously NOT—!"

"It won't work," Xie Lian shakes his head glumly. "I've had my foot amputated plenty of times—and the shackle always grows back with it."

(He's also had his eyes poked out more times than he can count with the same results, but that seems a little too gruesome to share.)

The three surrounding him grow still, silently horrified by that information.

"...And we don't know if this would work, either," Hua Cheng mutters, glaring at the God Slayer hatefully. "Which is why we're not using it."

"I don't think that's your call," Mu Qing glares, "and you're right, we don't know if it's going to work."

He sits back, pushing his own sleeve up to the elbow;

"Which is why we're trying it on mine first."

"...What?!" Feng Xin sputters—and he wasn't happy with the plan before, but now, he seems to be even less on board. "What if it goes wrong?! That's your sword hand!"

"And Mei Nianqing said the incision wouldn't need to be big." Mu Qing mutters, his brow pinched with focus.

"...No, Feng Xin has a good point," Xie Lian frowns. "My ankle is less of a loss than your hand—you're a swordsman and a doctor, they're more valuable than my—"

"If I cut on the top of my wrist, at most I'll nick a tendon. A small injury could heal without magic."

But the ankle? It has far more connective tissue involved, and while it's not as important for fine motor skills—it's weight bearing. The neck is even worse, and the *eyes* —

If they're going to try this, Mu Qing's wrist has the lowest risk of permanent damage.

"And if it does work—you think you could safely use it on his neck? Or his eyes?"

"I have no idea," Mu Qing admits. "But I also know I won't do it if I think I'm going to risk his life or permanently maiming him."

"...I'd be okay if I was a little mai—" Xie Lian starts, trying to ease the stress of the situation, but—

"No." All three of them speak in unison, each sounding slightly exasperated.

"The point is, I'm only putting myself at risk right now, so *shut up and let me work."*

Hua Cheng seems to decide that he is comfortable with that risk after a moment, shutting his mouth. And if Feng Xin still has concerns—

They're put to the side by a flash of light and a nearby rumble, the earth shaking faintly underneath their feet.

...A travel array.

And from the feel of it—one that powerful could only be coming from one being.

Mu Qing leans against Xie Lian's side, bracing his arm between them to keep it still, even as the ground moves. "Both of you keep him off of us while I get this done!"

Hua Cheng and Feng Xin pause, looking at one another.

It's not exactly a position either one of them expected to be in—but the situation doesn't give them time to express any distaste for the idea.

Now, they have to move.

Jun Wu shakes the ash and dust from his hair, brushing the dried blood from his armor with a flick of his wrist.

"Xianle..." He muses, eyeing the overgrown ruin around him. "Time has not been kind to you."

Whether he's speaking about the man or the kingdom remains to be seen.

It's easy now, to stand upon this mountain and remember what it used to be. How the Kingdom used to shine with prosperity and promise.

And the young prince who was born here. The boy Jun Wu watched grow.

It's a pity that it all came to this.

Even if he's the architect of this outcome, he isn't blind to the reality that it is, in fact, a tragedy.

CLANG!

He raises his sword, barely catching the blow from E'Ming in time—sparks flying from the edge of his blade.

"It must be strange for you, being back here."

Hua Cheng doesn't reply, not gripping E'Ming with his own hands—rather using the weapon like a fifth limb, attacking the emperor viciously and without a single moment of hesitation.

And with his own hands, he wields a guandao of black steel, inlaid with gold.

The spear moves deftly in his grip, spinning in and out of parrying range, coming down with daunting force each time Jun Wu goes to block him.

CLANG!

CLANG!

CLANG!

"...A jack of all trades, aren't you?" The emperor sneers, his expression twisting with annoyance as he's forced to block the polearm with his own blade, using the edge of his vambrace to fend off E'Ming.

"You know that means you're a master of none, yes?"

CLANG!

The next blow is so powerful—it comes with a painful reminder, forcing Jun Wu to take one step back, bracing himself.

They aren't in *his* territory anymore.

Hua Cheng pulls back, only to lunge forward for another strike, using the guandao and E'Ming in a pincer maneuver.

"My Gusohi taught me that a man should be a master of any weapon he forges—or else it might fall out of his control." His eyes flash viciously. "You're familiar with that problem, aren't you?"

Jun Wu doesn't know which offends him more.

What Hua Cheng is implying, or calling Jun Wu's wife his teacher.

"There isn't enough familiarity in the world to save you once I'm through with—"

CRACK!

Jun Wu stumbles back once again, startled, and when he looks down...

There's a crackling bolt of spiritual energy sprouting from his breast plate. Not piercing his armor, but a close call.

Fired from none other than the bow of Nan Yang.

"Has anyone ever told you that you talk WAY too damn much?!" The general snarls, three more arrows notched.

"I get it, it was probably fucking EXHAUSTING hiding what a piece of SHIT you are for so long!"

CRACK!

CLANG!

"But it's okay to NOT BE YOUR GODDAMN SELF SOMETIMES! OR ALL THE DAMN TIME!"

Honestly, Feng Xin never had any love for the emperor of any kind.

He respected the man. Did his duty, and followed orders—as anyone would expect of someone in his position.

But he always found something about Jun Wu to be just a little too slick in nature for his liking.

Like an octopus that can find the smallest hole in a net, using it to squirm its way out of any predicament.

Feng Xin pushed that feeling aside. Because he swore an oath of loyalty when he ascended as a martial god.

Because there's a way to things, in the Heavens. Because Xie Lian trusted him. And because—

Because if there was something wrong with him, Mu Qing would catch onto it.

Little did he know, Mu Qing had—

He just didn't trust Feng Xin enough to tell him.

But Feng Xin would prefer Jun Wu's fake, cloying, manipulative persona to this.

The openly taunting, gloating, arrogant opponent that stands before them now. And he has no reason to be so assured. Maybe so, if he were facing anyone else—

But here, Hua Cheng has him evenly matched.

And with Feng Xin's help—

CLANG!

CRACK!

CLANG!

Jun Wu is outmatched.

Hua Cheng's relentless assault is keeping both of the emperor's hands occupied, blocking each of his weapons—giving him no time to shield himself when Feng Xin's arrows slip in between Hua Cheng's blows.

Jun Wu is able to ward them off with a spiritual barrier—but only once for every three bolts. And the longer this goes on, the more likely his armor is to wear down.

Which is why he shouldn't be so arrogant, or boasting.

He isn't winning this encounter.

So...why is he?

If it were anyone else, Feng Xin would cock it up to sheer hubris or stupidity—

But that can't be true.

Feng Xin might not be a deductive genius like Xie Lian, or as innately cunning as Mu Qing, but he has never been a *fool* .

Jun Wu has kept a group of the most capable and intelligent people in all of human existence on a tight leash for the last thousand years. Even more than that when one considers how long his reign has been.

You don't last that long, hiding your intentions and manipulating everyone around you, if you're too arrogant to see your own position clearly. It requires perception. Guile. Always thinking beyond your opponent's reaction.

So, why is a man like that wasting his time *boasting?*

Further up the mountain, Xie Lian grips Mu Qing's hand tightly, using his other hand to grip the martial god's elbow—holding him steady as Mu Qing carefully slices into his own skin.

And the moment he does—his brow pinches with an instant flash of pain.

Far more than what one would feel from any other kind of blade.

"...How the hell was Shi Wudu able to do this to himself?" He mutters under his breath, forcing his voice not to break, even if it trembles slightly.

Though, given the type of wound on his throat that Mu Qing found when he performed the autopsy—it wasn't a carefully made incision, like what he's performing now. More like a last second slashing of the neck. One with little to no hesitation.

He didn't have to feel how painful it was during the act—only after, when he was already dying.

But making a slow incision like this? It's agony.

In part, Mu Qing is sure it must have something to do with the fact that, as someone who has been a god for more than eight centuries now, he's grown unaccustomed to the mortal sensation of pain.

He still experiences physical pain as a god—he isn't so far removed from it as Xie Lian, for example. But somehow, knowing that the wound will inevitably heal makes it hurt less.

But not now.

Now, he feels like he has to fight to cut through every millimeter, lips trembling as he struggles to keep his hand level, even with Xie Lian's help holding him steady.

"...If you need to stop—"

"Already halfway there," he spits out between clenched teeth, toes curling, nails scraping against the soles of his boots from the discomfort. "It'd be pointless to pull out now."

Especially when he hasn't hit a tendon yet.

If he keeps on moving vertically, there won't be any serious damage to his hand. There's blood dripping down his wrist, dropping down onto the grass beneath them—but little other sign of physical distress.

Even so, it makes Mu Qing feel wary of having to do this to the prince.

Not on his ankle or throat—Mu Qing knows he could perform both without serious risk to Xie Lian's life or athletic ability.

But his *eyes?*

Even if Xie Lian's pain tolerance could handle that–-and Mu Qing is disturbed to say that it might—

Is he willing to put his friend through that kind of agony? Even if it is to save the world as they know it?

The further the knife moves through the shackle, the more of a reaction there is. Mu Qing can see dark sparks of light flickering around the cursed shackle, swirling angrily in protest.

And watching it now, he struggles to understand how they, as Heavenly Officials, found cursed shackles to be anything but sinister in nature.

Xie Lian grimaces each time he feels Mu Qing tremble against him—holding him tighter in response.

Partly out of anxiety, but also because Mu Qing can't afford to flinch right now—not even a little bit.

If he does—he might permanently damage his fine motor skills in that hand, something they can't afford to risk.

Then; it occurs to him.

'...Feng Xin?' He calls out in the god's private array, having no doubts as to whether or not his friend is listening.

'Start aiming your arrows on the right side of his armor—just underneath the third rib. If you focus there, San Lang will follow!'

'Got it,' Feng Xin agrees shortly. ' *But why there? And why not tell Hua Cheng yourself to make sure he gets the message?'*

Because Xie Lian can barely stand saying Hua Cheng's password in a hostage scenario, he isn't going to willingly say it with Mu Qing sitting right there.

'When I fought him before my second banishment—I struck him there! His armor should still have a weak spot from where I broke through!'

He hasn't had his beloved wife to fix it for him since then, after all, and would have had to settle for a lower quality armorer to fix it.

Leaving him with a singular point of vulnerability in his armor.

Xie Lian doesn't need Feng Xin to confirm that he went with that strategy—he can already hear the clashes growing to a fever pitch, the martial god and the ghost king each giving their all to take Jun Wu down.

Even if that action would be ultimately futile, they could at least incapacitate him first. That would buy them all the time they needed to handle—

Mu Qing stiffens harshly beside him, hissing sharply, the muscles in his neck straining as he applies firm, controlled pressure to his wrist, his body quivering from the pain—

And Xie Lian can barely stand it anymore.

"Mu Qing," He pleads—not pulling the god's hand aside, too worried that he would accidentally hurt him in an attempt to help him, but desperate. "That's enough, we'll have to try some other—!"

BOOM!

The God Slayer, after sliding millimeter by millimeter at a painfully slow pace, goes through the last centimeter of the cursed shackle like butter.

When it does, it releases an almost violent blast of energy—sending them both flying, each sprawled a few meters away from one another on the ground.

Mu Qing sits up, hair mussed, breathing hard, and when he looks at his hand...it's bleeding, still stings like a bitch, but—

His wrist is bare.

It's light again.

And the pulsing, crackling warmth that Mu Qing can feel flowing back into his body, coursing through his veins—

It's spiritual power.

"...It worked," he whispers, his ribs aching as he sits up, rolling his wrist to test his range of motion. "...Guoshi was right...It...it actually works!"

And when Xie Lian looks over to confirm—he sees the blues of Mu Qing's aura confirm it, clear as day.

“…We’ll work on your ankle first,” Mu Qing mutters, moving to brace Xie Lian’s leg as best as he can. “You have to stay completely still, your highness.”

Xie Lian steels himself, reaching down to brace his palms against the ground.

“I understand.”

CLANG!

CRACK!

Each impact from E’Ming and the arrow strikes raining down is thunderous, narrowing in on one point of focus and until the armor visibly begins to warp in response, but—

“You should have taken my olive branch when I gave you the chance,” Jun Wu muses. “It’s fascinating to stop and wonder what kind of god you might have become.”

The reference to Hua Cheng’s ascension is enough to make Feng Xin falter, nearly dropping his bow in shock.

“…What?!”

“As if I would ever bow to *you,* ” Hua Cheng snarls, slashing him again.

There’s only one man Hua Cheng would be brought to his knees for;

And he’s also the only god who would never ask him to kneel.

That’s when Jun Wu smiles—

Still gloating.

“It’s adorable that you think I ever planned on giving you the *choice.”*

It’s like Jun Wu told the prince before—

It is remarkably easy to control someone who doesn’t make an effort to hide that which they love most.

Before Hua Cheng can land another blow, the emperor snaps his fingers.

Crack!

And then—

There's a blood curdling scream.

A sound Hua Cheng has only heard once in his life. One that has haunted his every waking thought since.

The scream he heard, the day he died.

And hearing it now—

It brings the ghost king to a halt, eye wide, hands trembling.

Xie Lian wrenches his mouth shut, hands trembling as he claps them over his face—trying to keep quiet.

Mu Qing is left below him on the ground, looking up in silent horror as—

As the crown prince is dangled in the air—hung from the shackle on his neck like a noose.

His shackles burning gold, like flames embedded in his skin—twisting and digging deeper into his flesh.

Feet flailing.

Tears falling from scorching eyes as he fights with everything he has to keep quiet, but—

It *hurts.*

"YOUR HIGHNESS!"

It really, *really* hurts.

So much that it takes up all of the space in his mind. No fear, no sadness, hope, or anger—

Just pain.

Wanting nothing more than for it to *stop* .

For someone to *help him.*

Why…

Xie Lian whimpers, trembling, surrounded by darkness.

Why won't anyone help him?!

Help me.

Help me, help me, *help me.*

Help me, help me, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help me!!!!

Where's Feng Xin and Mu Qing? Or his parents? He…he wants his mother, he…

Hong'er…where's…

Another scream rips out of him.

It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts...it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS!!!!

And it's that second scream that knocks the resistance out of Hua Cheng's spine.

That makes his knees buckle, hitting the ground heavily.

Because it's not just agony—

It's a howl of fear and grief.

Screaming his name.

"HONG'ER!"

He falls silent again, straining to remain quiet as he's dragged down the hill by his shackles, hanging limply in their grip—

And Jun Wu smiles, holding his hand out in front of him.

“I’m only going to ask you once—and I hope you choose your answer *very* carefully.”

The emperor eases his grip slightly—leaving Xie Lian hanging overhead, gasping with relief, but still agonized—

And Feng Xin, who had been staring up at the prince with horror, suddenly looks back at Hua Cheng with wide eyes.

Realizing *exactly* who he is.

That the four of them—

They’re all that’s left of this place. A forgotten kingdom—and a fallen prince.

All of it was taken too soon.

And now—

“Where are your ashes?”

Now, it seems like even the burning embers of Xianle are about to be snuffed out.

And Hua Cheng's answer—

"I've never had them."

It's enough to make Jun Wu pause, his brow furrowed. He's more than prepared to unleash more pressure on Xie Lian to make him talk—that isn't the problem. But—

Hua Cheng isn't *lying* .

"...What?"

He can't bring himself to look away from Xie Lian, his eyes burning with pain and hatred, his resentment swirling with more power for every second that he has to watch his love in agony.

"I was a ghost fire for months after my death. I had no control over my ashes back then."

Logically, that has to be true, Jun Wu knows that, but—

He also knows that Xie Lian never would have left Hua Cheng's ashes, or buried them. Not when the prince had clung so desperately to the idea of Hong'er lingering in this world for so long.

...Did he hide them?

If he had, he would have returned to a certain location periodically to check on them—but the god was truly nomadic in his exile.

So, what could it be...?

He turns, looking up at the prince thoughtfully—and in the moment his attention is divided—

CRACK!

Hua Cheng lurches forward, catching Xie Lian in his arms when he plummets back towards the ground, crushing the prince to his chest, and behind them...

Jun Wu drops down on one knee.

Not by choice, but...

His achilles tendon has been slashed.

Through the smallest gap in his armor, something that couldn't have been done with anything but the curved, lethal edge of a saber, but E'Ming didn't move the entire—

CRACK!

Something slides past him on the ground, and just like that—

His other ankle goes, too.

Mu Qing rolls to his feet, his saber flashing in one hand, wielding the god slayer with another.

"His recovery time for an injury like that is THIRTY SECONDS, *GO!"*

He couldn't have used the dagger for it—he needed an angled blade.

But now, he has Jun Wu on his knees.

Feng Xin doesn't hesitate, having fought by Mu Qing's side for so long, they move together like one fighter, rather than two.

With Mu Qing instinctively dropping out of the way of his arrows, and Feng Xin knowing exactly where and when to hit to narrow Mu Qing's attacks.

And that's the part about Mu Qing that Jun Wu had forgotten. What, in all honesty is quite easy to forget when his medicinal skills are as useful as they are—

Xie Lian and Pei Ming are the best swordsmen in the Heavens—but Mu Qing is very close behind.

And there is nothing more deadly than a swordsman with a surgeon's aim.

"CRIMSON RAIN!" Feng Xin looses three arrows in one pull, arms straining as he looses a hail of bolts in order to create openings for Mu Qing's blade. "WE DON'T HAVE MUCH TIME!"

Hua Cheng presses his forehead against Xie Lian's cheek for a fraction of a second, gritting his teeth.

He's conscious, but struggling to re-orient himself, limbs trembling.

And he would rather use this moment to take his god and escape, but —

He knows that he can't.

When he lets Xie Lian go, a cloud of wraith butterflies appears, cushioning him as he sinks back to the ground, Hua Cheng launching himself back into the fray.

Wielding E'Ming directly, giving the weapon far greater force.

Mu Qing slides directly under the attack as Jun Wu parries, the sparks from the clashing weapons landing on his cheeks as he brings his own saber up, slashing the blade through the gap in the bend of Jun Wu's elbow, severing the tendons there.

Each move is precise—like the emperor is a marionette, and Mu Qing is methodically cutting off his strings.

And with three limbs incapacitated, only one arm remains.

Jun Wu can't block all three of them with that. Mu Qing and Hua Cheng divide at the last fraction of a second, with the ghost king knocking the emperor's blade from his hand, snapping it in two—

And the martial god spinning the God Slayer into a reverse grip, bringing it down on the weak point in Jun Wu's armor with a—

THUD!

He feels the metal fracturing, can smell blood when he hits the flesh beneath—

And in that moment, the emperor grows desperate.

BOOM!

The blast of spiritual power is strong enough to even send Hua Cheng flying back, stabbing E'Ming into the earth to stay grounded

Feng Xin isn't as lucky, smashing back into a nearby tree, and Xie Lian —

He hears a sharp gasp, immediately recognizing it by Mu Qing, who wasn't blown away by the blast.

But only because Jun Wu was already gripping him by the hair, holding the god against him like a shield.

"I see I wasn't wrong to want you on side," Jun Wu hisses, fingers twisting around in Mu Qing's hair with a vicious grip, but when he reaches to take the god slayer out of Mu Qing's hand—

It's already gone, thrown far out of reach.

"...You really *are* too clever for your own good," he mutters, shaking his head. "But no matter."

His hand slides around Mu Qing's throat. "I don't need that trinket to kill you. It's just a little short cut."

Feng Xin staggers to his feet, several of his ribs having been broken—but he doesn't give a damn.

"DON'T FUCKING *TOUCH* HIM YOU BAST—!" He flinches when Jun Wu starts to squeeze Mu Qing's throat in warning, making the general squirm with discomfort.

Hua Cheng grimaces, watching the predicament with a tense eye.

He's never been fond of Mu Qing—for obvious reasons.

But he takes no pleasure in the fact that, once Jun Wu has someone in his grip like that—it's a lose-lose situation.

They attack—he kills Mu Qing.

They don't attack—and there's the same inevitable result.

There's nothing they can do now but w—

"Put him down, your highness."

Those words alone make the combatants freeze—even now, struggling to breathe, Mu Qing's eyes grow wide.

And Jun Wu—upon hearing that title—grows completely rigid, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up.

"...Excuse me?" He asks quietly his voice turning lethal, but—

When he looks back, just like Hua Cheng—he freezes in terror.

Xie Lian can barely stand.

Even now, his knees wobble—on the verge of giving out.

But his voice is firm.

"Let. Him. Go."

The God Slayer, tossed aside by Mu Qing when Jun Wu caught him–is now gripped in Xie Lian's hand.

Held directly over his own heart.

And when Jun Wu sees that—

His lips twist into an infuriated snarl, knuckles white from how tightly he's gripping Mu Qing's throat.

"You stubborn *CHILD!"* He snarls, but—

Even through his armor, Mu Qing can feel the emperor's heart pounding.

"You'd rather throw your life away—after everything you've been through—than give up this stupid farce and return to my side?! And for *what?!* For—”

"My friend."

Mu Qing freezes, eyes widening as he stares at the prince, blood rushing in his ears.

"He has *always* been my friend," Xie Lian repeats emphatically. "And I won't let you take anyone else from me, even if that means I have to take what YOU love most!"

Even if admitting that makes him feel slightly sick.

Acknowledging what Jun Wu feels for him as love.

Because Xie Lian is so, so lucky.

He's been loved by so many people in his life. Loved so long and so passionately by one believer, that it carried him through any suffering.

It showed him, even when he was in his lowest, most hateful state, that he loved the world.

That he loved everyone in it.

His people. His family. His friends. Even his enemies, in the end.

He's loved one man for so long, with such endurance, that it is embedded in his soul, forging him into something new.

Something imperfect, but—

Beautiful.

That is love.

He can't look at the damage Jun Wu is doing, and call this love. Or anything other than a warped desire to create someone who could understand him.

But to the emperor—that's exactly how he sees it.

"...You wouldn't *dare,"* Jun Wu mutters, but...

He doesn't sound sure.

Xie Lian raises one eyebrow, a familiar bandage slithering up his arm, coiling around his neck protectively.

"Look at Ruoye, and tell me that again," he counters calmly.

Digging the dagger in just enough to break the surface of his skin, blood pricking up through his robe.

Hua Cheng can't move, can't breathe, can't speak, his eyes fixed on Xie Lian's face, shoulders rising and falling rapidly, and Jun Wu—

His face twists with frustration, looking down at Mu Qing in his arms with vehement resentment.

".. *.Fine,"* he murmurs. "I'll let him go."

He allows Mu Qing's feet to touch the ground, making sure Xie Lian hears the sound—still using one hand to grip the martial god by the throat.

"How can I trust that you mean that?" Xie Lian mutters, still gripping the dagger tightly.

"...I swear, I won't kill him." Jun Wu promises evenly. "You have my word, Xianle."

And Jun Wu might not be an honest man, but he's proud.

If he gives his word—he'll keep to it.

Xie Lian doesn't let go of the dagger—but he pulls it back just a little.

Jun Wu's grip on Mu Qing's neck loosens—enough for the god to take a shuddering gasp, coughing—

But just as he's about to let him go—his hand shifts from Mu Qing's throat, gripping him by the hair—

And he yanks his head to the side.

Silent enough for Xie Lian to be unaware of it—and fast enough for Feng Xin and Hua Cheng to have no time to react.

Sinking his teeth into the martial god's neck—drawing a shocked scream from Mu Qing's lips.

And in an instant, it's over.

Mu Qing crumples to the ground as Jun Wu leaps away, both of his legs having healed from the attack.

But—

CRACK!

CRACK!

CRACK!

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

Feng Xin fires one bolt after another, eyes burning red, not thinking, not hesitating, roaring with anger.

"WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU *DO?!"*

He moves to chase after him, but—

A pained moan makes him stop, arms trembling, throat scorching with rage.

But he turns back, rushing over to gather Mu Qing in his arms.

"What the *hell* did he just do?!" Feng Xin mutters, looking him over.

Mu Qing is staring up at him blankly, breathing hard—

And he's grown so pale so quickly, Feng Xin feels his stomach plummet.

He grabs Mu Qing by the chin, pulling his head to the side, and when he looks at the teeth marks...

Mu Qing's veins are inflamed around the wound—

And there's a blackness spreading from it, creeping down his throat like dark roots, spreading to his jaw, all the way down to his collarbones.

Feng Xin looks back at Hua Cheng, utterly frantic.

"What did he *do?!"*

Xie Lian kneels down beside them both—

And he knows the answer already, reaching over to push Mu Qing's bangs out of his face with trembling fingers, finding his skin scorching and damp.

"...It's Death Qi," he whispers.

Watching as Mu Qing's aura is pierced with darkness.

"...What do we do?!" Feng Xin hisses, looking between Xie Lian and Hua Cheng—the latter of whom has stored the God Slayer in his belt, refusing to take his hand off of the prince's arm. "He broke his shackle, can't he heal it?! He heals *himself* all the time!"

"T... *trying..."*

Feng Xin looks back down at him, his lips trembling as he watches Mu Qing writhe weakly in his grip, pressing a hand to the side of his neck, hand glowing faintly as he tries to heal the wound, but—

It clearly isn't working.

"...Do you not have enough?" Feng Xin whispers, and without a care for the fact that they aren't alone—

He leans down, kissing Mu Qing fiercely, giving as much of his spiritual power as he can.

"Take it—take it all, okay?! I don't fucking *need it!"*

Mu Qing shudders, shivering violently—only for Feng Xin to wrap his cloak around him, holding the martial god against his side, and Xie Lian turns to Hua Cheng, desperate.

"...Is this like what happened to Shuo at the terrace of Cascading Wine?" he whispers.

Remembering how, back then—Shuo was able to recover by drinking Hua Cheng's blood, cleansing himself with the Ghost King's power, but—

Hua Cheng shakes his head.

"...Shuo isn't the same as Jun Wu or Bai Wuxiang," he murmurs. "But he's still a ghost, gege."

Ghosts will still have a violent reaction to particularly toxic Death Qi, but—

Nothing like what will happen to a mortal, or, even worse—

A *cultivator.*

"...The more pent up resentment a living soul has, the worse the reaction is."

"Fuck..." Feng Xin groans.

In spite of everything—Mu Qing almost laughs.

"F...Fuck you too..."

"I didn't mean..." He shakes his head, pressing his forehead against Mu Qing's. "What else can we do? Why did he even *do that?!"*

"Because he's the only healer around right now," Hua Cheng mutters. "And it buys him time."

It prevents Mu Qing from using the God Slayer to shatter Xie Lian's shackles—and he was the only one with the requisite experience to do it.

And—he *did* hit Jun Wu with the God Slayer earlier—leaving the emperor injured.

He's likely fled to the base of the mountain to deal with the issue before trying to take them on again—and when he does, the only one in proper physical or mental condition to fight will be Hua Cheng.

Hua Cheng, who knows Xie Lian can be strung up by the shackles again at any moment.

"...I've only seen this happen to mortals," Hua Cheng mutters. "I can't say with certainty how it would affect a god."

"Could you take a fucking guess?!" Feng Xin snaps, rubbing Mu Qing's arms to try to get some warmth back into them as his partner starts to shiver violently.

"The Qi would need to be purified before his spirit is thrown too far out of balance, and his spiritual energy grows out of control," the ghost king explains slowly. "And the best person to perform a ritual like that—"

Would be a medicinal god, like Mu Qing himself.

Jun Wu's move was cruel—but strategically sound.

"...What about the lake?" Feng Xin asks hoarsely, looking up. "He said he put as much of his spiritual power in there as he could—would that help?"

Hua Cheng hesitates, thinking it over, before reluctantly admitting;

"It couldn't make things worse, but I'm not..."

Feng Xin rises to his feet with Mu Qing in his arms, Xie Lian stumbling close behind as he makes his way down an old, familiar path.

They walked here together once—all four of them, many years ago.

Back when Hong'er refused to be carried by anyone but Xie Lian, arms trembling as he pressed his face into the Prince's neck.

He smelled like safety and comfort—maple leaves gently falling all around them.

And in that moment, being in Xie Lian's arms was so peaceful, that he forgot the pain of his beaten, broken body.

Now, someone else is being carried, and rather than Feng Xin and Mu Qing, it's Hua Cheng and Xie Lian walking behind.

Hurrying through an ancient, overgrown path.

It's easy to remember when the stones were freshly swept and polished smooth. When Xie Lian was young and slender, arms held aloft, giggling as he refused to let his feet touch anything but scattered tiles leading to the lake, calling back for Feng Xin to hurry up and catch him.

Butterflies rushing around them, ducking in and out of the canopies above. Xie Lian had always been terrified of insects, but never them—beaming with delight when they landed in his hair.

And when he got around the bend, ducking beneath the boughs of two maple saplings—the clearing would open up, leading to a large, still lake.

Those maples tower now, reaching almost impossibly high.

But the lake is the same.

Clear and calm, in spite of the chaos and bloodshed of the world surrounding it—staring back up at the world above like a mirror. Reflecting its pain, but remaining as still as ever.

Feng Xin doesn't even slow down.

He rushes to the water's edge, walking until it reaches his knees before kneeling down, carefully lowering Mu Qing onto the surface—submerged up to his shoulders, with Feng Xin still cradling him in his lap.

Mu Qing's eyelids twitch for a moment, then flutter open—long eyelashes moving delicately against his cheek—

Impossibly dark eyes staring back up at them. But not a flat sort of darkness—rather the kind that has an impossible depth to it.

An abyss that could drown you, but you would never really mind.

Because it always feels like home, somehow.

"The..." Mu Qing's gaze drifts to the side, eyes growing in and out of focus as he takes in the scene around them. "The cherry tree...is still...here..."

Xie Lian kneels down beside them both, swallowing down the building emotions in his throat.

Remembering when they were young—and he found Mu Qing here, picking cherries up from the ground, a tipped over basket laying on the ground nearby.

Looking back on it, it feels so painfully obvious that the other cultivators on Mount Taicang were bullying the boy, but...instead of asking what was wrong...

Xie Lian simply told Mu Qing that he could take as many cherries as he wanted.

It seemed kind, at the time. But...he's almost ashamed of that memory now. Of how *oblivious* he was to what Mu Qing was going through.

How it was so much worse than the other children being cruel, or a toppled basket of fruit.

But it took Xie Lian centuries to ask the question that actually mattered, and now, so soon after—

It might already be too late.

"Is it doing anything?" Feng Xin presses his palm against Mu Qing's cheek, and despite the coldness of the water...it's still scorching to the touch. "Come on...look at me... *C'mon..."*

He rocks backward slightly, carefully pushing wet strands of hair away from Mu Qing's face.

He's spent their entire lives complaining about the way the martial god always insists on having so much of his hair loose. The way it always gets in Feng Xin's face. How Mu Qing always reacts like a whining princess when Feng Xin so much as touches it, but—

Now, he handles it as carefully as he would if it were made from spun gold. Like something infinitely precious.

"...Don't..." Mu Qing shudders, light flickering in his palms as he tries to harness more spiritual power, even as his body struggles. "Don't...be *mad..."*

"I'm not—!" Feng Xin lowers his head, pressing his face into Mu Qing's shoulder. "I'm not *mad* , okay? Stop putting words in my mouth. You...you always..."

His arms tighten around him, like Mu Qing could slip beneath the water and never resurface again.

"You..." He sniffs, shaking his head. "You're gonna be fine. You're always fine, you—”

Feng Xin's voice breaks, and Xie Lian's heart goes with it.

"Goddamn it, Mu Qing!"

He waits for some snarky comment, for Mu Qing to complain that Feng Xin just said he wasn't mad, but...

Mu Qing's palms grow dim, and Xie Lian watches as his aura grows dimmer, feeling so helpless, when he says—

"D...Dianxia?"

His tone is so unfamiliar at first—small and uncertain—but after a moment, Xie Lian realizes it isn’t that.

It’s nostalgic.

“...I’m here,” he murmurs, reaching down to grip one of Mu Qing’s hands, squeezing it gently. “I’m right here, Mu Qing.”

"I…I'm sorry…"

And Xie Lian's heart aches.

"Oh, Mu Qing…there isn't anything to—"

"I…I think I'm sick…" he rasps, staring overhead blankly. "I…if I sleep a little more, I can…before your lessons are…"

His words are slurred and unsteady, and—

Xie Lian can hardly bear to listen.

"…That's okay," he whispers, his voice cracking. "You take the morning off and sleep. It'll be alright."

"Your…" Mu Qing grimaces. "Your dad…"

"Is my problem," Xie Lian assures him, squeezing his hand gently. "It's…I-it's *okay* , Mu Qing."

Of course, he can handle it gracefully. He can hold Mu Qing's hand, and try to make him feel safe and comfortable as everything around him slowly fades, but—

Feng Xin can't.

"…The fuck?!" He shakes his head, heart pounding in his chest.

"Feng Xin—"

"NO!"

Feng Xin can barely even see through the tears in his eyes, crushing Mu Qing against him.

"Don't you DARE fucking sleep—don't—you can't—"

"This isn't about us—"

"You *CAN'T* leave me!" Feng Xin snaps, somehow managing to sound infuriated, even as tears drip from his chin.

"…But you…" Mu Qing's brow pinches, "You're the one always leaving me…"

"I never *mean* to!" Feng Xin sobs, shaking his head. "I'm just a fucking *idiot* , okay?!"

"You—"

"If you leave—every morning, I'll wake up, and I'll be pissed at you. Is that what you want?!"

One of his hands cups the back of Mu Qing's head, sobs ripping from him uncontrollably.

"I already think about you when I wake up, but then it'll be about how much I fucking *hate* you!"

"You…" Mu Qing's eye lashes flutter sharply. "You think about…?"

"If I wanted to figure out what life was like without you—I've had PLENTY of time to do it, okay?!" Feng Xin snaps. "Guess what, I DON'T! And after all of that—you're just gonna LEAVE ME?!"

Beating the odds of pain and exhaustion—Mu Qing's eye twitches.

"It's…not like I can *help it…"*

"That's not fucking FAIR!" Feng Xin could almost throttle him, if he wasn't holding onto him for dear life. "You wanted me to care?! Congratulations, I DO! You want me to never stop thinking about you?! *DONE!"*

"B- *Bullshit—"*

"JIAN LAN WAS TELLING THE TRUTH, YOU *IDIOT!"*

Even Xie Lian leans back in shock, his jaw hanging open that Feng Xin would say that now.

"Because no matter who I'm with, or what I'm doing, it's always you! It's always been *YOU!* And *EVERYONE* else can see it!"

"I…wh…you said you weren't…how is that *my* fault?!"

"Because you're always LOOKING AT ME like that! And saying shit I think about for *hours* later! Always acting like such a piece of shit, but *always* doing the right thing in the end anyway, and—"

"Are you mad at me, or—?!"

"And you MADE ME *CONGEE* , YOU BASTARD!"

Xie Lian pauses, sensing Hua Cheng sending him a confused stare, and shrugging as if to say—

'I honestly have no idea.'

But Mu Qing—

His eyes snap into focus for a moment, bright and aware—

And then he's fuming.

"…And you're telling me all of this NOW?!"

"When else was I supposed to say it?! You run away from me every single time I try to talk to you—!"

"You should have MADE ME!"

"Have you ever seen what it's like to try to 'make' you do ANYTHING?!"

Mu Qing glares up at him venomously. "You fucking MORON, you—!"

Then he cuts himself off, wincing from the pain—and Feng Xin noticed something else—

Something that wasn't there before.

A streak of silver running through Mu Qing's hair—starting at the temple.

"…What's happening?!" Xie Lian whispers, trying to check Mu Qing's forehead again, but—

It's gotten too hot to touch at all.

"…Well," Hua Cheng starts, his voice dry, "before, the Death Qi was completely overrunning his system and devouring him from the inside out."

"And now…?" Xie Lian murmurs, hopeful.

"It seems your friend was able to upset him enough to trigger his own spiritual power into fighting back, but…"

Hua Cheng pauses, watching another streak of silver spread through.

“…That isn’t necessarily a good thing.”

Feng Xin frowns, eyes flickering between Mu Qing, squirming more violent in his hold, and Hua Cheng—frantically trying to understand.

"...How can it be worse than the alternative?!"

Hua Cheng pulls Xie Lian back by the shoulder. "Sometimes a quick death is easier."

Normally, if he tries to move the prince, and Xie Lian shows a hint of resistance, he won't force him.

But this time, his grip is like iron—Insistently pulling Xie Lian behind him.

"Easier than what?!" Feng Xin snaps, feeling Mu Qing's limbs start to tremble violently.

"His spiritual energy is fighting it," Hua Cheng explains slowly. "But he has no way of controlling it."

Which means both sides will rage out of control.

And rampaging spiritual energy usually means—

Xie Lian's eyes grow wide, his stomach plummeting.

"...Feng Xin!" He tries to get to them, but Hua Cheng holds an arm out, keeping the god behind him. "LET HIM GO!"

"What?!"

"HE'S ABOUT TO—!"

Mu Qing's eyelids snap open, and when they do—

The whites of his eyes have turned black.

His lips part, and a silent scream wrenches out of him, back arching painfully, and—

Resentment is pouring off of him in thick waves, making Feng Xin wince, but—

It isn't until he feels a flash of pain across his cheek, three deep scratches sinking in, that he realizes.

Mu Qing doesn't recognize him anymore.

"RUOYE!" Xie Lian shouts, sending the bandage flying towards his friends, shoving Feng Xin out of the way as it encircles Mu Qing, forming a magical barrier.

"What's—?!"

Xie Lian's answer nearly makes the entire world go still.

"He's gone into Qi Deviation, Feng Xin! He doesn't know *who we are!"*

And if they get too close—

Mu Qing will attempt to kill them both.

He already is, snarling, straining to get past the barrier created by Ruoye, white light bursting forth each time he strikes the bandage.

The sound that rips from Feng Xin's chest—

It's a kind of sorrow that Xie Lian is painfully familiar with.

Because usually, it takes weeks, years of flawed cultivation to push someone to this point.

Jun Wu did it in minutes with one blow, poisoning his soul.

And once this point is reached, it's almost impossible to turn back.

Xie Lian hangs his head, teeth aching from how tightly his jaw is clenched. Wishing there was something he could do, that there was any god with them who specialized in purification, or even a cultiv—

"...Gusu..." He mutters under his breath, his stomach lurching—then he looks up, looking in Feng Xin's direction blindly. "...You HAVE TO GET TO GUSU!"

"What?!"

"There's a cultivator there, his name's Lan An—"

"One of the teenagers who ascended with you last time?!"

"Yes!" Xie Lian nods quickly. "He's been training Shi Qingxuan—and he used a spiritual cleansing ceremony on me while I was in Gusu. I don't know if it'll work, but—"

But at this point, it's Mu Qing's only chance.

"How am I supposed to—?!" Hua Cheng pulls something from his pocket, tossing it towards Feng Xin with a—

Clack!

Clack!

Feng Xin looks down, staring at the dice in his palm with a dark expression. "Oh, for the love of—not these again—!"

"They'll take you there and back," Hua Cheng mutters.

Mu Qing is too unstable to be moved—he might just end up killing Feng Xin in the process—

But Ruoye can hold him long enough for Feng Xin to find Lan An and come back. Just, hopefully...

It won't be too late for Mu Qing when he does.

Feng Xin eyes the dice distrustfully, remembering all too well how that ended last time, but...

He doesn't have time to waste.

His wrist flicks as he tosses them into the air, the dice snapping together crisply—and with one step forward, he's gone.

Xie Lian sags, his head in his hands--flinching as he listens to Mu Qing's snarls, mixed with sounds of pain—

But Hua Cheng's hand on his shoulder is a heavy reminder.

"Feng Xin will do everything he can for him—but Jun Wu never intended on retreating for long."

Xie Lian knows that he's right—and the thought of that makes him slump even further, his heart in his throat.

Because...they're the only two left standing.

"If Mu Qing can't remove my shackles, I don't know—”

Hua Cheng's lips press against his forehead, and he grows still.

"Don't be afraid," the ghost king murmurs, repeating the same words he told Xie Lian before, when they were running towards the Kiln together. "You're stronger than him, your highness."

"..." Xie Lian's head sinks forward, pressing against Hua Cheng's chest.

"...San Lang..." He bites his lip, heart aching as he listens to Mu Qing.

As he thinks about everyone and everything that they've lost.

Of how many times he's failed.

"I don't think that's true," he whispers, voice wavering—

And Hua Cheng helps him to his feet.

"Walk with me, gege."

Xie Lian shivers, heart aching at the idea of leaving Mu Qing like this, even if he doesn't have a choice, but...

He smells the forest around him. Wild, but clean.

There's a familiar hand holding his own—gentle, with firm callouses from gripping a saber.

With each step he takes, there's the gentle ring of silver bells--and with the faint rush of wings, a gleaming butterfly flutters ahead of them, drifting on the bells.

Xie Lian found him again, on a mountain. Even if Hua Cheng couldn't answer him back then.

But even so—it was never hard, taking his hand.

And it's so easy right now, being led so carefully, Hua Cheng guiding him by the elbow.

Just as he used to.

But it's not quite the same.

The man guiding him isn't a stranger—and Xie Lian isn't a stolen bride.

Though, as Hua Cheng reminded him—he never pretended to be the ghost groom. He just—

He was there for Xie Lian.

Just as he tried to imply that night in Puqi Shrine, when the prince simply smiled and laughed it off, agreeing that he seemed to have time on his hands.

It almost hurts now, thinking about how badly Hua Cheng must have wanted to tell him the truth that night.

But...

Xie Lian's hand tightens in his.

Now that he has him back—he won't ever let him go. Not ever again.

...Even if fate doesn't plan on giving him a *choice* .

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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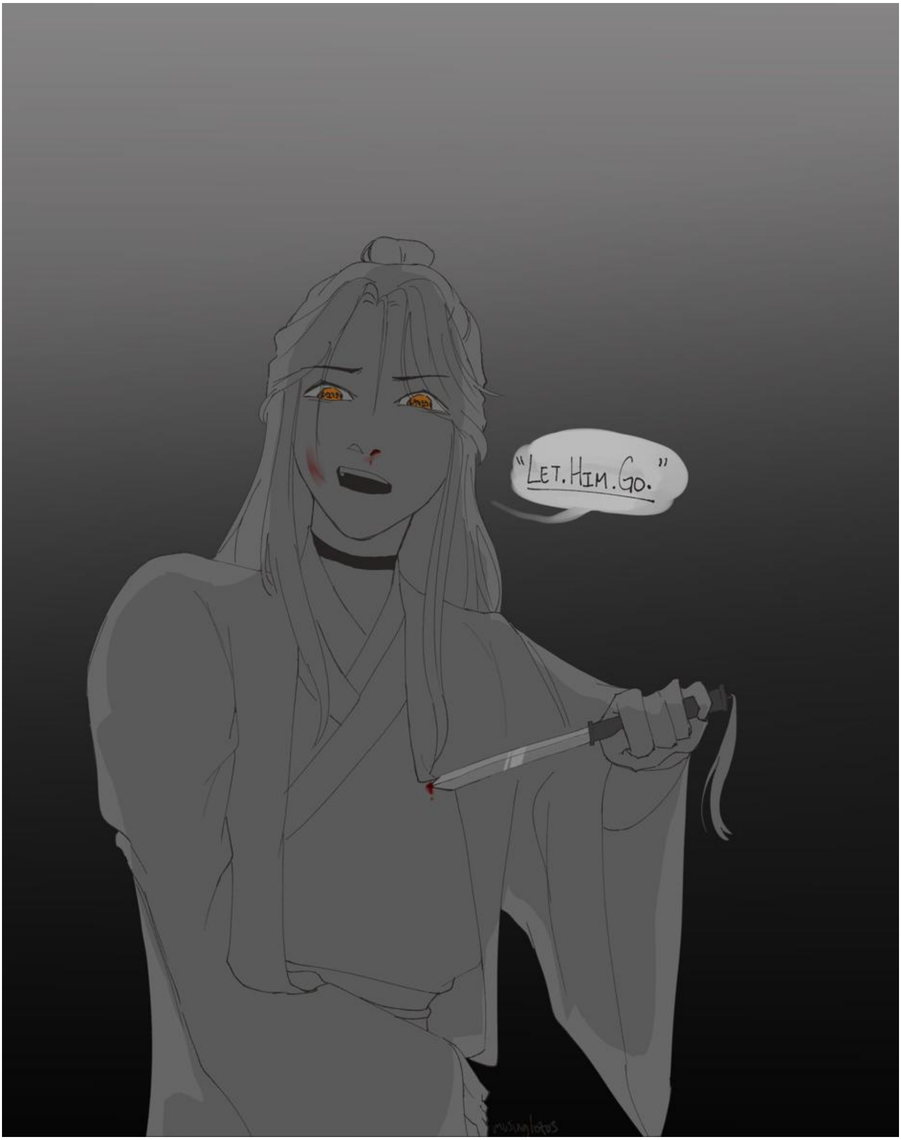

"LET. HIM. GO."
musinglotos

CREDIT: **CASS**

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CREDIT: **SYL**

A funny little video about the creative process.

Chapter End Notes

Mu Qing wake up, I don't like this, mU QING WAKE UP

The Young Lord Who Poured Wine

Chapter Summary

> Sometimes, Shi Qingxuan can’t help but wonder if she’s been prey for so long, that she’s simply fallen in love with the throat of being devoured.
>
> But it’s also given her a certain level of appreciation for the act of the hunt.
>
> “…And what do you know of the other elemental masters?” She murmurs, watching him with coy eyes and a sequin smile.
>
> Wen Sicong raises an eyebrow—but opts to indulge her.
>
> "...The stories say that you, the Wind Master, are beautiful and beloved by Gods and Mortals alike," he recalls, dragging his fingertip around the rim of his wine glass. "It's easy to see why, now."

"...A toast!" A voice barks across the banquet hall, echoing across the ceilings as he raises his glass. "To our esteemed hostess!"

Servants linger towards the edges of the room, watching their "guests" with thinly veiled loathing.

More like their captors.

But the lady of the gathering raises her glass in return, her smile glittering with promise.

“To my esteemed guests!” She calls in return, tilting her head back as she empties her glass, waving her hand to queue the servants to start the music once more.

“Thank you for bringing some entertainment to this lonely housewife,” she sighs, walking behind their chairs, spinning in a lazy, aimless dance.

“…Housewife,” Wen Sicong snorts, watching her with a heated gaze. “I can hardly imagine that.”

Shi Qingxuan's smile is light and infectious, one dimple flashing at him as her eyes sparkle in the candlelight.

"Oh, but it's true—He Xuan keeps me under lock and key."

"Then he is a *fool."*

"Or wise," she counters, stopping at the opposite end of the table. "If you had a prized jewel in your possession, would you leave it out for any common thief to take?" Her head tilts, curls slipping over her shoulder as one of the servants steps forward, refilling her glass.

Wen Sicong sits further back in his chair, knees spread lazily.

"...I suppose," he agrees, not bothering to hide his interest as he watches the goddess move about the room. "But does a woman like yourself have any need for that? You're one of the great elemental masters, after all."

Shi Qingxuan's smile doesn't fade—but it *shifts* .

She barely remembers her parents. Their faces are faint in her mind, and when she tries to picture them—

Her gege is all that ever seems to come to the surface.

But there was one story he used to tell her over and over, shortly after they died—because it was her favorite.

One that Shi Qingxuan's father used to tell her—even if she can't remember his voice when she tries.

About a princess, beloved by all. Vivacious and kind. With a light that shined so bright, a shadow always crept close behind, wanting to swallow her whole.

The King and Queen were clever, and they hid her carefully, disguising her as a shepherd's daughter. And she was content to lay among the lambs, singing lullabies and watching the clouds go by.

Still, no matter where she went, she couldn't help but shine.

But the shadows couldn't touch her—if she just never looked back.

Thinking back on that time, Shi Qingxuan can't understand why she adored that story so much. Maybe it was just nostalgia, or the way her brother would play with her hair as he told it, tickling her at intervals.

When she recounted the tale to Ming Yi later, half asleep in his arms, he said something that surprised her.

That he actually found the story to be rather sad.

And Shi Qingxuan couldn't understand it at first, because the princess lived happily ever after.

'She did,' he replied back, then, his chin resting on top of her head. *'But the monster died alone.'*

'...But isn't that what monsters do?'

'In fairytales, maybe.' He agreed. *'But I've never thought of those as happy stories. Far too reliant on perspective.'*

She didn't understand it back then—because Shi Qingxuan had always been the princess.

Shining as brightly as she could, and never looking back over her shoulder.

But once she did...

Her shadow wasn't a monster at all—but rather a man.

And oh, how she adored him.

Adores him still, even when part of her knows it would be easier if she didn’t.

Because he was selfish, and he hurt her.

But that doesn’t mean she hasn’t thought about all of those years she refused to look back.

Leaving him alone in the dark. Unloved and unseen.

But beyond that love—somewhere past the goodness and familiarity that he’s allows her to glimpse through the gaps in his disguise—

Sometimes, Shi Qingxuan can’t help but wonder if she’s been prey for so long, that she’s simply fallen in love with the throat of being devoured.

But it’s also given her a certain level of appreciation for the act of the hunt.

“…And what do you know of the other elemental masters?” She murmurs, watching him with coy eyes and a sequin smile.

Wen Sicong raises an eyebrow—but opts to indulge her.

"...The stories say that you, the Wind Master, are beautiful and beloved by Gods and Mortals alike," he recalls, dragging his fingertip around the rim of his wine glass. "It's easy to see *why*, now."

Shi Qingxuan smiles at him, silently urging him to continue.

"The Rain Master is said to be gentle and generous—at least among the mortals. Whispers among the other realms say that she's rather reclusive..." Wen Sicong sighs, rocking backwards. "Of course, now everyone with a line to the Heavens knows Ming Yi was Blackwater all along..."

He tilts his head to the side, watching her curiously. "I'm shocked that you two were able to move past such a betrayal."

Shi Qingxuan shrugs, taking another sip from her glass. "I suppose a lack of context would make it confusing to prying eyes."

Wen Sicong waits with curiosity, but it doesn't seem that she's particularly eager to enlighten him.

One of his officer's looks up from the meal, tearing at a lamb shank with his fingers. "...Here's what I've been wonderin'—are you a man, or a woman? The stories are mixed."

Wen Sicong glares at him irritably. "Don't be rude, we're her guests—”

"We came to take the city, how are we guests—?"

"Both." Shi Qingxuan's answer is simple and immediate enough to surprise them both. "I'm happiest when I can change as I like."

It's been hard, trapped in their female form for so long. Xiong Li has been far more kind and understanding about the situation than anyone else ever has. Giving them men's clothes, treating them as a man on days when they need it.

But sometimes, they ache for their old body.

"...And Blackwater doesn't mind?"

Shi Qingxuan's eyes snap to the officer's—beautiful, but sharp.

"There is no form I could take that my He-Xiong wouldn't adore," she replies curtly, finishing off the remainder of her glass, her attention returning to Wen Sicong.

"And what of the other masters? What do you know of them?"

He's as relieved to get away from the subject as she is, gesturing for the servant to return to fill their glasses again.

"The thunder master was killed centuries ago, and there has been no fire master in this dynasty."

Shi Qingxuan nods with each statement, marking them off as correct, until...

"...And after your brother was killed, Blackwater replaced him as the new Water Master, isn't that correct?" Wen Sicong recalls. "Even if he turned the assignment down rather bluntly."

That is certainly one way of putting it.

"Though I'm assuming it couldn't have been too much of a blow for you," Wen Sicong shrugs, lifting his newly filled glass. "Given how you married his killer."

"He Xuan did not kill my brother."

Slowly, the room grows still and silent.

Shi Qingxuan looks down at her cup for a moment, staring at her reflection for a moment.

"And I don't need to ask you what you thought of my brother," she mutters, shaking her head.

Not when the emperor was so careful to ensure people saw what he wanted them to see.

The Water Tyrant.

Or, even worse, the tales that worshiped him as imperial consort, Goddess of the Moon, waning as Jun Wu's power grew.

"But everything you think you know about him is a lie."

Lies Shi Wudu told to protect himself. Lies Jun Wu told to destroy him.

"...He was the cleverest person in the room," she recalls softly. "The best to his friends, and the worst enemy that you could ever have."

The one she could always go to for advice. Could always confess her mistakes to, knowing—

Gege would make everything alright again.

"...Everyone has always loved me," Shi Qingxuan agrees softly, her brow furrowed. "Everyone has always called me beautiful. But I could never have been so happy or endearing to them, if I had not been raised to always *know* that I was loved."

Shi Qingxuan is only the person she is because of him. All the traits that make her so agreeable and pleasant to everyone else—

She couldn't be that person without him.

And all of the things he sacrificed for her. All the pain he endured for her sake.

In the end, the story her father used to tell her wasn't true.

Shi Qingxuan had two twin shadows, lingering just behind her at all times—she just never turned her head to look at the pain that they were experiencing.

And just like all monsters, her brother died alone.

In so many ways, he and He Xuan were so similar, she just—

She never could see it. Not until it was too late.

"...But what often gets lost when people tell stories of us is that he is my brother," Shi Qingxuan finally continues, her voice steadier than before. "And people fail to understand that we actually do carry family resemblances," she explains, walking behind the chairs of her guests once more. "I just package mine in a more palatable way."

He has their father's eyes, for example. She has their mother's laugh.

Shi Qingxuan was gentle, kind, and carefree because her brother created a world that allowed her to be.

But her brother isn't here anymore.

"When I was young, Xuli was ruled by the wealthy, and my brother was the wealthiest of them all." She recalls quietly.

And Shi Qingxuan was still being hidden from the Reverend of Empty Words, posing as the young lord's sister, Mingxia.

"There was a man who tried to have me abducted to be used as leverage against him in some political dispute..."

They never even reached Shi Qingxuan's chambers.

"When my brother caught him, he placed his head on a pike before the city gates." Her footsteps echo faintly against the cavernous ceilings overhead. "There was no trial. No possibility of mercy. He was seventeen at the time."

"...And you mean to say that shows a *resemblance* between the two of you?" Wen Sicong muses, both eyebrows raised. "My lady, I fail to see your point."

Shi Qingxuan's smile only seems to grow wider—and her dimples far sharper.

She and her brother actually share the same smile, when they know that they're about to win. Bright eyes, a victorious flash of canines.

"My brother would do absolutely anything to protect the people he loves," she clarifies. "Even at the expense of his own conscience."

Shi Qingxuan stops on the opposite end of the table once more, staring Wen Sicong down, delicately grasping her cup between her hands.

"What do you imagine I would do if someone came to my home, and placed my *child* in danger?" She asks, one hand resting against her stomach.

Wen Sicong pauses, eyes following her hand. The dress was cut loose before, as those of that style often are—

But when Shi Qingxuan presses her hand there, he can see the slight curvature of her stomach.

Thud!

One of his men slumps forward, his head landing in his plate.

Several others follow suit.

Thud!

Thud!

Thud!

And those who don't, well—they fall to the side, clutching their throats, wheezing and coughing, their faces turning blue.

When Shi Qingxuan sets down her glass, only for the rattling to knock it over—

Revealing water.

Of course, they weren't poisoned from the beginning—Shi Qingxuan waited, speaking silently with Xiong Li through their communication array, waiting until most of the citizens of Gusu had been evacuated through the tunnels beneath the city.

Then, she gave the signal.

Asking Wen Sicong what he knew of the other Elemental Masters.

That was when the wine poured was laced with poison.

That was when their fates were sealed.

Wen Sicong watches his officers fall one by one, unable to move from the shock, rooted in his chair.

But unlike the others, he shows no sign of collapse.

He hadn't drunk enough of the wine.

Shi Qingxuan closes the distance between them, manicured nails resting on the table--just next to his unfinished glass.

A potential offer of mercy. But—

She knocks it over.

The dark liquid runs over the tablecloth like blood—and Wen Sicong's lips pull back into a snarl, looking up at her with bubbling fury.

"You little *bitch—!"*

CLANG!

Something cold and heavy slams against his temple, making the invader see stars.

A black bangle, gold veins running through the sides. What he mistook for a simple piece of jewelry before, but—

Now, Shi Qingxuan yanks a golden chain from around her neck, ancient, of magical make—

And she wraps it around his own.

Slipping behind Wen Sicong's chair, sliding down the back of it as she pulls, using the chain as a makeshift garrote, the bangle used as a counterweight—

Crushing in on his larynx until it's crushed.

From then on, he can only writhe, uselessly gasping for air.

Shi Qingxuan doesn't relent.

Not even when the chain digs in, slicing into her palms until they bleed, blood dripping down her wrists.

Not until Wen Sicong grows still, burst blood vessels turning his eyes red as they stare up at the ceiling, unseeing.

Her grip loosens, arms trembling from exhaustion as she slips the locket back around her neck, and the bangle back onto her wrist.

Not caring about the blood that stains them, or if it gets on her in the process.

"...Well," she rasps, holding her stomach. "We're murders now."

Despite being as old as she is, Shi Qingxuan has never killed anything before. Not even an animal.

Now she's killed ten men.

One of them with her own hands.

She sends a quiet nod towards the last remaining servants, who turn to flee down the hidden palace passageways.

'Is it finished? ' Xiong Li asks her in the array, his tone cautiously optimistic.

Shi Qingxuan looks up at the table of slaughtered guests, wiping the blood from her cheek with the back of her hand.

'Yes,' she agrees, her tone resolved. As frigid as her brother's, years ago. *'And the city?'*

'The citizens have been cleared out, and the gates have been sealed. We'll have to wait until this is all over to come in and clear the rest of the demons out—but they won't be able to leave Gusu and attack anyone else.'

Shi Qingxuan sighs with relief, but...that's not the only thing Xiong Li has to say.

'And...Lan An says that the Martial God of the South is here.'

That's the last one that Shi Qingxuan would have expected, and it gives her pause.

'What? Which one?'

'Feng Xin.'

Shi Qingxuan frowns, reaching for the tablecloth to wipe the rest of the blood from her hands, wincing as the cloth drags over the cuts on her palms.

'What's he doing here? Did someone send him to help?'

'Not exactly.'

...Of course not. Why would their luck turn around now?

'Xie Laoshi sent him here—apparently their friend is hurt, and Lan An is the only one who can help...' Xiong Li trails off, audibly worried. *'Of course he agreed to run off with them right away, no matter how dangerous it might be.'*

'That leaves you finishing the evacuation alone,' Shi Qingxuan mutters, pulling her dress tighter around herself as she leaves the banquet hall, making her way towards the last escape tunnel.

The rest were sealed, preventing the citizens from being followed—leaving one for her.

'...It's not so bad,' Xiong Li assures her . *'It's a little cramped and dark down here--but these tunnels open up near the Cloud Recesses. Once we're there, there's nothing to do but sit back and enjoy the fresh air. You'll love*

it!'

Shi Qingxuan smiles.

'...It sounds nice.'

She rounds the corner, pulling an explosive talisman from her sleeve, distributed to seal the tunnel behind her as she escapes, but...

Something's rattling beneath her shoes.

The former goddess pauses, the echoes of her footsteps fading in the air.

Thud...

'Shi Qingxuan?'

"..." She looks back over her shoulder, the talisman crinkling slightly as her hand balls up into a fist.

'Shi Qingxuan?!'

'Sorry,' she mutters, taking a step back. *'I got distracted—I'm right behind you.'*

But even as she tries to keep moving—it finally rounds the corner.

On one hand, it almost makes sense.

Jun Wu would have known that, outside of Yunmeng, Gusu had the most skilled cultivation sect in the world. And, with two ascended cultivators here—they wouldn't be an easy target.

Wen Sicong seemed to think that the emperor was going to make him a god, but...

He made the same promise to his father, many years ago—only to turn him into the opposite.

Figuring that out doesn't make it any easier to see the clawed paw round the corner.

Thud...

"What..." Shi Qingxuan starts, stumbling backwards, landing on her backside as she stares ahead with wide eyes, realizing—

When she killed Wen Sicong, the power Jun Wu granted him went into effect.

Not as a god, but—

The creature rounds the corner with a roar.

As a *demon* .

One that nearly takes up the entire height of the hall—one that almost looks like an enormous bat, with a head and chest covered in dark fur, leathery wings, and eyes that burn like red hot coals.

And when it looks at Shi Qingxuan, it's a killer...

It reveals its fangs in a macabre imitation of a smile.

"Lady Wind Master..." It doesn't have vocal cords that would allow it to speak like a man—and yet, its voice rumbles all around her, whispering through the shadows.

"...I haven't finished my meal."

Shi Qingxuan gulps.

"I...haha..." She glances back over her shoulder, taking in the sight of the tunnel entrance.

Knowing that even if she could make it, she wouldn't have time to seal it—leading it straight to the citizens of Gusu trying to escape.

"Haha...hahaha..."

She pushes backwards with her heels, looking back at the exit—then Wen Sicong approaching.

"W...was it something about the food?" She mumbles hoarsely, bursting into nervous peals of laughter. "I...ha...hahaha...I'm sorry...haha...it's been a while since we...hahahahaha..."

Her foot slips, and she barely manages to catch herself on her elbow. "I-I'm really...ahaha...so sorry for the...hahaha...ha... *HAAAA!"*

She cuts off with a scream when a spined tail lands in the floor next to her, sending cracks through the marble.

"I'M *SORRY* HAHAHAHAHAHA!"

Shi Qingxuan rolls to her feet, sending one last look at the entrance to the tunnels, then...

The talisman flies out of her hand, attaching to the door.

BOOM!

The explosion rattles the halls—and she's back to exactly where she started.

Running for her life.

Sliding as she rounds the corners, arms flapping around her in her panic, with Wen Sicong's monstrous form following her in an almost hilariously similar path. Slamming into the wall when he rounds the corner, wings scrambling.

"HAHAHAHAHAHA I HATE THIS *SO FUCKING MUCH!"*

One of the claws almost gets her in the back, and Shi Qingxuan wails with hysterical laughter, hurrying up a flight of steps.

(This is one of the cases where she and her brother are not quite so similar: fighting and bravery is easy for him. For her...not so much.)

"THERE'S NO NEED TO BE SUCH A BAD SPORT ABOUT THIS HAHAHAHAHA YOU TRIED TO KILLMEFIRST HAHAHA IT'S JUST FAIR YOU DON'T HAVE TO KILLMEBACKOKAYWECANJUSTSHAKEHANDSANDWALKAWAYEVENTHOU HAHAHA!!!"

She's about halfway there when Wen Sicong starts to follow, using his talons and claws to rip the path open wider, allowing him to climb through—

And when he does, it makes the staircase begin to shudder, collapsing just as Shi Qingxuan reaches the top.

"AHHHHH HAHAHAHA!"

She catches herself with her forearms on the landing, legs swinging wildly as she manages to pull herself over, fleeing down the corridor as Wen Sicong scrambles up through the wreckage.

Well, that answered one painful question.

Even if Shi Qingxuan manages to squeeze into a small space, he can just rip the palace apart trying to get to her.

Which, in retrospect, means she did the right thing, not going into the escape tunnel.

Even if that feels like a death sentence at the moment.

But it also means that there's nowhere she can go.

He'll catch her inside the palace. He'll tear through the underground before she gets deep enough to run away.

Even if she manages to get outside, then he can fly, and—

There's the *rats.*

And even though she's doing a decent job outrunning him now, she's human.

Her endurance will run out far before his does.

Shi Qingxuan knows that help isn't coming. She can't even open her communication array to call for He Xuan, she doesn't have enough power left.

She used the last of it calling Xiong Li, and he would have heard that explosion and assumed that Shi Qingxuan made her escape.

And even if she could—he's the only one left who can finish the evacuation. Saving Shi Qingxuan would cost thousands of lives.

So, she's on her own

With no powers, an unborn child, and no way of escaping Wen Sicong. Or killing him.

The thought almost exhausts her prematurely as she runs out onto the palace roof, listening as the demon shatters columns and windows behind her, struggling to get to her.

What can she do? If no one is coming--shouldn't she be focused on dying in the least painful way possible? Like falling from a great height? Or using some of the left-over poison? But she—

Her hand drops down to her stomach, and she grimaces again.

Then, she turns her head.

"...Maybe..." she mutters, staring into the distance, doing some math with her fingers in the air.

Estimating height, weight, calculated force per inch.

...Maybe...she could...

There's a horrible crashing sound as the entrance bursts open behind her.

No more debating.

Shi Qinxuan makes a running start, leaping onto the next roof over, scrambling down to the lower levels as Wen Sicong circles overhead, wings flapping aggressively.

Rousing the rats below from their slumber—beady red eyes glittering to life.

Shi Qingxuan grits her teeth.

"That's right," she snarls, running though the second level of an abandoned house. Scrambling out onto a balcony, leaping from one to the other, grateful that the buildings are placed so close together.

If she was on the rooftops, she'd be a sitting duck for Wen Sicong.

Now he's forced to fly over the alleyways, waiting to see where she'll pop back out.

But here—the rats make a beeline for her, crawling up the sides of buildings, following the same path.

"KEEP ON CHASING ME, YOU LITTLE FREAKS! HAHAHAHA! I—THAT'S FINE! I DON'T *CARE* HAHA!"

(She clearly does, but her pursuers don't have the wherewithal to understand bravado.)

The further she goes, the paler she becomes, speaking more quietly now.

Not to Wen Sicong, or the rats.

Not even to herself.

"I don't know if I'm going to make it," Shi Qingxuan mutters. "I don't know if you can even hear me."

Some of the women she's spoken to think your child can hear your voice, later in pregnancy. That they like the sound of it.

But she isn't that far along, and—

Her son couldn't understand her anyway.

But still—she tries.

"But even if I don't survive this—I haven't learned how to purge the resentment from your spirit, so—" She winces, pulling herself over the railing of the next building, not having any time to falter. "You—You'll turn into a ghost fire, if that happens."

Or a fetal spirit.

Either way, the thought of him being deprived of the chance to live hurts her, more than words could ever express.

"And your father..." Her voice wobbles, but she says the words clearly. "He'll come and find you, okay? He'll...he'll take good care of you. I promise."

She knows, without a single doubt, that He Xuan will. Because he—

He's a good man.

Shi Qingxuan said she needed time the last time she spoke, and she meant it, but—

Part of her knows that she could never stop loving him, no matter how hard she tried.

And even if she could—

Shi Qingxuan doesn't want to give up on anyone else she cares about.

Not ever again.

Not even *herself* .

But still, she says the words, leaping through the last rows of buildings.

"Just...No matter what happens..."

She makes the final jump, catching herself on a reinforced set of scaffolding—

Lining the sides of the new walls being built around Gusu.

Her hands grip the ladder rightly, blowing her bangs out of her face—and she starts to climb.

"I love you, Baobei."

The ladder is rough under her palms—and she feels like she’s going to slip more than once, wearing a dress like this.

But she doesn’t stop.

Even with Wen Sicong right behind her, powerful flaps of his wings sending roaring gusts of wind her way, nearly blowing her off.

But still, she holds on.

Pulling herself up the layers of scaffolding, moving higher and higher as the ground shrinks away underneath her.

Trying not to think, to pretend that she’s turned small again, climbing trees while her brother worked inside.

“You can do this,” she mutters, her arms trembling as she makes her way into the highest platform.

Connected to a series of ropes and pulleys, being used to drag enormous blocks of limestone to the top of the wall. And when she leaps over, grabbing onto the rope—Rats follow. Crawling up the robe behind her as she climbs—

But that’s the thing about rats.

They are eaters by nature, consuming everything around them without a thought.

“You’ve nowhere left to run, Lady Wind Master…” Wen Sicong’s voice echoes below. “All you can do is *fall.*”

Maybe that’s true.

That’s all she can think about, feeling the rope burn her already bleeding palms, whimpering from the pain as she pulls up with all of her strength.

But, it’s like she said—rats will eat anything.

Including *rope* .

And if you can estimate the speed of degradation based on the size of the rat’s teeth, the bite force, and the downward pull on the rope—

You can calculate exactly when and *how* it will break.

Sending the two tons of limestone dangling from the bottom crashing down.

Shi Qingxuan can’t look down to see the results of her work—not when the release of the rocks weight sends the end of the rope she’s still hanging onto flying violently through the air, but—

BOOM!

The accompanying roar of pain tells her it was a direct hit.

But when a rope carrying that much weight is suddenly released…

It spins in a violent circle, hundreds of feet around the ground, shaking her like a rag doll. And with her palms already slick from the blood—

It flies out of her hands.

There’s a moment, the briefest, most heartbreaking instant, when she remembers how it felt to fly.

But now, as gravity wraps around her like an unforgiving blanket—

Shi Qingxuan begins to fall.

Hands outstretched, heart pounding.

And in spite of a lifetime of running away, of never looking back, of hiding behind her brother’s sleeves—

Shi Qingxuan isn’t afraid in this moment—no.

She’s *anguished* , knowing—

Knowing that she’ll never hold her son.

“…I’m sorry,” she whispers—

But it’s lost to the wind.

CRASH!

Wen Sicong’s roars are drowned out for a moment as all of Gusu is swallowed up in a resounding rumble.

His wings shake violently, forcing the rats swarming around his body off of him as he rights himself, throwing his head back to roar again with warning.

He tries to look around, to see the wreckage that’s been wrought—

But for a moment, there’s only this harsh, blinding light, engulfing the square around him.

Followed by a warmth unlike anything he’s ever known.

When it fades, he’s left nursing an injured wing, burning red eyes peering through swirling clouds of dust, until—

Until a powerful burst of wind roars through the streets of Gusu.

Blowing back the dust and smoke—

Revealing countless bodies of dead rats around him.

And there, standing in the epicenter of destruction, is Shi Qingxuan.

Hair falling loose around her shoulders, whipping around her violently from the force of the gale.

“…WHAT IS THIS?!” The creature snarls—

Only for eyes filled with emerald light to stare back at him.

Gusu is an ancient city.

A powerful place.

One bred in generations of endurance. The earth itself is soaked in magic.

When she replies, her voice echoes with power.

“I already told you.”

And now—a god has ascended upon the streets of Gusu once more.

“I’m the Wind Master.”

As she says this, her gaze turns down to her sleeves, reaching inside to pull out two fans.

The very same she had been training with, just when this entire mess began.

Taken from the Palace of Wind and Water—The characters Feng and Shui painted across the front.

Thrumming with power—stained by the heavenly light of her ascension.

Forged into two new spiritual devices.

And when her eyes snap back up—

Wen Sicong immediately takes a step back, raising his wing joints, prepared to take flight—

But she doesn’t let him get far.

Each fan snaps open with smooth flicks of her wrists, arms twisting gracefully as she summons winds from the North and South, hot and cold fronts swirling violently when they crash together.

Forming a cyclone overhead.

And even as he flaps his wings violently, desperately trying to escape—

Wen Sicong is dragged inside, roaring with protest until the wind silences him, snatching the breath from his lungs.

And with each twist of her fans, Shi Qingxuan begins the process of ripping him apart.

Shredding his form bit by bit, scattering his soul until nothing remains. Sucking the remaining rats into the cyclone all the while, sending them into oblivion with their master.

And Shi Qingxuan supposed she could chalk it up to the burst of power that accompanies ascension, but…she’s still surprised.

After falling back into being a mortal, how could she be *this* strong upon her return to godhood?

But when the dust begins to settle—she gets her answer.

The worst part about her newfound mortality was, after so many years, being left in silence.

But now, when she hears the faint whispers…

Shi Qingxuan sinks down to her knees, eyes wide and brimming with tears.

‘Lady Wind Master…’

‘Protect me…’

‘…Help my son…’

‘Give me wisdom…’

“…They…” Shi Qingxuan’s voice comes out as a croak, her mascara running down her cheeks, hands trembling in her lap. “…They never stopped praying to me?”

She had been so certain that all of her believers had already abandoned her, but…

They…

They never *left* .

She uses one hand to cover her mouth, pressing her other over her stomach, slowly coming to terms with something else:

Shi Qingxuan is going to *live* .

Her child is going to live.

And she saved them both *on her own.*

When no one believed she could.

And now, as her full communication array flickers back to life—

His voice is the first and the loudest among them.

‘Shi Qingxuan?!’

A small sob rips out of her chest as she reaches up to wipe her eyes, clearing her throat.

‘H-He-Xiong?’

‘Are you hurt?!’

‘No…No, we…we’re both fine,’ she murmurs, sitting back on her heels, surrounded by corpses and wreckage. ‘ *Gusu is safe now.’*

‘…Then what the hell did you do with my ashes?!’

A wet laugh escapes her as she hugs the bangle tightly.

‘I…may have bashed a man’s head in…’

‘…You did WHAT with my WHAT?! Is that—is that why you asked me if they were DURABLE?!’

‘And you were right, THEY ARE!’

‘I gave you those so you could feel more secure about TRUSTING me, not to be used as a MELEE WEAPON QINGXUAN!”

‘IT WAS A CHAOTIC SITUATION!’

‘Don’t give me that, you didn’t sound desperate when you asked, you PLANNED IT !’

‘I didn’t have anything else on hand that would have worked!’

‘What, so there wasn’t just a brick laying around?!’

There was, but she couldn’t disguise that as a stylish accessory, could she?

‘I wanted it to feel like we were fighting together, and it did!’ She pleads . *‘Like you were a big strong man, protecting me…’*

‘Shi Qingxuan.’

‘He Xuan?’

‘How many times have I willingly grown a pair of breasts for you?’

‘…Haha…’

‘…And you think appealing to my manhood is effective emotional manipulation.’

‘Well,’ she crosses her arms. *‘You do get off on it when I say it isn’t going*

to fit.'

'That's different.'

'How—?!'

'BECAUSE YOUR LIFE AND MY ASHES ARE NOT IN DANGER IN THAT SITUATION!'

Actually, if her brother had been aware of the situation back then, it very well could have been.

But...

Her laughter fades slightly.

She supposes that isn't a concern anymore.

'...Where are you?' She asks after a moment. *'I want to see you.'*

She wants to show him.

'It's...' And now, she hears just how exhausted he sounds. *'It's a long story, but I had to stop seven tsunamis today—and I'm not even certain I caught them all.'*

Certainly not the furthest north, anyway.

Shi Qingxuan's eyes widen with shock. *'How..?'*

'...The short of it is that Hua Cheng destroyed the Heavens, and Jun Wu proceeded to throw the burning remains on top of my territory, which is now also destroyed.' He Xuan recalls cataclysmic facts with a tone of dry irritation. *'Most of the Martial Gods are defending the Imperial Capital. Mu Qing has gone into Qi Deviation. Yin Yu is dead. No one knows where Tai Hua, Qi Ying, or Ren Song are, and Pei Ming and the Rain Master are safe, but too wounded to fight.'*

Shi Qingxuan can barely take all of that in, her jaw hanging open.

'But...it's only been a day!'

'Longest day of my fucking afterlife,' He Xuan grumbles. *'And now it's just me, Hua Cheng, and the prince left standing, and...'* He sounds reluctant. Slightly pained, even. *'...I want to see you too,'* he admits quietly—his tone slightly gruff.

He's been wearing disguises and telling lies for so long—it's terrifyingly vulnerable for him to be honest.

But when he is, it makes Shi Qingxuan feel like she could melt to the ground.

'But I made a deal with Crimson Rain years ago, and I have to help him see this through.'

Which could be dangerous for him, but...

'...Okay,' Shi Qingxuan whispers, pulling her knees against her chest . *'You're...going to fight the emperor?'*

'...Him, or Bai Wuxiang.'

Shi Qingxuan clutches the bangle close to her heart.

'...Make him bleed, He Xuan.'

The tone of her voice startles him.

How cold it is—almost bloodthirsty.

But her next words leave him somber:

'For gege.'

'...I will, Shi Qingxuan.' He replies softly. 'I promise.'

She nods, twisting the golden locket around her neck—scraping the blood away.

'And make sure you bring my best friend back to me.'

His parting response, even after everything that's happened, still makes her smile.

'...Who's that?'

His voice fades, and she's left alone—watching the sky overhead.

In the next few hours she'll stay here, watching the sun rise over the streets of Gusu, listening to prayers.

And when that time passes, she'll face the world—

Only to find it has forever been changed.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY (tw// blood)

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Children of Death

Chapter Summary

> "Instead, I allow you to continue on. You pretend you're free of it, but…" Bai Wuxiang tilts his head to the side. "You're still a slave to my whims, Hudie." His thumb slides over her chin delicately.
>
> "I'm the one who made you into a mother, after all."

Chapter Notes

> CONTENT WARNING: blood, gore, psychological torture, referenced grooming and pressured consent, death

The air itself tastes like blood, rolling down her throat with every inhale.

Clang!

A hammer clatters to the ground, then rolls onto its side with a faint thud.

"…This…" A voice hisses from the dark, rasping with exhaustion, "Is why I could never let you go, my love…"

His hand brushes through her hair, pushing wayward pieces from her face.

"No one *challenges* me quite like you…" he muses, watching as dark tresses slip through his fingers. "Even after all this time."

Violet eyes stare up at him hatefully.

"You don't want a challenge."

If he did, he wouldn't have forced her to spend two thousand years locked inside this cage, forced to watch the world outside.

Unable to break free, and unable to move on.

"…I would destroy you if I didn't," he muses, watching her broken down form.

Bleeding and exhausted.

“Instead, I allow you to continue on. You pretend you’re free of it, but…” Bai Wuxiang tilts his head to the side. “You’re still a slave to my whims, Hudie.” His thumb slides over her chin delicately.

“I’m the one who made you into a mother, after all.”

His claws dig into the underside of her jaw, leaving faint imprints in their wake. "And I'm going to destroy the 'children' you have left before I scatter their ashes before your eyes—”

He stops when something wet lands on his cheek.

Blood, from his wife spitting on his face.

"You didn't make me a mother," her voice is guttural, screamed raw and scorched with smoke. "A man doesn't make anyone a mother." She looks up at him through her lashes, fangs bared.

"I *chose* to be a mother. My *sons* made me a mother. You took them AWAY from me!"

Even now, after fighting him alone for nearly a day of constant battle, she still manages to snarl with the wrath of centuries of resentment. Unable to rise to her feet, but—

"How could you have made me a mother when you were never ONCE an actual father to our children?!"

"...Is this where you insult me more than you already have by telling me my Guoshi was visiting our bed in my absence? Because he already told THE WORLD, don't you worry—”

"He did!" Zhao Beitong admits without an ounce of shame, or remorse.

"But he was also the only one who comforted your wife after you gambled OUR SON'S LIFE AWAY!" She reminds him with a wrathful glare. "And San Lang was on this earth for nearly THIRTEEN YEARS, and Mei Nianqing was more of a father to him than you EVER were!"

"You knew I had responsibilities—to my people, to my believers, and you chose to marry me anyway—”

"CHOSE!" She laughs, sagging forward on her hands, shoulders trembling with amusement. "I was a commoner, being Courted by the Crown Prince. What choice did I *have?!"*

She was a young woman back then—one whose father was considered new money, an artisan with a tenuous position at court.

Rejecting the prince could have meant her father losing his commission. It could have meant losing her position as a guoshi.

She would have been ostracized.

Tonglu Hudie learned to love her husband, but it didn't come quickly or easily to her.

"And I married a prince, not a god! If you wanted that, why did you EVER take a wife, or have children at all?! Why would you *put us through that?!"*

“…It’s fascinating that you think I had any more of a say in it than you, my dear.”

With one more flick of his wrist, another shard of obsidian flies into her chest, pinning her to the floor of the Kiln.

“I suppose that’s what makes loving you so tragic.”

As much as they might have loved one another—they never understood each other.

But she doesn’t need to understand Bai Wuxiang.

Not for what he has in mind.

And now, with the Goddess of the Kiln forced into submission—

A calamity begins to emerge.

His palms press flat against the edge of the Kiln, soaked in Zhao Beitong’s blood—and with a slow, thunderous rumble, the doors begin to open once more.

And outside—

It’s dark.

Black as pitch, in spite of a crimson moon shining down.

The ghost king pauses, looking back over his shoulder—

Only to find that the Kiln behind him has disappeared.

And when he looks back ahead…

Only darkness awaits.

“…You don’t have any other tricks to play, do you?” He murmurs, but something stops him.

The sound of a flute.

Notes drifting through the air—beautiful, but somewhat shrill, like the notes hanging in the air are in slight tension with one another.

Bai Wuxiang turns his head, sleeves weighing heavily against his arms, wondering—if he hasn't left the Kiln, what memory is it showing him?

A child's laughter falls—careless and free, with a longing note that—

That makes Bai Wuxiang reach for his chest, startled.

By the way it tugs at his heartstrings.

Something bumps against his side as it runs past him;

A little boy with long, impossibly dark hair.

And when he looks back over his shoulder—

Bai Wuxiang recognizes those eyes.

Somewhere between silver and amethyst, mimicking the contrast between his parents.

But the last time he saw them, it was in the face of an infant in his crib.

And now, he whispers—

"...Zhang Wei?"

The child stops a few feet ahead of him, back turned.

A small toy flute clutched between his fingers, reminiscent of one that his mother made for him, when he was too small to even use it.

Insisting that the boy would be musical, from the way he hummed in his crib.

Bai Wuxiang loved their son as dearly as any father loves his first born, but he struggled to see everything that his wife did, in Zhang Wei's future.

She was able to see an entire personality, an entire person, and he just saw...

Lost possibilities.

But when the boy turns his head to look back at him, the ribbon holding back his hair fluttering in the breeze—

He doesn't have a face at all.

Rather, he has the same visage Bai Wuxiang possessed, when his soul first split in two.

A face without features—only scar tissue.

There are faint, pained sounds, almost like—

Almost like he's trying to speak through it. To scream and cry about the fact that he's trapped.

And all Bai Wuxiang can do is stumble back, falling to the ground with shock.

"You...you *died,* " he mutters, shaking his head.

Small, innocent hands reach upwards, fingernails tearing at overgrown scars.

Until finally, his lips crack open.

“You gave me away.”

And that—

That makes the calamity snarl.

“LIAR!”

Bai Wuxiang hadn’t known.

“HE *LIED* TO ME!”

He lunges forward, claws extended, ready to rip the illusion apart.

The Kiln simply replays past and future events. Memories that haunt you. Futures that await you, or alternatives that are never meant to be.

But it's never been explicitly *sadistic* like this before.

But the moment his claws make contact, his son disappears, leaving Bai Wuxiang crashing to the ground, empty handed.

Beneath him—it's like the surface of a lake. Completely smooth, but so dark, with no hint of what lies beneath.

His own warped reflection stares back at him.

…Bai Wuxiang's lips twist into a snarl as he pulls his fist back, ready to slam it back down into the image, when—

"F…father?"

This time—

This time, it's a voice Bai Wuxiang knows all too well.

He turns around, only to find another young boy standing before him.

A beautiful child, bearing an almost elven face—wild, dark hair braided over his shoulder, and eyes like two fallen stars.

"…San Lang…" he whispers, taking a step forward. "San Lang, I'm—"

"San Lang," another voice comes from over his shoulder, speaking over him.

"You know better than to wander into the temple so late. Your mother worries."

The child bites his lip, hanging his head.

"…It's not tomorrow yet," he whispers. "He'll come."

Bai Wuxiang listens to the answering sigh, and…

Watches his Guoshi approach, kneeling with his son.

"…I know you wanted your father to be here," Mei Nianqing murmurs, placing a hand on his shoulder. "But you had a nice day with your mother and I, didn't you?"

San Lang sits down, pulling his knees against his chest.

“He *promised!”*

“…He has believers who need him—”

“But why are they more important than me?!” San Lang sobs, hugging himself tightly.

“San Lang—”

“I pray to him too!” The prince shakes his head. “I pray so hard but he—he’s *never here!”*

“And I know it hurts him more than you can imagine, but he has duties.”

“So do you!” San Lang whimpers. “So does mother! But you’re *always* here!”

For every milestone, heartache, and…

Birthday.

“…San Lang,” Mei Nianqing squeezes his shoulders gently. “Your father loves you.”

“Don’t.”

“I’m n—”

“Don’t *LIE!”*

San Lang buries his face in his knees.

“If you love someone—you don’t LEAVE THEM!”

Bai Wuxiang takes a step back.

“You don’t let them feel so—so— *WORTHLESS!”*

“Careful, San Lang—remember where you are—”

“What?! So he can hear me, even if he’s not here?! I HOPE HE DOES!” San Lang lifts his head, eyes red and tear swollen. "I hope he knows that I *HATE* HIM!"

"You don't mean that—”

"YES I DO! AND HE HATES ME *TOO!"* The child weeps, caught somewhere between pain and indignation.

Because his father never came to a single one of his celebrations before, but—

Your tenth birthday is supposed to be important.

In Wuyong, it's the year that a prince is given his first duties and presented before the royal court.

And his father wasn't even there.

Mei Nianqing strokes the boy's hair, pulling him in for a gentle embrace as San Lang presses his face into the Guoshi's shoulder, sobbing.

"I know you're disappointed, and I'm sorry," he murmurs. "But this is who your father is, and if you expect that to change..."

Then he'll only be disappointed again, and again, and again.

Like he already has been.

It was one thing for Bai Wuxiang to have seen this thousands of years ago, knowing that he couldn't return to the mortal realm until he had solved the current crisis.

It's another seeing it now, knowing that he never got to make things right.

Knowing that this was the man his wife was in love with.

That the one he trusted to protect his family in his absence usurped *his* place in it.

"No..." He growls, stalking forward. " *No!"*

Maybe Bolin was Mei Nianqing’s son all this time—

But San Lang and Zhang Wei were his.

“That man is not a part of this family! HE *ISN’T* YOUR—!”

He grabs San Lang by the shoulder, but when the boy turns to look at him—

Bai Wuxiang stumbles back, falling to the ground.

That small, beautiful face is covered in soot now.

Unblemished skin begins to blister and melt away, revealing the bones underneath.

His lips can barely pull back over his teeth, charred and black—

“You let me *fall.”*

For a moment, the scene flashes.

Showing a glimpse of Bai Wuxiang's brother, broken and bloody on the ground, eyes unseeing.

Because he was pushed.

And then, in an instant, it's San Lang again.

His body crumbling into ash, disappearing into the surface of the lake.

"No...No, nonono no *NO!"*

"Even a tiger won't kill its own cubs..." A whisper floats in his ears, crawling under his skin until his teeth begin to chatter.

"No..." He hisses, slamming his fist into the lake over and over again. "No, no, no, no, *NO!"*

But the surface isn't black anymore.

And now—

Bai Wuxiang watches a different child fall.

One with the right side of his face covered in bandages, wild dark hair, plunging through the sky like a falling star.

But someone catches him.

A masked, golden prince holds him close as flowers fall down like rain.

Watches as the child is held close, his trembling frame secure in the teenager's arms as he whispers—

"Don't be afraid..."

And it's so easy to see it now, the immediate spark of adoration in the boy's eyes as he stares up at Xie Lian, clinging to the front of his robes.

Bai Wuxiang shakes his head, leaning back, stretching out with his consciousness to fight the grip of the Kiln, but—

He doesn't feel it there. Not in the way that he did when he was fighting Xie Lian.

What—?

But even when he turns around, more scenes flash before him.

Of Xie Lian, kneeling by a riverbed—reaching out and catching the boy's hand.

Begging him not to go.

Forcing Bai Wuxiang to witness the relief in the prince's eyes when Hong'er doesn't run away.

To watch how Xie Lian heals in his presence, like a flower stretching back towards the sun.

And when you're forced to watch something a second time, it brings all of these small details that seemed so inconsequential before back into the foreground.

How Xie Lian’s shoulders always seem to relax when he hears the sound of Hong’er’s voice.

The fact that he leans into it when the mortal touches him, rather than cringing away.

Bai Wuxiang glares, shaking his head as he takes step after step backwards, but everywhere he looks, everywhere he turns—

There's just more.

More flute melodies, drifting through the air.

The sound of his wife screaming.

More of San Lang's sobs as his body burns.

When that reaches a fever pitch—he lashes out with his blade, not looking for the Kiln's presence anymore, but just anything that he can grasp hold onto—

And when he does, his sword finally lands on something solid.

Thud!

It's drawn back slowly—dripping with blood.

In the world outside—a figure stumbles from the forest, coughing, and Lang Qianqiu surges forward, grasping him by the shoulders.

"Did he figure it out?! Did he hurt you?!"

Ren Song sways slightly in his grip, holding one hand over his ribs.

"...He's starting to."

The wound in his side is deep, but regenerating at a rapid pace as the ghost grasps onto Lang Qianqiu's arm, reaching for Quan Yizhen's hand with the other.

"How much longer do you think we have to keep this up?" The prince of Yong'an looks back over his shoulder.

He's been doing that this entire time, for once desperately hoping that Hua Cheng will appear, prepared to take a task that is far beyond them off their hands, but—

"Lang Qianqiu..." Ren Song rasps, wiping the blood from his mouth.

"What?!"

"You...need to prepare yourself for the possibility that no one is coming," he coughs wetly, spitting blood onto the ground—expelling what built up in his lungs as his form recovers.

"But Hua Cheng knows we're here, right?!"

"..."

"...Hua Cheng knows we're here, right?!"

Ren Song pulls back from him, tightening his ponytail as he gets the rest of his energy from Quan Yizhen.

"They'll get here as soon as possible to deal with Bai Wuxiang anyway.

Knowing we're here wouldn't make them come any faster."

"That makes sense," Quan Yizhen shrugs.

"...I BEG TO DIFFER!" Lang Qianqiu glares, only to be aggressively shushed by Shuo, loudly whispering—

"Look, I don't know why you and Crimson Rain are so weird about acknowledging the fact that he RAISED you—"

"—that's a really *broad* term—"

"But he would CARE!"

"I *know!"* The ghost snaps. "If you think I'm under the impression that he doesn't care about me at all, you've misread the situation, alright?"

He also knows that Hua Cheng would have never allowed him to come here in the first place, had it been up to him.

But he also knows that, if Hua Cheng knew where he was and what he was doing—he would be forced to choose between competing priorities.

And Ren Song knows what Hua Cheng would choose—but that doesn't mean he wants to have that confirmed.

"...But just because I didn't tell him doesn't mean that nobody knows we're here," he mutters, shaking his head as he looks back towards the forest. "And either way..."

His fingers tighten around his ribs, stomach twisting with nausea.

"He can't do that a hundred times."

Lang Qianqiu frowns, struggling to understand the reference, but the ghost makes no move to explain.

Ren Song has targeted humans over the years. Abusers. Molesters. Murders and predators.

But in all of that time, he's never seen memories so *vile* .

And it's not that Bai Wuxiang isn't capable of doing that again, it's just...

Ren Song knows that he can't survive it.

"How much power do you have left?" He mutters, looking between the two of them.

"...About half," Lang Qianqiu winces, visibly tired.

Quan Yizhen scratches the inside of his ear—seeming remarkably impassive for someone deep in enemy territory, facing certain death.

"I've used a sixth of mine."

Both Ren Song and Lang Qianqiu turn to stare at him, shocked.

"...How?!"

The martial god of the west shrugs, crossing his arms as he leans back against one of Shuo's trees.

"I'm projecting this into the dreams of my worshippers."

"Why would you do that?!"

Hee shrugs again. "They get excited if they think I'm about to fight and send me prayers."

Quan Yizhen doesn't resort to that often, but when he does, it results in an enormous surge in his power.

Which he would have used before in the Grand Martial Hall, if Jun Wu hadn't blocked all communication with the outside world.

"They're really weird that way."

Lang Qianqiu sends him a baffled, exasperated look.

"When would you ever have the room to call anyone else weird?"

Quan Yizhen stares back at him with that constant, deceptively expressionless look.

"You're weird."

"...What?!"

"You pretend to be angry a lot. It's weird."

Quan Yizhen understands pretending not to be hurt or sad, because those emotions can make a person seem weak to their enemies.

But pretending to be angry seems like a complete waste of energy.

"You are *objectively* the weirdest god in the Heavens!"

"Everything I do makes sense to me."

Lang Qianqiu grits his teeth, certainly not pretending to be angry now, because of COURSE everything Quan Yizhen does makes sense to HIM, but—

"We don't have time for this," Ren Song interrupts them both. "Quan Yizhen, give me more."

He offers his hand without complaint—but it isn't fast enough, forcing Ren Song to resort to sinking his teeth into the martial god's wrist, drinking directly from the source.

Rumble...

The trees around them shiver, and he winces in anticipation.

"...I might not come back out again," he mutters, wiping his mouth as he pulls back. "If Bai Wuxiang comes through—he's a ravenous ghost like Blackwater and I. He sees any source of spiritual energy as food. Make him chase you to stall for time."

However much they have left.

Lang Qianqiu swallows hard, wanting to say more, to do more, to stop him, but—

Ren Song disappears back within the trees, hand slipping just out of reach when he grasps for it.

Leaving the martial god staring into darkness—praying that the ghost is wrong.

"...They're beautiful," he admits quietly, fingertips drifting near the edges of the pond, watching the fish glide beneath the water's surface.

Scales like jewels of white and blue, spots of red across their backs.

"You don't keep them in your own palace," the emperor observes.

Shi Wudu smiles faintly, pulling his fingertips back from the water's surface. His body aged to its peak form when he ascended—but it's only been two years since then, and he feels far younger than he looks.

"The cat would torment them, I'm afraid."

The memory is slightly warped, stemming from a time when Bai Wuxiang lurked within the recesses of the emperor's soul—

But the sight of his fingertips brushing the Water Master's hair from his cheek is clear enough.

"You're the first since Yushi Huang to deputize a beast."

Shi Wudu seems a little sheepish, being reminded of that fact—but he shrugs it off, nonchalant.

"Qingxuan would have been devastated if we left him behind, he's known him since he was a kitten—”

"And how is Shi Qingxuan's cultivation going?"

And just like that—the light in Shi Wudu's eyes quickly begins to fade —

Replaced with nothing but fear.

"Oh, no need to look like that," the emperor assures him, patting the side of Shi Wudu's head. "You know your brother is safe here, don't you?"

"...Yes," he whispers, the second half of that statement going unspoken, but felt.

For now.

But if he doesn't ascend, he'll never be able to leave the Heavens either. And Shi Qingxuan is such a free spirit...

Shi Wudu was already forced to raise him behind the protective walls of their childhood home. Underneath the disguise of his little sister, 'Mingxia.'

He can't bear the idea of sentencing his brother to an eternity within a gilded cage, even if it saves him from his fate...

It feels *cruel* .

But what else can he do that he hasn't already done?

"...There was always the possibility that he was never fated to ascend to begin with," the emperor muses, watching Shi Wudu from the corner of his eye. "But your little exchange should have solved that."

It's funny.

Up until now, Ren Song had only ever heard He Xuan's narrative of the Water Master, describing him as a unfeeling, inhumane tyrant—

But in this memory, the mere mention of what Shi Wudu has done makes him visibly nauseous, covering his mouth with his hand.

"...But even if he has that young man's fate now, he wouldn't have his natural skill or talent," Jun Wu muses. "He'd need additional help with his ascension."

"...I've been planning to take time aside to train him myself," Shi Wudu mutters, his brow furrowed. "I know he seems silly to those who don't know him well, but he's just a teenager, and he does have talent —”

"Of course you'd think that, you *adore* him." Jun Wu sighs. "But don't let that blind you to what the situation calls for. And you won't have time to train him."

"...But he needs—”

"I need my Water Master," the emperor's tone isn't exactly scolding, but Shi Wudu still seems to grow sheepish in response. "You have responsibilities to more than just your brother now. But...that doesn't mean I'm not willing to help you."

That seems to catch Shi Wudu's attention—and when Jun Wu feels the young god's eyes on him, he smiles.

"...How?"

"There are spiritual devices that can assist in accelerating cultivation," he explains easily.

“You’ve already purchased some of them for your brother—but nothing could quite compare to what I have in my personal collection…of course, we would need to be discreet, it would be a blatant act of favoritism.”

Shi Wudu frowns, pulling his hand away from the lake once more.

It's already difficult for him to socialize among the other gods, because of how the emperor has publicly singled him out. So early into his ascension, many far more senior gods find it offensive.

"…If that's the case, then why would you—?"

He grows still, eyes wide as another mouth presses against his own.

They never close, his body stiff and unsure of how to react, and—

It's obvious from his reaction that it's his first.

There's a flash of sadness in his gaze—like someone who knows something has been stolen.

But when the emperor pulls back, there's none of that.

Only carefully curated embarrassment and surprise, cheeks flushed, lips parted.

"Because I *do* have favorites," the emperor murmurs, looking him over with a keen, admiring eye. "And what's so wrong with that?"

The Water Master says nothing, but when Jun Wu leans in to kiss him again—

He's more than aware of what is on the line when it comes to remaining in the emperor's good graces.

So he doesn't push him away, accepting it.

At the time, Jun Wu interpreted his stillness as shyness

Not for the quiet resignation that it actually was.

But the scene melts away, leaving his arms empty—

And it's followed by a sharp contrast.

"…Are you sure you don't need me to carry you?" Pei's voice rings clear—terribly amused.

"…Yes…"

The Water Master's voice is slightly slurred, and the culprit is easy to see from the fireworks overhead—

A mid-autumn festival decades ago.

"I can't tell if you're drunk, or just that exhausted." Pei Ming laughs fondly, following him down the street.

"…No…"

"No?"

"No." The water master stumbles slightly over the curb, only for his friend to catch him by the elbows.

"You should let me carry you Shui-Xiong." The general needles him lightly. "It'll be less of a blow to that pride of yours than falling over in the street."

Shi Wudu stops ahead of him, tilting his head back, gazing at the lanterns overhead.

"…I hope you didn't drink that much because you came in second," Pei smiles, watching the Water Master with nothing but warmth and longing. "You'll surpass me before long."

"No…"

"Shui-Xiong, Shui-Xiong," the general sighs, smiling a little when he can see the slight tinge of visible annoyance in the water god's expression. "I've not seen you drunk in three hundred years. What's the occasion?"

"I had to sit next to you all night…"

Pei clutches his chest, as if wounded.

"You had to drink that much to find me tolerable?"

Shi Wudu rolls his eyes. "I drank…that much because I love…" He spins around to face him, but overestimates his own balance—

And when his face lands in Pei Ming's chest, he doesn't move

"…Love what?" The general questions, resting one hand between Shi Wudu's shoulder blades—steadying him.

"…Wine," Shi Wudu rasps, still not lifting his head.

Pei Ming clearly wants to tease him just a little more, but…

“I see,” he murmurs, rubbing Shi Wudu’s back. “Does that mean that you—?”

“I want to go home.”

It‘s the first thing he’s said clearly since they left the celebration, grilling the back of Pei Ming’s robes tightly.

“Yes, I’ve been trying to get you th—”

“With *you,”* Shi Wudu corrects him. “I don’t want my bed.”

The general pauses, fingertips tangled in the younger man's hair.

"You're too drunk for what happens in my bed," he reminds him—seeming far more endeared than anything else—

And Shi Wudu rocks up onto the balls of his feet, pressing their mouths together.

Pei Ming stiffens, humming as he holds him closer.

"...That's very nice," he murmurs, pulling back to kiss his forehead, "but you're still *very* drunk."

"After I sleep, then," the Water Master amends, hugging him tightly around the neck. "Unless you don't want..."

It's hard to tell if Shi Wudu is a clingy drunk, or an honest one. In any case, the hesitance he displays when experiencing a fear of rejection is very real.

"...I always do," Pei Ming murmurs, lifting the Water God up in his arms. "But only after you sleep."

Shi Wudu lets out an annoyed groan of protest, only for Pei Ming to hold him closer.

"Relax kid, I won't let anyone see me carrying the great Water Tyrant, your secret's safe with me."

And it's contradictory—the way Shi Wudu relaxes, but grimaces at the same time.

As though he knows that Pei is telling the truth—

But it's the secrets that *aren't* with him that he worries about.

It isn't just one moment like this. One instance that throws the contrast between the way Shi Wudu reaches for Pei, but cringes from Jun Wu.

It's countless.

And Bai Wuxiang is forced to watch them.

Over and over again.

Forced to watch as the Crown Prince stands before the Heavenly Court once more. Disgraced, with shackles in his eyes—

And all he can talk about is *Crimson Rain Sought Flower*.

Every single time, he's asking about him. Trying to get back to him, to help him, thinking about him—

And he doesn't even know who the man is yet, that's the worst part.

Knowing how easily he's pulled back into Hua Cheng's orbit. How effortlessly.

The images begin to take on a pattern, a painful rhythm that pulls him into a cycle.

The sound of a flute. Zhang Wei's scarred, blank face.

His wife screaming, thrusting Zhu Xin into his ribs.

San Lang sobbing in Mei Nianqing's arms as he crumbles into ash.

Xie Lian, catching Hong'er in his arms.

Shi Wudu kneeling on the ground in shackles.

Xie Lian, with a bloodstained smile.

"You were so desperate to stand beside me?"

"Enough…enough of this…"

The flute chimes again, and Bai Wuxiang moans.

"I said *STOP!*"

There's an empty crib, and his wife's paralyzing sobs.

San Lang falling, screaming, begging someone to catch him.

Xie Lian, laying in the streets by Lang'er bay, a sword through his chest.

Shi Wudu breaking the Brocade Immortal apart. The first time Jun Wu saw a new rival.

Xie Lian ascending again, saying the words, those awful fucking words —

' *Body in abyss, heart in paradise.'*

Xie Lian in a Gambler's Den, cheeks flushed as Hua Cheng named the terms of his bet, guiding him to shake a cup of dice.

But—

Bai Wuxiang grows still, watching the memories swirl and churn around him.

"Oh…I see it now," he murmurs, eyes narrowed into slits. "Very *clever."*

Because this memory isn't *his* .

He's never seen this one before.

His hand shoots out, and this time, he knows exactly where to look.

"It's the little bird that likes to hide in the trees," he muses, catching his attacker by the throat.

Holding him in the air, squeezing.

"You're a resilient little thing, aren't you?"

His head tilts to the side, taking in the sight of the ghost they call Ren Song.

Such promise.

"I nearly devoured you, last time we met," he murmurs, eyeing the array around them.

It's intricate. Elegant, even.

There are far more powerful beings who couldn’t manage this.

“…Though I suppose I was right to do so.”

Clearly the child has the skill required to become something far more dangerous than a mere savage ghost.

And there is far more hatred in his eyes than what Bai Wuxiang found the last time they met.

"Tell me child," he muses, squeezing Ren Song's neck just a little tighter, knowing that it won't inhibit the ghost's ability to answer. "What's your birth name?"

He obviously didn't grow old enough to receive a courtesy name before his death.

Ren Song offers him no answer.

"...You...want to know because you think I'm someone important?" he snorts, shaking his head—even if his range of movement is limited in Bai Wuxiang's grip. "Sorry to disappoint you, but..."

Thud!

Thud!

There are two sharp pains in Bai Wuxiang's back—and the body in his hands disappears in a rush of autumn leaves.

"...My mother worked in a tea house, and my father was a soldier." Ren Song snarls from behind his ears, yanking his daggers from the calamity's back.

It doesn't matter who your family was. How much wealth you had in life. What name you carried.

A knife is a knife, and you'll bleed like anyone else.

Bai Wuxiang wrenches his head around, hissing—

Only to come face to face with his brother, bleeding and shattered.

"Liar..." He whispers, broken teeth and bones grinding as he speaks. *"Liar..."*

Bai Wuxiang slashes at the specter, twisting around to stab outwards with his sword, but...

San Lang stares back at him, eyes wide, blood dripping from the corners of his mouth.

"F-Father?"

Bai Wuxiang's eyes drift down to where the blade is buried in the teenager's chest, lips trembling.

"I...I didn't..." He shakes his head vehemently, yanking the blade out as he turns around, attacking around him blindly.

Reminding himself that this isn't Tonglu.

These illusions are designed to cause or exacerbate madness. They aren't real. They aren't the—

"I hate you."

Bai Wuxiang grows still, staring straight ahead.

The prince kneels on the ground before him--the same as he was back then.

So beautiful, so new, so perfect.

Xie Lian tilts his head to the side, two silken strands of hair falling across his cheek, pearl earrings jingling softly as he moves.

"...My mother says we're not supposed to hate anyone," he admits slowly. "She says it's a double edged emotion. But..."

He looks up at Bai Wuxiang.

"I hate you."

But he doesn't scream the words in anger, like he did before.

"I'm not scared of you. I don't feel sorry for you. I don't care about you at all. You're *less* than worthless to me, because all you do is break things."

"Like you?" Bai Wuxiang sneers, teeth gleaming sharply as he takes a step forward.

But Xie Lian only smiles.

"You did everything you could to bring that outcome in Xianle, didn't you? And all it took to unravel everything you had done was one peasant boy. How *pathetic."*

The calamity stalks toward him, hands trembling with rage.

"You would rather roll around in the mud with that mongrel than change your ways?!" He snarls, grabbing him by the shoulder. "All because you—?!"

"Love him."

That wrenches an enraged howl from Bai Wuxiang.

But with one violent shove to his shoulder—

Xie Lian falls.

The terrain around them shifted without Jun Wu ever noticing, warping itself into...an all too familiar cliffside.

Bai Wuxiang stands at the edge, his face growing impossibly more pale.

"No..."

He drops down to the bottom, somehow even more affected by this than he was by the sight of his own sons dying, gathering the prince's shattered, unmoving form in his arms.

"NO!" He screams, shaking him uselessly.

Almost like a child that's been throwing a beloved toy at the wall over and over again, only to be shocked when it breaks.

And no matter how tightly he holds the prince—

He still crumbles to dust in Bai Wuxiang's arms, fading away into nothing.

Bai Wuxiang rocks back and forth on the ground, hands covered in soot, eyes wide and unfocused as something inside of him begins to break.

"It's not..." He whispers, lips dried and cracked. "It's not real...it's not...it's *not..."*

The scene starts to shift again, but—

Somewhere between desperation and a sudden burst of awareness, the calamity twists around, snatching something up between his claws.

Bringing his blade down over and over again.

"It's not real, it's not real, IT'S NOT REAL!"

His sword comes back soaked in crimson—and around them, the darkness begins to flicker.

Showing shards of volcanic stone piercing into the sky above—gnarled, twisted roots surrounding them as trees sway in the breeze overhead.

Blood drips down Ren Song's chin.

Eight stab wounds are visible through the front of his robes, blood pooling through the fabric.

But his hand grips the blade of Bai Wuxiang's sword, holding on fiercely, stopping the calamity from pulling it out one final time.

"Do you...even know *where we are* right now?"

Bai Wuxiang stares, tugging at the blade irritably.

Of course he knows where they are, how could he not—?

BOOM!

The blow to his chest is enough to send him flying off of his feet, slamming back into an awaiting blade, the weapon running through his heart.

Quan Yizhen pulls his fist back, spikes of metal bent around his knuckles and in between his fingers, giving his blow the force of a hammer, even if he didn't bring a blade with him.

And when Lang Qianqiu pulls his blade free, kicking the calamity in the back—

He laughs.

Bai Wuxiang falls down to his knees, and he laughs.

"What's so funny, you fucking *freak?!"* Lang Qianqiu snarls, pulling his sword back—and Bai Wuxiang doesn't stop him from stabbing him again, allowing the blade to run him through.

"There's...so much to choose from."

His eyes drift between the three, watching as Quan Yizhen stalks toward him, fists clenched menacingly.

"The Martial God of the East...The Martial God of the West...and a child from the Central Plains, all fighting as one. It's almost *auspicious."*

He laughs again, not seeming to feel an ounce of pain from the sword piercing his body—almost leaning back into it, like the reminder of a blade is a comfort to him.

"But even more ironic...is the fact that you never would have been a prince without *me."*

There would be no Lang clan without Bai Wuxiang. No Kingdom of Yong'an.

No General Tai Hua. No Gilded Banquets. No Guoshi Fangxin.

"But I want you to know something, boy." Bai Wuxiang tilts his chin back, looking up at Lang Qianqiu from where he sits on his knees.

"He prayed to us every single day that he spent in that coffin, begging for help."

His lips curve upwards with satisfaction when Lang Qianqiu's eyes grow wide with horror—

And pain.

"After enough time, he did not beg for freedom. He begged for death. So," Bai Wuxiang lifts one hand, "Tell me, prince—"

His sword flies back into his grip, ripping itself violently from Ren Song's body, leaving the ghost limp and bleeding on the ground.

"What do we do, when faced with the wicked?"

CLANG!

By the time Bai Wuxiang lifts his blade to attack—

Lang Qianqiu has already pulled his own sword free, raising it to parry.

CLANG!

CLANG!

CLANG!

"Maybe..." The martial god growls, sweat dripping from his temple. "You should remember who *taught* a man how to use a sword before you go and PISS HIM OFF!"

He might not have Xie Lian's innate talent or skill—but he's trained hard, and in the same sword form.

It's swift, overwhelming, and leaves little holes in his guard, making it far more difficult for Bai Wuxiang to look for an opening—and all the while—

BOOM!

Another blow lands in the middle of his back, knocking him forwards and into Lang Qianqiu's blade once more.

And it's almost *unfair* .

Any other opponent would be easily outmatched by two martial gods pummeling him from either side, raining blows faster than the calamity can block them.

Most gods would fail under such an onslaught. Most ghosts, too.

But not a calamity.

Somewhere in the hail of blows, he sticks out both hands—

One catches Lang Qianqiu's sword, snapping it in two—the other grabbing Quan Yizhen by the neck, twisting him around until he slams the martial gods together, sending them flying.

BOOM!

They land so violently, a crater arises around the two—rendering them unconscious in an instant.

Totally vulnerable, ready to be devoured.

Bai Wuxiang's tongue peeks out, wetting dried and cracked lips, when —

"HEY ASSHOLE!" Ren Song screams out. "YOU DIDN'T LET ME TELL YOU *WHERE* WE ARE!"

Bai Wuxiang doesn't even look back, blood staining the sweeping sleeves of his robes, gray streaked hair loose, blowing in the breeze.

"You can tell me all about it, after I kill your friends—"

"You should listen, your highness."

And that voice is enough to make Bai Wuxiang stop walking, turning to look back over his shoulder.

Only to find his Guoshi, kneeling on the charred earth, holding Ren Song's bleeding body in his arms—supporting the young man enough to help him sit up.

Not like the Mei Nianqing that he saw in the illusions Ren Song cast before—a painful memory, or a taunting specter of loss.

The ghost doesn't have enough strength left to cast a spell that intricate—not after how many blows Bai Wuxiang landed on his spirit.

No, this is him, in the flesh—and the sight makes Bai Wuxiang snarl.

"You *dare* show your face before me?" The calamity whispers, eyes flaring with rage. "HERE, of ALL places?!"

Mei Nianqing's answer is maddening in its simplicity:

"Of course, I dare."

He braces Ren Song against his body, holding a hand against the ghost's shoulder as he hacks up blood, clutching his ribs.

"This place isn't ours anymore, your highness. That changed long ago."

"...What joke is this?" Bai Wuxiang hisses, lifting his blade. "This is where I lost everything. Where everyone betrayed me! Where my CHILDREN—"

"It's a graveyard," Ren Song rasps. "For my brothers and sisters."

Those who died in the civil war and plague that followed in the greatest numbers—

The lost Children of Xianle.

An entire generation of souls snuffed out. Crammed into the fields of Tonglu when they entered the afterlife. Some of them used as cannon fodder for more powerful ghosts, but—

Most of them met their end here, at the hands of the ghost of Lang Ying.

This land was already cursed, before it became soaked with even more blood, death, and despair.

"These are the burial mounds of the Children of Xianle," Ren Song lifts his chin, looking Bai Wuxiang in the eye.

And like those who have shaped him—

He shows no fear.

"Lang Ying tried to release human face disease again, the same way you showed him the first time."

But with more children, more suffering—

More resentment.

"Hua Cheng killed him before he could unleash it," Ren Song recalls quietly. "And every single one of the remaining souls tied to it has moved on, or been dispersed."

But the land still carries the stain of what happened—teeming just beneath the surface. Not unlike the magma chambers beneath Mount Tonglu.

"Except for *me."*

Ren Song is the last one.

He is not the last survivor of Xianle—

But the rest are soldiers.

Gods and Calamities.

He is the last innocent.

The last child of a madman's war.

"...And what of it?" Bai Wuxiang questions coldly. "Am I supposed to feel *remorse?* Or *pity* you?"

The ghost smiles, and for the first time in all these years—

He feels this release in his chest. An unburdening of tension.

And he thinks that's what peace must feel like.

"I don't need you to be sorry. I don't care how you feel."

"How *brave."*

"Baoshan."

Ren Song sits forward, spitting blood onto the ground—and when he looks back up at Bai Wuxiang, he smiles.

Unkindly. With such wrath, but—

The intention to make it count.

"My birth name is Baoshan Shuo, and I curse you."

The words sound so simple—but they carry weight.

He presses his palm to the ground, allowing the Burial Mounds to taste the blood of Xianle once more—eyes burning like wildfires.

As he holds all of his resentment in the palm of his hand—all of the pain of his brothers and sisters—

And he makes it count.

"I curse you. I curse you. *I curse you."*

He repeats the words three times, watching as Bai Wuxiang stares at him, baffled.

"...You would throw your existence away so fruitlessly?" He muses, his head tilted. "The curse of this land does not work on me."

He's a killer.

Baoshan Shuo smiles, eyes burning brighter and brighter, until they mimic the effect of sunlight—burning until Bai Wuxiang is forced to shield his eyes, squinting.

"Are you sure about that?"

And then, with dawning horror, Bai Wuxiang realizes what he is dealing with.

A child born into war and famine. Raised in the shadow of two calamities. And the man who taught him magic…is a ghost who has spent almost his entire *existence* under the burden of one of Bai Wuxiang's curses.

And with that upbringing, Ren Song learned something crucial.

The conditions of a curse are dictated by the one who releases it.

This curse doesn't leave *murderers* exempt.

And for the first time in countless years—

Bai Wuxiang clutches his face, making faint cries of pain, staggering away from the two.

"What...HAVE YOU *DONE?!"*

His fingers dig into his skin, only to find—

It isn't even anymore. With large lumps rising in his cheeks and throat, openings tearing open in his skin—

And the whimpers aren't coming from him.

They're coming from the faces tearing through his flesh.

Human Face Disease has been unleashed once more.

On one person.

It can't be spread to anyone else. It can't be *cured.*

It's fused to Bai Wuxiang's very soul. And if he attempts to rejoin Jun Wu—

It will fuse itself to the emperor as well.

"Release it..." Bai Wuxiang moans, straining under the maddening cries of agony filling his ears—

So painfully reminiscent of his wife. Of his sons.

"RELEASE IT!"

Ren Song cackles, his voice echoing through the air.

"What makes you think anyone would give you *mercy?"*

Bai Wuxiang can't even form words in response, only an animalistic howl as he scrambles forward, claws and fangs extending—

CLANG!

Only to meet the resistance of steel.

"...Oh guoshi," the calamity sneers, speaking louder to be heard over the din of voices. "Has someone finally decided to take their head out of the sand?"

Mei Nianqing rises to his feet, holding his sword aloft.

"I turned my back on the children of Xianle once," he admits, staring back at his student.

The boy he failed so *profoundly* .

"Never again."

"...You'll die," Bai Wuxiang reminds him coldly, not sparing any of the empathy or sorrow that his master would for him. "You don't stand a chance against me."

"I know," the guoshi agrees softly.

He knows his value has never come through his strength, or his bravery.

It comes from his willingness to endure sorrow, regret, and shame—all in the purpose of waiting for the day he could tell the truth.

Until someone came along who was strong enough. brave enough.

If that time isn't now—then it will never come.

And he's *tired* of running.

Even if the gesture is mostly hollow.

Knowing before he started that it would only take ten strikes for Bai Wuxiang to bring him to his knees, his sword cast aside. One arm hanging limp and useless, the other barely managing to support himself, stopping him from collapsing.

"...After this many years..." Bai Wuxiang mutters, his voice screamed hoarse as he holds a blade to his former master's throat. "To think you would throw your life away so easily..."

Mei Nianqing doesn't tremble, or try to flee.

He raises his chin, offering his neck freely.

"I didn't throw it away, child. I can assure you of that."

And even now, after all of these years of loss, distance, hatred, and death—

Hearing his former master call him a child makes the calamity hesitate.

CLICK!

CLICK!

CLICK!

And Mei Nianqing was right.

Bai Wuxiang looks down—

Only to see chains locked around his ankles.

Like wraith butterflies—made from pure spiritual power.

Larger than manacles, twisting until his bones break.

The same chains that ships use to weigh anchor, sinking down deep into the ocean depths.

Mei Nianqing knew those last few minutes would accomplish exactly what the three of them had set out to do.

To buy time.

Just enough for *another* Ghost King to arrive.

...Just not the one that Bai Wuxiang expected.

And now that he's here—he doesn't pay Bai Wuxiang any mind.

Kneeling on the ground with a young ghost in his arms, holding him close as his form begins to warp and flicker.

"Don't...don't look so sad..." Shuo croaks.

He Xuan doesn't look up—but blood falls from his chin.

"You were the one throwing a huge fit...saying we weren't a big happy family..."

"Shut up," the ghost king whispers—and it's the words he doesn't say that Shuo hears the most clearly;

I lied.

"You should've called for help *sooner."*

"It wouldn't have changed anything."

He Xuan closes his eyes, regret searing him like a brand.

Thinking of all of the years he spent, chasing revenge for the family he lost.

Never seeing what he had. That he—

All these years, he still could have been *someone's* older brother, if he had just stopped to look.

"...Besides, I...I didn't think...I'd ever get the chance to...find someone who hurt me, and...hurt them *back..."* Shuo whispers.

And he did.

The man who unleashed the plague that killed his mother. Bao. His other brothers.

The man who cursed Hua Cheng.

Shuo *got* him.

He didn't get a funeral. He didn't get the chance to look his killer in the eye, or to even see the man receive justice.

But he left a mark on Bai Wuxiang that will never be lifted.

And even if he doesn't matter, even if he *is* nobody—

He did something *important* .

"...He should be here," He Xuan mutters, turning his gaze back to the portal behind him.

Knowing that he can't take Shuo back now. Even if it didn't mean risking Bai Wuxiang following him—

They don't have that much time.

"...That's okay," Shuo whispers, but...his voice cracks. "I'm kind of glad that he isn't. I don't...wanna be another sad memory, y'know?"

He's never had someone mourn him before, and he—

Shuo doesn't want that. He never has.

And this—this isn't so bad.

It was so much scarier, last time.

He isn't alone, now. He knows he's safe.

And when He Xuan's arms tighten around him—Shuo knows that he's being held by someone who cares.

That was all he ever deserved.

"He Xuan..."

"You shouldn't talk any more—"

"You're gonna make a really good dad," Shuo rasps.

He Xuan can't bring himself to lift his head, not wanting to show the boy the look in his eyes—or make these moments about his pain, but —

"...You were always a good kid," he whispers. "And he's *proud* . You know that? He—"

Shuo's form grows impossibly light, wavering.

He Xuan has experienced more pain and loss in his life than any man should have to. But—

It never gets easier, feeling someone you care about slip away in your arms.

Your first love. Your little sister. Your oldest enemy—

And now, part of the family you didn't know you had.

"I know," Shuo whispers.

He didn't before, but—

In those last few moments, there's no room for denial.

No more energy for being afraid of admitting who raised you. The face you imagine, when someone asks you about your father.

Your *real* father.

In that sense, he supposes he got lucky.

Because even when no one had to take him—Shuo still somehow ended up with the best. And that makes it hard, because—

He *really* doesn't want to go.

But all seasons change. Leaves fall—and in the end, they blow away.

He Xuan remains still as the spiritual remains drift around him—maple leaves swirling in the air, brushing against his hair before they float away.

To somewhere better, he hopes.

A world with more kindness than this one.

And when he finally lifts his head—

The whites of his eyes have turned black, giving the gold of his irises an unnatural hue. Fangs extended as he rises to his feet, chains gripped in either of his hands.

"I warned your other half before," he recalls, his voice low.

"That the next time you saw me, you'd die."

The ground beneath their feet begins to rumble.

Ancient waterways, soaked with resentment and corpses, rushing to the surface with a bloody vengeance.

Black waters bubbling up through ash and bone.

"And I'm a man of my word."

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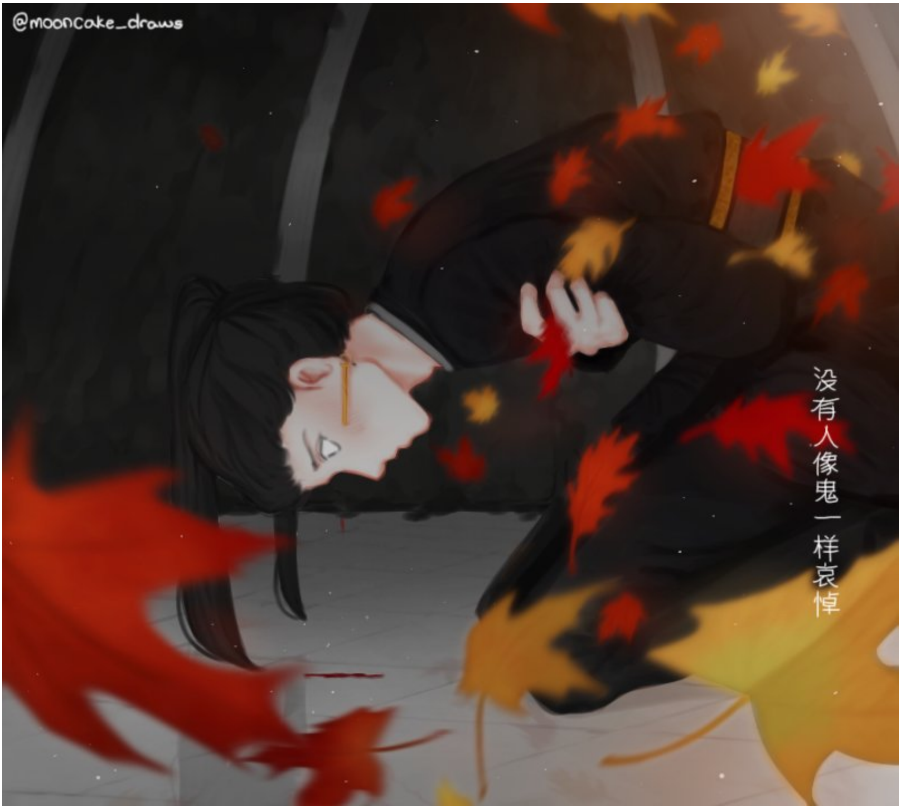

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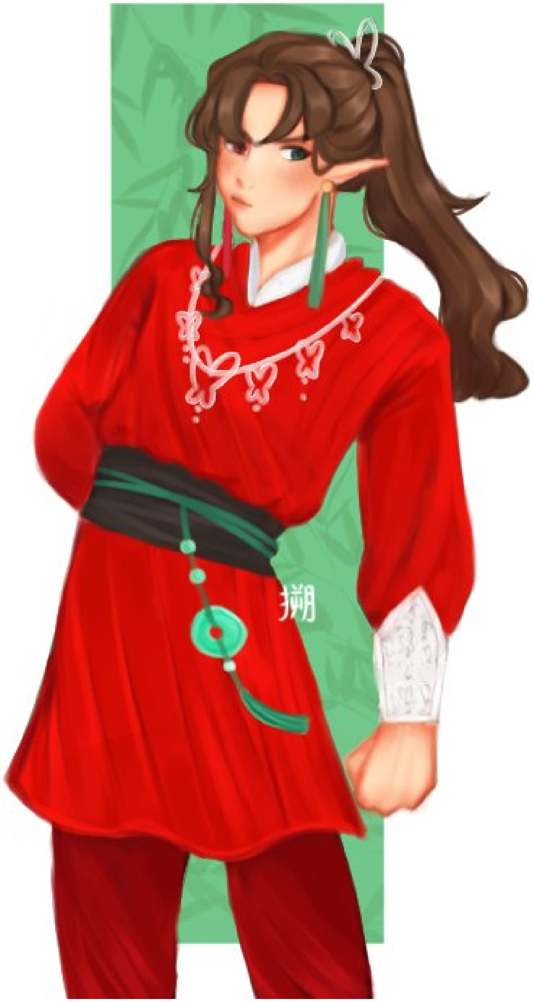

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The God Who Drowned

Chapter Summary

> “I have a question, before I die.”
>
> Xuan Ji whips her head around, pieces of hair sticking to her face, her armor soaked from the rain.
>
> “That’s a change of tune,” She snarls. “What is it?!”
>
> “You’re doing this because you love him.”
>
> That isn’t a question—just a statement, even if he doesn’t believe it’s true.
>
> “Why else would I be here?!”
>
> “Do you care if he’s happy?”

Chapter Notes

> This is a shorter chapter, but the next two that follow are very long, so I didn't know how else to split it up! Sorry!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

BOOM!

A barrel explodes, sending shards of splinters flying in every direction, salted fish hurling into the air.

One of them lands against the general’s cheek, making her grimace with disgust as she claws it away, leaving a wet mark behind.

“Hiding like a little *rat…”*

Her eyes drift through the market, peering between empty stalls, looking for a twitch of movement.

A sign of life.

“You made it seem like you were ready to go down in a blaze of glory before…” she sneers, blade dragging against the ground. “Did somebody get cold feet?”

She sends another fireball into a nearby stall, making it explode into a ball of smoke, sparks flying.

“It really is such a shame that you’re a man…” She hisses. “Otherwise, I could dress you up like another bride before I show him your *CORPSE!”*

“I’d still probably pull the wedding dress off better than you.”

The voice echoes from different points in the square, making it impossible to tell where it’s coming from—and Xuan Ji shrieks with fury, destroying an entire store front in her wrath.

Across the square, Shi Wudu slumps further down against the ground, his back pressed against the counter of a glassware stall, vases and cups clattering around him with every strike Xuan Ji makes.

As it turns out—taking on a ghost given power from the emperor himself when you don't have your godhood is easier *said* than done.

The deep claw marks in his ribs are a testament enough of that.

"I was going to be MERCIFUL to you!" Xuan Ji snarls. "I was going to let you die with DIGNITY!"

BOOM!

Behind him, another stall explodes.

"But now, I'll string you up before the city gates and let you ROT!"

Shi Wudu rolls his eyes, stretching out one leg carefully, using it to nudge a polished silver serving plate on the shelf in front of him, carefully adjusting it until the reflection shows Xuan Ji, pacing in the square behind him.

“THEN HE’LL SEE HE NEVER SHOULD HAVE WASTED HIS TIME ON A WEAK, SPINELESS CREATURE LIKE YOU!” She howls, looking around wildly—

And reflection wavers, growing fuzzy at the edges. Not because her form has changed—

But because the plate is rattling.

Trembling with the shelf underneath it as the ground begins to rumble.

Shi Wudu's gaze snaps upwards—

And it's time to move.

CRACK!

Xuan Ji screams, staggering to the side when the white hot surface of Zidian slashes against her back.

"I have a question, before I die."

Xuan Ji whips her head around, pieces of hair sticking to her face, her armor soaked from the rain.

"That's a change of tune," She snarls. "What is it?!"

"You're doing this because you love him."

That isn't a question—just a statement, even if he doesn't believe it's true.

"Why else would I be here?!"

"Do you care if he's *happy?"*

Xuan Ji stumbles, seeming almost confused by the question.

"…He makes *me* happy—!"

"That's not what I asked," Shi Wudu reminds her coldly, thunder roaring as lightning crashes overhead. "After everything that's happened, has he ever given an indication that he actually *wants* you?"

Xuan Ji swallows hard, his words stoking ancient flames of rage in her heart.

"He…he used to cross the entire country in one night, just to see ME!" She shakes her head vehemently, clinging to the memory of the love she once had. "I gave up EVERYTHING for him—betrayed my country, destroyed my leg—THERE'S NOTHING MORE I CAN *GIVE!"*

"You think showing such a lack of principles would woo a man who values honor above all else?"

Shi Wudu lifts Zidian, curling the weapon around him in an arc of light as she lunges for him again, lightning meeting the steel of her blade with a violent—

CRACK!

"Do you think he ever could have been happy, obtaining victory by such dishonest means?"

Xuan Ji glares, deflecting Zidian with the side of her vambrace, wincing when the whip cracks through steel.

"It meant we could have been TOGETHER—!"

"He's never put that aspect of his life first." Shi Wudu shakes his head. "Actually, I can't think of anything that would disgust him more than the fact that the world is ending, people are dying everywhere—and instead of doing anything to help, you're *here* . Trying to kill someone you think of as some sort of rival for a man who doesn't *want* you."

Shi Wudu is more than aware of the fact that he doesn't cut a particularly heroic figure.

"Who would ever want a psychotic, traitorous *bitch* for a wife? Did it ever once occur to you that you weren't *good enough?"*

He doesn't espouse grand morals, or speak of good and evil.

Shi Wudu knows, after everything he's done, he has no *right* to pretend to be a good person.

But he's spent a lifetime sharpening his knives, and he's more than prepared to use them on her.

Stoking the rage inside of her until she's wild with it—focused on nothing but him.

"YOU THINK *YOU'RE* SOMEHOW MORE DESERVING?!" She screams, eyes growing black as coal. "I'VE HEARD THE STORIES ABOUT YOU, WATER TYRANT! A THIEF AND A *MURDERER!* A SYCOPHANT TO THE EMPEROR!"

A startled, angry laugh slips from Shi Wudu's lips.

"…You're right," he mutters, "I'm a vile creature. I'm a thief. A murderer. A liar and a cheat. But I am *not* a sycophant."

If he was, Jun Wu never would have discarded him.

Shi Wudu is here because he was strong willed and *disobedient* .

“Then what would you call yourself, an uppity little brat like you, enjoying his favor for so long? Why would he send me for you personally, if it wasn’t personal? What were you, his *whore?!”*

Shi Wudu doesn’t flinch—even if his fingers tremble.

“…I suppose so.”

He was bought and paid for after all, even if he never understood the price, or what he was giving away.

“But that isn’t an insult, and I never claimed I deserved Pei Ming. I *know* I don’t.”

How could he, after the pain and damage he’s caused?

“…I just love him,” the mortal admits.

He’s always loved him. Before he even knew what it meant. Even when he desperately tried not to. He loved him before he even knew his face, daydreaming as he watched a divine statue from a terrace window.

He loves him in a way that feels as fundamental as walking. Something he’s always innately known how to do, if he’s willing to take the first step.

Almost as if part of his *soul* has always been meant for loving him—like a flightless bird that can only soar in his presence.

“I love him, and I want him to be happy,” Shi Wudu mutters.

Even if that happiness comes from someone else. He’s too selfish to be happy, if Pei Ming fell in love with someone else.

But he would *never* stand in the way.

“That makes someone as vile as me better than *you.”*

“…It doesn’t *matter* if you’re better after I kill you,” Xuan Ji reminds him, leveling her blade with his chest. “And there’s nowhere left for you to run.”

The thunder crashes with a violent rumble, lightning illuminating their faces in sharp relief.

"I don't need to."

Xuan Ji looks down now—

Finally seeming to notice the ground shaking beneath her feet.

"…What the hell?" She mutters, looking up—

Just in time to realize the darkness on the horizon wasn't the storm clouds at all.

Rather, it's a wave.

"Hope you know how to swim."

BOOM!

Shi Wudu has never been fond of pain.

He's familiar with it. He can endure it. But he's never learned to greet it like an old friend, the way braver men do.

No—he accepts it with quiet dread, and waits for it to end.

But this isn't pain.

Even as the force of the water breaks his bones, swallowing his body like a small creature, trapped in the body of a great monster—

The pain isn't what grips him.

It's chaos.

His body slipping round and round between the currents. There is no up. There is no down.

Only water.

He wonders now, in some distant way, if he was feared like this.

It's hard, rendered into something so weak, to be faced with the immensity of the power that he once had.

Knowing that he wielded it selfishly.

Now, there's just the crushing weight of water dragging him *down* .

His back hits the street below—and when he opens his eyes, it's impossible to see through the chaos of debris, sand, and silt.

But even now, in that darkness—there's one point of light.

A hallucination—expected, given the oxygen deprivation, but—

It's a ghost fire.

One he saw in someone else's memories, floating at the bottom of the sea.

The soul of a good man, who drowned.

And when he remembers—

Shi Wudu grows still, fractured arms reaching upward.

Knowing now, with no shadow of a doubt, how He Sheng felt back then.

But when his hand brushes through the flickering flames—

They're warm. Like a small heartbeat in the palm of his hand. Baffling, because a ghost fire always burns—

Thud.

There's a sharp, searing pain between his ribs—and he sucks in a pained gasp, water filling his lungs.

Xuan Ji drives the blade home, the metal running him through, pinning him to the ground below, even with the water twisting and churning around them.

Desperate to stop his heart with her *own* hands.

Even if it means being pummeled by the currents herself.

Because even if everything the mortal said was true—even if Pei would never want her, even if he's disgusted with her—

Maybe there's worth to be found in killing such a legendary man.

Like slaying an albino tiger for the glory of its pelt.

She may have lost everything in pursuit of Pei Ming's heart—

At least she can return the favor by slaying the greatest son of Xuli where he stands.

Or, should she say drowns.

But legends are fickle things.

Great tales passed through the ages.

Whispered around campfires, sung by mothers as they rock their children to sleep.

A princess who slit her throat.

A general who broke his sword.

A prince who pleased the gods.

A young lord who poured wine.

For as long as many can remember, there have always been four.

In the days that follow—one of them will no longer hold the titles that they once did.

There will always be four great tales whispered from one corner of the continent to the other.

But now, there will be a new story to tell.

Xuan Ji squints through the dark, twisting her blade deeper, waiting to feel his heart stop, but—

Two points of light stare up at her through the darkness.

Cerulean eyes, filled with an unnatural light.

And when she attempts to pull back—a hand grasps her forearm.

Keeping her exactly where she is.

Xuan Ji attempts to rip herself away, and his broken, mortal arm shouldn't be able to hold her, but—

His grip is like iron.

BOOM!

Lightning strikes the sea overhead, bringing flashes of light all around them.

BOOM!

For the first time—lightning strikes the same point twice.

And now, it stretches far beneath the waves, encircling the two in a crackling, wrathful web of light, hair flaring out around them from the static shock.

Xuan Ji trembles from the force of it, teeth rattling.

And when she looks up—

A long, spidery arc of power stretches down from the sky in the blink of an eye.

Now, Xuan Ji watches lightning strike thrice.

Followed by a sound that dwarfs the rest—

CRASH!

And a light that frowns everything else out.

That of the divine.

It clears the water around them—creating a small, spinning maelstrom in the center of the wave as it spreads across the land.

Standing in the center of it all is a young man in dark robes—a golden pin in his hair. Arcs of electricity curling around his body like armor.

Known from henceforth as The God Who Drowned.

The Thunder Master, Shi Wudu.

And with every step he takes—the storm overhead roars with fury.

He flashes in and out of sight with each crash of lightning, and when he does—

He strikes Xuan Ji.

A bird circles overhead, untouched by the storm—its caws matching pace with the thunder strikes.

And when Xuan Ji is brought to her knees, burned and bleeding, hacking up smoke, on the verge of returning to a ghost fire—

The storm grows silent.

She lifts her head, armor scorched and broken—

Only to find Shi Wudu turned away from her, hands lifted towards the sky.

And even now, when water is no longer his affinity—

He's able to guide the sea back to its proper place, waves growing calm under his grip.

Leaving the two of them soaked, in the ruins of what was once Lanling.

"…" Xuan Ji lowers her chin, glaring at the flagstones hatefully. "Get on with it."

Shi Wudu doesn't look at her, staring at the sea as it returns to its normal state.

"Did you say something?"

Xuan Ji gnashes her teeth together in humiliation, nails biting into her palms.

"If you're going to disperse me—you'd better GET ON WITH IT—!"

"No."

His response is so calm—so unbothered, it makes her falter in the midst of a rush of bravado.

"…what?" She asks hoarsely, her throat still singed from the lightning blasts.

Shi Wudu shrugs, turning his gaze back to her.

"I'm not the merciful type."

He doesn't make Xuan Ji ask him what he means—he's more than willing to elaborate, kneeling down before her.

"You will never see Pei Ming again." He promises her quietly. "He will never hear your voice again."

She'll never hurt him again.

And in this state, where Shi Wudu has reduced her to little more than a ghost fire—she can't hurt anyone else, either.

"It doesn't matter what you do, how long you wait, or how hard you try—I won't *allow* it. So," he straightens. "If you really can't find another reason to linger on in this world—go on and disperse yourself. I won't give you the dignity of going down in battle."

He leaves her there, alone in the street.

Broken and powerless.

Lacking much in the way of a plan, the shock of his newfound divinity slowly beginning to sink in.

He…

Shi Wudu sinks down, sitting on the crumbling steps of the remaining temple of Ming Guang, staring at his hands.

When he forced himself to begin cultivating again—Shi Wudu constantly reminded himself that you don't need to be a good person to ascend. That he didn't need to deserve it.

Ascension has far more to do with fate and chance than anything else.

And yet, he had been so certain that door was closed for him forever.

That, if the world was fair, he would die in a place like Lanling—powerless and alone.

But life has never been about what you deserve. It just *is.*

The moon sinks low in the sky as the citizens of Lanling begin to sail back into harbor—forced to beach their ships with all of the docks reduced to rubble.

Finding everything they once knew destroyed, but—

They're *alive* .

All because of one man.

"…Guess you're homeless now, huh?" Jiang Ning lifts a broken store sign, examining it curiously. "You're always welcome back in

Yunmeng—if you can stand the boredom that is."

Jin Feng rolls his eyes, snatching the sign from his hands.

"I'm staying here, thanks."

The one good thing about everything being destroyed is that everyone in the city is in the same boat now, wealthy and poor cultivators suddenly on a level playing field.

"What, and cultivate with deadweight like them?"

"No…" Jin Feng mutters, tossing the sign aside. "Maybe I'll start my own sect."

He thinks it over, looking at the rubble around them.

And maybe build a taller house when he does…

A tower, even.

Shi Wudu watches the moon sink low, the sky beginning today warm near the horizon as the sun approaches.

Even the emperor's temple has been rendered to the foundations—but Ming Guang's remains.

Damaged, but still standing.

He turns the hair pin round and round between his fingers—the gold gleaming with heavenly light, stained by his ascension.

But it still feels the same—warm and familiar against his palms.

"…Where did you get that?"

When Shi Wudu looks up—

A mask settles over his face—heavy and white, molded to look like it's shedding tears.

Hiding his expression from someone who might recognize it.

A young man in armor stands before him, wary.

"…My General sent me to offer assistance, and it seems like a new god has ascended," he explains, still staring at the pin in Shi Wudu's hands. “…Was that you?”

And as if the day couldn’t become any more strange—

The stranger rises to his feet, pulling Pei Su into his arms.

“I’m glad you’re alright.”

Pei Su remains stiff in his confusion, eyebrow raised—trying to understand why the man’s voice sounds familiar, and for some reason…distorted.

“Take me to him.”

“…What?”

"Your general," the new thunder master murmurs, pulling back. "Take me to him."

In any other scenario—Pei Su would hesitate to bring a stranger to his general while he was already injured, and under such strange circumstances, but...

Something tells him that he *should* .

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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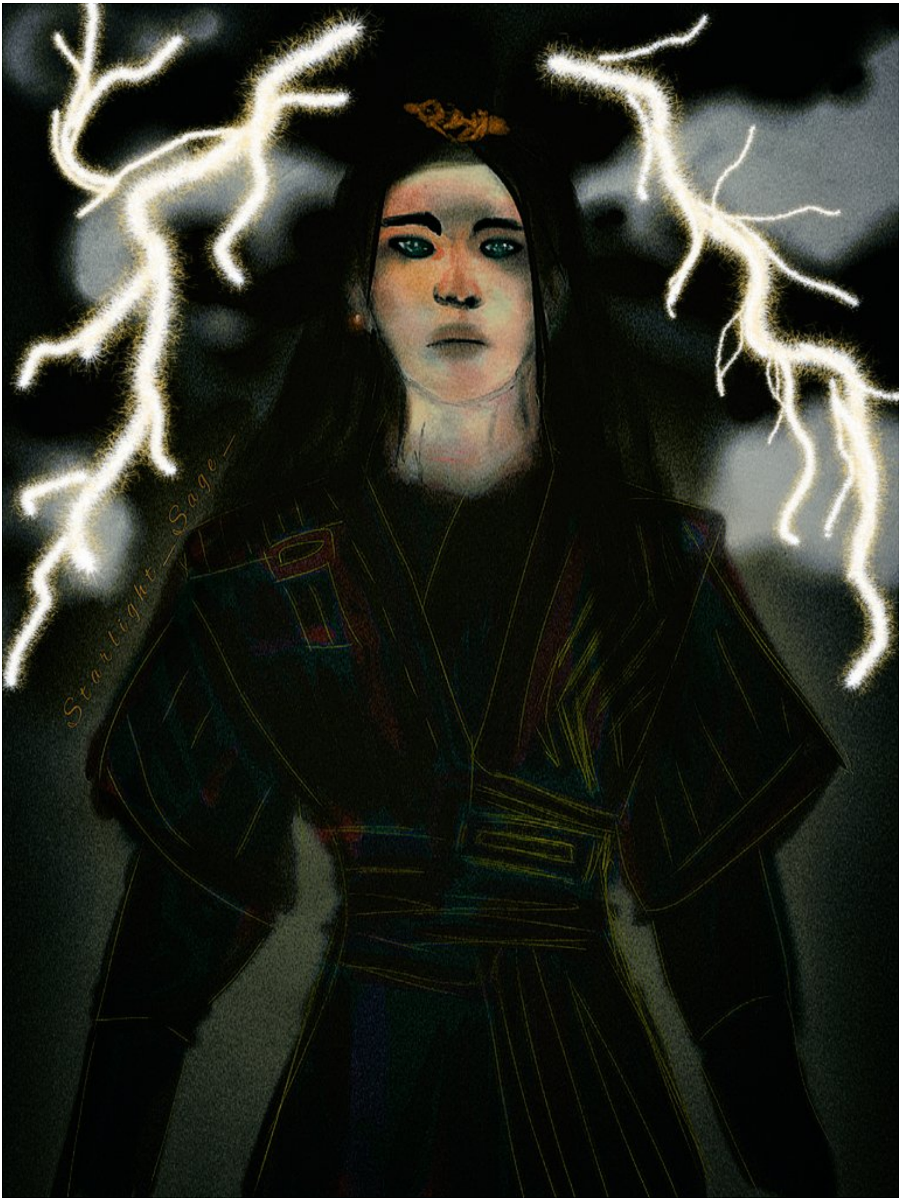
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CREDIT: **SAGE**

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you guys so much for taking the time to read a million words of this story! I know it's a lot of time and effort to put aside to consume my work, and I'm so grateful! I couldn't do all of this without the kindness and support, I appreciate everyone who has been following this fic so much! I hope you all have a wonderful day, and please send birthday wishes to taizi dianxia!

xoxo, Evie

He Doesn't Tell Stories Anymore

Chapter Summary

> "...What's gotten into you?" His father asks, squeezing him tight. "Bad dream?"
>
> The little boy nods, refusing to lift his head from his shirt—hugging his father as tightly as he can.
>
> "You went away, and I couldn't f-find you a-again..."
>
> Mu Shen shakes his head, lifting the boy to his feet. "I'd never leave any of you, A-Qing, you know that."

Chapter Notes

> !!!IMPORTANT CONTENT WARNINGS!!!
>
> This entire chapter focuses heavily on complex trauma, child abuse, childhood sexual abuse, and the aftermath in ways that could be seriously disturbing for some readers. No actual molestation or abuse is shown on screen, but it is heavily implied, and the results are shown in detail. It also focuses heavily on victim blaming. For those who need to skip, you can safely read the scene with Mu Qing and his father, then should stop reading the chapter at the point where the woman arrives in the market. I will place a summary at the end of the chapter for those who need to skip. Thank you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's warm.

It's quiet.

Everything is soft and easy around him.

There's the sound of a fire in the hearth. The lazy woofs of a dog outside.

Soft leather presses against his cheek, cracked and familiar, pushing his hair behind his ears.

"A-Qing..." A voice scolds without bite, "I keep telling you not to sleep here."

The little boy groans, curled up into a ball beneath the window, enjoying a warm patch of sun.

"Just a little longer, baba..."

His father's laugh is indulgent, filled with warmth.

At some point, Mu Qing forgot the sound of it.

Now, it makes him sit up, lifting his arms frantically as he crawls into the man's lap, holding him tight.

He smells like pine and sawdust from long days in the mill, and when his arms wrap around his son—

It's safe. *So* safe.

"...What's gotten into you?" His father asks, squeezing him tight. "Bad dream?"

The little boy nods, refusing to lift his head from his shirt—hugging his father as tightly as he can.

"You went away, and I couldn't f-find you a-again..."

Mu Shen shakes his head, lifting the boy to his feet. "I'd never leave any of you, A-Qing, you know that."

Mu Qing does know, holding his father's hand tightly as he follows him out the door.

His father is the smartest, the bravest. Smiles the widest and laughs the warmest.

And Mu Qing loves him.

Loves him so much, he doesn't know how to talk about him when he's gone.

Doesn't know how to answer his little sisters when they ask him what their father was like.

They could never ask their mother without making her weep.

All Mu Qing could do was hold them, and say he was sorry.

Sorry, because his embrace could never feel as safe as their father's arms.

Mu Qing had so many memories of him, and they had so little.

"Why don't you help me, then?" His father murmurs, setting him down.

It's easy, being in this memory. Back when everything was green and golden, carrying a stack of firewood nearly as tall as he is, helping his father fill the tinder box to the brim.

Back before they worked in golden palaces, surrounded by fake smiles and sharp tongues.

Back when his father was a wood cutter, and Mu Qing had never wandered further than the forest surrounding his village.

Helping his father set traps for rabbits and wild hens, hiding in trees as Mu Shen looked for him, snarling like a make-believe monster.

And nothing ever hurt more than he could stand, even when it felt like the entire world at the time.

Holding back tears as he walked up the hill to their house, only for his father to kneel down and squeeze his shoulders.

"A-Qing—what's wrong?"

It was some trivial thing—the butcher's sons picking on him because he was small for his age.

"A-and t-they s-said I w-was…"

"Shhh…" his father hushes him, stroking his hair. "Take your time to get the words out, it doesn't matter how long it takes you to say it—I'll listen."

Mu Qing swallows thickly, his face blotchy and red.

"They…" He screws up his mouth, forcing himself to slow down and sound out each word. "Said I…was…was s-stupid…"

"What?" His father's eyebrows raise. "Why would they say something silly like that?"

"Can't…t- *talk…*"

Mu Shen frowns, pushing the boy's hair behind his ears.

"You know that's not true. Mu Qing—look at me."

When his son doesn't comply, Mu Shen taps his fingers under his chin, making him look up.

"Your thoughts just move faster than your mouth does, that's all."

Mu Qing shakes his head, eyes shining with tears.

"Y-you a-always…"

"Shhhh…" his father hushes him gently, reminding him to slow down, and Mu Qing takes a deep breath.

"You…always…say that…"

"Because it's true," Mu Shen murmurs. "You're *brilliant* , A-Qing."

The boy grows silent, disbelieving, and his father sighs—sitting back in the grass as he pulls his son into his lap.

Part of him knows that he should be old enough not to be held like a little kid anymore—but Mu Qing rests his cheek against his shoulder anyway, holding on tight.

Part of him doesn't ever want to grow up. Wants to stay here, when he would catch fireflies in his hands to show his sisters. When he could ride on his father's back if he got tired on the walk home.

He doesn't ever want to grow too old for this.

"…You know why they pick on you, don't you?" His father murmurs, stroking his fingers through the boy's hair.

"I'm st…d-dumb…"

"No," Mu Shen shakes his head. "Because you're special."

"I'm n-not—"

"You are," his father's voice is firm. "You have no idea."

If Mu Qing is special, he doesn't have reason to think it'll be in a good way.

“The others…t-think I’m…a c-cry baby who…gets m-mad too…too easy…” he mumbles, only for his father to hold him tighter.

“That’s just because you care. *Never* be sorry for caring so much.”

He scratches the back of Mu Qing’s head gently—something he’s done ever since the boy was small, soothing him after a tantrum, or helping him back to sleep after a nightmare.

“And it might be hard for some of the children in the village—seeing how special you are.”

“W…Why?”

“…Because you could be anything you want to be,” Mu Shen explains carefully. “You could do incredible things, Mu Qing. Not everyone is blessed with so much talent.”

They used to say that about Mu Qing’s father, years ago.

He’s heard the stories.

That his father was one of the brightest young men in their village. That he even went to the Royal capital as a teenager, hoping to cultivate on Mount Taicang.

The details on why it didn’t work out were always carefully kept out, when he was young.

Just that it had something to do with the daughter of a wealthy man—and that his father wasn’t welcome in the capital any longer.

As a cultivator, or anything else.

“…What about you?” Mu Qing whispers, his cheek slightly warm and numb from resting on the bone of his shoulder.

“Hmm?”

“You’re special,” he points out. “You could be anything you wanted to be too, baba.”

Mu Shen blows out a harsh breath, thinking.

“…There’s nowhere I’d rather be, or anything else I’d rather be doing than being right here, with my son.” He answers easily. “It’s the most important thing I’ll ever do.”

Mu Qing blows his bangs out of his forehead, mimicking his father's breathing on a moment of biting sarcasm, and Mu Shen smiles.

"Say it."

"Huh?"

"Say that you're important."

He should have appreciated it more, back then.

How lucky he was, to be loved so much.

"Baba…" he groans, squirming.

"I'm not letting go until you say it."

"…'M important…" he mumbles, red around the ears.

"And *smart."*

There's another groan, and Mu Shen chuckles.

"What's this, you don't think my son is smart?!"

He gasps, faking offense. "I'll have to defend his honor!"

Peals of giggles erupt from Mu Qing's throat as his father tickles his sides.

"I-I'm smart, okay?! I'm *smart!"*

"And adorable!"

"Baba!"

"What?! You insult my son again?!"

"I *AM* your son!"

"Are you really?" His father teases. "I could have sworn my Mu Qing was taller."

The child squawks in indignation, and the two fall back onto the grass, play wrestling and laughing.

"There's my little tiger!"

They've done this countless times—and it always works.

Mu Qing's tears are always forgotten as they lay in the grass, counting the stars, his father pointing out the constellations as his little sisters wander out to join them, comfortable and sleepy on warm summer nights.

Nights so clear, the stars look close enough to touch.

His father whispers for them to hold on tight to the grass, to make sure they don't float away.

And Mu Qing is old enough to know better—but he still holds on so tightly.

"...Baba?" He whispers, lips trembling in the dark.

"What is it, A-Qing?"

"...Don't let go.”

He rolls over, grasping the front of his father's robes.

Why did you let go?

"Don't let go!" Mu Qing sobs, holding on as tightly as he can, but...

Every time he has this dream, he's never able to stop it.

There's a flash in the corner of his eye, and when he turns his head—

He's standing in the middle of the market in his village, holding a basket as his mother picks out vegetables from a nearby stand.

But there's always something in the memory that doesn't seem right. That sets his teeth on edge.

A woman who doesn't belong.

Dressed in silk robes, with pearls dangling from her ears, and gem encrusted combs in her hair.

Watching him, her gaze painfully intent.

Mu Qing was only ten years old, but even then, the hairs on the back of his neck began to stand up.

He takes one step back, then another, reaching for his mother's skirts.

"...Mama?" He mumbles, tugging again. "Why is that lady staring?"

Mu Qing’s mother follows his gaze—and when she sees the strange woman across the square…

Her face grows pale.

“Mama?”

She grabs his hand, clutching it tightly.

“We’re leaving.”

“But I don’t—?”

“ *Now* ,” she mutters, dragging him from the market without another word.

He never saw his father again, after that.

Mu Qing wasn’t there when they took him. His mother couldn’t look him in the eye and say where he had gone.

Not back then.

But when he found her in their bedroom, weeping as she clung to his father’s coat—

Mu Qing knew he was gone.

And that was the moment that he stopped being a child.

Right then, watching his mother weep, he felt something inside of him die.

He couldn't be blissfully unaware anymore. Not after that.

Every moment of every day he was watching. Thinking. Worrying.

Learning how to mend clothes while his mother went to work in the Inn. How to make meals for his sisters when she took another job in the local wash house.

But with so many mouths to feed, and not enough money to go around...he saw his mother grow desperate.

Taking the only job available that could pay what they *needed* —and Mu Qing couldn't understand why she seemed so pale and frightened at the time.

"...We have to live in the house?" He asks, sending their home a reluctant last look, his pack weighing heavily against his back.

His mother strokes the back of his neck in an effort to soothe him, but —

Her fingers tremble.

"You and Suyin are old enough to work now," she whispers. "They want both of you, too. Nothing difficult. Just to help with the washing —you two already know how to do that."

Back then, Mu Qing believed her.

Now, watching this memory in replay, he knows better.

Knows all too well the sting of terror that will strike his body when they walk into a palace for the first time, his sister holding his hand tightly.

Seeing that the woman of the house was the same one from the market, that day.

Standing at the top of the steps, pale and drawn, watching them with a gaunt expression--her hand tightly gripping the banister of the stairs, knuckles white.

Watching all of them with silent horror—

But no one quite so much as Mu Qing, her eyes haunting his every move.

Darkness falls across the room, shrouding his mother. His sisters. The other servants.

Leaving only Mu Qing, at the bottom of the steps—and her at the top.

He hated her.

Mu Qing thinks he hated her almost as much, if not more than he hated *him* .

Because he left scars on Mu Qing, on his family, that could never go away.

But she was the one who came *looking* for them. Who led the monster to their doorstep and fed them to it.

"...I never felt sorry for you," Mu Qing admits quietly. "Everyone else did. But I found you repulsive."

Because she was so willing to accept pity and sympathy, but, at the same time...

The room around them melts and warps, reshaping itself into one of the palace sitting rooms.

Mu Qing is eleven, and everything hurts, inside and out.

In ways he's too agonized to give name or meaning to. If he does, he thinks he might try to crawl out of his own skin.

"...Mu Qing, was it?" The lady of the house asks quietly.

She has a brittle voice, weak in pitch.

The guards hang over her, flitting to fulfill her every want and need. So careful with her, like she might break.

The bruises peeking from the collar of her dress imply vulnerability. They draw pity.

Mu Qing's are worse.

"You know it's important not to lie, don't you?"

She speaks as if he’s some sort of ignorant child.

As if a child could ever conceive of making an accusation like that without reason.

“Because my husband is an important man. My brother-in-law is a *very* important man. You know that, don’t you?”

Mu Qing’s hands hurt.

They hurt, because his skin is dry and cracked from scrubbing the floor. Because his knuckles are bruised from breaking the nose of another servant his age who tried to pull his sister’s hair.

But his nails hurt the most. Ripped and torn. From…from…

"…He hurt me." Mu Qing repeats firmly, fighting back the bile in his throat.

"It's not a crime to strike servants," she points out softly. "Or wives, for that matter."

His fingers start to dig into the edges of his chair—and the pain shocks him enough to flinch.

"…I don't think what he d-did is the same." Mu Qing mutters, and he —

He's trying *really* hard to be brave.

But—

"Alright." She stares him down, taking a sip of tea. "Shall I call him here, and you can explain exactly what you think the problem is?"

The child grows pale.

"…H-he has t-to…b-be…in the-the r-r-room—?" He spits out, teeth chattering, but—

"Can someone find the boy's mother?" The lady of the house sighs, looking towards one of the guards. "She should be just outside. I'd rather deal with someone who can speak properly."

Mu Qing's mouth twists as his face burns with humiliation.

"I…c-can… *talk* …—"

"Sweetheart," his mother steps in the room, wiping her hands on her apron before she places them on his shoulders, squeezing gently. "What's going on?"

Mu Qing can't look at her, his shoulder hunching under her hands.

"...He's been making very serious accusations against my husband," their mistress explains, setting her cup of tea down. "But he won't speak clearly or tell us *exactly* what happened."

His mother grows silent for a moment, then bows her hand—but her hands are still tight on Mu Qing's shoulders.

Staring at his nails, bleeding against the edges of the chair.

"...Forgive me miss," She murmurs. "I've been told I'm a bit slow. But how could he be making serious accusations if he hasn't even told you what happened?"

The lady of the house leans back, her lips pressing together tightly, growing thin with frustration.

"Because he's implied that it's something that should be reported to the authorities, but he won't explain how. What can we be expected to do with such information?"

Mu Qing's mother doesn't say anything for a moment, sending her a look of—

Of such *disgust* .

So palpable—

It actually makes her avert her eyes with a flicker of shame.

Mu Qing swallows hard as his mother kneels down beside him, gently pulling his hand from the edge of the chair, squeezing it gently.

"What is it you want to tell them? It's alright."

Still—her son won't look at her. Only through the corner of his eye, peeking through his lashes, and when he does—

He can see that his mother is *terrified* .

Even as she says reassuring words, holding his hand in a show of support. She might even be trying to hide it, but...

It was made very clear upon their arrival that the Qi family hiring them was an act of great charity. That no one else would take the single mother of six, widow of a disgraced man.

If he tells the truth, at best they'll end up on the streets, left to starve.

At *worst* ...

Mu Qing and his mother could end up...

"..." He hangs his head, pulling his hand out of her grip.

"Mu Qing?" She prompts him again quietly, waiting.

And it's not just for the sake of their survival either, it's—

It’s the sort of thing that you never forget, once you know.

Mu Qing doesn’t want *that* to be the only thing his mother thinks about, when she thinks of him. He doesn’t want her to feel like she let him down. Doesn’t want it to make her feel as bad as he already does.

“…” She stares at his face, waiting, but when it becomes clear that he isn’t going to say…

She hangs her head, clearing her throat.

“…Apologies, miss. It’s been hard since his father passed…he…” her voice is strained. “He likes making up stories, sometimes.”

Mu Qing does lie sometimes.

He lies about why he does things, about where he was, and what he was doing.

But he would never lie about *that* , he—

He doesn’t even have a word for what happened, doesn’t understand what it *is* —

How could he lie about it?

“…It’s alright,” the noblewoman sighs, reaching for her tea once more. “It’s normal for children to act out when they’re grieving. He probably doesn’t even realize that he’s doing it, but—”

Her eyes cut to Mu Qing, shrouded with emotions that he could never understand.

“…You should be careful, boy. Keep making up stories, and no one will believe you when you’re telling the truth.”

Mu Qing has a monster in his chest.

Placed there by a beast of a different kind.

It’s dark, jagged, and ugly. Angry and vindictive.

He feels it there, now.

The spines of its tail digging into him as it coils with fury.

But he wasn't born with the privilege of letting it out, the way his masters do.

Mu Qing's monster is on a leash, locked away as he sits there, silent and still.

But inside, it *howls* .

It's there when he's at the foot of the stairs, scrubbing the floors until his shoulders ache from exertion. Until he can't feel his fingers.

He doesn't look up, doesn't pause or shift his movement as others walk past.

Invisibility is an art he's carefully practiced, and he wears it like a shroud.

Until one of the servants inevitably places a hand on his shoulder, telling him that someone wants him to clean the floors in the library.

He always has to be asked twice.

He always stops and stares at the door from the end of the hallway, wishing it would just stretch on forever instead of getting closer.

Mu Qing will never hate another room so much.

He knows the wood grain in the ceiling by heart. Has memorized the tiniest tears in the silk lining of the couch by the window.

Even eight centuries later, he could still tell you exactly what the books smelled like. Which floorboards creaked and which remained silent.

There are other things he could tell you, but he never would.

Mu Qing doesn't tell stories anymore, real or make believe.

He always leaves the door wide open behind him, desperately hoping that no one will shut it.

Someone always does.

But Mu Qing doesn't tell anymore.

Every time the door shuts, the monster gets bigger. Angrier. Louder.

With sharp claws and jagged teeth.

“Why would you hit him?” His mother asks, dabbing a cool cloth against a swelling black eye.

“I don’t know.”

His words are always hollow.

“You broke his *jaw* , Mu Qing.”

He’s never gotten along with the other boys who work in the kitchens and stables—

But now, he doesn’t just use his words when he’s angry.

Now, someone doesn’t have to hurt him for him to hit back.

Mu Qing hits first, and he hits harder.

Sometimes, because feeling something break under his hands makes the monster in his chest grow quiet and sated, and he goes from angry to numb.

Sometimes, because someone moved too quickly near his face. Walked behind him without warning.

Tried to touch him.

But sometimes, the monster slips through, wearing his face to hide its teeth. His hands hide its claws.

“Mu Qing…” his mother shakes his shoulder insistently. “I’ve let you sleep as long as I can, it’s time to get up now…”

Her son doesn’t answer.

His face is pressed into the pillow, desperately clinging onto a dream.

One where familiar leather gloves press against his face, gently rousing him from the floor.

Where arms hold him close, safe, *so* safe—

And no one ever lets go of the grass.

“Mu Qing!” His mother pleads.

“If you’re late another day this week, they’re going to start docking our pay. We’re still paying for the doctor after your sister had that fever, *please* —”

“No,” he mumbles, shaking her off, pulling the blanket over his head.

“…What?”

“I’m not going.”

“Mu Qing, you have to—”

“No!” He whimpers, his voice sharply *younger* than he actually is, tears rushing down his cheeks as he hides behind blankets, desperately trying to remember the sound of that voice, before it rushes away into a dream.

‘ *You’re so special , Mu Qing.’*

“Mu Qing, I—" her voice grows firm, trying to order him out of bed in a final desperate try, grabbing his wrist and pulling. “You get up this instant—!”

“NO!”

He screams, but it’s not him.

His arms strike out blindly, but those claws aren’t his.

“DON’T TOUCH ME!”

His throat is dry, raw from a monster’s roar taking flight through a child’s voice.

“DON’T TOUCH ME! DON’T TOUCH ME! DON’T TOUCH—!”

THUD!

Something hits the floor loudly, and he’s left lying there, nauseous and disoriented for the first three heartbeats, chest heaving.

But when he realizes what he’s done, it’s so much worse.

“… *Mom!”* He croaks, crawling out of bed in a trembling mass of limbs.

Finding her knocked to the ground, cheek swelling, nose bloodied.

And Mu Qing can't breathe. Can't *think* .

His chest is galloping, rising and falling too fast for his lungs to get any air, hyperventilation setting in as he weeps soundlessly, throwing his arms around her middle.

"I-I'm s-s-sorry!"

It's almost impossible to decipher the words coming out of his mouth.

Part of her doesn't even try to.

Holding him close, rocking on the floor with him in her arms.

She asks him again.

Asks him what's happening.

If that man is hurting him.

Mu Qing whispers *yes* , but he won't say *how* .

He doesn't tell stories anymore.

"…I'll get us out of here, sweetheart." She promises him, hugging him close, kissing his hair. "I'm looking for another place, I *promise."*

Mu Qing doesn't move. Doesn't lift his cheek from her shoulder.

They told the others he was sick today.

In part that's true.

"…Why did we even come here?" He whispers hoarsely.

"They…they were the only place that would take us, after your father —"

"After he *what?!"* Mu Qing weeps, his chest too small to hold what lurks inside of it.

It was something she had wanted to explain when he was older.

"Mu Qing, it's not…"

"What?! Why were they the only ones who would take us?! Why was that woman here the day he disappeared?!" Mu Qing presses, his heart aching and stricken. "Why didn't he come back?!"

"…He didn't disappear, Mu Qing, he never would have left us—"

"Then why did he?!"

"…" His mother hangs her head, left without a choice. "…He was arrested, Mu Qing."

His stomach plunges—and it never stops falling.

He's known for months that his father was never coming back. But—

That takes on a very different meaning now.

"…He wasn't a criminal—"

"I *know* ," She agrees.

"Then I don't understand—!"

"You know the lady of the house hates Lord Qi," Mu Qing's mother mutters, wary. "She rushed into a marriage with him to find favor."

"…But her sister is the queen! Why would she need—?!"

"Because when you're a rich young woman—there are things you just *can't* do, Mu Qing. Especially when your sister is being courted by a prince. And—" his mother grits her teeth with anger and disgust. "She couldn't be caught dallying with a disciple with nothing to his name."

Mu Qing leans back suddenly, staring up at her in shocked horror. "Why would he have anything to do with an evil hag like *her?!"*

His mother sighs, not necessarily disagreeing, but…

"People change, Mu Qing. Especially when life is unkind to them. I'm sure she was enchanting back then."

Mu Qing remembers the look in her eye, when he tried to tell the truth—and he struggles to believe that.

"And when there was proof of the affair she couldn't deny…"

His mother grimaces. "No one was willing to have her. Queen's sister or not. And for Lord Qi to be willing to take her…she had to tell a horrible lie about your father to absolve herself of any blame. He had to leave the capital after that, he didn't have a choice."

"…But…" Mu Qing bites back nausea, focusing on the memory of his father's face.

The kind, gentle, loving man that he knew.

"…You're sure she was lying?"

She bites her lip, resting her cheek on top of Mu Qing's head.

"When he told the story—I felt doubts at first," she admits softly. "When a man says that—it's usually to excuse his own actions. But… he had love letters. Favors she had given him. And when she came to the village…Mu Qing, she wanted your father to take her *away."*

Assuming that the bright, promising young man she *knew* would have the means to help her, a decade later.

Only to find him living a simple life with a wife and children—still without much wealth to his name, but content.

And he wasn't willing to abandon that for *her* .

Mu Qing doesn't need to ask the rest.

Lord Qi must have followed her—because that's what he does.

When he found his wife looking for an old flame—she was forced to choose between telling the truth, or avoiding his wrath.

And Mu Qing's father was taken the very same day.

"…But…" Mu Qing swallows hard, struggling to wrap his mind around the thought that his father could be gone, all for something so—so—

"If he knew there was a horrible story like that about him in the capital, why didn't he run further? Then they wouldn't have found him!"

"…Because he met me," Mu Qing's mother admits. "I offered to leave with him, but…"

She doesn't want to say it, because she knows how it will *sound* .

And maybe, if Mu Qing was still living the life he'd had a year ago, he wouldn't be able to understand on his own.

Because it might seem romantic when you read stories about couples running off together—but that isn't actually how it works.

It costs money, starting over in a new place. And two young people can endure the strife, but—

When there's an infant involved, it's complicated.

Mu Qing's father couldn't flee because of *him* .

He was trapped in that village because of *him* .

He *died* because of—

"But one of the other maids knows a farmer in the country looking for a wife," his mother mutters, her brow pinched. "He doesn't have any children of his own, so he might..."

It's a shot in the dark.

Mu Qing is an asset—a strong young man who can work—

But no one wants a widow with five small daughters.

"...Was she just going to leave Qi Rong behind?" Mu Qing asks suddenly.

"What?"

His mother is wary, wishing he would just let the subject go.

"You said she came to the village because she wanted Baba to take her away—but Qi Rong wasn't there that day." Mu Qing frowns.

His limbs still feel a little numb, in the wake of his breakdown—head aching.

"She was just gonna leave him?"

Qi Rong is a brat, and Mu Qing never liked him—but he's also *little* , little enough to need his mother around.

Even he doesn't deserve to be left behind by his own mother.

“…Not every mother is the same,” she murmurs, hugging him tight.

“Not all of them love their children the way they should.” Her grip turns even more fierce, rocking back and forth with Mu Qing in her arms, like she did when he was small. “It doesn’t matter what her plan was—it was *never* going to happen.”

Mu Qing hugs her back, his arms loose and tired around her neck.

“…I hate them,” he admits quietly. “I hate them all.”

There was a time when his mother tried to tell him not to hate anyone.

Now, she just holds him even tighter.

“I wish they were all *dead* .”

“…I know,” his mother admits, the bruise on her cheek darkening with every passing moment. “But you don’t beat men like that, Mu Qing.”

Not when you’re people like *them* , anyway.

“You survive them.”

Tears roll down Mu Qing’s cheek silently—

And he doesn’t think he wants to.

There are moments when he pretends he doesn’t make it. That he’s turned into a ghost, and no one can see him unless he wants them to. No one can hurt him anymore, he’s already gone.

It makes the days bearable, but some things could never be.

“…Gege?”

Suyin is sitting beside him, holding a cup of nails as he replaces a dry rotted piece of wood from the window frame.

“What is it?”

Mu Qing likes work like this. The kind that leaves his mind occupied, hands busy.

“…I don’t want to clean the library anymore.”

The hammer doesn’t fall, and his hands grow still.

“…I know I have to be a big girl now,” Suyin whispers, her nose chapped, eyes red and framed with dark circles. “But I don’t wanna do that.”

Suyin might be the second eldest—

But she’s years younger than him.

“…” Mu Qing lowers the hammer slowly, setting it on the grass. “Why?”

“…It’s s…scary,” she whispers, “A-and it…u-um…”

Arms wrap around Suyin, hugging her tight.

“Shhhhh…” her older brother hushes her softly. “You can take your time to get the words out.”

Suyin lays her head against his shoulder—tired.

“I’ll always listen.”

She bites her lip, arms wrapping around his neck.

“It’s…scary,” she rasps, lips dry. “And…it…it…hurts.”

Mu Qing grows silent, arms holding her almost painfully tight.

“…Does anyone else know?”

Suyin shakes her head.

“…He said he would hurt Mama…”

She’s shivering with fear, clearly worried that he might hurt Mu Qing, too.

It’s far too late for that.

“…He won’t.” Her brother promises. “You don’t have to clean the library anymore.”

She looks up at him, confused, but—

Mu Qing kisses her forehead, ruffling her hair.

“Go play,” he urges her quietly, nodding towards the other children at the bottom of the hill. “Gege will take care of it.”

Slowly, reluctantly, she does as he says.

Mu Qing has said the same thing about bullies before. Or monsters under the bed.

In the end, she supposes this isn’t that different.

Mu Qing stares at the hammer in his palm, mind spinning in countless directions, settling on one thought.

He won’t let anyone call Suyin a liar.

He doesn’t really think after that. There aren’t conscious decisions. Memories turn into flashes.

Setting the hammer down on the kitchen table, trading it for a knife.

The sharpest one. The one they use for slicing bone.

He wraps it carefully in cloth, making sure it won’t cut him, when he hides it under his shirt.

It’ll be found if he puts it anywhere else.

He goes to clean the library—for the first time without being asked twice.

Mu Qing leaves the door standing wide open.

Eventually, someone comes to shut it.

It’s different, this time.

The lady of the house isn’t home tonight.

It’s longer, and he falls asleep after—not even going back to his chambers.

Sprawled on that couch, one arm thrown carelessly across his ribs.

Blissfully unaware.

Mu Qing thought it would be hard. He remembers that. Puzzling around with the idea in his head. What it would mean, doing that to another person.

But he wasn’t a person at all.

People don’t do the things that he did. They don’t feel nothing, when a child begs them to stop.

Monsters do.

He wasn’t a person at all, and it wasn’t hard for Mu Qing to draw the knife across his throat in a quick, clean line—blood spraying.

It wasn’t hard for Mu Qing to watch as his eyes snapped open, soundlessly clutching at his throat, gesturing for the boy to fetch help.

It wasn’t hard for Mu Qing to sit down and wait for his hand to fall limp, and his eyes to slip shut.

It wasn’t hard for Mu Qing to clean up the floor after. Refilling the bucket over and over. Using countless rags. Never looking up from the task at hand.

Even as the body grows cold, and the blood sinks deep into the lining of the couch.

Mu Qing leaves the floor spotless.

But he doesn’t move the body, and he doesn’t clean himself.

He goes to the kitchens—cleans the knife before putting it back exactly where he found it.

Finishes the rest of the dishes, while he’s there.

Then he pulls back a chair from the kitchen table, and he waits.

Half an hour later, the door opens—

And green eyes stare up at Mu Qing, baffled.

“…M’ hungry,” he mumbles, slightly unsure.

The older child seems shell shocked—almost like he doesn’t really *see* Qi Rong at first, but…

“…Okay,” he rasps, rising from his chair.

It’s harder to move, as the adrenaline fades—but he reheats rice from last night’s meal, giving the boy a warm glass of milk.

He eats quietly, watching Mu Qing with wide eyes, and he asks no questions.

No one in this house ever does.

He’s back off to bed not long after, and Mu Qing waits.

Waits until a maid notices someone left a candle burning in the library.

Listens to the scream as she calls for the guards.

Unsure of *what* to do—they call for someone more senior.

An officer from the Royal Palace.

Jian Ming has never seen a scene like it.

Not a robbery, or the brutal beating he would expect from a crime of passion.

Someone cleaned the floor, but made no effort to hide the body—or even move it from the couch.

There’s no weapon to be found.

But it’s not difficult to discern what happened when they find a boy in the kitchen—hands, face, and shirt splattered with blood.

Sitting in a chair, looking up politely when the guards call his name.

He steps down from the chair, and when his legs wobble…

Jian Ming crouches beside him, reaching out to touch the boy’s arm—only for Mu Qing to scramble backwards, falling against the chair with a clatter.

That’s when the officer notices his wrists.

Beneath the dried blood, are large, viciously purple bruises.

Shaped like fingers.

He pulls his hand back, his fingers curling into a fist—and his next order makes the soldiers he brought with him pause, staring up at him in confusion.

“Call for a doctor.”

“…Sir…” One of them frowns, glancing towards the staircase. “That can’t help Lord Qi now…”

Jian Ming shakes his head, sitting on the floor—keeping a careful distance from the child.

“Not for him.”

The soldiers look at each other, baffled—but as they move to obey, their commander gives one more chilling order—

“Make sure it’s a woman.”

He doesn’t try to touch Mu Qing again. Just slides a cup of water to him, coaxing him until he drinks one sip at a time, quietly ordering the soldiers to not let any of the other servants leave.

Effectively locking the palace down.

The doctor comes not long after.

She’s young, with freckles around the corners of her eyes and ink-stained fingertips.

Eventually she lifts Mu Qing into her arms when she notices that walking pains him—

And it’s only then that the boy remembers he’s still young enough to be carried.

She takes him to a private room—and it takes time for him to let her look. Nearly an hour of gentle coaxing and reassurance.

That no one else is going to see. That she won’t tell his mother.

That she and his sisters won’t be in any trouble.

And when he finally relents—

Her hands are steady. Her face is carefully trained to be calm, gently reassuring him as she peels layers of terror and shame apart.

The first time he can remember being touched by a stranger without fear—and it was by a doctor.

There are places where she has to open her kit, treating his injuries with careful precision.

He's been hurt like this before—but he didn't know it was something you needed a doctor for.

The pain is bearable, now.

She gives him something to drink—something to keep him calm.

He thinks she was hoping it would help him fall asleep—but he still hears the voices outside the door when she leaves.

Hears her break down and weep, leaning back against the door—trying to keep quiet.

Mu Qing hears, but doesn't understand what there is to cry about.

Listens as she chokes out explanations to Jian Ming—using terms like ' *scar tissue'* and ' *long term damage.'*

Jian Ming asks if she thinks Mu Qing will make it, and he doesn't understand what that means—because he isn't dying.

Even if it feels like it, sometimes.

She says that she doesn't know, but children that age can be resilient.

Mu Qing doesn't think he is.

The lady of the house doesn't scream or weep when she comes home. Doesn't ask what happened.

She doesn't need to.

The only question she asks is for Jian Ming.

Asking what they're going to do with the *boy* .

"…I think it's in everyone's best interest if we call it a robbery," Jian Ming murmurs. "Send him and his family back to the village. He doesn't need to stay around this."

"…You're suggesting we just let him *go?"* She hisses. "Do you have any idea who my sister is—?”

“Do you think I would have left my wife’s bed to come here on *your* account?” Jian Ming glares. “Of course, I know who she is.”

“You—!”

“I also know that the condition of your brother-in-law allowing you to live in the lifestyle that you do was that *no more children* could work in this house.” Jian Ming glances around them as she grows silent. “I’ve counted thirteen in the servant’s quarters since I arrived.”

Mu Qing will remember the words that echoed from underneath the crack in the door for as long as he lives, and long after.

“They’re the *maids’* children, and most of them were too young for him anyway, you don’t understand—”

Too young for him anyway.

“You’re *foul.”*

“If it wasn’t *their* children, it would have been mine!” She pleads. “I didn’t know what else to do—”

“But now you…what? Want me to throw the boy in a cell? Cut off his head?”

“If he isn’t punished, people will *wonder* , they’ll *talk* —they’ll all think that I—!”

“You *did.”*

The steps back, her hands balling into fists, teeth clenched.

“You…you can’t treat me like this! My sister is—if they find out what you’ve done— *both* of you will be lucky if you still have your lives—”

“Try it,” the doctor snarls. “And I’ll tell *anyone who will* listen.”

Lady Qi glares, pulling her hand back as if to strike her. “Don’t forget who you’re *addressing* , you filthy little—!”

The doctor catches her wrist, shoving her aside.

“I’m *addressing* a woman who used defenseless children to protect her own reputation.” She hisses.

"And do you really think Captain Jian was silly enough to send for a country doctor for something like this? General Feng is my uncle. Still think you can kill me to keep me quiet?"

She falls silent, taking a step back from them both—and Jian Ming crosses his arms.

"I report directly to the general as well."

And it's a known fact—the King trusts no one as much as General Feng, not even his wife.

"Forget about keeping this quiet—you'll be lucky if he doesn't put you and the boy out on the streets after this." He mutters.

"He can barely stand the sight of you as it is."

Mu Qing listens, their voices swirling around in his head as sleep eventually takes him.

She doesn't get her way—he isn't thrown in cuffs or taken away for execution.

But Captain Jian doesn't get his either.

The royal family has enemies, after all.

No one has the stomach to kill a child to keep it quiet, but…

What's the harm in keeping him in the Royal palace kitchens? It's certainly an improvement from what his life was like before.

A mercy.

A fresh start.

In some ways, it is.

No one is hurting him anymore. The doctor from that night visits. Brings him cakes to take home to his sisters.

"…Did Captain Jian think I was gonna die?"

"Hmm?"

"He asked you if I was going to make it," Mu Qing mumbles, fiddling with a frayed sleeve.

"…" Doctor Feng is quiet for a moment, testing the reflexes in his foot. "You might not have felt it at the time, but you were badly hurt, Mu Qing. Over time, it could have..."

"…But is that what he meant, when he asked?"

Mu Qing doesn't know why she still visits.

She might just care—she seems kind. He trusts her.

But strangers don't help without a reason.

It might just be to make sure he doesn't tell anyone.

She sighs, patting his knee as she sits back.

"…I wish I could say what happened to you was rare."

But it isn't.

He was just the first one who made her *cry* —

Because he kept apologizing about the couch.

He knew it was ruined, because he hadn't been able to move Lord Qi before the blood sank in.

He was too heavy.

"…You still…have a lot of pain over what happened, don't you?"

Mu Qing doesn't look at her—but he nods.

Doctor Feng's expression is grim.

"…Sometimes, when that happens to a child—they get so sad, and they think they'll always feel that way. And…they give up."

"…But I won't?"

"Won't what?"

"Always feel this way," Mu Qing croaks, lips quivering.

"…Oh," Doctor Feng reaches for his hand, squeezing gently. "I don't think so. You're a tough kid. And someday—you're going to find something that makes you happy again," she promises.

"And when you do, no matter how small it is—you'll know everything is going to be alright. Even if it's hard."

Mu Qing's life has *always* been hard.

He just wishes that part of it, even a *small* part—didn't make him feel so bad.

"…I hope so," he whispers.

The women in the kitchens are so fond of him, always sneaking him extra food and pinching his cheeks.

Small things show up outside his door. Small stuffed animals. A golden foil.

Mu Qing never keeps them, taking them back to the palace guards instead.

Afraid of being a thief.

But one day, just as his feet are beginning to feel sure underneath him, just as the nightmares get less overwhelming—

It's all pulled out from under him again.

Not because *Mu Qing* said a word—but because others talk, and paranoia blooms.

That's how he ends up before the King in a private room. Trembling and stammering, promising that he wouldn't tell, he'd *never* tell—

And he isn't sure if what he's being offered is a bribe of silence, or a threat.

Maybe a shorter leash, even.

Until the day that segmented his entire life into two phases.

Before them, and after.

Walking behind the Queen like a little shadow, listening as she struggles to recall his name, offering—

"Mu Qing, your highness."

"…Ah, yes—thank you—Xie Lian, this is Mu Qing. He'll be looking after you from now on."

He takes a slow, shuddering breath—he used to work for his cousin, so he knows what to—

"Oh."

A voice calls out, and Mu Qing grows still.

"Hello, then—it's very nice to meet you."

Mu Qing had never met someone like that before.

So beautiful, it's hard to look them in the eye.

He's slightly shorter than Mu Qing, with fuller cheeks—with eyes that remind him of the sun shining across the River, just before sunrise.

He doesn't even *try* to speak, nodding his head sharply, but—

"Aren't you going to say hello? He's going to be with us every day."

"Oh…"

That's when he sees the boy standing beside the prince.

Older. Taller. Gangly. With deeply tanned skin, and a bruise on his cheek.

And he's giving Mu Qing a weird look, one that makes his stomach twist in a new, entirely unfamiliar way.

"...Nice to meet you."

Mu Qing's eyes linger for a moment—widening, and he looks down, swallowing down the heartbeat in his throat.

"…I promise I'll work hard."

The prince hums, looking back and forth between them for a moment —

Then reaches out, taking Mu Qing by the end of the arm.

"…Wanna see my room?"

The question is baffling, because in what world could he say *no?* But—

In an instant, they’re off.

Chapter End Notes

> SUMMARY OF CHAPTER: Outlines Mu Qing's childhood. After the scene in the market, his father disappears without explanation. He's moved into the palace of Qi Rong's family when his mother gets a job there, with him and his sister, Suyin, being old enough to work. He has increasing behavioral issues as he works there, and when he tries to tell Qi Rong's mother that he's being abused, he's called a liar and intimidated into silence. He lashes out at his mother, who tells him that his father and Lady Qi used to be lovers. She came to him that day to try and escape her abusive husband, and repeated her sexual assault allegations against him from when they were younger in order to have him arrested. Later on, Suyin tells Mu Qing that she's being abused. Mu Qing kills Lord Qi that night in response, Jian Lan's father is the guard from the palace sent to investigate. Feng Xin's cousin is a doctor who examines Mu Qing, and it's clear he was abused. He's moved into the palace as a servant to be monitored, and eventually assigned to Xie Lian as a bribe.
>
> Thanks!
> Evie

Don't Let Go of the Grass

Chapter Summary

“Do you like books?”

“…What?” He looks up, shocked.

“Books!” Xie Lian repeats, eyes round. “Feng Xin thinks they’re boring, he only likes it if I read to him, and he falls asleep sometimes. Do you like them?”

Mu Qing is an exception among the servants—he can read, his father taught him how.

“…I don’t know,” he admits. “I haven’t read many.”

“Oh…” Xie Lian frowns. “…Wanna borrow mine? What kind of stories do you like?”

Chapter Notes

CONTENT WARNINGS: this chapter still deals with complex PTSD, as well as the aftermath of childhood sexual abuse, victim blaming, and the like. While not as vivid regarding the childhood sexual abuse as the last chapter, reader discretion is advised.

The prince is sitting on the floor, items strewn around him, happily chatting away as Mu Qing sits beside him, unsure if this is what he’s *supposed* to be doing.

“Do you like books?”

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“…I don’t know,” he admits. “I haven’t read many.”

“Oh…” Xie Lian frowns. “…Wanna borrow mine? What kind of stories do you like?”

“I don’t…” Mu Qing looks away, squirming with discomfort, waiting for the show to drop.

For the prince to make fun of him—or, worse—pity him.

“…Right,” Xie Lian recalls, “you haven’t read many.”

He looks back at the stack of books, thinking.

“…Okay, you can start with my favorite. It’s got sword fights, dragons, ghosts—and the horse talks—”

“You like that one because there’s *kissing* ,” Feng Xin calls from where he’s lying on the edge of Xie Lian’s bed, hanging upside down to watch them both.

The prince makes a face, picking up a pillow to throw at him, his ears turning pinks.

“No!! It’s SWORD FIGHTS, Feng Xin!”

“Sure, sure—and not because the princess gets caught by the prince—while he’s flying on his dragon—and he looks deeply into her eyes as they miss while flying into the sunset—”

“The horse TALKS and there’s a secret treasure map and—kissing is gross, that’s the worst part!”

“…But all of your favorite books have kissing,” Feng Xin raises one eyebrow, bangs dangling away from his face, and Xie Lian’s jaw drops in mortification.

“Adventure books have kissing most of the time—why are you noticing that?!”

“Because your voice always gets squeaky when you read those parts, and it’s funny!”

Mu Qing clutches the book in question to his chest, looking deeply betrayed.

“…You’ve changed.” He sniffs, looking away.

“…Hah?!”

“It’s puberty.”

“Puberty?!” Feng Xin squawks.

“Mother said you were getting to an age where you were gonna start getting hairy and talking about girls. You’re already hairy, so I guess it was a matter of time—”

“I’m not HAIRY, dianxia, don’t say that!” Feng Xin cries, now equally mortified, eyes flickering to Mu Qing.

“It looks like you have small woodland creatures living under your arms!”

“N-No it *doesn’t* ! And I’m not talking about girls all the time, you KNOW they make me nervous—!”

“But now you’re trying to make my favorite books all about the kissing, and that’s just ONE SCENE—!”

“I like kissing.”

Both of the other boys stop, whipping their heads around to look at Mu Qing, who averts his eyes with discomfort.

“…In books,” he explains awkwardly. “I don’t mind if it’s in there.”

“See Feng Xin?” Xie Lian slams the book down in Mu Qing’s lap for emphasis.

“Us civilized gentlemen can read books with kissing and not make that the most important part!”

“I never said it was the most *important* —and—you’re about to start puberty *too* , y’know!”

“Nope, never.” Xie Lian shakes his head. “I’m not doing it. I don’t want to.”

“…Me neither,” Mu Qing agrees quietly, to which the prince gasps in delight—as though he’s won some sort of battle that Feng Xin has unwittingly dragged them into.

“See! Maybe he’ll cultivate on Mount Taicang with me!” He declares, flopping back on the ground.

“No girls, no kissing—none of that!”

“He already said he likes kissing,” Feng Xin grumbles, rolling his eyes when Mu Qing sends him a look.

“In *books* .”

“…At least I’m not hairy,” Mu Qing fired back with a slow, cautious little smirk.

“HEY—!”

Mu Qing discovers the first great love of his life: reading.

Devouring the first book Xie Lian loans him—then another, staying up by candlelight, eyes straining from exhaustion. Sometimes reading until it’s already time to wake the prince up for breakfast.

Then, a few months after—in a moment of genuine terror—Mu Qing finds the second.

“There’s nothing to be nervous about,” Xie Lian sighs, rolling back on top of his bed, slipping his boots off of his feet. “I already asked Guoshi, he said it was fine.”

Sure, he made some eye rolling comments about whether or not Mu Qing would be able to keep up, but he agreed.

The servant remains quiet and pale, carefully pulling pins from Xie Lian’s hair, brushing it out when it slips down around his shoulders.

“I know, dianxia.”

He knows, but He’s read the texts for new disciples—

And the word ‘chastity’ jumped out from the page like an angry beast. It’s been spinning around in his head ever since.

Does it count if he didn’t mean too? If he fails, is everyone going to know what happened?

“…Then what’s there to be so worried about?” Xie Lian tilts his head back. “You’re smart—and athletic, too. You’ll be fine, Mu Qing.”

But Mu Qing isn’t listening to him.

He’s listening to that achy, funny feeling in his chest. The familiar spine pricks of a monster’s tail.

Reliving every single thing in vivid detail, wondering if a line was crossed somewhere.

"Mu Qing?"

If it matters that he asked for it to stop. If it *matters* that he ripped his hands apart, trying to get away.

Xie Lian reaches back to where the servant's hands have gone rigid in his hair, tugging at the comb.

"Mu Qing, that hurts a little bit—"

But it doesn't say people who have *willingly* kept their chastity. It just said chastity.

His chest tightens, and the monster gets bigger.

Does that mean it doesn't go away ever?

Does that mean it doesn't get better?

But that's not fair. Mu Qing didn't *know* , he didn't want—

A hand wraps around his wrist firmly, pulling.

"Mu Qing—"

A sound comes through his lips, but it isn't *him* .

Claws scratch out, but they're not *his* .

CRACK!

"Don't touch me!"

He's curled up on his side, arms wrapped around his head, breathing hard.

And Mu Qing *thought* he knew what it was like, to feel scared.

He didn't know anything.

Didn't know the stomach gripping terror he would feel when he sat up, trembling—

Only to see the prince had fallen to the ground, shocked—

A red mark on his cheek.

And Mu Qing can't breathe, can't *think* .

His limbs grow ice cold, his breaths growing faster.

Every worst possibility crawls out to the front of his mind, paralyzing him.

"I-I-I'm s- *so* s-s-sorry—" he scrambled backwards, trembling like a leaf.

Thinking of what's going to happen to him, to his mother, to his sisters—

"I…It's okay…"

Xie Lian looks away, rubbing his cheek. "I didn't mean to s-scare you, you were just pulling my hair and it kind of *hurt* —"

He doesn't know *why* Mu Qing got so scared, but it's obvious that he was—

And the sound of his voice makes the servant pause.

"…A-are y-you c-c-crying?!" Mu Qing half whispers, half screams, even more terrified than he was before, and Xie Lian rubs his cheek even more aggressively, sniffling.

"I-I'm not trying to! No one's ever hit me before!"

Not ever—and he's certainly never been slapped.

"I'm s-s-sorry—!"

"It's okay!" Xie Lian cries, still sniffling as the tears roll down his cheek. "Just please don't d-do it again, okay?"

"I-I w…w-won't—"

"Good, this…this is good!" The prince wheezes, trying to smile. "I…it builds character!"

(He says, whimpering.)

"Any proper martial god needs to know how to take a punch like a man!" Mu Qing can't tell which one of them Xie Lian is trying to soothe, him, or himself. “Actually, maybe you should hit me again—”

“I j-just p-promised that I w-wouldn’t—”

“Right, I’m sorry—”

Xie Lian thoughtlessly slaps his hand against his own cheek in a frantic, ill-conceived gesture of solidarity—

Then he bites back a wail, clutching his cheek.

“…Y-you’re m-making it *worse!”* Mu Qing moans, clutching his own face. “W-what’s w-wrong with y-you?!”

“Everything! I’m sorry!” Xie Lian presses his face into a pillow—all so Feng Xin won’t wake up from the next room because of his crying.

They’re both quiet for a minute or two—Mu Qing trying to stop hyperventilating, and Xie Lian pushing down shocked whimpers of pain.

“…W-What’s…g-going t-to happen t-to m-me?”

Xie Lian looks up, staring at him in confusion.

“What do you mean?”

“D…Do you…w-want…me to l-leave?”

The prince continues to stare at him, slowly understanding his meaning.

“…No,” he mumbles—and Mu Qing doesn’t understand.

He doesn’t understand why Xie Lian seems saddened by the thought.

“P…People are g-gonna *know* …”

When they see the bruise on his cheek. Then who knows what will—

“…No,” Xie Lian repeats—a little firmer this time. Less sniffly. “No one else is going to know about it.”

He looks a little long suffering as he rises to his feet, walking towards the cabinet with a grim expression.

“I’m not that good at making stuff up, so…play along?”

Mu Qing stares, knees pulled up against his chest—but he nods.

Xie Lian mirrors the movement, turning around.

But he isn't prepared for the prince to scream bloody murder, hopping onto the floor hard to mimic a *thud* , then intentionally smacking his head against the cabinet with a—

Bang!

"FENG XIN!" He wails (crying for real, since he hit himself again), "KILL IT!"

Mu Qing is frozen on the floor—too shocked to move as the guard barrels into the room, shirtless, his hair all over the place, sword half raised.

"WHASHAPPENING—?"

"S-SPIDER!" Xie Lian shrieks, scrambling across the floor to hide behind Mu Qing. "In my *BED!"*

"I don't…I don‘t see a…" Feng Xin looks around, sword lowering slightly as he squints against the candlelight. "Are you sure it wasn't just your hair on your arm again?" He rasps, still half asleep.

"It was HUGE!" Xie Lian sobs, clinging to Mu Qing's arms.

"Look for it!"

Mu Qing almost feels a little bad, watching as Feng Xin is forced to strip the entire bed down, shaking every pillow case out for a sign of anything with eight legs—knowing the entire thing was a ruse.

(The prince is somber, hiding behind him the entire time.)

But that guilt is quickly replaced with stomach churning confusion as he watches the older boy's bare skin—turning his eyes away, conflicted.

"…Dianxia, I don't see anything. You probably scared it off—"

"But if you don't find it, how am I supposed to go to sleep?!"

Xie Lian moans, shaking his head. "…Mu Qing, can you sleep with me tonight?" He pleads. "I don't wanna be by myself if it comes back—"

Mu Qing's jaw goes slack, and he isn't sure what to say, but—

Feng Xin looks like a kicked puppy.

"…But that's what I always do…"

"Then you can both sleep with me!" Xie Lian shrugs. "My bed is big enough for all of us!"

Mu Qing and Feng Xin look at each other suddenly—then quickly look away, each red behind the ears.

Xie Lian crawls in first, nestling beneath a mountain of pillows and blankets. He likes sleeping with the feeling of being *suffocated* by softness, surrounded with the pressure of pillows, stuffed animals—one of his dogs.

Mu Qing hesitates, awkwardly sliding in after.

When Feng Xin goes to follow—a foot presses against his chest, heel digging in sharply—and he looks up to see a dark pair of eyes glaring up at him from beneath the blankets.

"Put the woodland creatures away."

"Huh?!"

"Put on a *shirt* , idiot!"

He grumbles and complains, but he slinks off to find one—crawling in wherever he can fit with Xie Lian and Mu Qing already slumped together, the large guard dog that normally sleeps at the foot of Xie Lian's bed stretched across his back.

Which leaves him wriggling in on the other side of Mu Qing, crowding him in to make more room for himself.

The younger teenager falls silent, waiting for the monster in his chest to roar, raising up his defenses when someone bigger than him presses against his back.

But, for some reason—

It's like the monster has already gone to sleep, and everything is still, easy, and quiet.

For some reason, it's never around when Feng Xin is.

He doesn't know *why* .

And he certainly doesn't know why he leans back against him, either, relaxing when Feng Xin starts to snore, feeling the vibrations against the back of his head.

"Mu Qing?" Xie Lian whispers, his voice drifting through the dark.

"…Yeah?"

"…What did I do wrong, earlier?"

Mu Qing bites his lip, arms wrapped tightly around his ribs.

"…You didn't," he whispers back. "I was wrong."

He's *always* wrong. Doesn't know how to be—

"Please?" Xie Lian presses quietly. "I don't want to scare you like that again."

The words are slow—heavy with hesitance as they fall from his lips.

"…I…get scared…when people grab my wrists," he mumbles, his cheeks burning with shame, knowing how stupid it sounds, but—

"Would practicing help?"

Mu Qing falls silent, confused and unsure.

"…Huh?"

"I could hold your hand sometimes," Xie Lian explains slowly. "When you know it's safe…so that way you get used to it, and it's not so scary?"

Mu Qing has no idea if that's how it works, but—

No one's ever tried to make him less frightened before.

"...Okay," he replies, feeling the sheets rustle as Xie Lian slowly reaches over—giving him plenty of time to pull away before he takes his hand, squeezing it softly.

"Is this alright?"

Mu Qing swallows hard, his cheek pressing against the pillow as he squeezes him back.

“…Yeah,” he mumbles, his voice thick.

Xie Lian’s hands are so soft and perfect compared to his—but he never complains.

He doesn’t let go.

Not even when he falls asleep, rolling closer—until Mu Qing is trapped between the prince and his bodyguard.

But it isn’t *scary* .

Mu Qing holds his hand even tighter, tears slipping down the side of his cheek, landing on the pillow.

And he—

It’s the first time he *realizes* it.

That he’d been in so much pain for so long, he thought he would never get better.

That he’d never stop feeling so fucking sad.

And now, holding the prince’s hand in the dark—

Mu Qing starts to think that someday, even if it’s not soon…

Things might be okay again.

He wakes up first in the morning—with Feng Xin’s chin digging into his shoulder.

And Xie Lian still holding onto his hand.

This is another memory he wouldn’t mind staying in.

Here or waking up in his father’s arms.

Or when Mu Qing met the last and longest love of his life, sitting on the edge of a kitchen counter, heart pounding as, for the first time, he kissed someone back.

(He made him congee.)

Only sixteen, hands shaky and unsteady as they twisted in Feng Xin’s hair, not caring about how sweaty he was, even if that was the first thing he said when the teenager pulled away.

Or the second time Feng Xin kissed him, when they were arguing over that stupid *Pearl earring* .

Maybe the third time, when Mu Qing wouldn't stop pointing out a non-existent patch of dirt on his cheek and they ended up pressed behind a pillar, tangled up on each other.

Warm, sweet, terrifying, wrong, *good* .

Or so many other times, in different corners of the palace.

And Mu Qing always knew.

Always watching everyone else, all the time—like an anxious child, treading the spaces between floor tiles, convinced the world will end if he steps on a crack.

He saw the way Xie Lian watched Feng Xin.

Short, embarrassed glances. Flustered. Unsure.

And he saw the way Feng Xin silently pined after him, because whenever Mu Qing stared after Feng Xin—

He was never looking back at Mu Qing.

And it wasn't *fair* .

He whispered that to himself over and over at night, scrubbing the floors in the hallways.

Why would he do that?

Why would he kiss Mu Qing like that, then look at the prince that way?

And part of him always knows why.

Knows that he isn't good enough.

Who *would* look at Mu Qing that way, after everything that's happened? Even if they don't *know* , he still carries it like a stain.

Like a monster, taking up too much room in his chest.

And sometimes, when it hurts too much—he's cruel to Feng Xin. He knows he is. He's snide and belittling, picking apart every word he says, criticizing everything he does.

But it usually ends with Feng Xin kissing him.

Even if Mu Qing isn't kind, like Xie Lian. Even if he isn't patient, fair, or generous. Even if he could never be *that* beautiful—

Feng Xin kisses him like this.

Mu Qing had that. That's *his* .

He clings onto it desperately, even if he knows Feng Xin *can't* kiss Xie Lian.

Because there are certain things princes can't do—and kissing guards is one of them.

Mu Qing isn't the first or best choice—it just wouldn't matter if anyone caught them.

Who cares if the son of a general eases his boredom with a palace servant? It isn't *serious* .

And if he had any self-respect, he wouldn't put up with it—

But he doesn't.

Mu Qing doesn't love himself enough for that.

Not even when he's promoted to a deputy god at the age of sixteen.

When his mother doesn't have to work anymore.

When Mu Qing moves them to a new house by the lake, cherry trees blooming all year round.

And then there was a war, and he couldn't.

Mu Qing couldn't look down at his blood-soaked hands, and push Feng Xin's arms away when they wrapped around him.

Even when he was a general at the age of seventeen, he knew he'd never be more than a moment of weakness for the only man he'd ever wanted.

That all they know how to do is resent and hurt each other. To be caught in between crushing walls of want, jealousy, and need.

That still didn't stop him from going to General Feng's funeral.

From standing by Feng Xin's side when they gave him his father's sword.

Xie Lian was *supposed* to be there—but was caught in a cave by an enemy ambush, protected by one young soldier while he was incapacitated.

But Mu Qing was there.

He was there when everyone else left, kneeling by Feng Xin's side when the young General sank to his knees, muffling his tears behind his arms as his father's ashes were placed in the family shrine.

Knowing Feng Xin didn't have a father like Mu Qing's.

General Feng wasn't gentle, patient, or understanding. Mu Qing watched him strike his son more than once.

That doesn't mean that Feng Xin didn't worship him, spending a lifetime chasing his father's approval.

And it doesn't mean that General Feng wasn't proud, before the end.

That doesn't mean Feng Xin wept for him any less than Mu Qing did for his own father.

And when everyone else leaves, Mu Qing stays.

Knowing that Feng Xin's mother is gone. That he doesn't have any other siblings.

When Feng Xin slumps with grief, Mu Qing holds him.

Even though he's heavy, and his jaw is sharp, aching when he buries his face in Mu Qing's shoulder to weep.

When Feng Xin begs Mu Qing to never bring this up again, he promises that he won't.

But it hurts, that Feng Xin thought he needed to make him swear.

He can't even make it out of bed when the prince makes his way back to camp, hours later—limping, his arm slung around a young boy's shoulders.

Mu Qing is the one who meets them, rushing Xie Lian off towards the medics.

"What the hell happened?!"

"I'm sorry…" Xie Lian leans on him heavily before he's loaded onto a stretcher, bleeding heavily from the ribs. "Is Feng Xin alright? I tried to make it—"

"Forget about that," Mu Qing shakes his head vehemently. "He'll just be glad you're alright. What happened?!"

"…The boy," Xie Lian recalls suddenly, grasping Mu Qing's forearm tightly before the medics can carry him away—paying no mind to his friend's question.

(But even now, he doesn't grab him by the wrist.)

"He saved me, Mu Qing. Make sure he's seen…seen to…I want him to…"

His grip grows slack as he slumps back in the stretcher, the blood loss finally making him faint.

If he was still mortal, Mu Qing would fear for him—

But that isn't the emotion coiling in his chest when he looks past the others, seeing a vaguely familiar face.

He must be close to fourteen years old now. Not the small, bleeding child they brought to Mount Taicang, years ago.

But the bandages on the right side of his face and the scars on his cheek are familiar.

And even if they weren't—

The way he watches Xie Lian is a dead giveaway.

The boy who fell from the walls that day.

The child who brought fire to Mount Taicang when Xie Lian took him there for refuge.

Now, the teenager who brought Xie Lian back bleeding and in pain.

Always watching the prince like a crow with his eyes on a jewel.

"…" Mu Qing sets aside the scroll of supply manifests in his hands, slamming it into an officer's chest as he walks over, arms crossed.

"Soldier."

"General."

The boy says that, but not with the air of respect he would offer Xie Lian, if the prince was still here.

"The Kingdom of Xianle thanks you for your service," he grabs a small bag of gold coins from a nearby table, tossing it into the teenager's waiting hands. "You're dismissed."

Hong'er stops, staring down at the bag in his hand, looking back up at the General in confusion. "What?"

"You saved the Crown Prince. For your heroic actions, you're dismissed from further combat." Mu Qing explains shortly. "I'm sure your family will be relieved."

"I don't have one," the boy answers shortly.

"Your friends, then."

"I don't have those either."

Mu Qing's eye twitches as he turns around, walking away. "You've got time on your hands now. Make some. The world's your oyster."

But the kid won't stop following.

"I'm not injured. There's no reason why I can't fight—!"

"Are you missing the fact that this is a reward?!"

"How could it be a reward?!" Hong'er glares, disgusted. "You're taking away the only thing I—"

"What?" Mu Qing turns around, staring at him harshly. "The only thing you *what?"*

The teenager falls silent, glaring at him venomously—

And then he says those *words* .

“To die for the crown prince is one’s greatest honor!”

And it makes Mu Qing a little sick, nearing it.

Not because the kid is unique. There are plenty of teenagers in the army. Mu Qing is barely of age himself.

But because Mu Qing knows the impact those words have.

“…Do you think it makes him *happy* , having children die for him? Do you think he has *any* desire for some scrawny kid to die in a battle he has no chance of making a difference in?”

The number of young men who have died with those words on their lips—

It haunts Xie Lian.

And it’s not as if Hong’er doesn’t listen. Mu Qing watches his gaze flicker, processing that information.

“…Then I’ll get stronger.”

“Yeah, sure,” Mu Qing rolls his eyes, turning away. “Good luck with that.”

“You can’t stop me from fighting for him.”

“I can stop you from dying in this army.” Mu Qing stops, looking back over his soldier to glare. “What’s your angle?”

The teenager pauses, nose wrinkling as he stares up at him in confusion.

“What?”

“What are you trying to get out of this? What do you want from him?”

Hong’er almost seems to recoil from the suggestion, as if it disgusts him.

“I don’t want anything.”

“Bullshit.” Mu Qing glares right back at him. “You think you’re the only person obsessed with him? You're not, you're just weirdly *persistent* —"

"They aren't like me."

If it was possible for Mu Qing to roll his eyes any harder, they would fall out of his head.

He honestly can't *tell* of the kid is creepy or pitiful, if he's a threat or an annoyance, but—

"You don't even know him. You've barely spoken to him at all. You don't know—"

"I know enough," Hong'er locks his jaw stubbornly. "I don't want anything from him, I just want to help—"

"Yeah, well, you can't." Mu Qing shakes his head harshly. "You wanna help? You're going to bring him Lang Ying's head? Is that supposed to be a joke?"

Xie Lian is a *god* , what could a child possibly do to help him?

"You'll build him a palace that won't fall when these people come for it? You'll protect him from an entire *army* ? He wouldn't do those things for you, and you *can't* —"

"I don't need him to. I don't—"

"Want anything." Mu Qing finishes shortly. "You can say it as many times as you want. That isn't—"

"And dianxia can do anything."

He says it with such firm resolve, and Mu Qing's stomach sinks as he shakes his head.

"No."

"He—!"

"He's a man. Flesh and blood like you and me."

Mu Qing looks back over towards the medical tent with a frown.

"He gets scared of things. He loses his temper. He can fail."

Right now, in this war, Xie Lian is failing for the first time in his life.

“You aren’t doing him or yourself any favors by putting so much faith in—”

“It doesn’t matter if he fails, or if he’s scared of things,” the child frowns—

As if everything Mu Qing is spouting is completely irrelevant.

“I don’t need him to be perfect. I don’t need anything from him. That isn’t why I pray.”

He looks the deputy god over with a glare.

“I wouldn’t expect someone like *you* to understand that.”

He makes no more attempts to convince Mu Qing—seeing that it’s getting him nowhere.

And Mu Qing is left standing there, his face frozen.

“…Someone like me,” he repeats slowly, watching his officers drag Hong’er away.

He won’t see the child again for eight more centuries—each of them wearing different names and faces.

Each of them trying to serve the same prince in the same ways as they once did.

But next time, the child who fell from the sky will stand by Xie Lian’s side.

And Mu Qing…

Mu Qing’s world crumbled twice before he turned twelve years old.

It crumbles for the third time when he’s eighteen, watching as his prince is placed in shackles, sent to the mortal realm.

More than just powerless—but *blind* .

No one else was there, when the emperor placed the shackles on him.

As his senior deputies, Feng Xin and Mu Qing were the only ones who remained after the trial.

Mu Qing watched the tears that fell down Xie Lian's cheeks, when the world became dark.

Felt how frightened he was. How his hands trembled, when they returned to the mortal realm.

Heard the pain in his voice, when he thanked Mu Qing for finding a silk bandage to wrap around his eyes, hiding the shackle from prying eyes.

He couldn't imagine anything more cruel.

All of the things Xie Lian *loved* —

Sword fighting. Calligraphy. Books. Watching the stars at night.

When his sight was taken, he lost so much of what once brought him joy.

What little he had *left* , after everything else had been taken.

Mu Qing sees no justice in it.

Mu Qing writes his letters for him, even though there's no one left to write to. Reads to him, even though he already knows the book by heart.

Feng Xin sits beside him at night, and tries to tell him which stars are out.

Xie Lian will reach for Mu Qing's hand, fumbling blindly in the dark—

And it breaks the young man's heart, listening as his prince fervently apologizes when he misses, and grasps his wrist.

"…It's alright, your highness." Mu Qing whispers, pressing their palms together.

They try to get him back in the sparring ring—to hold a sword again —

But Xie Lian isn't just heartbroken—he's proud.

He can't stand holding a sword anymore, and seeing how weak he's become.

He can't stand *falling* all the time, tripping and scraping his hands and knees.

His parents are old, now—they shouldn't have to be taking care of him, but the Queen is with Mu Qing every morning, helping her son get dressed.

Helping him try to remember where the doors and steps are. Which bags are kept where, and how to tell them apart by touch.

It's not as if Xie Lian was remarkably independent before—but now he's entirely dependent on those around him—and he hates it.

Mu Qing stands outside his door some mornings, listening to the muffled sound of him crying.

For Xianle. For his parents. For himself.

When the palace falls, and they're forced to retreat to a remote house in the countryside…

Mu Qing knows it could be worse. It's still nicer than any home he's ever lived in.

But to the Royal family, born to wealth and privilege—it's an unbearable humiliation.

And it's not that Xie Lian told Mu Qing what he was going to do, or that the servant suspected—

He just wasn't shocked when they woke up one morning and found his bed empty—a messy note left behind.

Saying he had gone off to try to cultivate again.

That he doesn't want to be a burden. That he doesn't want anyone to look for him.

But of course, Feng Xin *does* .

Frantic, morning till night, for an entire month.

Terrified that he might have fallen on the mountain path, or been recognized in the streets.

Mu Qing is beside him, keeping his fears inside.

Finding the situation horribly reminiscent of barn cats who know the end is near, sneaking off to the forest to take their final breaths.

He remembers how profoundly *hopeless* Xie Lian was, when he left.

Remembers what Doctor Feng told him, all those years ago.

How some children can feel so sad for *so long* , they don't think they'll ever be happy again.

That they give up.

Mu Qing never says it out loud. That would only cause Feng Xin and Xie Lian's parents needless pain.

At some point, wandering the woods and streets by Feng Xin's sides, hands in his pockets, Mu Qing finds himself relieved that they *don't* find him.

But he doesn't think Xie Lian is ever coming back, either.

"Feng Xin…"

"Don't."

"We need to talk about it—"

"DON'T!"

"We're wasting time," Mu Qing mutters, breath fogging up in the air in front of him—his nose flushed and stinging from the cold. "We're searching places we've already checked at least three times, he isn't here."

"He might have circled back—he could have gotten *lost* —!"

"Feng Xin—it's *snowing!"* Mu Qing throws his hands up, gesturing to the white flurries falling around them. "It's been snowing all week!"

"I know that, alright?! That's why we can't waste any more—!"

"He didn't have winter clothes. He doesn't know how to build a fire—he can't even hunt when he's like this!"

"Why are you—?!"

"If he was out in the elements, we would have found him by now. He'd be too weak to move!" Mu Qing grumbles, blinking the snow off of his eyelashes.

“Wherever he is—he’s either inside and safe from exposure, or he’s gotten so far, we aren’t going to be able to find him—”

“Yeah, or he’s been *captured!”* Feng Xin glares, looking at the wilderness around him helplessly. “Do you have ANY idea what they’ll do to him?!”

Mu Qing huffs, crossing his arms over his chest. “ *Yeah* , I think I might have a better idea of that than *you.”* He sneers, his voice cold.

“The fuck is that supposed to mean?!”

“Nothing, just—you aren’t being logical. If we could find him, so could the enemy.”

Mu Qing shivers when a cold wind blows by, piercing straight through the thin layers of his robes. “It’s probably a good thing that we haven’t seen a sign of him. It means he can hide himself at least—”

(That, or there’s nothing left to hide.)

“A *good* thing?!” Feng Xin stares at him, his boots sinking deeply in the snow—but he doesn’t seem nearly as bothered by the cold. “You realize if the tables were turned, Xie Lian would *never* stop looking for you. Not until we found you!”

That’s enough to make Mu Qing flinch.

“We wouldn’t be in this situation if Xie Lian was logical, so—”

“He’s just not the type to cut and run on the people he cares about!” Feng Xin shakes his head. “He—He wouldn’t have left unless he didn’t think he was coming back! He *needs* us!”

“I’m not saying he doesn’t—”

“I wouldn’t expect someone like you to understand!” Feng Xin interrupts him, snapping tree branches out of the way as he attempts to push deeper into the underbrush. “But I’m not gonna repay him by abandoning him!”

“…Someone like me,” Mu Qing repeats slowly. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You didn’t care about him like I did!” Feng Xin is facing away from him, but Mu Qing can hear his voice break. “You think he’s naive, and spoiled—you’re *RELIEVED* that he’s gone—!”

THUD!

Feng Xin flinches, appalled, reaching up to touch the back of his head.

“…Did you just throw a fucking *SNOWBALL* AT ME—?!” He turns around, only to get nailed in the face with another ball of snow and ice.

“FUCK YOU, FENG XIN!”

“WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU?!”

“I *HATE* YOU, THAT’S WHAT’S WRONG WITH ME!” Mu Qing screams, his hands balled up into fists. “I KNOW YOU’RE SAD, AND YOU’RE SCARED—BUT THAT DOESN’T MEAN YOU GET TO TAKE IT OUT ON *ME!”*

“YOU SAY FUCKED UP THINGS TO ME *ALL THE TIME!”*

“THAT’S DIFFERENT!”

“HOW THE HELL—?!”

“BECAUSE I DON’T ACTUALLY MEAN IT!“ Mu Qing hurls another one at him—and this time, Feng Xin has the sense to dodge it.

“Oh, BULLSHIT, you mean it every FUCKING TIME you call me an idiot—!”

“STOP ACTING LIKE A GODDAMN MORON AND I’LL TREAT YOU LIKE A FUCKING PHILOSOPHER!”

Mu Qing shoves him in the chest, hard enough to make him lose his balance on the snow, stumbling to the ground.

“…Alright,” Feng Xin glares, wiping the melting ice from his cheeks.

“Maybe I’m not a *reader* like either of you. Maybe I didn’t get the chance to study on Mount Taicang, because I never even got to *try* — but that doesn’t mean I’m *stupid!”*

“I never said—”

“And I get you two had more common interests, and you made him laugh—and you guys were always talking about shit like it was over my head, but— *I* WAS HIS BEST FRIEND!" He rises to his feet, shoving Mu Qing *just* as hard, sending him sprawling.

"I was there from the start! I don't have a family waiting on me after this! I don't have another job I can just go and do, alright?! He *is* my job! He *is* my family! I can't just—!"

"You think I don't get that?!" Mu Qing lunges, and they're left wrestling in a snowbank.

"I know what it's like when someone you care about *leaves* , and you don't know why! I GET IT!"

The snow is in his sleeves, against his neck—and it stings.

"BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN YOU GET TO TELL ME HOW I FEEL ABOUT HIM, OR THAT I DIDN'T CARE!"

"YOU'RE THE ONE NOT EVEN THINKING ABOUT—!"

"You know what I'm thinking about?!" Mu Qing snaps, rolling on top of him, straddling his waist, hands on his shoulders to keep him down. "The fact that we CAN'T find him right now, I've been with you every single fucking day looking!"

Just as much as Feng Xin has—just as hard.

"But if we *can't* find him, Xie Lian wouldn't thank us for letting his father get *sick* , or his mother *starve* !" Mu Qing sits back. "So, if you want to get lost in the snow and *kill yourself* looking for him, FINE!"

Mu Qing stands up, and Feng Xin is too startled to stop him.

"I'M going back to try and make sure he has *something* left to come home to! You do whatever you want—I don't *CARE!"*

He says that, but there are tears in his eyes when he leaves Feng Xin laying there in the snow.

He says that, but his heart beats halfway out of his chest when Feng Xin returns to the house that night, ashen faced, head hanging low.

He says that, but there's a bowl of hot food waiting for him, sitting on the table in his usual place.

He says that, but Mu Qing moves over to make room for him when

Feng Xin comes to bed that night—even though Xie Lian's room now sits empty.

They shared before to give him privacy.

They share now, because neither of them want to sleep alone with him gone.

And it's a little miserable—but it's also a little *happy* .

Even if Mu Qing knows he's the only one who could find a way to enjoy it.

Not the days spent hunting or busking. Mu Qing picks up work easier, he has more skills that sell in peacetime.

But Feng Xin tries—and he learns.

And there are days when Mu Qing wonders.

Waking up from a break in the afternoon, slumped on a grassy hillside —only to feel the familiar press of leather against his cheek.

Worn gloves stroking over him slowly.

And when he opens his eyes—

It's Feng Xin's face that he sees. Blushing and embarrassed, grumbling something about how Mu Qing had something on his face before pulling away.

But Mu Qing doesn't move at first.

He lays there, and he wonders.

Holding the grass as tight as he can

Before, they were always arguing when they touched each other—it was an act of snapping restraint.

Now—sometimes—Feng Xin kisses him softly. In passing moments of quiet.

And Mu Qing knows it's only because Xie Lian isn't there—

But sometimes, it feels like he means it.

Sometimes, he reaches for him when they're in bed at night, and it's good.

His lips against his throat, Mu Qing's hands in his hair, legs tangled together.

The first time he rolls on top of him, Mu Qing goes still—whispering for him to stop.

…And Feng Xin does.

Every single time.

He asks why after—but never forces Mu Qing to tell him.

And it—

After that first, nauseating moment when he panicked under Feng Xin's hands, Mu Qing thought that would be it.

But it never seemed to make Feng Xin want him any less.

Some nights, Feng Xin pulls him close, complaining of the cold—saying Mu Qing's feet are like ice blocks.

He says that, but he holds him closer anyway.

When it's quiet, he asks what he'll do later.

("later" Is a gentle way of saying 'If Xie Lian doesn't come back.')

"…Go back to my mother and sisters," Mu Qing murmurs.

He put away every single coin he made before, leaving it for them—more than enough to support them for now, but not forever.

"Try to cultivate again, I suppose. What about you?"

Feng Xin never has an answer.

Deep down, Mu Qing knows it's because he can't picture a future without Xie Lian in it.

Still, part of him thinks about telling Feng Xin that he could come along, if he wanted.

That his mother and sisters wouldn't mind one more.

“…Would you cultivate in the same method?”

The question takes Mu Qing slightly off guard.

“…Why?”

Feng Xin won’t meet his eyes.

“You love kids. I guess I always thought…you’d want them.”

Mu Qing is surprised that Feng Xin noticed something like that—but he isn’t wrong.

“That doesn’t mean I need them.”

He turns his cheek against the pillow, fingertips splaying across Feng Xin’s shoulder blade, tracing the scars there.

Knowing the story behind every single one.

“Do you?”

“…I wouldn’t know how,” Feng Xin admits, staring at the frost on the window.

“But if the person I…”

He never finishes that sentence.

Mu Qing doesn’t know if he actually fell asleep, or just pretended to.

And he doesn’t think he’d like the end of that sentence—so he never asks again.

The weeks turn to months. Then, an entire year.

Xie Lian’s mother never stops watching the window, hands fidgeting restlessly in her lap.

Mu Qing *tries* teaching her how to cook, when she seems so keen to learn—but it’s not a matter of effort, she’s just a menace.

But whatever she makes, however inedible, has a name.

One day, when they’re elbow to elbow, and Mu Qing is trying to salvage what must have been a pile of dough originally, laughing with her over something silly—

The Queen of Xianle stops to look at him—really look at him, and her smile fades.

“…Your majesty? What’s wrong?”

She looks away, fiddling with the cloth covering the counter so the dough doesn’t stick.

“…I can’t imagine what you must think of me,” she murmurs, the lines around her eyes so much deeper than they were two years ago. “But I’m not without shame.”

“…I’m sorry for laughing, it’s really not that b—”

“You’ve been far kinder to our family than we deserve,” the Queen finally explains, and Mu Qing grows silent. “And I know we have no right to your generosity.”

“…”

Mu Qing wipes the dough from his hands.

“…I was always under the impression that you didn’t know,” he admits, unable to meet her eyes.

“…I didn’t,” the Queen agrees quietly, looking towards the door to her bedroom. “But my husband thinks he’s dying.”

And now, he tells her things.

Things she should have known.

“…I wasn’t sure if I should say anything, once he told me,” she admits, pulling her hands back from the cloth before she ruins it. “I wasn’t sure if silence would be better for you, or giving myself permission to abdicate myself from this…”

This horrible *thing* .

“…But you’re so good to us,” she whispers, shaking her head. “And I felt so *ashamed* , I…”

“…I have questions,” Mu Qing admits, his hands tight on the edge of the counter. Shoulders hunched. “If you want to help—”

“I do,” she agrees quickly. “Anything I know, I promise.”

"…Did you know that they weren't allowed to have children in the house?" Mu Qing is shocked that he can ask without stammering, but—

He's never been afraid—not of her.

The Queen of Xianle is a kind woman, even if she's imperfect.

"…I did," she admits softly.

"But I didn't know the actual reason."

Mu Qing turns to look at her, fighting the urge to be distrustful, to say something harsh.

"…What did you think the reason was?"

She bites her lip, her gaze far away.

"I knew my brother-in-law was a horrible man," she recalls.

"I couldn't tell you how many times I begged my sister to leave him—but…I thought the reason there couldn't be children in their palace was…because of *her.*"

Both of Mu Qing's eyebrows raise, and the Queen's expression grows grim.

"She tried to take Xie Lian once."

When he was only a toddler—confused, but willing to go in the arms of someone who looked and smelled so much like his mother.

"She never made it past the palace gates…but I had never been so frightened," the Queen whispers. "I thought she might try it again with another."

"…But you didn't put her in jail? Or at least cut off contact with her?!" Mu Qing stares, appalled by the very thought, but—

"She had just lost a child herself," the Queen explains faintly. "A *horrible* miscarriage. She wasn't herself."

She really had thought that her husband banning children from the house was because of *that* —because servants wouldn't have the means to fight back, if a wealthy mistress attempted to take their sons for her own.

She thought that with time to grieve, her sister would get better

She thought, when Qi Rong was born, that the need she once felt would pass.

"…My sister and I were closer than most siblings, when we were small." The Queen admits softly. "I think my husband thought it would devastate me if I knew the truth, but…I wish I had."

She's clearly ashamed now. Thinking of all the years she had Mu Qing in her service, treating him like any other servant—

Not knowing the damage that had been done.

"…What would you have done if you *had* known?" Mu Qing mutters, his knuckles aching.

"…I don't know what I would have done about my sister," the Queen admits. "I feel so angry and ashamed now, it *feels* like I would have cast her out. But I don't know if that's hindsight, or…"

Mu Qing's chest is tight—but he appreciates the honesty, on some level.

"…But I never would have allowed your family to stay there," she concludes firmly. And Mu Qing believes her, but—

"And I never would have let that happen to your father. If I had known, I would have—"

Mu Qing takes a step back from the counter, staring.

"…What?" He croaks.

"I…" The Queen stares at him, confused by his reaction. "I thought you already knew."

"…I knew he was arrested because your sister accused him of assaulting her," Mu Qing admits faintly. "…But I never knew the King was involved with…what did he tell you?"

"…That he handled it personally," the Queen admits, her lips growing pale. "Because it was my sister."

And there's a certain implication that goes hand in hand with 'handled it.'

One that sinks into Mu Qing's bones, and twists in his stomach like venom.

It takes him a week to ask.

Sitting behind him one afternoon, applying a salve to the King's back.

An old wives' cure for the lungs that he sneered at, when Mu Qing first tried it—but it helps.

They rarely speak—and Mu Qing's question is calm, but somehow sudden.

"Where is my father buried?"

It takes him a moment to realize what the boy is asking—and when he does, he grows still.

"…My wife spoke to you," he mutters, shoulders hunched.

His hair is more white than gray now, his body more and more frail by the day.

It doesn't make Mu Qing feel any better, to see him old and weak.

No matter how far the King of Xianle sinks, pride sticks to him like a second skin.

"…It provided perspective," Mu Qing's voice is cold—hands working calmly.

"I doubt it."

"What do you mean?"

"I doubt you could understand everything that went into the situation at the time," the King mutters.

He says that, but he doesn't explain.

"…Maybe not," Mu Qing agrees. "I'm a servant. I'll always be a servant. That's what your brother-in-law liked to say."

That makes him wince, at the very least.

"But I know that you already knew you killed my father—an innocent man—when you stood in front of me and *threatened* me for my silence, acting like it was mercy. But we're both adults now," Mu Qing pulls his hands back.

"We both know the only thing you were trying to do was protect *yourself."*

"I had no reason to think your father was innocent at the time—"

"And you had a reason to think he was guilty?" Mu Qing shakes his head. "I'm not your wife. I'm not your son. You can't do that with me."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Using some manipulative explanation about the *pressures* of ruling, or saying that I'm a child, or a *woman* , and I couldn't *possibly* understand your choices." Mu Qing mutters, wiping off his hands.

"You think you can just—?"

"I can do whatever I want to you," Mu Qing stares at him sharply. "I could kill you here and now, and leave this place without consequences. Because you're not a king anymore—you're *nobody."*

Less relevant than Mu Qing's father was. At least he knew how to *work* .

At least he never tried to make his children feel like they were stupid, and taught them what they needed to know in order to survive.

"What pressures of kingship kept you silent when I was feeding you for the last year? When I made sure your wife had *shoes* on her feet?"

Mu Qing stands up, shaking his head. "Was it when I spent an entire month searching for *your* son in the ice and snow?"

"…This has *always* been your life," the king stares at him, appalled. "How could you expect us to adjust—?"

Mu Qing laughs, equally disbelieving.

"You are a grown man who never learned to take care of himself. That is *your* fault. I was a child, you know what I lived through—because of *YOU!* And you have the audacity to feel self-pity?! To accept *my* help?! At least your wife has a speck of *decency* —"

"I was NOT responsible for what that man did!" The king whips his head around to glare at him. “I had *nothing* to do with it—I told them not to let any more children in that house—”

“You killed my father on an *accusation* ,” Mu Qing glares. “You gave a rapist a *palace.”*

“I didn’t *give* him a palace,” the king winces, struggling to sit up on his own. Mu Qing makes no move to support him. “He was already wealthy. I never *condoned* or *allowed* —”

“‘My brother-in-law is a very important man,’” Mu Qing replies flatly. “That's what she said.”

If you allow people to hide behind the shroud of your power, you’re responsible for the damage they do.

“…When I tried to tell the truth, she said—”

“Does it even matter anymore?” The king mutters, exasperated. “We’ve all suffered. We’ve all lost. It was ten years ago.”

Mu Qing takes a step back, his lips pressed into a thin line.

“The best thing you can do for yourself is pretend it never happened. You’re a man now, and you still complain like a—”

“Where is he buried?” Mu Qing repeats his original question, his voice low.

Feng Xin glances up, startled when Mu Qing rushes past him, stomping down the front steps.

“…What the—? Did something happen?”

The servant doesn’t answer, slamming the door behind him.

“Mu Qing!”

He’s past the tree line by the time the first sob rips out of his chest.

At some point he stops running, hand resting against a tree, clutching one hand over his heart as he gasps, crying so hard, it takes the breath out of him.

“Hey—”

“Go *AWAY* , Feng Xin!”

"Not until you tell me what's going on—did you and his majesty get into a f—?"

"It doesn't *matter!"* Mu Qing shakes his head so violently, it hurts. "Just g-go b-b-back!"

"Like *hell!"* Feng Xin snarls, grabbing his shoulder and spinning him around. "Who the hell got you this upset?

"It's n-not worth it—"

"How can you say that when you're like this—?"

"BECAUSE YOU WOULDN'T BELIEVE ME ANYWAY!" Mu Qing half cries, half screams. "AND IT WOULDN'T CHANGE—!"

"WOULD YOU STOP PUTTING WORDS IN MY GODDAMN MOUTH?!" Feng Xin snarls, snatching his wrist before he can walk away.

"Don't make up ideas in your head of what I'll do before you even give me a fucking chance to react!"

Mu Qing grows silent, tears slipping down his cheeks—staring at the hand enveloping his wrist. Looking up at Feng Xin's face—torn between frustration and worry—then back down.

Waiting for the roaring to crop up in his chest.

For the teeth and spines and claws, his breaths short and trembling.

Waiting for the world to feel like it's ending. Waiting for the monster to take his voice, to take his hands—

But nothing ever comes.

"…Why is it always *you?!"* Mu Qing croaks, his voice breaking, all while Feng Xin stares at him in growing confusion.

Why does everything only feel okay when I'm with you?

"Mu Qing—I'm not a mind reader," Feng Xin half grumbles, half *pleads* . "What are you talking about—?"

Mu Qing grabs him by the front of his shirt, pulling him in. It's not unusual—most of their embraces are impulsive and over emotional—

But Mu Qing is almost never the one who starts it, and he never kisses him so desperately.

And Feng Xin could never push him away.

Hands in his hair, tangling together in the constant unanswered question—

'I don't know why I want you, but I do.'

Mu Qing wants to be here, when Feng Xin is kissing him like his life depends on it. Like he means it.

Like a first and best choice.

He doesn't want to be in the next moment.

When his foot slips on a loose rock, Feng Xin's arm tightens around his waist, holding him steady.

When Mu Qing feels those words against his lips:

"Careful, dianxia—"

And they both grow impossibly still.

"…Fuck," Feng Xin mutters, pulling back. "I didn't mean—"

He doesn't get another word out before Mu Qing shoves him away—*hard* .

As a year's worth of cautiously built trust crumbles in an instant.

"It was a reflex, Mu Qing, don't do this—"

"A *reflex?!"*

"Because you *tripped* , not because I was—I wasn't thinking about—!"

"It doesn't matter—I don't *care!"*

"Mu Qing—"

"It's not like we're *anything* to each other," Mu Qing snarls, stomping away from him. "You want to pine after a prince who LEFT you without a second thought?!"

Feng Xin stops following, eyes widening with hurt. "WHATEVER! I could never be that *pathetic!"*

Mu Qing isn’t there when he comes back.

Isn’t there when he wakes up in the morning, or any of the days after.

And that’s how he ends up here.

Sitting on a familiar hillside.

His old house is gone now, burned down at some point in the war.

Suyin is buried in the meadow at the foot of the hill, where she used to look for wildflowers.

Mu Qing’s fingers knot and tangle in the grass as the starlight shines down.

Knowing now that his father never left.

That he was buried under this hillside all this time, alone and forgotten.

Somehow, that hurts Mu Qing more than he ever thought it would.

Thinking about how all this time, he was there.

He was right *here* .

Mu Qing slumps back on the grass, rolling over onto his side, allowing it to press against his cheeks, swallowing his tears.

He knows what comes after this memory.

That he finds his mother and sisters again. Takes a position as a deputy in another Martial God’s palace.

That he buries her beside his father, when she goes to sleep one night, never to wake up again.

After that—

After that is so much *shame* , and he—

Mu Qing shakes his head, curling into a tighter ball.

“…What is this?!” He whispers.

What kind of dream is *this?*

Warm leather gloves press against his cheeks, and it's quiet.

It's safe here.

It doesn't *hurt here* .

"It's time to come home, A'Qing."

He sits up, face tear stained, hair tangled and blood streaked.

"…Baba?" He whispers.

His father holds him close, stroking his hair.

"I'm so sorry," he presses his face against Mu Qing's shoulder, holding him so *tight* . "I never wanted to go."

The tears have been falling for so long—Mu Qing doesn't think they'll ever stop.

"I know," he whispers, hugging him tighter, curling up against him. "I—"

"Murderer."

Mu Qing's father tightens his arms around him, and when the god looks back over his shoulder—

He sees *himself* .

Eleven years old, a boning knife in his and—covered in blood.

With silver streaks in his hair.

"I…" Mu Qing swallows dryly. "I didn't have a…"

The monster smiles.

"…But we liked it though, didn't we?" Its voice takes on a strange, echoing quality.

"We like hurting people."

"…No!" Mu Qing shakes his head, reaching back for his father, but—

He's alone.

"Then why is that all we ever do?"

Mu Qing tries to turn away—

Only to find his mother there, with a bloody nose, her cheek swelling.

But that was an *accident* , he didn't mean—

But in the blink of an eye, it's Xie Lian sitting there.

Filthy. Kneeling in the mud—eyes covered in bandages.

"Mu Qing—tell them!"

Mu Qing takes a step back, his heart leaping into his throat.

"…It was a *mistake* ," he moans, covering his mouth with one hand. "I didn't mean—"

His own words echo around them—so loud, it strains his ears.

"I BET YOU'RE GLAD HE ISN'T HERE TO SEE YOU LIKE THIS!"

Mu Qing can't stop shaking his head, watching Xie Lian's face turning dark with hurt and anger.

"THAT *GUY* YOU FELL IN LOVE WITH!"

"I didn't…" Mu Qing shakes his head, knees wobbling. "I wasn't trying to…I j-just w…wanted—"

To make Feng Xin know how it *felt* .

He wasn't thinking about what those words would do to *Xie Lian* , beyond the fact that it just—

Xie Lian didn't know everything Mu Qing had been through, but back then, everything felt so *unfair* .

"…What the *fuck* , Mu Qing?"

And he knows that makes it worse.

He knows that means he—

Mu Qing might have wanted to be Xie Lian's friend—but that didn't mean he deserved it.

That didn't mean he was a good friend.

"When you left—it was a *RELIEF!"*

"Careful, dianxia…"

"…H-He wouldn't s-say that—" Mu Qing whispers.

Trying .

"Why would he pray to *you?"*

"My husband is a very important man, you know."

"IT HURTS!"

Mu Qing sinks to his knees, hands clutching either side of his head. It's —

It's that okay again, but this time, it's *really* Xie Lian.

Screaming, begging for help as—

As a sword is rammed into him, over and over again.

A feeling that Mu Qing now knows all too well.

"FENG XIN! MU QING!" He screams, writhing in agony. "HELP ME!"

(My fault.)

Mu Qing stumbles forward, reaching for him.

(All my fault.)

"IT WAS HIM!"

Jian Lan's finger points squarely at his chest, sending him falling backwards.

"He's a *MURDERER!"*

A snarl rips from Mu Qing's throat, eyes growing darker, more streaks of silver shooting through his hair.

"YOU LYING FUCKING *BITCH* —"

"She didn't lie."

His younger self is there again, standing over him with a Cheshire grin.

“We like hurting people—”

“No we *DON’T* —!”

“Gege, I don’t wanna clean the library anymore.”

“Stop—”

“It’s not good to tell stories about important people, Mu Qing.”

“Please!” He sobs.

“She was in love with my best friend, too.”

“How did it feel?”

“How many times did it happen?”

“Did you fight? Why didn’t you fight harder?”

“Did part of you enjoy it?”

“It’s been ten years, can’t you just let it go?!”

“KILL ME!” Mu Qing screams, the voices growing louder.

Crowding in around him until he can’t stand it anymore.

“I DON’T WANNA DO THIS ANYMORE!”

“It’s *always* been you!”

A sharp twang echoes through the air, cutting through the voices.

A song Mu Qing doesn’t *know* , but—

“…You made this for me?”

Feng Xin’s voice comes with it.

Mu Qing twists his head around, tearful and disoriented.

“You still taste the same.”

“…I never thought Xuan Zhen was a bad person.”

“Thank you, Fu Yao.”

“I heard it was a special young lady’s birthday…who else could I take to the festival with me?”

“No…” Something tugs at his sleeve, and when Mu Qing looks down…

Cuo Cuo is his arms.

In his cleansed form. Tugging at Mu Qing’s hair, staring up at him with his father’s eyes.

No crying.

Mu Qing bites his lip, leaning down to press their foreheads together.

“…You deserved better,” he whispers, cheek pressing against his hair—soft against his skin.

They both did.

“…Wanna see my room?”

“Do you like books?”

Mu Qing holds the child tighter, his lips trembling.

“I could hold your hand, sometimes…”

The music grows louder, gentle plucks of strings filling the air.

“You are *so* special, Mu Qing.”

It’s almost like relief, but it’s straining, fighting against something.

A pain with a gravity to it—one that threatens to sink its claws in and drag *down* .

And in an instant, everything grows cold and dark.

Mu Qing watches as a door slides shut. A tall, broad figure turning the lock.

He glances back—green eyes gleaming in the darkness.

“I think it’s just us, now.” He speaks quietly, watching as the boy on the ground begins to shake.

“Why don’t you put that down and come over here?”

Mu Qing looks down at his arms—and they’re empty. Looks behind him—and he’s alone.

“…No…” he scrambles backwards, his voice weak. *“NO!”*

He strains his ears, fighting to listen to the music.

“Don’t be childish…”

The ground tilts forward in that moment, almost like gravity has reversed, leaving him ready to plunge down into a starless night.

Down where the monster is waiting.

With cruel thoughts and intentions, words and claws that aren’t his, and it’s so *hungry* .

And he almost falls, stomach lurching painfully as his body begins to drop, but—

He doesn’t let go.

A sob rips from his throat, hands clutching at the grass as his body dangles.

“Mu Qing isn’t *like* that!”

“I won’t let go—I promise.”

“He’s my friend!”

Tears slip down Mu Qing’s cheeks.

“He has *always* been my friend!”

“I DON’T WANNA KNOW WHAT IT’S LIKE TO LIVE WITHOUT YOU, OKAY?! YOU DON’T GET TO LEAVE ME BEHIND!”

“…Help…” He croaks, fingers clinging tighter as the music gets louder, filling his ears. *“Help…”*

Suddenly—gravity rights itself, and he isn’t falling anymore, slamming back down against the ground.

And when he looks up—

It isn't dark.

There's a spilled basket on the ground in front of him—cherries scattered across the ground—

And a hand, held out in front of him.

"Was someone hurting you, Mu Qing?"

The prince's eyes are sorrowful, filled with remorse. And Mu Qing—

He's sorry too.

He's so, *so* fucking sorry.

But this time—he grasps Xie Lian's hand, and he holds on tight.

"…Yeah," he admits, his voice small and broken.

"Really bad."

Xie Lian's other hand presses against his cheek, wiping the tears away with his thumb.

"I'm sorry, I'm *so* sorry—" he whispers, but Xie Lian stops him.

"It won't happen again," he murmurs, and somehow—

Mu Qing believes him.

Allows the prince to pull him to his feet, picking up his basket.

"Let's go home," he's gentle, leading Mu Qing down the path.

Mu Qing doesn't look back at the hill behind him. Doesn't listen to the voices that call.

He follows his prince, listening to the music.

"…Okay."

There are soft notes drifting through the air. Gentle humming in his ears.

And warm, familiar leather—stroking against his cheeks.

"…Ba…baba…?"

Hands cup his cheeks—and it's cold, in a sharp, piercing way.

Wet.

He's soaked.

"…Mu Qing?!"

His eyes flutter for a moment, lashes sticking together—Vision blurring in and out of focus—

Only to find Feng Xin staring down at him. Covered in blood and soot, eyes frantic—and when he meets Mu Qing's gaze—

He *sobs* .

Clutching Mu Qing against his chest, clinging to him.

"Don't EVER do that to me again!" He half shouts, half weeps, holding both arms around Mu Qing's back. "I'll—I'll fucking—"

"Kill me?" Mu Qing rasps, dazed and disoriented.

"Yeah!" Feng Xin croaks, pressing his face into Mu Qing's neck. "I'll fucking KILL you!"

Mu Qing pats his arm weakly, breathing hard, his heartbeat slowly beginning to calm.

They're—

They're near the lake on Mount Taicang—with the cherry trees.

Beside him, there's a white robed cultivator he's never seen before, a guqin in his lap.

But no Xie Lian or Hua Cheng.

"What…?"

"Is his hair going to stay like this?" Feng Xin mutters, twisting his fingers through it.

"Most likely," the newcomer replies, audibly exhausted. "I've never heard of someone coming back from Qi Deviation this severe—it's bound to leave a mark."

Qi…Deviation…?

Mu Qing glances down at the water, trying to see what he's talking about, and—

His hair has turned completely silver.

He reaches a hand up towards his cheek weakly, shocked, and Feng Xin is so undone, he comments without thinking.

"Don't be pissed, I like it—"

Then he stops, wincing, knowing exactly what Mu Qing is going to—

"You think what matters most to me is that YOU like it?"

"I never said—I just meant—"

"Meant *what?"*

"It's beautiful, alright?! That's all I was trying to fucking say!" Feng Xin snaps.

"I don't know why you have to turn everything I say into a damn atta—!"

He doesn't finish that statement, because his mouth is soon occupied.

Mu Qing's arms are shaky—but they hold on around his neck tightly, water sloshing around them.

And Feng Xin—

His arms tighten around Mu Qing's waist, his heart leaping into his throat.

Because Mu Qing—he hasn't kissed him like this since they were *teenagers* .

And when their lips part, the first thing he says is—

"…Did you just call me beautiful?"

Feng Xin flushes, growing hot around the ears, prepared to backpedal, but—

Mu Qing is smiling.

And Feng Xin can't remember the last time he's smiled at him like *that* , either.

If he ever has.

"…Yeah," he admits hoarsely, pushing a lock of hair behind his ear. "I did."

"…And you meant everything you said before?" Mu Qing asks slowly, most of it coming back in flashes, but—

He remembers the most important things.

And when Feng Xin nods—

Thud!

"OW!"

"And you waited until I was DYING to say anything?!"

"You never let me TALK!"

"When did you ever try to—?"

There's a deep, violent rumble in the ground below—and flashes of light in the distance, the sun slowly beginning to rise—

Too bright to be lightning.

"What's that?" Mu Qing struggles to sit up—but Feng Xin helps him.

"…I wish I knew."

A Soul's Worth

Chapter Summary

It’s cold and dark, the stone smooth and unforgiving against his cheek.

Everything hurts—more than he thought it was supposed to.

He thought that was supposed to stop.

But it hurts, and it’s cold, deep down in his bones.

But when he looks up—he knows this place.

He’s been here before.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was very short, but I couldn't think of another way to split it with ongoing content, apologies!

THUD!

It’s cold and dark, the stone smooth and unforgiving against his cheek.

Everything hurts—more than he thought it was supposed to.

He thought that was supposed to stop.

But it hurts, and it’s *cold* , deep down in his bones.

But when he looks up—he knows this place.

He’s been here before.

Recognizes the small, flickering points of light overhead.

Ghost fires.

One black door, to the left—and a red one to the right.

This place has never been frightening to him.

He came here for the first time when he was fresh from the fields of Mount Tonglu. So small, he had to hold Hua Cheng’s hand as he climbed the stairs back out.

But that way is closed to him now.

The only man who can open it isn't with him.

"…Didi?"

Shuo's eyes flicker over momentarily—widen, then sharply look away, his jaw growing tight.

"You're not really here," he mutters. "Qi Rong destroyed you."

"He did," Bao agrees, sitting on the ground—leaning against the black door. "But people see strange things when they die."

"…But we're already dead," both brothers point out at the same time.

An inside joke they used to tell.

And even now, it makes Shuo laugh, wincing as he holds his side.

"…It's been really shitty without you," he admits, sitting back against the red door.

"Oh," Bao's smile softens—forever sixteen, but always his big brother. "I don't believe that."

Shuo grunts, leaning his chin against his knees. "Well, then I'm glad you're not actually real. You'd be disappointed."

"I don't believe that, either."

"Pah."

"…How's that old man of ours?"

"Better." Shuo admits, twisting a curl around his finger. "Happier. Not because you're gone, just…he found him."

Bao's eyes light up, and his smile widens. "Really? Remember the tally marks he used to keep on the wall?"

In spite of it all, a laugh bubbles up to Shuo's lips

"Yeah, we kept on having to make a bigger step stool for Fai so he could reach—"

"—and then Yanlin knocked it over on day ten thousand?" Bao snickers, shaking his head. "I thought Hua Chengzhu was gonna disperse—"

"Geeze," Shuo giggles, sitting cross legged. "You could be a little more sensitive, it's a little too soon for me—"

Then they're *both* laughing, and—

Shuo never realized how much he missed laughing with him.

"…What's he like?"

"The prince, you mean? Weird—but great."

Which makes sense, in retrospect—Shuo never expected Hua Cheng to fall in love with someone *normal.*

How could he be, when he'd been looking for one man for so long?

"He's…kind, brave, generous. Funny, but he usually isn't trying to be. And he…" Shuo bites his lip.

"He sort of reminds me of Hua Chengzhu sometimes. It's not that they're alike—they couldn't be more different—but the way he makes you feel, when he's around…"

Shuo hadn't found that feeling of safety from anyone else.

Not until nights spent with Xie Lian in Puqi Shrine.

That's the one thing that makes this easier—even if Shuo doesn't *really* want to go.

Knowing that Hua Cheng won't be alone again in paradise manor, when all of this is over.

He's spent so *long* missing him.

He deserves to be by the side of the man he adores.

"…Are you scared?" Bao glances over at the door behind Shuo's shoulders, eyebrows raising.

They all know that's the one he'll be taking.

It's ironic—Shuo has doubted so many things about himself. His worth. His purpose. His future.

But he's never thought of himself as a bad person.

Whatever comes next—he doesn't feel like it could be *that* bad.

"…" He pulls a leaf from his hair, crumbling it between his fingers. "I know we don't have any control over what our next lives are like," he admits.

"But I've always kind of had this dream of what my next one would be like."

It's hard—because he knows how childish and embarrassing it is—

But that never made him stop *hoping* for it.

"Yeah?"

Shuo pulls his knees against his chest, resting his chin against them.

"…That if Hua Chengzhu ever had a son—a *real* one—it would be me," he admits in a small voice.

That maybe he wouldn't be the most important person in his world—but he wouldn't feel so disposable either.

"That you and I would be brothers again. And we'd have a sister, and —"

"…We weren't real enough the first time?" Bao tilts his head, watching Shuo with that irritating, discerning gaze.

Always picking up on the things he never actually meant to say out loud.

"You know what I mean," Shuo mutters, lowering his eyes again. "I'm not—"

"He's not like our old dad, Didi." Bao points out softly, watching as Shuo shrinks.

Eyes filled with an ancient pain.

"He would never throw you away like that."

"…I know he's not like him," the ghost agrees, small flames flickering around them like fireflies.

“But I’m not—”

“Good enough?”

Shuo doesn’t answer, and Bao sighs.

“Didi, you’ve gotta grow out of this—it’s a nasty habit.”

“I—”

“Whether or not Hua Chengzhu tells you what you wanna hear has nothing to do with you being good enough,” Bao shakes his head.

“He can’t *make* you good enough. Neither can the prince, or Qi Rong, or that boy you—”

“We’re not talking about boys,” Shuo cuts him off, his cheeks splotchy and pink. “And I *know* they can’t. I know I’ll never be—”

“How did you forget the first story we ever knew?”

Shuo lifts his head, staring. “What are you—?”

“Of the man who died a thousand times—but *always* came back. The god who cast himself back to earth, to protect the orphans of the streets. The man who made the sky rain tears of blood. The—”

“I didn’t forget *Hua Chengzhu.”*

“You forgot he was an orphan from Xianle, just like you.”

Shuo pauses, his eyes growing wide, because—

He *had* forgotten that.

“No one gave him permission to be special, Didi.” Bao points out softly. “He didn’t spend all this time waiting for Xie Lian to acknowledge him.”

He spent eight centuries fighting to get stronger even if Xie Lian *didn’t* acknowledge him.

Because just being useful to him would be enough. And that makes it all the more ironic, remembering—

'You don't have to make yourself useful to justify your existence. '

…Hua Cheng wanted more for *Shuo* than he—

Shuo's throat tightens, and his knuckles grow white against his shins.

He wanted more for Shuo than he wanted for himself.

"…If you're ready to go, then he wouldn't hold that against you," Bao looks at the red door again.

Remembering how many times Hua Cheng brought them here—always giving them the chance to move on.

But always carrying them back when they chose to stay.

"But I don't think you are."

"…I don't think I get to pick this time, gege," Shuo whispers—shoulders slumped.

He's been dispersed—and he doesn't have the strength to reassemble his spirit. Not after using all of his resentment to unleash human face disease on Bai Wuxiang.

There are consequences to curses like that. He can't just cheat—

"That doesn't mean you don't get to try."

As Bao says this, Shuo turns his head to the side—

Seeing a table of stone—one that's sat empty for centuries now.

But even still, he can see the specters of the gamblers who once sat there.

One round with bright eyes, the other lanky and pockmarked.

Each kinder than they seemed.

Shuo is slow, sliding up from his seat against the red door--ghost fires shivering in the air, slinking close to him, as if trying to give the fallen ghost a hint of warmth.

But a ghost fire always burns cold.

The table sits as empty as ever, left alone for centuries now—

But a set of dice still sit on top. Black, with characters painted in gold. Waiting for the chance to be thrown.

"...Hua Cheng bets his entire soul every time he rolls, you know," Shuo murmurs.

"That's how he wins every time."

Because the base value of his soul is high enough, it tilts luck in his favor. Because any stake lower than that wouldn't be enough to open the door.

If Shuo tries the same thing and loses—there's no second chances.

No red door.

No waiting around, hoping that his luck gets better.

Just oblivion.

But Shuo isn't sure if reincarnation is any better--because he won't be himself. He'll be someone new. All of his feelings, memories, and experiences--those are wiped clean, the moment he moves on.

He has no control over who he'll be, or what he'll do after that.

He won't be *him* , he'll be some stranger, living someone else's life.

And Shuo—

He lifts the dice, rattling them against his palm gently.

For the first time, understanding *why* Hua Cheng took that risk.

Because there isn't a huge difference between oblivion and the unknown--and if you still have people you care about, something precious to you in this world—

Fighting to stay, fighting to come back…It might be a riskier bet—but it's always the better one.

But, unlike Hua Cheng, Shuo can't say that he throws the dice with any measure of confidence.

CLACK!

CLACK!

He crouches down on the floor, throwing his arms around his head, waiting for his form to disperse into nothing, but…

There's a low, rumbling groan.

One he knows by heart, after so many years.

And at first—there's part of him that doesn't actually want to open his eyes. That doesn't believe it, but—

When he does, there's a white door waiting for him: standing wide open.

A pair of dice sits alone on the table—gleaming in the firelight.

Two sixes.

And it’s one thing, to *want* to believe you’re good enough.

It’s another to bet your soul, knowing in your gut that you’ll lose—

And having the universe turn around, and say that it’s enough.

That *you’re* enough.

The world always likes to push this idea on you, when you’re a kid.

That everyone is equal. No matter what your name is, or where you were born. Regardless of how much money you have in your pocket, or the gender you’re given at birth.

It’s supposedly the natural order of things—and yet the very nature of humans is to separate based on differences.

To sort different qualities as good or bad. To rank certain people over others.

Sometimes, no matter how smart you are, you’ll never be a scholar.

There are people who work themselves to the bone their entire lives, and they die penniless.

How can everyone be *equal* , when fate treats everyone unequally?

And at some point, very early in his life—

Shuo began to believe that he was never supposed to make it that far.

That whatever fate he possessed—it wasn't a kind one.

Because he was thrown away by his father. Because he was left to hang in that tree, by Lang Ying. Because for so many years, he was just *lost* .

But now, he understands.

Gods and ghosts are two sides of the same coin.

If ascension isn't determined by class, wealth, and family name—

Neither is the strength of a soul.

"…Gege," he breathes, picking the dice back up, "Gege, did you see —?"

But when the ghost turns around—

Only ghost fires await him, flickering gently in the dark.

"…" Shuo swallows hard, turning back to the waiting door, his throat thick with emotions.

For most people, dead doesn't actually mean gone.

But when it does, it's hard to accept it.

Still.

He makes his way to the open door—old enough to climb the steps on his own now.

Sometimes, you can spend your entire life feeling as though you're struggling up the steps of a winding staircase.

One foot after the other, never feeling the distance you've climbed.

Not until you reach the top, and see what's waiting for you beyond.

Grooooooooan…

There's a low rumble—and when the passageway finally opens into the light—

Shuo has no memory of this place.

An impossibly large cavern with smooth, white walls—a ceiling so high, it’s impossible to see where it ends.

And he isn’t alone, either.

There’s a woman—one with dark hair and amethyst eyes, her cheeks streaked with blood.

Sitting up on her elbows, staring at him with equal curiosity.

And Shuo almost feels a stroke of fear, until—

A silver butterfly lands on his shoulder.

And then—he knows he’s *safe* .

At First Sight

Chapter Summary

Xie Lian can tell sunrise must be coming.

He can hear the birds starting to wake, and feel the morning dew on the grass beneath his feet.

And now, being here—it's almost like being a teenager again, walking towards the grand temple for his lessons.

"…This reminds me of when I brought you here," he recalls softly, squeezing Hua Cheng's hand.

That draws a ghost of a smile to the man's lips.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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"…This reminds me of when I brought you here," he recalls softly, squeezing Hua Cheng's hand.

That draws a ghost of a smile to the man's lips.

"Does it really?"

Xie Lian nods, remembering carrying Hong'er up the mountain—how tightly the boy clung to him, back then.

"...You felt so small in my arms back then," he recalls, not seeing the way that smile quickly fades into something a little more sheepish.

"Yes," he agrees, "I suppose I got taller in eight centuries."

"Sooner than that," Xie Lian shakes his head.

"You were taller than me, when you..."

Xie Lian lowers his chin, biting his lip—only for Hua Cheng to reach over and grasp his chin, pulling it free with his thumb.

"I wanted to be taller, even back then."

"...You did?" The god tilts his head. "Why?"

Hua Cheng watches him from the corner of his eye, one hand still resting in the bend of his elbow.

"Because then you might forget how small I used to feel in your arms?"

It's not something he would normally say, and only for the intended result—the smile on Xie Lian's face.

"Gege..." The ghost king whines, but Xie Lian persists.

"You were so *cute* , San Lang—how could I forget that?"

That was part of how he knew, carrying the ghost king in his child form as they raced towards the gates of Mount Tonglu.

"You could try."

"I won't."

Hua Cheng can't ever seem to make himself look away from him—his gaze impossibly full with every emotion—

But mostly longing.

The ground begins to even out beneath them—and Xie Lian's chest begins to sink with dread.

It hasn't slipped his mind that this isn't a scenic walk.

That Jun Wu will be returning soon, and when he does—

Xie Lian doesn't know what to *do* .

He effectively has Xie Lian taken hostage, with the shackles on his body—who's to say he couldn't do that again?

Hua Cheng didn't give up his ashes last time, but…

If it meant having to save Xie Lian from *that* —he would.

And the thought of that makes him desperate.

“San Lang?”

“Yes, gege?”

“I need you to promise—no matter what he tries to do—you won’t tell him where your ashes are.” Xie Lian looks up, his gaze fiercely determined.

And Hua Cheng softens, shaking his head.

“Gege doesn’t need to worry about that.”

“How could I not—?” He falls silent, his heart skipping a beat when Hua Cheng presses his palm against the god’s chest.

“My ashes have always been in the safest place they could be.”

Xie Lian swallows hard, covering Hua Cheng’s hand with his own, knowing how much faith the ghost king has in him, but—

Xie Lian doesn’t know if he *deserves* it.

He’s failed to protect Hua Cheng so many times—what could he do, if Jun Wu came to take them?

“…But now, if dianxia could forgive this one for being presumptuous—your San Lang has something to ask of you.”

Xie Lian looks up, his heart aching. “It’s not presumpt—”

“You love me.”

Just hearing the words makes Xie Lian’s face burn, heart fluttering with embarrassment.

“…I do,” he agrees quietly.

He said as much in Mount Tonglu, holding onto him—crying his heart out as, for the first time, the world gave something back to him.

But outside of the heat of such a moment—shyness finds him.

“Could dianxia say it again?”

Now, the heat in his face is even *worse* , but—

Xie Lian clears his throat, squeezing his hand tighter on top of Hua Cheng's.

"…I love you," he says—quietly, but with sincerity dripping from every syllable.

Unable to see the utter bliss in Hua Cheng's face, when he says it.

"This is where I become presumptuous—because I have something else to ask of you," he murmurs, allowing the world to fade around them for a moment. "And it's a very selfish thing to ask."

His prince tilts his head to the side, curious.

"What is it?"

Hua Cheng's other hand comes up to his face, gently brushing his hair from his eyes.

"There's someone more precious to me than anything else in this world." He explains softly. "Everything I am, everything I do—it's all for him."

Suddenly, Xie Lian's chest is tight.

"…I know," he whispers, his throat dry, but—

Hua Cheng's fingers brush under his chin, tilting his face back as he presses a kiss to the prince's forehead.

"Please—don't treat him so carelessly."

"…" Xie Lian slides his arms around Hua Cheng's neck, hugging him tightly.

He can't promise that he won't get hurt again. Or that he won't be placed in a situation where he has to put himself in danger, but…

"…I'll try," he promises, the tips of his toes barely brushing the ground when Hua Cheng's arms tighten around his back, holding him closer.

And Xie Lian knows *why* Hua Cheng is asking him this. Feels the weight of the god slayer in his sleeve like another shackle, but…

What other way is there? How can Hua Cheng be in two places at once, and fight enemies like Jun Wu and Bai Wuxiang? He—

“There’s one other thing I was wondering about,” Hua Cheng interrupts his thoughts, knowing they don’t have much more time. “But I didn’t get the chance to ask you before.”

Xie Lian raises an eyebrow. “…What is it?”

“In the Kiln—you met her.”

His eyes widen in remembrance.

“…Yes,” he agrees. “She was…fearsome.”

As a martial god himself—Xie Lian would use nothing short of the word *amazing* , but—

“Did she tell you anything about Jun Wu before you escaped? Anything you can remember?”

Xie Lian squints, thinking.

“No…” He frowns. They didn’t have time to talk about *much* , given everything that was going on—and Xie Lian can only remember parts. “…She told me she was sorry, that she would hold back Bai Wuxiang as long as she could, and…”

His nose wrinkles with concentration.

“…I tried to return Fangxin to her,” it’s hers, after all. “She didn’t take it, but she said something about having you replace it, eventually.”

He realizes how that sounds after a moment, shaking his head awkwardly. “Not that I would expect—”

“Gege,” Hua Cheng chuckles.

“You do remember I gave you my entire armory, don’t you?”

Xie Lian blanches.

Yes, he *remembers* , but he didn’t think Hua Cheng was serious about that—

“Do you think in eight hundred years, I didn’t make a sword specifically for you?”

“I—”

CLANG!

Sparks fly from clashing steel behind them—E’Ming flying out to parry the blow before it can even come close to Hua Cheng’s back.

The ghost king doesn’t turn around, still holding Xie Lian in his arms.

“My my,” he muses, squeezing the prince close. “Who’s classless now?”

“…Civilized tactics can be put aside when a fox thinks he can sneak away with a crown jewel, I suppose.”

The breach in the emperor’s armor has been resealed—and aside from a slight favoring of his right side when he walks—he seems completely uninjured.

Hua Cheng bares his teeth—but it’s Xie Lian who speaks first.

“San Lang hasn’t taken anything that wasn’t already his.”

Jun Wu’s eyes widen sharply, and Xie Lian doesn’t mean it the way it *sounds* , but—

You could still knock Hua Cheng down with a feather after hearing it.

“Exactly,” he repeats faintly—fingertips unintentionally digging into the small of Xie Lian’s back.

Jun Wu looks at the prince, his eyes narrowing with anger.

“…Xianle—I don’t think I’ve ever been so disappointed.”

Days ago, those words would have crushed him.

“That makes two of us.”

But not anymore.

Hua Cheng flashes away from Xie Lian’s side to parry the emperor’s next strike, crossing blades with him again and again, not showing an ounce of fear.

CLANG!

CLANG!

“…I’m only going to ask you one more time,” Jun Wu murmurs.

Their arms are straining as they push against each other, eyes glaring viciously—each trying to break the other’s guard.

“Where. Are. Your. *Ashes?”*

Hua Cheng’s smile is fierce, fangs gleaming.

“How about I show you mine if you show me yours?”

CLANG!

They could go on like this endlessly—but Jun Wu has been worn down by so many rounds of fighting—

And he didn’t come to play fair, or enter some climactic conclusion.

He came to end this—and end it *quickly* .

His eyes slip over Hua Cheng’s shoulder, back to Xie Lian’s face.

He’s watched the prince since his birth—through every trial, joy, and disappointment.

“…I hope you understand I didn’t want this,” he says softly—knowing that, even from a distance, Xie Lian will hear him. “As a matter of fact —it breaks my heart.”

“What *heart?”* Hua Cheng snarls, pressing harder, on the verge of making Jun Wu’s knees buckle, but—

There’s a pained gasp behind him.

One that, after what happened on the Mountain, makes Hua Cheng’s blood run cold.

“You forced this choice on me, Xianle.”

But when Hua Cheng turns his head—he doesn’t see the shackle on Xie Lian’s neck glowing the way it did before, when Jun Wu used it to torment him. No—

Black marks start to sprout across the prince’s jaw like ink, curling and twisting.

Forming a *fourth* shackle.

Xie Lian stumbles, hands clawing at his mouth, voice straining and changing, as Jun Wu—

As he begins to seal something else away.

“W-what is t-this?!”

“What you asked for,” Jun Wu replies calmly as Hua Cheng shoves him back. “Don’t you remember?”

When they were in the Heavenly Capital months ago, and rather than deny the allegations of the Gilded Banquet—

Xie Lian asked Jun Wu to place another shackle on him as punishment, sealing his voice.

“You’ve caused so much death. So much destruction.”

Xie Lian’s knees hit the ground.

“Yin Yu is dead. Your friends are dying. Countless mortals have lost their lives already—all because you couldn’t do as you were *told* . And for what?”

CLANG!

“You were content to roll in the mud with humans for almost a *thousand* years.”

CLANG!

“You never stopped to care about what I was doing *then* , but you’ve started now? Has ‘exposing the truth’ brought anything but suffering?”

Xie Lian winces, struggling to speak, clutching either side of his head.

Feeling growing pressure in his ears.

A fifth shackle.

“You think you can outthink, out fight, out *smart* the world?” Jun Wu sneers, struggling to hold Hua Cheng back, adding the new shackles straining his strength, but—

He won’t need much.

“You aren’t *different* from me, Xianle. And if you don’t change—you’ll

FALL!”

Xie Lian winces as their voices become distant, shoulders trembling under the weight.

It’s crushing him.

He can’t, he can’t, he *can’t* .

Jun Wu’s voice is still there, faint—demanding.

“WILL YOU CHANGE? WILL YOU CHANGE? WILL YOU CHANGE?!”

A pained sob rips from Xie Lian’s throat as he shakes his head vehemently.

Knowing what “changing” means for Jun Wu.

Xie Lian *joining* him—or becoming just as ruthless as he is.

“I WON’T!” He screams, even as his jaw tries to lock itself shut. “I WON’T CHANGE!”

He won’t change, because there are mothers who give even the most meager of meals a name, just to make their sons smile.

He won’t change, because there are children who will leave bowls of food outside of a blind man’s shrine, even when he has nothing to give in return.

He won’t change, because there are mortals who will pick you up from the ground and give you the hat from their own head, just to shield you from the rain.

He won’t change, because there are friends who promised to protect him forever—not only until it got hard.

He won’t change, because even after so many years of hurting each other, there are friends who will stand beside you.

(Even when they think they’ll never have your forgiveness.)

He won’t change, because there are little girls who spend centuries defending those who scorned them

He won’t change, because there are students who learn the hardest lessons—in ways that you never meant to teach them.

He won’t change, because when he was standing alone in the dark—someone reached through a bridal veil to take his hand.

He won’t change, because every single time he fell, someone caught him.

He won’t change, because even when he was so *sure* he would be forced to face the endless stretch of time alone—his Hong’er came back to him.

He won’t change, because golden palaces will always fall.

That’s the point of building them in the first place.

Xie Lian won’t change, because he never hated this world—even when it hated him.

Xie Lian won’t change, because he loves this world.

And he loves the people in it.

And now, even as his voice starts to grow fainter and fainter, as the world around him grows closer to silence—

Xie Lian screams out.

“I WON’T CHANGE! EVEN IF IT’S PAINFUL I WON’T CHANGE, EVEN IF I DIE I WON’T CHANGE, I WILL *NEVER* CHANGE!!!”

Kindness is never weakness.

Being gentle does not make a man meek.

And it requires far more strength than it takes to become cruel.

Xie Lian reaches for the dagger in his sleeve, croaking out an apology to Hua Cheng as his jaw seals shut, knowing that he doesn’t have another choice, but—

A hand rests over his own, stopping him, and before Xie Lian can struggle—

He hears a voice in the distance, small and faint;

“You don’t need it, your highness.”

Xie Lian shakes his head weakly, fingers trembling as he feels Hua

Cheng enter his communication array.

'You've always been stronger than him. '

The prince twists his head back and forth, golden shackles gleaming painfully in the morning twilight, tears creating paths through the blood and grime on his cheeks.

'I'm not, San Lang—not like this, he has millions of believers, I—'

'So what?' Arms tighten around him, forcing him to set the dagger aside. *'He had millions of fools following him. But you? For you, even just one person is enough.'*

Xie Lian's eyes grow wide.

One person is enough?

'San—'

Lips press against his, and there's no more thinking.

No more breathing.

Xie Lian doesn't even think he can feel his own heartbeat anymore—not with the surge of power coursing under his skin.

Pulsing louder, brighter, until it consumes every part of him.

Until Xie Lian feels his ears popping—a roaring rush as sound returns.

Until his jaw unlocks, lips parting as Hua Cheng kisses him deeper, a sound of surprise slipping from the back of his throat.

His foot jerks with shock, feeling something around his ankle *snap* —

But Xie Lian doesn't feel any pain.

And it's too much, it's so much power, he finds himself writhing in Hua Cheng's grip, struggling to push him away, because he can't *take it* , but—

The ghost king grips the back of his head firmly, not allowing Xie Lian to squirm away from him.

Not this time.

Not until something around his neck shatters, and Xie Lian starts gasping for air, arms trembling, because—

In eight hundred years, he had forgotten what it felt like to take a full breath. Clinging to the back of Hua Cheng's robes, until—

Until, after so many years of fumbling around, staring into the darkness—

Xie Lian sees a crack of light.

Then another.

And another.

Fractals of gold filling the darkness, stretching out like spidery veins—until finally, there's no more shadow.

Only blinding rays of light.

It's *overwhelming* , paired with the power coursing through his body, the roaring in his ears, the thundering of his heart—

But as it all begins to fade, it doesn't grow *dark* —

It just becomes clear.

And for the first time in eight hundred years, the first thing Xie Lian sees with his own eyes is a young man.

One with sharp features—wild, dark hair, and a leather patch over his right eye.

His left is a falling star, sparkling down at him like a wish.

Wearing crimson red robes and silver vambraces, butterflies edged across the surface.

Xie Lian has never seen him before—

And yet, he would know him anywhere.

He would know him by the scent of the forest all around him. By the touch of his hand.

He would know him by the silver bells on his boots, jingling as he holds Xie Lian closer, their noses bumping together.

Clink!

Clink!

Xie Lian would know him without memory of him, like a wound on his soul—one he'd never wish to be healed from.

He would know him if he didn't know *himself* , has known him with so many different faces, names, and lifetimes—

And every single time, he's been loved by him.

Been saved by him.

All those years ago—Xie Lian caught him once.

And Hong'er caught him every time after.

Now, he reaches up with trembling fingers, pressing his palm against his believer's cheek—

And Hua Cheng stares back into the eyes that saved him first.

That loved him, when he never thought he could be worthy.

That gave him a reason.

Xie Lian smiles—so much that it hurts—his eyes swimming with tears that hold no hint of sorrow or pain.

His thumb strokes across Hua Cheng's cheek bone—just under the leather of his eye patch.

He whispers to him, his voice raw—but brimming with adoration.

"…Handsome."

A wet, shocked chuckle slips from Hua Cheng's lips, eye widening.

"I always tried to tell you," his prince reminds him with a shaky smile.

"You—You did…" Hua Cheng pushes his hair back, only to be pulled in for another kiss, this time softer—Xie Lian's hands in his hair.

"My handsome, brave San Lang," Xie Lian whispers against him, feeling Hua Cheng shudder in response.

He doesn't want to move. Doesn't want to let go yet.

Doesn't *ever* want to let him go again.

But they aren't finished yet.

"…Come back to me?" He whispers.

Hua Cheng presses their foreheads together, his hands squeezing tight around Xie Lian's waist.

"Always," he swears, making the same oath again, and again, and again.

And now, he helps his god to his feet.

"You'll tell me when?"

Xie Lian nods, hands aching as he's forced to let him go, but—

"Oh, and Dianxia."

He looks up just in time for something to be placed in his hands.

A long, white scabbard—one that fits perfectly in his palm.

Just like it was *made* for him.

"This is—?"

"I already told you," Hua Cheng smiles.

Normally, a sword has its name painted across the hilt—but in this case, for obvious reasons—

It simply bears the golden effigy of a flower.

"Everything I have is yours."

But this—this was made especially for him.

Hua Cheng lifts his palm, sparing Xie Lian one more look—his gaze brimming with an emotion Xie Lian never would have expected to see. Not when someone was looking at him, anyway—

Pride.

"See you soon, gege."

CLACK!

CLACK!

BOOM!

CRASH!

ROAAAAAAAR!

Lang Qianqiu can barely move, his entire body wracked with pain as his eyes crack open—swollen and stinging from—

…Salt water.

He's been moved above the valley that was once the foot of Mount Tonglu, left on a stone outcropping along the ridge, and when he sits up—

He sees that the land below has been flooded with water—enormous, skeletal spines appearing and disappearing between the waves.

"…What the hell is that?" He rasps, rubbing his head—finding Quan Yizhen sitting beside him.

In better shape, though not by much, legs dangling over the edge as he watches the scene below.

"Blackwater is fighting Bai Wuxiang," he explains quietly, watching the two clash.

Several sea serpents of bone, twisting and curling around a man-made lagoon, caging the two calamities in, even as Bai Wuxiang slams into them over and over again, desperately fighting to escape.

"Think your other half can help you?" He Xuan asks him darkly.

"No one can."

Every single time Bai Wuxiang even manages to get a finger outside of the perimeter, golden chains appear, dragging him back in.

"…We're evenly matched like this, you *fool!"* Bai Wuxiang snarls, straining against his bonds. "At this rate, we'll just destroy each other!"

"Fine."

Bai Wuxiang looks back over his shoulder, incredulous—and He Xuan raises an eyebrow, completely unfazed.

"It seems you forget I'm vengeful to a *fault* until it stops being convenient for you."

"Vengeful?!" The elder calamity repeats, incredulous.

He's soaked to the bone, his face covered in growths—splitting into new mouths, screaming, multiplying by the minute.

"Why would you be vengeful against me?! I orchestrated it so you could GET your revenge, you idiotic little—"

CRACK!

He Xuan's claws leave three deep marks.

"…It's almost infuriating," He Xuan sneers, pulling his hand back in disgust. "How many lives you destroy without even remembering the most *minute* details."

"I—"

"Gave a desperate teenager what you framed as an *easy out* —and I hated him for that," He Xuan admits slowly. "But he never tried to tell me it wasn't his fault. He never tried to push the blame on someone else."

"He was *weak* ," Bai Wuxiang retorts, hair damp, sticking to his cheeks. "He wanted to reap the benefits of ruthlessness, but couldn't live with the responsibility—"

"What do *you* know about taking responsibility for anything?"

A lifetime ago, when He Xuan could have been many things, he chose to be a scholar.

Nose buried in countless texts, fingertips stained with ink.

A son of a ship builder—but when he prepared for his civil exams, he studied countless philosophies.

And in every single one—the *but-for* cause of harm bears the most responsibility.

Jun Wu taught Shi Wudu that spell, hoping he would use it.

He used He Xuan's future, his sister's future, Qin Meirong's future—

All as tools for blackmail, to keep a promising young god in check.

Without him—it never would have happened.

And Bai Wuxiang can't even *admit* to that.

But even if that was the only thing—

He Xuan has other grudges held against Bai Wuxiang.

"I haven't forced anyone to suffer through something I myself wouldn't—"

He Xuan lashes out suddenly, gripping the hair on the back of the calamity's head, slamming it down.

THUD!

"Really?" He Xuan snarls, fangs bared as he watches blood drip from the calamity's temple. "Someone's held you down like this, then?"

Golden chains wrap around his wrists, his ankles, his throat, dragging him down to his hands and knees.

"Someone's put you in shackles?"

He Xuan isn't even remotely vile enough to even *consider* putting this thing through the other forms of pain it's caused.

And even if he was—even touching him this much makes the man sick.

"What—are you trying to avenge *him?"* Bai Wuxiang hisses, disbelieving.

And when he begins thrashing, the chains binding him start to break.

"I don't know if that makes you pitiful, or a goddamn *Saint* ," he rises back up to his knees. "Either way—you're a *failure* . If you'd rather be destroyed in his account then so BE IT!"

His hand shoots out, grabbing one of the skeletal serpents wriggling around them—ripping off a section of spine, the bones sharpening in his hands as he levels them against He Xuan like a blade, knocking him back.

“You were one of the few who could have walked away from this,” Bai Wuxiang points out over the roar of the sea, his gaze cold and unforgiving. “But you’d rather die before your son takes his first *breaths—”*

CLANG!

Steel meets bone, grinding and crushing.

An old, worn battle ax has cut the bone through—sliding deep into Bai Wuxiang’s palm, where even more faces are springing forth.

Screaming for mercy.

“If it means he’s born into a world without *you?”* He Xuan’s eyes are a burning sea of hatred. “Happily.”

Even if he has no intention of losing today.

(He promised Shi Qingxuan that he would bring their best friend back.)

Bai Wuxiang shoves him back again, stumbling to avoid the waves churning all around.

Up until now, he’s always used a blade to fight his battles.

Elegant weapons—those that allow him to cling to some guise of civilized nature, even when he’s been reduced to something far more barbaric.

But now, he’s forced to lower himself.

Claws extending, fangs bared—eyes turning black.

With that, and the faces spreading across his skin—he doesn’t look *human* at all anymore.

More like something pulled from the recesses of a nightmare—never meant to see the light of day.

And yet—it suits him more than any mask he’s ever worn.

It’s more honest, in a sense.

“…You think you’re different from all the others?” Bai Wuxiang rasps, claws glinting in the pale light. “You think that in two *thousand* years, there weren’t others who tried to stop me? Stronger than you. *Braver* than you.”

“Maybe,” Blackwater admits, unfazed. “But I doubt you let them get that far before you clipped their wings, did you?”

“It wouldn’t have MATTERED!”

The fighting between them becomes a bloody thing.

Violent swings of an axe. Claws and teeth, saltwater sinking into their wounds with a vindictive sting.

"There is only one who has ever come close to taking me from this world," the first calamity admits, blood dripping down his jaw. "But I've found her heirs to be *lackluster."*

He Xuan's breaths are wet and ragged, ax gripped tightly in his palm.

"Says the one who wasn't willing to fight Crimson Rain in the Kiln," he sneers, raising an eyebrow.

Of course, between communicating about the fall of the Heavens, He Xuan *heard* .

Says the creature who places any god who could stand against him in chains.

He would have done the same to He Xuan already, had the new water master not rejected the Heavens from the moment of his ascension.

Bai Wuxiang skids backwards, feet balancing on the surface of the water.

"I'll be more than willing to fight him when he fails to save you from —"

Bai Wuxiang falls silent, eyes whipping to the side, tracing a new source of movement—a point of light, glinting as it darts through the waves, the clouds of soot and smoke.

And when it flutters past him, landing on Bai Wuxiang's arm, He Xuan's eyes grow impossibly wide.

A maple leaf—gleaming like molten bronze.

Made from pure spiritual energy.

Followed by one—then another, and another, until Bai Wuxiang is swarmed with them. Slicing into his skin, making it easier for He Xuan's chains to drag him *down* .

When He Xuan looks back over his shoulder—

The doors to the Kiln stand wide open.

Bai Wuxiang follows his gaze—only to find her standing there. At the very edge of the barrier.

As far as she can go.

Hammer clutched between her fingertips.

Hair loose, blowing around her shoulders in the wind.

And even from this distance—he can see her mouth the words, even if the sound is lost to the wind.

'It ends here. '

His gaze narrows with hatred, teeth bared in a vicious snarl.

She can't *hurt* him anymore.

No one can.

There was a time when she believed that.

When she buried two sons and had a third ripped from her arms.

Believed that he was inescapable.

And each time she found herself on the verge of bringing another ghost king into this world—Zhao Beitong refused.

She lovingly named each after her lost sons, then swallowed them whole.

Until the third.

Until she met a young man with a fire in his heart that burned so brightly—she was forced to turn her eyes away from the shadows.

To look back on a world she had forsaken.

Hua Cheng didn't make her think the world wasn't cruel.

He didn't make her think that Bai Wuxiang's defeat was certain.

But he made her remember that it is *always* better to rage and claw and bite than to fade quietly into the shadow.

That the nature of a ghost is to *fight* .

That when you send your sons out into the world, you know it's a brutal existence. That they'll suffer and break and struggle—and sometimes, they don't come back to you.

But even in all of that pain—they live a life. Painful, beautiful, and it is *theirs* .

All you can do is love them as much as you can before you feed them into it.

Love them, and *teach* them.

Teach them to be more dangerous than what waits in the dark.

To have longer claws and sharper teeth.

With that in her heart, she forged Crimson Rain Sought Flower.

And when she met a young man with nothing left in his heart but hatred and vengeance, and held him in her arms. Seeing not what he had become--but what he was. What he would be again.

A good man.

Black Water Sinking Ships.

Two ghost kings, for two ages of pain and peril that passed through this world. Reflecting unfathomable death, suffering, and injustice.

Now, this earth finds itself on the precipice again—

And Zhao Beitong had three sons.

There were always Four Great Tales of the Heavens.

They were always *meant* to be paired with Four Great Calamities.

And when the bell tolled, a knock landing on her door once again—she found a child of revolution and war.

A lost soul, found over and over again.

Who has always had a reason to remain in this world—one he didn't recognize himself, hiding it under layers of self-doubt, but one Zhao Beitong knows all too well.

A fierce devotion to one's family.

Now, she forges her final Calamity—

Autumn Twilight Shrouding Forests.

THUD!

Bai Wuxiang breaks his gaze from his wife's face—

Looking down at his bleeding stump of a wrist.

Two daggers gleam viciously, one turned black with the calamity's cursed blood, dripping down into the waters below.

"...That's a desperate move, even for her," Bai Wuxiang hisses, watching as the child of Xianle stands before him now.

With eyes like twin wildfires, leaves whipping around him in a fury, mixing in with the maelstrom of waves.

"Turning a *child* into a weapon."

"You're one to talk about desperation," Ren Song mutters, feeling a hand land heavily on his shoulder.

He turns his head, finding He Xuan staring down at him with a painful mixture of emotions—

But more than anything else, *relief* .

"Don't *ever* do that again."

"..." Ren Song smiles up at him, shaking his head. "You're always bossing me around, but I'm *older* than you, you know—”

"What? Expecting me to call you gege?"

"Couldn't *hurt* ," he shrugs, looking back at Bai Wuxiang. "And she didn't help me so *I* could kill you."

No. That task has always belonged to someone else.

Bai Wuxiang watches the two Ghost Kings, prowling around him like wolves circling a kill.

But he's no frightened deer. He's a predator on his own, waiting to make his *own* meal out of them.

"No one can kill me now."

"Is that so?"

A hand lands in Ren Song's hair--heavy, but reassuring in its weight—ruffling it softly.

Clink!

Clink!

"I've heard conflicting reports on the matter."

A silver saber rattles in its sheathe.

"I suppose I'll have to see for myself."

His gaze flickers towards He Xuan and Ren Song momentarily—conveying a silent message—and the waters around them slow, growing still.

Bai Wuxiang has an opening to run *now* —

But he doesn't take it.

Watching as He Xuan and Ren Song move back.

"...You're arrogant enough to fight me alone?" The White Clothed Calamity stares, his eyebrows slowly raising—

And Hua Cheng simply smiles.

It isn't a kind one.

"It won't be much of a fight."

Not with Xie Lian half a world away, and He Xuan and Ren Song moved out of range.

Jun Wu has always been careful to face Hua Cheng in a situation where hostages were involved—and Bai Wuxiang would be no different.

But without that threat present—it leaves him free to fight without regard for anything else.

Nothing, except for the *kill* .

And for the first time, when faced with an attack—

Bai Wuxiang dodges.

Flips away from E'Ming, rather than attempting to block it with his arm, or allowing himself to take the damage in order to gain an opening.

Almost as if he knows this fight is going to be different.

As if he fears allowing the scimitar to touch him.

His hand lands on the newly exposed earth as the waters slowly begin to retreat back to the river banks, finding a weapon discarded from earlier, *barely* raising it in time—

CLANG!

But when he looks up, it isn't into the famed gaze of the greatest calamity, one of dark leather and an eye like a flame—

No, he looks into the eyes of a teenager, dressed in the armor of a different time.

One eye dark as pitch, the other red as blood.

Scars on his cheeks—a nose twice broken, and healed as many times.

Wielding a saber far more simple than E'Ming, but more than strong enough Bai Wuxiang, forcing him back.

"I haven't been able to wear this skin since I died," he admits in the voice of a young man.

One who never screamed or begged for mercy, not until the very end.

The one Bai Wuxiang never *broke* .

A reminder that only makes the calamity gnash his teeth in frustration, shoving him back.

"Who wants the face of a *useless child?"*

But—

CLANG!

Another blow rains down—this time, from an entirely different direction.

Bai Wuxiang parries a blade of black steel, gleaming wickedly against his own.

Wielded by another young man--this one in black armor, and—

A white mask covering his face.

Smiling.

Born into this world in a moment of pure anguish and rage—and dragged out of it the same way.

The one who denied Bai Wuxiang of what he desired most ardently, back then.

Xie Lian, alone.

"...Clones?" He mutters, disbelieving. "You actually mean to fight me with *clones?"*

CLANG!

This time, he blocks a teenager with eyes like two fallen stars—wearing robes the color of maple leaves, wild, dark hair braided over his shoulder.

The same boy who fell into the Sinner's Pit.

"Oh, no," Hua Cheng corrects him softly.

THUD!

Something slams into the calamity's back, just between his shoulders, and he twists his head around--only to find a ghost fire, flickering in the pale light.

"Consider them visual aids—to jog your memory. It seemed like a senile piece of trash like you might need it."

"Hardly," Bai Wuxiang replies coldly. "Your failures have been nothing if not *memorable* —”

CRACK!

This time, when he goes to parry the next attack—

His blade crumbles upon impact. Shards of steel embedding themselves in his forearm and shoulder.

E'Ming gleams up at him.

Wielded by a man in crimson robes and silver vambraces, leather covering his right eye—

And a wicked, bloodthirsty smile, his gaze glinting with vicious promise.

"Before I erase you from this world, you're going to do something for me."

Long ago, this creature stole something from him. Leaving him wandering alone in the dark for countless centuries, fumbling blindly for the light.

Now, Hua Cheng wants it back.

E'Ming's edge rests beneath the Calamity's chin, waiting.

"You're going to *say my name."*

Bai Wuxiang towered over him once.

A daunting specter of power, holding Hong’er’s entire soul in the palm of his hand.

But that was all a mask—half laughing, half crying.

This was always lying beneath.

This warped, miserable, pathetic *thing* .

“…You think you can torture anything out of me now?” Bai Wuxiang rasps, hands glowing white hot as he welds the broken shards of his sword back together.

Hua Cheng's smile widens.

And the ground beneath them shudders.

"You think you're beyond suffering?"

If he does, then he is a fool.

"What if, when I'm through with you, there's nothing left?"

The earth groans violently as they clash.

"Not even the ruins of Wuyong."

Not the palace he once called home. The empty frames of his temples. Not even the altar where his brother fell.

"You hear it, don't you?"

CLANG!

Each time they clash, Bai Wuxiang's blade is fractured and remade, weaker each time.

But he hears it, even from hundreds of miles away.

Rolling Thunder, rocking the continent from the scale of its force.

"Someone is burning your temples."

All ten thousand of them.

"When I'm through, there will be no trace that you ever set your feet upon this earth," Hua Cheng swears. "You won't be around to fool Anyone with a new name or disguise. It will be as if you never existed."

People will forget him.

" *He* won't," Bai Wuxiang snarls, clinging to the one vindictive point of victory, watching the ground crack around them.

Lava from the chambers beneath the remnants of Mount Tonglu bubbling forth.

"You think he ever *COULD?!* HE—"

“He will.”

In spite of Bai Wuxiang sneering about Hua Cheng’s use of clones—it doesn’t feel like fighting one opponent.

It feels like fighting *four* .

CLANG!

CLANG!

“There will come a day when he’s been free from pain and fear for so long, he’ll forget what it felt like.”

Hua Cheng will make sure of it.

"He'll look over his shoulder, and stop expecting to see you there. He'll dream again, and it won't be about you. Every scar on his body will heal. And it will be like you. Never. Existed."

Every single word is punctuated by a following blow.

Hua Cheng will rebuild the ruins of Xianle if he has to. Erase every trace of Human Face Disease from this earth. Destroy texts and erase oral histories, until there isn't a *whisper* of him left.

Any lingering thought of him will be reduced to nothing more than a story to scare children.

But never a name. Never a face. Only a formless monster that exists in between the pages of a story. One that *ends* , the cover slamming shut with the final chapter.

Bai Wuxiang's sword falls—not because his hand stopped holding it—but because his arm has been hewn away at the shoulder.

By a white masked shoulder with a black saber.

The other is the next to go.

Ripped apart by a youth in robes the shade of maple leaves.

Something wet lands on his cheek, swallowed by countless screaming faces, swirling across the calamity's skin, and when he looks up—

The sky has begun to rain blood.

Hands lock down on his shoulders, forcing him to his knees.

"Say it."

His jaw locks shut in stubborn refusal, but—

He watches now, as lava flows pour down the valley, rushing towards the ruins that were once his home—beginning to swallow it whole.

Listens, as his temples are raised to ash.

And it's—

"Say it."

It's painfully familiar.

Just like—

"Say it."

Just like last time.

And he doesn't, he can't—

"SAY IT!"

Finally, through clenched, blood stained teeth, Hua Cheng hears his birth name, his *full* name—for the first time:

"P...Pei Hong..."

The boy born beneath a Star of Solitude.

To two parents who loved one another, but never got the chance to see him grow.

The boy who fell from the city walls, only to be caught in the arms of a prince.

The child who refused to leave this world. Who would not be erased. Who will *never* be forgotten.

Thud .

Bai Wuxiang looks down—only to find a blade buried in his chest.

The cursed scimitar, E'Ming—pulsing with spiritual power.

Shredding his soul apart.

“You should be grateful to me, you know.”

Hua Cheng has been waiting so *long* to say those words.

“Without me...your story would have been so *boring* .”

Little more than a hideous villain, lurking within the shadows of a story. The sort that snatches babes from their cribs. Locks princesses in ivory towers.

“Look at the role you got to play. Beautiful, isn’t it?”

Even if Hua Cheng would never call it such—he doubts anyone else could have pulled this off.

The longest lie in history, perpetrated by its greatest killer, wearing the mask of a friend.

And no one suspected a thing.

"You said that the prince loved fairy tales."

E'Ming twists in his chest, forcing a rattling gasp from the creature, the screams of the faces on his body growing louder.

“And look at you now. A hideous little creature...desperately in love with a prince,” he sneers the words back at him, speaking next to his ear.

"But he would never have you. And even if you tried..."

No one ever would.

A lifetime ago, Hua Cheng would not have dared to say these words.

Would have found it too presumptuous. Too shameful.

But he—

"He is *mine* ."

Hua Cheng has always been a selfish man.

He knows that he'll never deserve him. That it's the cruelest joke in the world, for Xie Lian to be held by a lowly creature like him.

Hua Cheng has *always* been his, and for some reason, in some fit of madness—

Xie Lian chose him.

Those are the last words Bai Wuxiang hears, before his form begins to cave in on itself.

Swirling and contracting, spiritual aura screaming and flickering—

Until nothing is left but a ghost fire, floating in the palm of his hand.

And Hua Cheng doesn't let him go.

Chapter End Notes

> *drum roll* it's been a long journey, but this is no longer a blind! Xie Lian fic anymore! we made it!

Body in Abyss, Heart in Paradise

Chapter Summary

Jun Wu staggers backwards, clawing at the horde of butterflies as they hover around him, wings slicing with every beat—

“ENOUGH!“ He clenches his fist, sending out a shockwave of spiritual power, surprised to find—

He feels surprisingly light.

Like a weight has been lifted.

After countless rounds of battle and mounting exhaustion—

He hadn’t expected such a sudden rush of relief.

And for a moment, that brings a surge of confidence, watching as the wraith butterflies around him wither.

“Well, Crimson Rain…” he muses, “looks like you’ve tired out.”

Chapter Notes

CONTENT WARNINGS: death, gore

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“Well, Crimson Rain…” he muses, “looks like you’ve tired out.”

But when he turns around—Hua Cheng isn't anywhere to be found, and—

It's…snowing?

All around him, as far as the eye can see, falling down as the sun rises over the central plains.

But when Jun Wu reaches up to catch a piece between his fingertips—

It's a flower petal.

Gleaming gold—composed of spiritual power.

Falling around him like snow.

"It's just us, now."

His voice is as soft as it ever was—and yet it echoes, filling the air around them like thunder.

That's when the emperor sees him.

Walking lightly across the ground—his robes bloodied and torn from the battle, boots abandoned after carrying Mu Qing into the lake before.

With each step he takes, wildflowers bloom beneath his feet.

And as golden petals fall around his head, they begin to form a crown.

His eyes are filled with golden light—

No shackles to be seen.

His neck and ankles bare.

"…What has he done?" Jun Wu whispers, shaking his head

How is that *possible?*

Xie Lian's reply is deceptively simple:

"What you were afraid to do."

There are those who will always see something beautiful, and feel the overwhelming desire to place it in a cage.

Hua Cheng has always been the one to fling the door open, offering that which he loves the greatest gift of all;

Freedom.

What comes out of Xie Lian's mouth next makes the emperor go still.

"Lay down your weapons, your highness." Xie Lian encourages him quietly, his voice echoing across the plains. "There's no need to fight any more."

It's finished, now.

Jun Wu stares at him in shocked silence.

"…Did I ever ask for your forgiveness?" He asks him slowly, seeming offended by even the most minute offer of kindness. "Did I ask for *mercy?"*

Xie Lian arches one perfectly shaped brow.

"I offered you dignity," he explains softly. "And I never said that I forgave you."

He doesn't know if he could.

"…A significant amount of my power these last eight centuries went into those shackles," Jun Wu points out, his gaze lingering on Xie Lian's throat. "It'll be just like the last time we fought."

Just before Xie Lian's second banishment.

"…I suppose we'll have to find out." His one-time protege replies.

BOOM!

In the imperial city, hundreds of miles away, mothers hold their children close.

As far as Yunmeng, battle-worn cultivators and martial gods lift their heads and listen to the sound.

Jun Wu took the first strike, attempting to slip around the prince and hit him from behind—

A mistake, fighting a man accustomed to fighting things he cannot see.

Xie Lian blocked him with Fangxin—not even taking the blade from its scabbard.

But he doesn't let Jun Wu make the second attack.

BOOM!

Each time their blades clash, the ground quakes, wind rushing around them.

BOOM!

But while Jun Wu is concentrated, moving desperately to break his guard—

Xie Lian makes it look like a dance, moving like water.

Jun Wu might be wearing a full set of armor—

But Xie Lian has never worn it, not even once.

It makes him light, and compared to the emperor—impossibly fast. Slipping under his attacks before they even get close.

"You won't be able to bring me down with elegant *footwork!"*

As he says this, he holds his hand outward, summoning a mass of stone from a nearby hillside, sending it hurtling towards the back of Xie Lian's head, and—

When the prince raises his hand, holding his palm out, it turns to dust and silt upon impact.

It blows past them in a thick cloud—leaving both men covered in a thin layer of dust.

The emperor's eyes widen, realizing that, for the first time in his godhood—

He's found himself in a fair fight.

That knowledge breeds urgency.

One that the emperor hasn't felt since he was a child, forced to live behind a mask.

He stretches one hand out, his palm glowing with power as he opens a storage array—

Summoning a storm of swords to his side.

Every single one Zhao Beitong ever forged—flying forth in a fury.

CLANG!

Only to meet an equal, if not greater surge of blades—this time made from pure light.

During their last battle, Xie Lian summoned three thousand swords, and made one dent in his armor.

Now—he summons ten thousand, both gods rising from the ground.

Blades swirling around them like swarms of hornets, clashing all around—and as Jun Wu's eyes scan the horizon—

Something seems to occur to him, and in a flash, he leaps on top of one of the weapons—flying past the prince in a gleaming flash.

But Xie Lian isn't far behind, riding the surge of blades he summoned, fangxin aloft in his right hand.

His non-dominant arm, curiously enough.

Flying through the clouds as the emperor surges across the plains, wondering—

Because retreat isn't Jun Wu's style.

But as the surge miles away from Mount Taicang, his intent becomes clear.

Surging down into the streets of a small city—one of many in the sprawl of unincorporated states left after the fall of Yong'an—citizens screaming and running from the sight.

A young girl stumbles, dropping her basket of laundry as she carries it back from the wash house, trembling with fear as a man in armor falls from the sky, surrounded by swords, but—

Flowers are falling too, landing in her hair—warm to the touch.

And when she looks up—

A young man stands next to her—in torn white robes, with a crown of golden flowers in his hair.

Offering her a hand.

"Don't be afraid," he murmurs, his voice unlike any she's ever heard, but—

She takes it, allowing him to pull her behind him.

The citizens of the town shrink away, some trying to hide inside of their homes, others too terrified to move.

"Who is this for?" Jun Wu asks softly, swords hovering overhead, pointing towards the mortals menacingly. "For *them?"*

He glances around at the masses, his eyes filled with nothing but disdain.

For these, the common people that Xie Lian was so desperate to protect, all those years ago.

"They don't even know who you are." He sneers. "The fires of Xianle have long since burned out."

And those who do remember him know him as a god of misfortune. Of plague, death, and destruction.

No one will *thank him* for what he does here.

Xie Lian doesn't step away, doesn't stop shielding the mortals behind him.

"...I was never a god of Xianle," Xie Lian replies, his voice calm as he echoes his sentiments from many, many years ago.

"I am a god of this world."

And everyone in it—whether they believe in him or not.

That isn't why Xie Lian helps people.

“…I…I think he’s a martial god,” one of the mortals whispers to her husband, hiding behind him, both of them shrinking when Jun Wu looks their way.

Which is odd—because the Central Plains doesn’t have a martial god widely worshiped within their territory. Even General Tai Hua, native born to the kingdom of their forefathers, is primarily worshiped in the east.

But regardless of who he is—it seems like he's there to protect *them* .

"…You had so many years to learn," Jun Wu shakes his head. "And you're still a *fool* ."

Xie Lian disagrees.

He's always been a slow learner. His lessons are long and painful.

But he learns.

Jun Wu, however…

He stares at Xie Lian with endless frustration, his jaw tight.

"If I asked you to take the blows in their place--you would, wouldn't you?"

Xie Lian glances over their heads, where Jun Wu's swords are still circling, pointed at each mortal in the street like a threat.

Left with the choice of protecting them, or stopping the emperor. Because that's what Jun Wu *does* .

Takes every other option, and makes you feel like you have a choice.

But Xie Lian isn't interested in letting the emperor tell him what his choices are.

Not anymore.

"Enough blood has been spilled on your account," he answers . "I don't see a need to spill any more today."

He isn't going to offer himself in their stead—and he isn't going to let Jun Wu slaughter them either.

"…Is that so?" The emperor hisses, pupils narrowing. "Then I'll make sure not to spill any more."

He won't be looked down on by someone just like *him* .

He won't suffer the blatant hypocrisy laced in Xie Lian's calm offers of peace and surrender.

No.

He’s seen who the Prince of Xianle *really* is—

And it’s time that Xie Lian received a much needed reminder.

There’s a terrified scream from behind him—and Xie Lian watches as a young boy is dragged from the ground by an invisible force.

“A’HENG!”

“M—MOM—!”

Xie Lian’s eyes narrow as he grips Fangxin tighter. “Let him—!”

Creaaaak…

“Show them,” Jun Wu sneers.

Xie Lian doesn’t move.

Creeeeaak…

Watching as the boy hangs over them, feet kicking and struggling, hands tugging at a noose made from spiritual rope

“Show them how *kind* and *merciful* you are.”

Xie Lian can’t breathe, remembering that sound.

Calling for his mother and father, only to stumble into them blindly.

Desperately looking all over the forest for Hong’er, only realizing afterwards that the creaking wasn’t the boughs of the trees.

It—

It was him.

He…He…

His knees wobble, feeling a weight settle on him once more, dragging him down.

Around his own throat—like *he’s* being hung too—and that’s when he realizes.

Jun Wu is shackling him *again* .

Black ink crawling across his throat, squeezing until his knees begin to wobble.

But the moment his knees hit the ground—

Xie Lian's hands wrap around his throat, his eyes snapping up towards the emperor's.

Staring him down as he takes the forming shackle between his hands —

And he shatters it, his voice coming out in a low, wrathful snarl.

"No."

The boy falls to the ground, cushioned by a pile of flower petals as his mother rushes forward to help him, and Jun Wu—

BOOM!

He feels the building walls crumble around him as he's thrown through it—all four—before he's sent flying down the hillside, struggling to stand—

BOOM!

The next blow comes from underneath him, sending the emperor rocketing up from the ground, surging hundreds of meters into the air —

BOOM!

And the third sends him crashing back down, slamming into the earth with a thunderous crash.

The crater that forms is as deep as a house is tall—and Xie Lian is flying back down into it before the smoke clears, riding a surge of golden petals beneath his feet—

CLANG!

CLANG!

CLANG!

Thousands of weapons clash all around them, but it’s not like before.

Now, the blows from the prince’s hand have reached double time, unleashing such speed and force, it’s impossible for the emperor to keep up—and when the dust clears, it’s easy to see why.

He wields a sword in each hand. Fangxin in his right—

And a gilded blade in his left.

Knocking Jun Wu further and further down the hillside, away from the town—trees falling, earth rumbling around them—

Until they find themselves far away—in a deserted, vast clearing—and Xie Lian hits him harder, *faster* , with spiritual power in every blow.

"You're a disgrace," Jun Wu snarls, sweat dripping from his brow every time they clash, sparks flying all around them. "All for *nothing* . Once I've finished with you, I'll find your precious San Lang, and I'll finish what I STARTED—!"

He cuts himself off with a pained grunt.

"What?" Xie Lian asks coldly, standing over the emperor as he falls to his knees. "What did you say you were going to do?"

Jun Wu's sword clatters to the ground as he clutches at his throat, breathing hard.

"I'm waiting."

He tries to speak—but his throat feels so *heavy* .

Xie Lian has sheathed the gilded blade—leaving only fangxin in his hand, his other clenching into a fist as Jun Wu struggles—

Black ink crawling around his neck, growing tighter by the moment.

"You..." He coughs, clutching at his skin, trying to shatter it—

But he can't.

"You can't...use..."

"Only the most powerful deity of the Heavenly Court can administer shackles," Xie Lian recalls slowly, his knuckles growing white as black ink begins to spring up around Jun Wu's wrists. "That's why you were frightened when I asked you to remove mine."

Jun Wu sinks forward on his hands and knees, hands trembling as they claw at the dirt, breathing hard.

He has three, right now.

The same number Xie Lian lived with for all of these years—and he can't even stand on two feet under the weight of them. He can barely *breathe* .

Then, it feels like needles are pressing into his irises, stabbing into him as the world grows dark—

Golden patterns of white and black gleaming in his eyes as he looks around blankly, his expression tinged with growing fear.

Xie Lian would be lying, if he said that there wasn't a part of him that enjoyed the sight.

He would be dishonest, if he said that forcing the emperor to experience his own abuse didn't bring some form of satisfaction, but...

Jun Wu gasps and shudders as a weight is lifted.

But it also makes Xie Lian feel a little sick.

When the emperor looks up—the crown prince of Xianle is kneeling beside him, his head in his hands.

Not tired, or frightened—but torn.

"...I'm not doing it like this," he mutters, shaking his head.

Because as much as Jun Wu has hurt him, as much as he's hurt so many others—

Xie Lian isn't willing to compromise himself again out of hatred for him.

He didn't understand that when he was younger. Stinging with grief and humiliation.

When he donned the white mask and mourning robes, Xie Lian felt like he was taking control over his grief. Like he had *power* again, but —

But that was the weakest moment of his life.

Because the moment you allow suffering to change you—it begins to *control* you.

It locks you into a wheel that never stops spinning. Dragging more and more down with it as it rolls, crushing those caught underneath.

Before long, they become the ones who continue pushing it down the hill.

When the only way to stop yourself from hitting rock bottom is to let go, and walk away.

Even when that feels impossible.

Not for the other person. Not because they deserve forgiveness, or peace.

Justice brings peace.

Revenge is a snake swallowing its own tail.

Jun Wu rubs his wrists, shaking his head.

"...Even with all of that power," he whispers, looking him over. "You're still a *coward.”*

A frightened child who allowed his kingdom to fall. Who couldn't protect those he loved. Who rolled in the dirt for eight *hundred* years.

Xie Lian doesn't lift his head—and after a brief pause, he turns to look at the emperor—

And his expression catches Jun Wu completely off-guard.

How sincere it is, not showing an *ounce* of hatred.

"Whatever your next life may bring—I hope it's kinder to you."

Jun Wu's jaw grows slack, eyes casting aside their resentment and fury for a moment, staring at him with utter shock.

"...How could you say that to me, after everything that's happened, and expect me to believe you?"

Xie Lian smiles—because it's simple.

Something he's always believed, even if he didn't have the wisdom to understand it, when he was young.

It was something that took him *so* long to understand, a naive child and a slow learner—

But he learned.

"Body in abyss, heart in paradise."

And he means every word.

Knowing exactly how the emperor will react.

His scream of rage, pure and utter fury is nearly swallowed up by the clashing of blades echoing all around them—

And up until now while Xie Lian was faster and stronger, their movements mirrored one another.

As one would expect, given that they had the same teacher.

They were brought up in the same style of swordsmanship. And the only *real* sparring matches either have had in the last thousand years have been with one another.

But now, Xie Lian knows something new.

'You're stronger than him.'

Those were the words Hua Cheng said to him, over and over again. In the Kiln. In the Heavens. Now, here—just before he broke his shackles.

And Xie Lian couldn't fathom it.

That he could be stronger than someone so ancient, so *daunting* .

Someone he had lost against so many times.

It took him what felt like ages to realize it wasn't about how long they had lived—it was about how they had lived.

And that his greatest weakness might have been his ultimate strength.

'San Lang—now!'

Half a world away, a ghost fire is crushed in the palm of someone's hand.

Flickering into sparks before burning out.

And with a twist of Xie Lian's hands, rapidly forming signs as they clash—

The sun, rising over the central plains, begins to change.

Burning brighter—so bright, that for a moment, the sky almost seems to burn, shining down on the world in a fury of pure, golden light.

So intense—anyone standing beneath it would be forced to close their eyes.

And for one of them—

That makes all the difference.

His feet don't touch the ground, carried by a wave of petals, hidden by the rush of the wind, the clashing of blades all around, until—

Until there's silence.

Thud!

As the sun begins to fade back to its normal morning glow, weapons fall to the ground all around him.

Xie Lian lowers one blade, blood dripping from its gilded edge, staining the grass below—the flower painted across the hilt gleaming in the sun.

Untouched by the carnage.

Jun Wu's body lays on the ground before him—Fangxin buried in his heart, buried deep into the earth beneath him.

His head has come to a stop several feet away, resting on its side.

Eyes reflecting the morning sun, unseeing.

The prince wipes the edge of the blade San Lang made for him, watching as an angry, raging aura springs up from the emperor's corpse, forming a dark cloud overhead. Two shattered halves of a soul, twisting back into one.

But Xie Lian's gaze shows no fear.

He's known, far longer than he wanted to admit, how to stop Bai Wuxiang from hurting anyone else, ever again.

And now, by extension, the rest of his soul.

Hua Cheng told him the first day they met again, sprawled across an ox cart.

CRACK!

The hilt of Fangxin falls to the ground, shards of the blade scattering all around, only one shard remaining buried in the emperor's heart.

A blade of revenge and death, broken by one forged in faith.

Ghosts have a tradition of leaving their ashes with those they love most.

As the emperor's body slowly begins to fade, finally giving up the illusion of a living, *celestial* form—

The cloud overheat begins to shudder and shriek, thousands of faces straining in the darkness, howling with resentment—

Only to grow silent once more.

Sucked into the open pickle jar, waiting in the prince's hands—only to be slammed shut and sealed the moment it's inside.

Holding the barest remnants of Jun Wu's soul—made whole once more.

Xie Lian looks around him, slowly beginning to realize—

It's over.

No more shackles.

No more Jun Wu, Bai Wuxiang, or anything in between.

And while he knows it was the right thing to do, he didn’t expect to feel so—

Clink!

Clink!

The prince's eyes widen, and his heart grows full.

The jar falls to the ground, discarded.

"San Lang!"

He throws himself into the calamity's arms without a thought, arms twining around his neck.

Hua Cheng chuckles fondly, arms wrapping around his waist, holding Xie Lian close.

"I told gege I would."

And he's never broken a single promise.

"It's like I said," Hua Cheng's lips press against his forehead, chaste, but adoring. "You were always stronger than him."

Xie Lian's hands slide up from his neck, cupping the ghost's face in his hands.

"You made me strong enough," he whispers.

Hua Cheng falls silent for a moment, his throat thick until he's forced to clear it, fingertips brushing Xie Lian's hair from his cheeks.

Examining the cuts and bruises on his face.

"Gege, you really should be more careful…"

Xie Lian is smiling too much to sound contrite.

"I will be next time!"

Hua Cheng arches one eyebrow in an attempt at sternness. "Next time?"

A breathless laugh escapes the prince as he smiles up at him, eyes shining.

But he…

"…I…" He takes a deep breath. "There's something I need to tell you."

He promised he would, before he fell into the Kiln—and they haven't really had a chance to speak freely since.

Hua Cheng waits, prepared for many things, but not—

"I am *so* sorry."

Not the shame in Xie Lian's voice.

"...What?"

"For the way I—the way I treated Wu Ming."

Hua Cheng's eye widens, hands resting against the small of Xie Lian's back.

"...I didn't know you had figured it out," he admits softly, and Xie Lian averts his eyes.

"I used to think it was strange, how I could have loved him so deeply, when I didn't have him for that long."

Hua Cheng can't take his eyes away from him, lips parted with shock—and Xie Lian is too guilt ridden to be shy.

"But once I knew you had never left this world...I also knew it had to have been you."

Xie Lian was already ashamed of his behavior before—

But then, it broke him.

"There's nothing to forgive."

"I was so *selfish* , San Lang, I used you so carelessly—"

"And I was so happy," the ghost king assures him, his thumb brushing over Xie Lian's cheek. "Serving you was the greatest gift you could have given me."

Xie Lian shakes his head.

"My only regret was knowing that you were in pain," Hua Cheng admits softly. "And that I was part of it."

"...Oh," the prince exhales shakily, looking up at him. "None of that could have ever been your fault. But I—I asked for things I shouldn't have—”

“You mean the kiss?”

Xie Lian swallows hard. “I should never have put you in that position—”

Hua Cheng doesn’t let him apologize again—not really.

He pulls the prince close, kissing him until he’s breathless, hands limp against Hua Cheng’s chest.

“I’ve stolen more from you since.”

Xie Lian would argue that wasn’t true. Under water rescues aside, Hua Cheng won their first kiss fair and square.

And every embrace after was willingly given.

But when Hua Cheng pulls back, and Xie Lian’s eyes open—

His breath catches in his throat.

There’s a youth in black armor, his hair pulled back into a high, sleek ponytail. One eye dark as pitch, the other red as blood.

And even without the white mask, Xie Lian would know him.

Remembering how his armor felt and smelled, pressed against him.

“…Wu Ming,” he whispers

He’s here.

He’s here, and he’s so *beautiful* , it’s like Xie Lian can’t breathe.

Seeing the eye Hong’er always hid from him, even after Xie Lian couldn’t see anything anymore.

“Oh, Wu Ming,” he whispers again, his voice thick—

Then, they’re kissing again.

More fiercely than they ever have before, unburdened by secrets, fear, or shame.

So desperate, they fall to the ground, Hua Cheng holding him steady in his lap with one hand in his hair, the other against the small of his back

Xie Lian doesn't open his eyes when they pull apart, their foreheads pressed together.

"…Can we go home, now?" He croaks, his voice thick with emotion—and Hua Cheng laughs softly with surprise.

"Where would that be, your highness?"

"…I don't know," Xie Lian admits. "Anywhere, just…go with me, please?" His voice wobbles, unsure. "Or I'll go with you, I just…I want…"

He buries his face in Hua Cheng's shoulder—and the ghost king hugs him close, until his ribs burn with the sweetest kind of ache.

"…I'm sorry, dianxia," Hua Cheng whispers, fingers stroking through Xie Lian's hair. "But I'm going to have to keep you waiting a little longer."

Xie Lian stiffens, leaning back, and when he does—

He sees that the edges of Hua Cheng's form have become transparent.

"…What?" The prince mutters, dumbfounded as he holds Hua Cheng by the shoulders, his face growing pale. "What's…what's happening?!"

Hua Cheng winces, still twirling Xie Lian's hair between his fingers.

"Nothing too serious, I…just over did it a little bit…"

After breaking so many spiritual shackles, and destroying Bai Wuxiang—it's to be expected, but…

"Did you give me too much?" Xie Lian rasps, taking Hua Cheng's face in his hands. "Take it back, then! As much as you need!"

He kisses him again, desperately trying to give it back.

Pouring as much energy as he can into the embrace, but—

It isn't *working* .

Hua Cheng pulls back, pressing another kiss to Xie Lian's forehead.

"While I'm glad gege isn't being so shy—that isn't necessary. Unless you just wanted to kiss me, in which case—"

"What's going on?" Xie Lian pleads, cutting through the teasing as he clings to the front of his robes.

"Just taking a little break," Hua Cheng reassures him, cupping the back of his head. "Don't be scared."

The prince's shoulders begin to shake.

"…How can you say that?"

Xie Lian shakes his head, his breaths quickening. "San Lang, I-I can't do this—"

"Gege—"

"—I really can't do this!"

Because it *is* serious, even if Hua Cheng doesn't want to frighten him.

He wouldn't let Xie Lian see him like this at all if it wasn't.

Hua Cheng hushes him, pushing tangled pieces of hair behind the prince's ears.

"It's alright, your highness…"

"N- *No!"* Xie Lian sobs, shaking his head vehemently. "I-I'm sorry, I—I'm not strong enough, I—I'm not *brave* enough, I c-can't—"

"You are."

"I'm *not!"*

Xie Lian shakes his head, tears pouring down his cheeks. "I-I don't want to do this! It's—It's no good if you're not there! I don't—"

He's cut short when Hua Cheng hugs him close against his chest, weeping silently against the front of his robes as they begin to fade.

"Listen," Hua Cheng urges him softly. "Do you know where we are now?"

Xie Lian blinks, struggling to see through the tears as he lifts his head. He knew he intentionally moved Jun Wu away from the city, towards a clear, open area, but now he realizes—

These are ruins of Xianle.

And here, on what would have been the grand Avenue, he…

"…This is where you caught me," Hua Cheng reminds him gently.

The place where it all started, and now ends.

"…And failed you ever since," Xie Lian whispers, each word dripping with pain and regret.

"No."

"San Lang—"

"I loved you, the moment I saw you." Hua Cheng explains, resting his chin on top of Xie Lian's head. "It was so much—it scared me, the first time I felt it."

"…Me too," Xie Lian whispers thickly—but for different reasons.

Because he didn't recognize what he felt for Hong'er as love. Not until he was standing before a pyre.

"You didn't catch me once," Hua Cheng tells him. "It was so many times."

Pulling him from a sack behind a carriage.

Carrying him to Mount Taicang.

When he was weeping in Xie Lian's arms, pleading that he wasn't cursed—

And for the first time, someone agreed.

Giving him an umbrella and food when he was cold and alone.

Saying that, if Hua Cheng couldn't find meaning in his life—

Xie Lian could be that meaning.

Words that he called arrogant and misguided later—but that wasn't true.

"Every moment we were apart," Hua Chen explains slowly. "Every time I was angry, scared, or alone—that love for you was with me. It *caught* me, dianxia."

Tears fall from Xie Lian's chin.

"It caught me every single day." He presses his lips against Xie Lian's forehead. "That's why I refuse to leave this world."

Xie Lian blinks slowly, tear addled and weary. "W…What?"

Hua Cheng's forehead rests against his cheek.

"Because I have someone precious to me."

Xie Lian knows what Hua Cheng is describing better than most—

Faith.

Love and faith are two halves of the same whole, never mutually exclusive.

It was love for *Hong'er* that reminded Xie Lian of his love for the world. Of how beautiful it could be.

He—

Every single day, when Xie Lian kissed his ring and told him good morning—

Hong'er caught him, too.

Hua Cheng pulls back to look at him, taking Xie Lian's face between his hands—

"If your dream is to save the world, then my dream is only you."

Xie Lian stares back at him, eyes wide, tears falling silently, remembering—

A conversation he had so long ago, alone in the snow.

"But…you won't…be able to Rest in Peace—" he croaks, only for Hua Cheng to reply just as he did back then.

"I pray to never Rest in Peace."

Hua Cheng's hand rubs Xie Lian's back, just as his mother used to calm the prince when he was young and throwing a fit. Just as Xie Lian has soothed Hua Cheng twice now, telling him not to be angry.

"I understand your everything," he murmurs.

Not some idealized version of him. A god who doesn't cry, bleed, or fail.

There are countless gods who have projected that image, and Hua Cheng has never prayed to them.

"Your courage, your sorrow, your kindness, your pain, your resentment, your intelligence, your foolishness."

Because Hua Cheng—

He *never* needed Xie Lian to be perfect.

He loves his imperfections. His struggles. His scars and bruises, even if he wishes he could have spared him from every single one.

Hua Cheng has lived a life that makes a man find beauty in scars.

To—

Like Xie Lian said that night, sitting beside the campfire on Blackwater island, avoiding Hua Cheng's gaze, but speaking sincerely.

Hua Cheng loves *him* , not the state of him.

"...Please don't talk anymore," Xie Lian croaks, his face soaked in tears.

"Please, don't...Don't be like this, I...there are so many things...You...I owed Wu Ming one more promise, but you never asked! And...and I have so much more I want to say to you," the prince sobs. "It's been so long since anyone listened to me talk, just... *please* , stay?"

Hua Cheng's lips brush against his temple, and he shudders.

"I'll have to ask you later, don't worry."

"Don't," Xie Lian's voice cracks, "I can't do this again, Hong'er—" Saying his name for the first time in so long without pain—

It makes him break.

"Hong'er!"

He clings around Hua Cheng's neck, pressing his face against his shoulder, barely able to breathe, barely able to talk.

"It's—It's already been two times!" He weeps, trembling all over. "I can't go through that again, I--I don't want there to be a third! I *can't take it!"*

Doesn't want to see another sunrise if he isn't next to him. Doesn't *want* to face the endless years ahead of him if he'll be doing it alone.

Doesn't want a life without him in it, because it isn't living, it's just waiting, and he's so *tired* of waiting!

Hua Cheng holds him so close, it feels like Xie Lian could disappear in his arms—

And part of him wants to.

"To die for you is my *greatest* honor," he whispers fiercely.

Every single time. No matter how many times it takes—

Until the world is safe for him.

Until there's a place for them.

But Xie Lian doesn't want to be anywhere but here, in his arms. It feels like the minute Hua Cheng lets him go, he'll fall, and he'll never stop falling, not until—

Not until someone catches him again.

"You..." His shoulders hunch and quake, his cries no longer muffled by Hua Cheng's robes. "You said you'd never leave!"

Hua Cheng's eyelashes flutter slightly, fatigued—but his voice never shows it, repeating words he heard long ago, in another memory.

Another life.

"...There is no banquet in this world that doesn't come to an end," he mutters, tilting Xie Lian's chin up as the prince falls into inconsolable cries, "but I will never leave you."

Xie Lian pauses, struggling to catch his breath, his teeth chattering.

Hua Cheng smiles.

The same smile from before, when he fell back into the Sinner's Pit, making Xie Lian the same promise as he did then—

"I will *always* come back."

A choked sound of agonized adoration rips itself from Xie Lian's throat as he reaches for him one more time.

Desperate to say what he didn't before, what he couldn't for so long.

"I love you," he cries, hands pressed to Hua Cheng's face, desperately trying to take it in, every line, dimple, and smile. He—

He didn't have enough time, there's so much, and he—

"Hong'er, I love you, *please* don't—stay, stay with me? I promise I won't ever hurt myself again, I'll—I'll eat as much as you want, I—*please* , please, please. I love you! I'm—I'm so *scared* , I don't—I don't know *how* —"

"Wait for me," his love whispers.

He's said it many times before.

When Xie Lian didn't know he was there, desperately climbing that staircase, struggling to make his way back towards the light.

But even when the prince was at his most desperate, his most *sorrowful* —

Hong'er was always climbing back to him.

Saying those words, over and over again.

Wait for me.

Just a little longer.

Wait for me.

(Just a little longer.)

But faith isn't something that comes easily. If it was, it wouldn't have such power.

"I love you," Xie Lian repeats, saying those words as many times as he can before he disappears, trying to make up for lifetimes of lost hellos and goodbyes, memories they never got to share.

Trying to fit an immortality's worth of love and sorrow into one last moment.

But before the words finish leaving his mouth—his arms are empty.

Faith isn't tangible, that's why people struggle to find it.

It can't be seen, heard, or felt.

In the face of sorrow, it shrinks.

Xie Lian falls to his knees, surrounded by a storm of butterflies.

And he just wishes that the screaming would stop.

He's so tired of hearing it, but—

It's just him.

It's always been him, screaming.

Howling against the doors between life and death itself, feeling that pain, that *grief* open inside him like a pit, swallowing him whole.

Screaming at the unfairness.

Screaming at the agony.

Screaming at the void in his life that San Lang always leaves behind, even if it was never his choice to go.

Falling so hard and so fast, he knows, if he ever lands at that bottom, he will *break* .

But something brushes against his cheek, and when he opens his eyes —

A silver butterfly is there, wings brushing against his tears. Floating down to land on his finger, where...

A red thread remains, tied into an affinity knot.

Xie Lian hangs his head, his body convulsing with a pain that no one should ever *know* , breaking a bone you never knew you had—not until it shatters.

Faith is the first friend you accuse of abandoning you, and the one that never leaves.

Hiding in the smallest of places.

And now, when Xie Lian reaches for the chain around his neck--he finds it.

That feeling, twisting with beauty and pain, filling up the aching gap left inside.

And it catches him.

Holding him in its arms, even as he continues to cry his heart out—

But it doesn't die.

Because he—

Because his Hong'er *promised* he would come back to him.

And no matter how much it hurts, no matter how *badly* Xie Lian wants to turn his eyes towards that dark pit in the corner of every room he's ever in...

The one that makes him so tired that makes him want to give up, that makes him *ache* for the loving embrace of a rope around his neck, carrying him through that barrier between himself and everyone he's ever *lost* —

The pit he wants to fall into, and never climb out.

Xie Lian doesn't look at it.

He keeps his eyes firmly steered towards the horizon.

Watching the sun climb above the hills.

Xie Lian chooses life, clinging to nothing more than that fragile thread of faith.

Chooses to believe that he'll find him again.

Even if it takes another eight hundred years. A *thousand* years.

Even if he waits until the rest of life fades, and the stars fall from the sky, one by one, he'll wait.

A ring is grasped between trembling fingers, brought to his lips for another kiss.

Now, on the first day since they said goodbye again.

"...Good morning, San Lang," he whispers, wrapping his arms around himself.

He doesn't try to tell himself that it's going to be a good day.

He won't tomorrow, either.

But one day, he'll smile at the sunrise again.

He doesn't move when he hears people coming. Doesn't lift his head, or stop clutching San Lang to his chest for dear life, rocking back and forth.

"...Dianxia? Where's..." Feng Xin's voice is low with concern. "Where's the emperor? And Crimson Rain?"

The Prince doesn't answer.

Mu Qing is leaning heavily against him, his arm slung around Feng Xin's shoulders as he watches Xie Lian's slumped, trembling form.

Seeing the fading butterflies in the sky.

"...Your highness..."

"Gone," Xie Lian whispers, barely able to speak.

"They're...gone."

"What--?" Feng Xin frowns, stepping over the pickle jar on the ground, judging it away with his foot. "You—CRIMSON RAIN!" He shouts, looking around. "CAN'T YOU SEE HE'S UPSET?! GET THE HELL BACK OVER HERE, WHEREVER YOU ARE!"

But Mu Qing...

He kneels down on the ground beside Xie Lian, reaching out to touch the prince's shoulder.

Xie Lian looks up at him, his face flushed and tear stricken—and his friend pauses, taken aback.

"...Your eyes...?"

"...Your *hair* ," Xie Lian rasps, voice breaking.

They stare at each other, silent for a moment, each struggling through their own emotions, but...

When Xie Lian leans into Mu Qing's arms, they're wide open.

Holding him, the way he wishes he had back then.

The *first* time he lost him.

Xie Lian's face sinks into Mu Qing's shoulder, and he just—

He just *sobs* , allowing himself to be held, even if part of him wants to hide it away. To force himself to be silent and slink off, not wanting to be a burden. Because—

San Lang wouldn't want that for him.

You would think, after dying enough times, that it gets easier.

In some ways, it does.

The dark isn't as deep. The cold doesn't cut as sharply.

In other ways, it's exhausting.

Floating in darkness, slipping down, down, down—all the while, holding on.

Because you won't go.

You'll *never* let go.

It won't be easy—it wasn't last time, but—

He still has someone precious in this world.

Someone waiting for him to come back.

And that's enough to hold on. To struggle against the current, bracing his feet against the pull.

Thud!

He's fallen many times before—more times than he can count—

But he's never landed in a place like this.

Soft grass beneath his hands, tickling his nose.

The smell of hyacinth and orange blossoms drifting through the air.

He pushes himself up, brushing off the front of his robes, and when he looks up—his breath goes still.

A child is before him—no more than seven years old, sitting beneath the boughs of a maple tree.

Dressed in silks of white and cold, dripping with jewels that seem far too heavy for him.

But Hua Cheng would know those eyes anywhere.

His fingertips are outstretched, a silver butterfly resting against them—but with Hua Cheng watching, he pulls them back shyly.

"…Don't be scared," the ghost king murmurs, watching him with quiet wonder. "You can touch them."

The prince stretches his hand out again, smiling when another butterfly lands in his palm.

"What are you doing inside my dream?"

"Is that what this is?" Hua Cheng asks mildly.

Xie Lian nods rather seriously, averting his eyes. "And it's very rude to show up somewhere when you haven't been invited," he explains, parroting his mother's words.

He never means to be rude. He just gets lonely sometimes, when A'Xin isn't there.

"…I see," Hua Cheng bows his head, ever so contrite. "Shall I go, then?”

Xie Lian surveys him for a moment, a butterfly landing against his cheek, making the child giggle and shrink away.

“…You can stay,” he agrees, good natured. “Just don’t do anything scary.”

“Scary?”

“I don’t like scary dreams,” Xie Lian explains, his nose wrinkled with distaste. “And those are the only ones I remember…” he looks up at him apologetically. “Which means I won’t remember you, I’m sorry.”

But somehow, that makes Hua Cheng smile so wide, it hurts.

“I’m a good dream?”

Xie Lian looks away again, suddenly very shy—

But he nods.

“…And what if I told you that you would meet me someday? When you’re awake.”

“…Really?” The prince breathes, his eyes round.

“Really.”

“When?”

“When you’re older,” Hua Cheng promises.

“You just have to wait for me.”

“…I don’t like waiting very much,” Xie Lian whispers.

Hua Cheng’s eyes are brimming with fondness.

“I know—but you get very good at it.”

Which makes the prince frown with dismay.

“It sounds like I’ve had a lot of practice.”

“…Waiting isn’t so bad, sometimes.” Hua Cheng murmurs, sitting down beside him, pulling one knee up against his chest. “Not if it’s something worth waiting for.”

The prince thinks about that, staring at the butterflies in his hands.

“What did you have to wait for?”

“…Someone precious to me,” Hua Cheng looks over his shoulder, towards the hillside, gently sloping upward.

Further and further, disappearing in the distance.

“…I think I’m waking up soon,” Xie Lian frowns, glancing at Hua Cheng again.

It gets harder every time, almost as though he gets more and more shy the more he looks at him.

“…Are we *really* going to meet when I’m older?” He asks slowly, wraith butterflies casting his cheeks in a silver glow.

Hua Cheng smiles.

“Patience, your highness.”

The prince watches him for a moment, eyes taking in Hua Cheng’s face, flickering around in a childish fit of nervous curiosity—

But he smiles, watching as the butterflies slip away from his hands.

“…Okay.”

And then, he’s gone.

Taken from the realm of dreaming.

But Hua Cheng doesn’t despair.

He remains under the maple tree a moment later, breathing in hyacinths and orange blossoms, the gentle rays of sun warming his cheeks.

Then he rises to his feet.

Making the trek uphill.

Walking for what feels like days—maybe *weeks* , but—

Eventually, he hears laughter

Sees a child running past him—

Chasing the wraith butterflies.

Slightly older than last time—with the over-exuberance that children always seem to have, sending him tumbling and laughing when he stumbles, rolling over to look back at him.

“…You!” He breathes, sitting up.

Red honeysuckle flowers tangled in his hair.

Hua Cheng bites back what he *actually* wants to say, smiling down at the prince softly.

“Was I a bad dream?” Xie Lian tilts his head to the side, and he adds—“You remember me.”

“…No,” the prince shakes his head. “You’re good. It’s just—I’m not awake. So, of *course* I remember you.”

Hua Cheng’s smile widens. “Is that how it works?”

The prince nods, giggling when one of the butterflies lands on his nose.

“…I’m still waiting for you, by the way,” he adds offhandedly, as though he hasn’t counted the days in every dream he’s had since—that would be very silly.

And Xie Lian isn’t silly. He’s important. Busy. Dignified. Whatever else his father says a young man should be.

Definitely not—

“Patience, your highness.”

“I’m patient,” he cries, pausing and blushing when he realizes how *whiny* he sounds, very childish, not dignified at all—

So he clears his throat, tucking his hair behind his ears.

“I was just reminding you, that’s all.”

"...I see," Hua Cheng nods, opting not to question him. "Thank you—but I could never forget, your highness."

He says that, but there's so much *waiting* .

One dream after another, with Xie Lian slipping through the years. Growing from a child to a teenager between his dreams.

But his eyes still light up with recognition every time he sees Hua Cheng coming over the hill, saying the same thing.

It's you.

I'm still waiting, you know.

Patiently—just reminding you.

The older he gets, he finds more subtle, elegant ways of saying it.

But Hua Cheng's reply is always the same.

Patience, your highness.

The conversations are never long, but they're always fond. With the prince sitting beneath him under a maple tree, winding a lock of hair around his finger. Eyes averted from Hua Cheng's face.

"...This person you said you were waiting for...the one that's precious to you..."

Hua Cheng holds up his hand, watching as a falling petal lands on the back of his knuckles, offering it to him.

Xie Lian reaches out to take it—his fingers quick, ears pink.

"...What's she like?"

Hua Cheng raises an eyebrow, his lips quirking into a crooked smile. "You would like them, I think."

He should. Hua Cheng hopes he learns to, one day.

"Is she beautiful?"

His smile softens, and he never looks away when he replies—

"Breathtaking."

Xie Lian doesn't dare to look at him—but he frowns.

"...I'm waking up," he sighs, remorseful—because it's nicer here.

With *him* .

"You seem frustrated."

"I just—" Xie Lian bites his lip. "I don't even know your name. How am I supposed to know it's you when we—?"

Hua Cheng sends him a sly look, raising an eyebrow.

"I thought you said you didn't remember the good dreams."

Xie Lian opens his mouth, then closes it, flushing all the way to the back of his neck, and when he pulls his hand back from holding one of the butterflies—

Hua Cheng catches him by the wrist.

Pulling his hand over, pressing a kiss to his knuckles.

Something officers and politicians do to Xie Lian each and every day—

But it never leaves his heart hammering out of his chest.

"...I don't want to wake up yet," he whispers.

Doesn't want to go back to a beautiful, privileged life—but one with so many pressures.

It's never like that, here.

These are the best dreams that he ever has, and in a moment of honesty, because it's *his* dream, and no one will ever *know* —

"...Sometimes, I wish you'd just take me away." He mumbles, still holding onto Hua Cheng's hand. "When I meet you, I mean. That's selfish, isn't it? I shouldn't—"

Hua Cheng kisses his hand again.

(If only to hide the look on his face.)

"Patience, your highness."

He looks up at the prince through long, dark eyelashes—his gaze sparkling with an emotion that Xie Lian is far too sheltered to name.

"Wait for me."

Xie Lian swallows hard, struggling as he's pulled from dreams, because

—

These are always the sweetest.

"...I will."

Then Hua Cheng is alone again, watching the breeze play through maple leaves, breathing in the smell of the flowers.

They smell like him.

He got into a fight about that when he was small. It would probably horrify Xie Lian to hear about it now.

But when Hong'er was barely more than ten years old, sweeping one of the crown prince's less prestigious shrines, one of the other children who lived on the streets made some idiotic comment, saying something about how it wasn't very manly to be associated with flowers.

That the prince probably smelled like them too, that he was most likely a cutsleeve.

Hong'er hadn't known what that name meant back then—but that didn't stop him from breaking the boy's nose.

(And having his own broken in the process, which Xie Lian would loathe if he knew.)

But he *does* smell like flowers, and it changes.

Sometimes like hyacinth and jasmine. More recently like chamomile and bergamot. But always—

Always like home. Always like *him* .

And while part of Hua Cheng could spend forever like this, waiting beneath a maple tree for his love to dream of him—

That's all it is. A dream.

A beautiful one, but—

He promised he would come back. And Xie Lian...

He's already said he doesn't like waiting very long.

With that in mind, even if part of his soul *could* wait—

Hua Cheng could never Rest in Peace.

He prays that he never will.

And so, he rises to his feet, brushing the flowers from his hair

He climbs up the hill, knowing, someday—

He'll come back to him.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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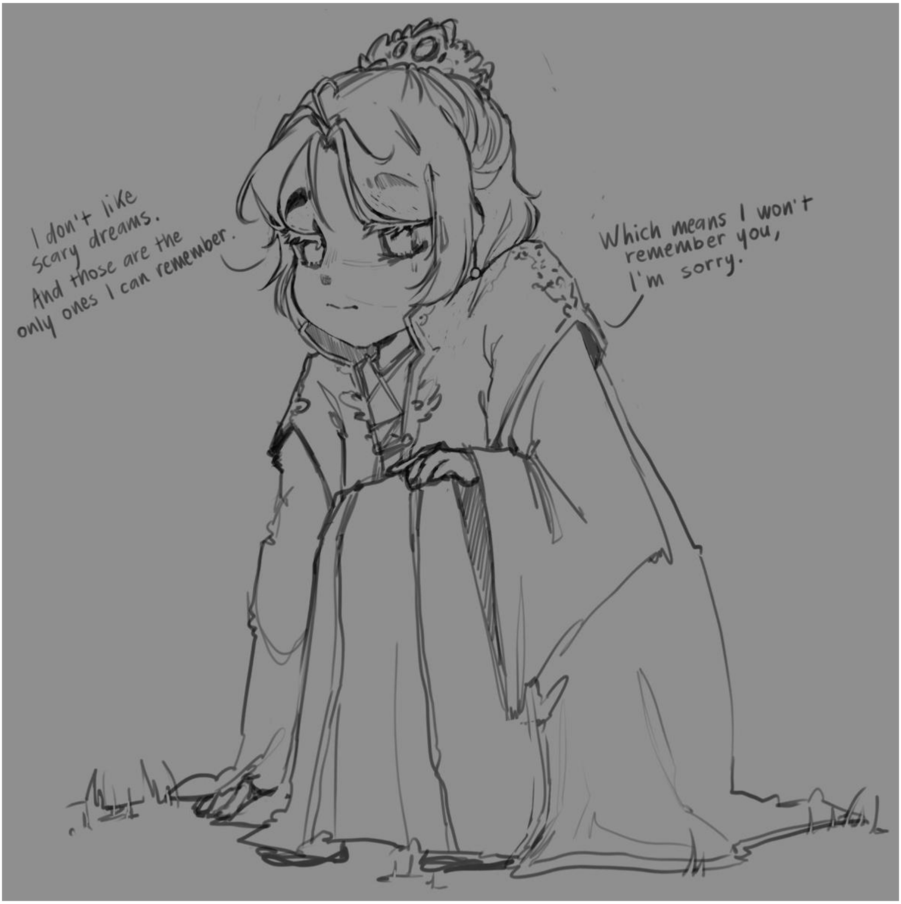
I don't like scary dreams. And those are the only ones I can remember.
Which means I won't remember you, I'm sorry.

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From the Ashes

Chapter Summary

> Even now, in the beginning of winter, the sun shines clear on Mount Taicang, maple trees full and red year-round.
>
> A birthplace of kings and princes, long since abandoned.
>
> And now, for the first time in so long—teeming with life.

THREE DAYS LATER

Even now, in the beginning of winter, the sun shines clear on Mount Taicang, maple trees full and red year-round.

A birthplace of kings and princes, long since abandoned.

And now, for the first time in so long—teeming with life.

"HEY!" Mu Qing barks at a pair of deputy gods from the palace of Nan Yang, arms crossed over his shoulders. "Don't carry patients like sacks of rice! He has a broken back!"

The deputies look at one another, then down at the unconscious martial god they're carrying on a stretcher.

"...If you're just gonna fix it anyway, does it matter if we jostle him a little—?" One of them asks, only to fall silent when they notice Feng Xin watching them from just behind Mu Qing, scowling. "I mean...we...yes, General, we'll be more careful!"

They hurry off (balancing the stretcher far more carefully) and Mu Qing rolls his eyes, consulting his scroll from Ling Wen, listing out all of the injured Heavenly Officials remaining.

"You're hovering."

"You've placed *half* the court on bed rest, and you're more injured!”

"I'm not," Mu Qing sends him a look. "My body is fine. His highness has been keeping an eye on my Qi. I just need to stay calm, which isn't going to happen if you keep *bothering me."*

"You—!" Feng Xin bites back the urge to snap at him in frustration. "You were literally DYING in my arms three days ago, and now you act like I'M the unreasonable one for asking you to *sit down—?"*

"I'll rest later. You—" Mu Qing pauses, huffing, blowing his bangs out of his eyes. "You can make sure that I do," he mutters under his breath.

Feng Xin shuts up, clearing his throat awkwardly as he looks away, arms crossed over his chest.

"I will."

"Fine."

"And you're not gonna *bitch* about it—"

"That's unrealistic."

"But you'll do it?"

"Fine."

"Then *fine."*

Xie Lian could almost laugh, watching them like this. Feng Xin scowling and making a fuss, Mu Qing rolling his eyes, silver hair gleaming in the noon sun--

But he hasn't been able to laugh yet. Even smiling is hard, and it's never genuine.

"Hungry, your highness?"

Xie Lian looks down to see Yushi Huang sitting beside him, a basket of steamed buns in her lap--freshly made from her lands, brought to Mount Taicang along with countless other provisions as the Heavenly Court regroups.

"Oh, I..." He pauses in the middle of refusing.

He hasn't eaten today.

He hasn't eaten since...

Xie Lian swallows hard, reaching to take one.

"Thank you," he murmurs.

'Don't treat him so carelessly.'

It must be delicious—but he can hardly taste the first bite.

"You've been missing since the battle ended."

She isn't exactly a natural at prompting casual conversation—but then again, neither is he.

"...I destroyed a few buildings in a town nearby," Xie Lian explains with a sheepish shrug. "I couldn't leave them like that."

Yushi Huang smiles.

"I suppose you couldn't."

She's a beautiful woman. Xie Lian has struggled with that in the last few days. Adjusting to all of the faces he'd never seen, or hadn't seen in so long, he had almost forgotten what they looked like.

But she's nothing like what he had imagined in his mind.

Someone as steady and firm as her—he never expected the Rain Master to have such a delicate face. Youthful and heart shaped. But—

Her eyes are kind, and that doesn't surprise Xie Lian at all.

“How are you adjusting?”

It’s too soon for Xie Lian to have any idea.

He can speak, this time. He can force himself to go through motions.

When Hong’er died, he cannot even remember how long he laid in the snow, wishing it would bury him too.

But after a moment, he realizes she isn’t asking about Hua Cheng—she means his sight.

“…It’s not so bad,” he admits. “Most of my robes have hoods on them already. They help.”

During the battle and what followed, he put the discomfort aside, but —

Light is painful now.

Mu Qing says there's nothing *wrong* with his eyes—they just need time to adjust.

But psychologically, for someone who has spent almost forty times longer in darkness than he has with his sight…

His mind will take far longer to get used to it.

"…Stories of the battle have grown far and wide in the mortal realm," Yushi Huang continues, taking a bite out of one of the buns, chewing thoughtfully. "People are saying that you and General Pei Ming saved the world."

Pei has expressed his discomfort with receiving the credit more than once—but his voice was projected across the entire continent, revealing the emperor for what he was.

Naturally, mortals would give him credit for his fall—

But Xie Lian is the one known for striking the final blow.

And Hua Cheng is known for striking down Bai Wuxiang in Mount Tonglu—mostly on account of Quan Yizhen's followers, who had already been watching the encounter through projections in their dreams.

"I hear three different kingdoms have already pledged to build temples for you," Yushi Huang continues, unusually verbose.

But only because Xie Lian has been so unusually quiet.

"…It's very kind," he acknowledges. "But they don't need to."

Yushi Huang raises an eyebrow.

"I believe this is exactly the sort of thing that people build temples for in the first place."

The prince nods, staring down at his hands in his lap.

Surprised that they look exactly as they did when he was a teenager.

Soft and smooth, without a single mark of pain or work.

It makes him feel disconnected from himself. As though he's taken up residence inside someone else's skin, and he doesn't belong.

"…Where will you go now?"

"I'm waiting for the rest of the court to return."

Xie Lian glances at a clay jar, resting beside his feet.

He has a plan for what to do with it, but he doesn't have the authority to act unilaterally.

"After that…Ren Song might need help in Ghost City. And then there's whatever the Heavenly Court needs of me…"

"But aside from that—on your own time, where will you go?"

Xie Lian hesitates.

He hasn't had a home since Puqi Shrine, with Hong'er.

Eight hundred years ago.

"…I suppose I might do the same as you," he shrugs, picking at his sleeves. "The people of Puqi Village are kind."

Xie Lian wouldn't mind living and working among them. With his powers returned, he could keep them safe. Could make their lives better.

Small acts of usefulness might do him good.

"…If that's what makes you happy," Yushi Huang agrees. "But be careful, Xie Lian."

It's always a little surprising when she calls him by his first name. She has a right to, as the former ruler of a nation—

And Xie Lian doesn't mind.

It reminds him of his mother—in a way that doesn't ache.

"I know how much the emperor meant to you," she explains quietly.

She's more than aware of how controlling Jun Wu was over Xie Lian's world view. His self-perception.

He's lived his entire life under the emperor's thumb.

And even with it gone now, Xie Lian might remain in chains out of habit.

"The world is going to be different now for all of us," Xie Lian agrees, audibly numb, eyes still resting on his hands, and—

Yushi Huang reaches over, taking them in hers, squeezing gently.

"I live simply because it brings me peace," she watches him carefully. "Not because I have grown accustomed to living in penance."

And it's hard to know, after so many years, if Xie Lian actually *wants* to live the way that he has, or if it's all that he thinks he deserves.

When he was young, he enjoyed living well.

Now...he has no idea.

Xie Lian doesn't know what foods he likes, or what clothes he would wear, if he had the choice. He doesn't know if he wants a soft bed, or if he would prefer sleeping on the floor.

But he—

Hearing the Rain Master say that, his stomach twists painfully.

Jun Wu is dead. Bai Wuxiang is no more.

Their curses died with them.

And just like that, Xie Lian remembered *everything* he saw in the Kiln.

He remembers now that, even after two thousand years, Jun Wu couldn't bear to sleep in a bed.

He was too accustomed to pain.

Xie Lian feels pity for him—but also fear.

In two thousand years, is that going to be him?

Pei Ming said something similar, after Xie Lian's mission to ghost city. That he had been suffering for so long, he had learned to take pride in it.

And it's not that Xie Lian doesn't *want* to suffer anymore. Part of him is frightened of the idea that he'll always think he'll deserve it.

It's just thinking about how pained Hua Cheng would be, watching Xie Lian punish himself.

"...What should I do, then?" He whispers.

Yushi Huang squeezes his hands again, then lets him go.

"Whatever you want to do," she assures him. "Just take your time—and be gentle with yourself, your highness."

Heaven knows he needs it.

"You two seem thick as thieves."

The Rain Master looks up with a smile.

"Old friends often do."

In spite of the sorrow in his heart, Xie Lian's lips curve into a tired smile, looking up at General Pei.

Fully healed from the battle—deep circles under his eyes being the only reminder of their recent struggles.

"I'm surprised you haven't returned to your territory yet," the general raises an eyebrow. "You typically avoid these things."

"No," the queen corrects him quietly. "I avoided the man who held them."

And he's no longer a factor.

Besides, she has no intention of leaving before Ling Wen's position is settled—unsure of how whatever new Heavenly Government forms will treat her. And...

"And as senior elemental master, I have to wait for my peers to arrive."

Pei Ming raises an eyebrow, watching as she stands up to walk away.

"...I thought she was the only one left," Xie Lian tilts his head. "Does she mean Blackwater?"

"Perhaps," Pei sighs. "But a new thunder master ascended in Lanling a few days ago. Pei Su is traveling with him."

Xie Lian's eyes widen slightly with surprise—but he supposes it isn't that strange.

Gods are known for ascending in times of crisis—and it's been so long since they had a Thunder Master, they were long overdue.

"But enough about that...take a walk with me?"

The last person to ask him that was...

Xie Lian shakes himself out of it, rising to his feet.

"Of course."

The path down Mount Taicang is as familiar as it always was—even if it's far more worn now, paved stones long since faded.

"This must have been a beautiful place to grow up." Pei Ming glances at the trees around them, the ruins of the temples and grounds that once stood here.

Xie Lian follows his gaze, one corner of his mouth turning up.

"It was."

But it was the people who made the difference.

"It's kind of you to allow the court to take shelter here for now," Pei Ming sighs—exhausted, but grateful. "We're going to have to find a new place for the Heavens now, after..."

"Yes," Xie Lian agrees. "But...I had a thought."

"You did?"

"Mortals have avoided the old capital for centuries," Xie Lian looks over the hillside, where the imperial city of Xianle once stood. "They have superstitions about plagues and bad luck. If we seal it off with enchantments and form a new capital there..."

It's likely to go unnoticed.

Pei Ming seems surprised by the thought. The Heavens were never on a completely separate plane of existence, but they were always *very* far removed from Humans, an entire city held aloft by the emperor's power, far above the clouds.

"Don't you think that's a bit close to the mortal realm?"

"I think that's for the best," Xie Lian counters. "Some of the officials in the court haven't descended in centuries. They've never met the mortals they serve. That..."

"Doesn't seem right," Pei Ming agrees.

"...But would you really be alright with giving it up for such use? The palace of your ancestors...It's your home, your highness. You shouldn't take that lightly—”

"I don't," Xie Lian shakes his head. "But I'd rather see it used, than just..."

Left to rot away.

"Besides..." He looks back over his shoulder, at the slope of Mount Taicang behind them, remembering what Yushi Huang said. "...I'll keep this for myself, I think."

Mount Taicang was where he grew up with Feng Xin and Mu Qing. Where his parents are buried.

Where he would have taken Hong'er, if life hadn't been so keen on separating them so soon.

Not far from Ghost City, close to the new site of the Heavens...

It might be a good place to wait.

(Even if Xie Lian *hates* waiting.)

He jumps, feeling something brush against his leg.

But when he looks down...It's just a cat.

Slightly larger than a house breed, with dark fur, and a nick in its right ear. Big, tawny eyes looking up at him as it purrs, rubbing against that calf.

"...Sorry," Pei Ming sighs, distracted. "That's Bai Ze."

"You have a pet?"

"No, no..." Pei Ming rubs the back of his neck, his gaze tired. "He was Shui-xiong's."

Xie Lian reaches down to scratch the animal behind the ears, watching as it nuzzles into the touch eagerly.

"He deputized him when he ascended, and I did the same after he..." He trails off, and Xie Lian softens, reaching over to place a hand on his arm. "I'm sure he'd be happy to know that you've been looking after him."

In many ways, Pei Ming is the easiest person for Xie Lian to be around right now—

Because they understand a pain others don't.

The smile the general offers Xie Lian in return is strained.

"You should consider yourself lucky—he's usually pretty picky about who he'll allow to touch him. I'll be taking him to Gusu, once everything is settled...he should be with Shi Qingxuan," he concludes quietly.

Xie Lian nods, not disagreeing, but...

Shi Qingxuan has been oddly quiet.

She was one of the few people that, even in the depths of his grief, Xie Lian reached out to, just to make sure she was alright.

She assured him that she was—but said little else.

Xie Lian can only assume that has something to do with the fact that He Xuan must have gone to Gusu first after things were settled, but even so, he can't imagine what they've been doing all this time.

"...But you didn't get me alone to thank me for offering this place."

“No,” Pei agrees, the wind stirring through his hair. “I think you already know why.”

Xie Lian does, but he still waits, his lips pressed together in stubborn silence.

“…Traditionally, the role of emperor goes to the strongest martial god,” Pei Ming sighs.

“I’m not too proud to admit that isn’t me—”

“That’s not true.”

Pei Ming stops to look at him, and Xie Lian fiddles with the chain around his neck.

“I saw Bai Wuxiang’s memories when I fought him. Jun Wu’s predecessor was the fire master of the last Heavenly Dynasty.”

“Oh,” Pei frowns, thinking. It makes sense that Jun Wu would perpetuate that rumor. He solidified his own position in doing so. “…In that case, do you think we should ask Queen Yushi what she thinks?”

Xie Lian snorts, covering his mouth in surprise.

He hadn’t expected to be able to laugh any time soon.

It’s not that the idea of Yushi Huang as Heavenly Empress is laughable—it’s that there’s no scenario under which she would accept.

“…If we’re talking about who would be the best choice, we both know who that is.”

Xie Lian grimaces, looking away.

Ironically enough, if Shi Wudu hadn’t been guilty of such a terrible crime—or deceased—he would have been the natural choice.

“If we asked the court to choose their own emperor, they would choose you,” he counters.

“That could change.”

Pei catches a leaf in the wind, holding a leaf between his fingers for a moment before letting it go, watching as it blows back down the hill. “Everyone knows what you’ve done now. What you’ve sacrificed. They’ll come to trust and respect you.”

But as he watches Xie Lian’s expression become strained—

He sighs.

“But you *have* made many sacrifices already. You deserve to have time for yourself. To be young for a while.”

Xie Lian’s lips twitch. “I’m eight hundred years old, General.”

“And your youth was stolen.”

He hasn't lived for himself since he was seventeen years old. And even before then, he was born with the weight of prince hood upon his shoulders.

"…So," Pei broaches carefully. "I don't mind giving you time. A long time."

Xie Lian pauses, his heart in his throat.

"But I'll expect a helping hand—and a *long* retirement—"

"You would do that…for me?" Xie Lian asks slowly, his eyes wide.

Pei Ming has always been an easy-going soul. A good soldier, but never one who desired to take up the mantle of rule for himself.

And he still doesn't.

"So, take your time, you can go off and do whatever you like when Crimson Rain comes back—but the role will find you eventually, your highness." Pei Ming concludes, looking him in the eye. "You were born for it. I truly believe that."

But when it isn't being forced on him, and he's being told he can wait until he's ready—

Xie Lian lets out a massive breath he didn't know he was holding, shoulders trembling.

"…Thank you," he whispers.

"You're—" Pei Ming pauses, startled when—

When Xie Lian hugs him.

He pats Xie Lian on the back, shocked—but certainly not offended—the prince has just never been prone to getting close to others in such a way.

"…You're welcome."

Xie Lian doesn't speak for a moment, his throat thick.

It's hard, realizing what you could have had.

When he first ascended as a god—the only mentor he had was Jun Wu. Because he thought—

He thought the emperor wanted what was best for him, and he didn't know there were other options.

But the Rain Master and General Pei—they were always there.

Part of him can't help but wonder if he would have been happier under their guidance.

If he might have made different *choices* , but—

It's impossible to ever know.

"…I don't plan on ruling the way he did," Pei Ming warns him. "And I can't take all of the weight from you."

"I know," Xie Lian agrees, pulling back with a small smile, but—

It's sincere.

"I'll do my part."

It's even easier to do now—

Knowing that his relationship with this emperor could never be like the last one.

"We'll talk more later," Pei Ming lets him go. "Go be with your friends now. We'll have a meeting of the full court once they arrive to make it official, and then…you can do as you wish."

With reasonable limitations, but Xie Lian has never minded those.

They could never be shackles.

Pei Ming is left alone at the bottom of the mountainside, watching the wind blow through the trees as Xie Lian leaves him there, returning up the side of Mount Taicang.

(To make sure Mu Qing rests, and Feng Xin doesn't send him into Qi Deviation again in the process.)

For so many years—centuries, even—Pei Ming ran from responsibility. Flinches from power as if it was something that could burn him.

It was also one of his greatest regrets.

Watching what Xuli became. Wondering if it could have been different, had he just been willing.

Rong Guang made his own mistakes. He was a fool, and he said as much now, so many years later…

But so was Pei Ming.

In many ways, his choice to enable the King of Xuli led to the prince's death as much as anything else.

That haunted him more than almost anything else.

When he lost his own son, centuries later—it felt like punishment for his past failures.

Now, he has the chance to spare another prince from a cruel fate—

And he won't fail, this time.

But just as he thinks of that…

Bai Ze suddenly bursts from his side, running across the plain, tail aloft.

"…Oi!" He frowns, squinting. "Where are you off to? You're not on vacat—"

Then, he sees where the deputy is running *to.*

Pei Su, rounding a curve in the road.

And of course, it's a relief that he made it back safely, but—

A second figure rounds the corner beside him, and that's the one Bai Ze runs straight to. Winding between his legs, purring so loudly, the General can hear it from tens of meters away.

He must be the new thunder master, from what Pei Su reported, but…

When Pei Ming sees the dark robes and white mask, his breath momentarily catches.

…it was the cultivator from back then? Pei Yuan? But…The moment he looks up, noticing Pei Ming looking…he makes to walk away.

But before he can take more than a couple of steps—

Pei Su grabs him by the wrist.

“We talked about this.”

And it’s baffling, because even if he’s new—as an ascended god, he outranks Pei Su. He knows better than that. Why is he being so familiar—?

But then, he sees it.

A flash of light in dark hair—

From a golden hair pin

So familiar, that he—

In an instance, he’s crossed the space between them, grasping the new Thunder Master by the shoulder—his other hand reaching up to touch the gold piece, staring.

“…Where did you get this?”

He turns his head away—or tries to, but Pei Ming doesn’t let go.

Was this—was this the offering from before? The one that was stolen? After the—after the pin on his *body* wasn’t right?

“Where did you get this?!”

He shakes him once, even if he doesn’t mean to, then—

Then, he remembers being on the docks that day. Nearly rattling the young man to death in his rage and grief, and—

He pulls his hands back, as if he’s been burned—but still demanding.

“Answer me!”

After a moment of silence—he does.

But not with words.

With trembling fingers, he reaches up—pulling the mask from his face.

Something he learned he could do soon after news of the emperor’s death began to spread, and now—

It lands on the ground with a clatter.

Neither of them move.

But all Pei can do, think, see, breathe—

Are electric blue eyes. The kind that you could drown in, if you aren't careful.

Raven hair, slightly curled—damp, from passing through a nearby storm.

An angry red scar across his throat—still healing.

"…I don't…" Pei croaks, and the new god takes a step away, hanging his head. "I don't…"

"It's him," Pei Su says, holding a hand to his chest earnestly. "I tested him every way I could think of on the way here—it's *him*—"

Pei Ming ignores him, grabbing the Thunder Master by the shoulders, holding him in a Vice grip.

"What were the last words you said to me?"

"…"

"What were they?!"

And his answer, his *voice* —it brings something back to life.

"That you would have been perfect," he whispers. "And that I was sorry."

Shi Wudu watches the emotions flicker across Pei Ming's face, wild and uncontrolled.

Everything he's been holding in since that day, forced to go on.

To keep fighting.

"…I held your body."

He forced Mu Qing to let him check for the birthmark on his shoulder, just because it was that hard to accept that he was gone.

"There was a *pyre* , we—"

“He Xuan didn’t want the emperor to have my ashes,” Shi Wudu doesn’t lift his head.

“He must have thought I was gone. I-I *was* gone, but…someone helped me.”

But by then, He Xuan had already ascended with the false corpse in tow.

Pei Ming doesn’t speak, and for a man so proud—his head has never hung so low.

“…I know I’m not welcome here,” he mutters. “I changed my mind so many times on the way here, but Pei Su—”

“What?”

“I—”

“Pei Su—“ Pei Ming’s voice is so cold, it nearly lacks emotion. The tone he uses when he’s so overwhelmed, he has to shut that side of himself down.

“Go away.”

And the deputy doesn’t even sound offended, spinning on his heel as he walks up the hill, leaving them.

“Going away.”

Shi Wudu listens to the sound of his retreating footsteps, closing his eyes.

“…I know…After everything you must have heard about me, you—” For the first time, in all of the years they’ve spoken to one another, His voice cracks. “I know you’re… *disappointed* …in me…and you probably don’t even want to see—”

Shi Wudu can’t speak after that.

Has the wind knocked out of him, from being hugged so tightly.

Pei Ming crushes him against his chest, fingers tangled in his hair, his face pressed against the side of his head.

“I’m *sorry.”*

The thunder master is frozen with shock.

"…You're…what?"

"I—That day in Lanling—" Pei Ming chokes, his tears falling into Shi Wudu's hair. "Why didn't you say anything?!"

"I-I *couldn't* ," Shi Wudu struggles to explain. "Before, the emperor did something to me—I couldn't say my *name* , I couldn't take off that—"

"I could have killed you, I—I *hurt* you," Pei Ming sobs, his arms trembling as he holds him closer. "I'm *so* sorry—"

"You didn't," Shi Wudu assures him instinctively.

He was so happy to see him back then—he could barely feel any pain at all.

But the differences between Pei Ming and Jun Wu—they've never felt more stark than they do now.

Jun Wu did so many things to him that he can't even think of, can't give a name to—

And here Pei Ming is, weeping over the possibility of hurting him at all.

He's—

He's more than Shi Wudu has ever deserved, and he's never loved him more.

"…You're…you're not…angry with me?"

Pei Ming sinks to the ground with him in his arms, holding his lover against him.

"Angry?"

"About what I *did* ," Shi Wudu whispers.

Pei Ming hasn't had a moment to truly give it any thought, so swallowed whole by his grief.

"…I was never very good at being angry with you before," he mutters, fingers tangled in his hair. "I don't know if I'll ever manage it again, now."

He can’t say he agrees with every choice Shi Wudu has made—

But that pales compared to the thought of losing him.

“…Okay…” Shi Wudu takes a deep breath, steeling himself. Then he presses a hand against Pei Ming’s chest—pushing him back. “Then I need to say something.”

Pei Ming goes back with his hand easily, watching him with wide, tear-stricken eyes.

“What?”

“Before—I was never honest with you, and I—” He grits his teeth, forcing himself to push through it. “That wasn’t right.”

“…I already told you, I’m not—”

“Not about that.”

All this time, he's told himself—if he ever had the chance to see Pei again, he would tell him.

And now he's here, and he—

His hands are trembling, and he can barely say it.

"I love you."

Saying it sounds simple, but it's *more* than that.

"I'm in love with you."

He closes his eyes, sucking in another deep breath.

"You've never been dishonest about what you wanted. I was. I—I've never wanted to be with anyone else. I don't want *you* to be with anyone else. You—we *are* friends, but I've never wanted just that."

He wanted him before he even met him, before he even knew what the feelings meant.

"I don't expect anything from you," he adds quickly, slowly beginning to lose his nerve. "But if you want to go back to the way we were before—I don't think I can. It was *hard* , and I—”

A small noise slips out of the back of his throat when a familiar pair of lips crushes against his own.

Hands cradling Shi Wudu's head like he's holding the entire world between his palms.

"...You..." He's breathless when they pull back. "I'm serious, I—”

"Loving you is one of the hardest things I've ever done," Shi Wudu falls silent, his eyes growing impossibly wide as Pei Ming cups the side of his face. "You scare the shit out of me. You're always pushing me away. You never tell me what you're *really* thinking."

"I—”

"But it's also the most rewarding thing I've ever done," Pei Ming concludes. "And I'll never stop."

"You don't..." Shi Wudu can't look away from him, only able to take shallow, adrenaline filled breaths.

Pei takes him by the chin, looking him in the eye.

"I haven't wanted anyone else since the day I met you," his thumb drags over the thunder god's bottom lip, flushed and swollen. "The thought of *you* with anyone else makes me want to break something —”

"—You don't have to say that, just because I—”

"There is nothing you could say or do to make me stop," Pei Ming speaks over him, never breaking his gaze. "I'm going to love you until every single part of me is *gone* , and even then—I'm not sure if I'll stop. If there's anything of me left behind—it will love you still."

Before he can say another word, before he can argue, Pei Ming's mouth is back on his, warm and *close* and—and safe.

Shi Wudu's arms slide around his neck--reluctant to hold him at first, but after a moment he *clings* .

Kissing him back, kissing him desperately, until—

Until he feels the words, said against his lips:

"Marry me."

And he nearly chokes, his hands tightening on Pei's shoulders.

"What?!"

"Marry me."

"You—” Shi Wudu can barely talk with how much Pei Ming is kissing him, but it gets easier when he pulls back to kiss his face. His cheeks, his nose, his forehead, leaving the younger man dazed and struggling in his arms. "You've lost your mind—!”

"Absolutely." He murmurs, kissing underneath his ear. "You should still marry me, though."

"No."

"Wudu—”

"No!"

"Why not?"

"You don't mean it—”

"I've asked you before," Pei reminds him, undeterred.

"You were *drunk!"*

"That doesn't mean I didn't mean it." Pei's lips press against his brow, his arms tight around his waist. "Which is why I'm asking you now."

"You're extremely *emotional* right now, it's not—”

"Marry me."

"I just said—" Pei Ming kisses him again, this time until he's breathless and squirming, patting his shoulder in a silent request for relief—and when it's given, he can only try to catch his breath.

"Then I'll ask you later."

"You're *insufferable—”*

"If you'd say yes, I'd never have to ask you again. You're really bringing this upon yourself, you know."

And in spite of everything, with Pei Ming's cheek pressed against his, holding each other for the first time in so long—

Shi Wudu actually laughs, hugging him closer.

"You're the one who isn't taking no for an answer."

"You also *did* just say you were madly in love with me, couldn't live without me, didn't ever want to see me with someone else—”

Shi Wudu presses his face into Pei Ming's neck, his shoulders shaking with laughter.

"You're *embellishing."*

"No," Pei Ming shakes his head, feeling his heartbeat freely for the first time since he lost him. "It's called paraphrasing. What—so you're *not* madly in love with me?"

There's a brief pause—and a soft kiss against the side of his throat.

"I am."

So in love with him, it scares him sometimes. Like living at the edge of a cliff, terrified of falling over the edge.

Pei Ming's arms pull him closer as he whispers in his ear;

"Marry me, then."

Shi Wudu never realized that the other person falls *with* you.

"...Alright," he agrees, closing his eyes as he sinks against him, all the tension and exhaustion leaving his body.

Just from being held in his arms again.

"I have so much to tell you."

"...Yeah," Pei Ming agrees with a wince. "Me too."

"What's wrong?"

"...Nothing," he shakes his head, pressing his face into Shi Wudu's hair, his head still thrumming with the shock of finding him again. "I just wish you had come back around...an hour earlier."

It was so easy to take the job when he didn't think he had anything else, but...

"Did something happen?"

"Nothing..." Pei Ming sighs, breathing him in. "Nothing that I shouldn't have done, anyway."

It might have been harder if he *had* known—but it was still the right thing to do.

"I'm surprised that you didn't go to Gusu first."

Shi Wudu bites his lip.

"...I don't think Shi Qingxuan would..." He closes his eyes. "I had Pei Su make contact, I know she's safe. But I don't think she would want...I don't know how she would feel about..."

Pei Ming's thumb drifts over his cheek, his eyes filled with sadness.

"Oh, love, she's not..." He sighs, knowing better than to argue with him—he'll just have to see.

He's so hard headed, he didn't think *Pei Ming* wanted to see him either, not until the general was holding him in his arms and begging for his hand in marriage.

"...You haven't asked me how I ascended again," Shi Wudu comments after a moment, laying his head back down against Pei Ming's shoulder, and the general laughs weakly.

"That's the least surprising thing about this situation."

Pei Ming found it hard to believe that anything could have defeated him in the first place—but if he survived?

Whatever obstacles were placed between him, and the ones he loved would be quickly overcome.

"The title might take getting used to," He admits.

"I suppose 'Shui-xiong' isn't appropriate any..." But when he mentions that, his smile quickly fades. "...Do you have all of your powers back?"

"...They're not the *same* , but yes," Shi Wudu lifts his head, raising an eyebrow. "Why?"

Pei Ming's arms wrap around his back, pulling him back in.

"I wasn't going to let him anywhere near you anyhow," He mutters. "But it's good to know that you can protect yourself."

Shi Wudu's eyebrows knit together. "From who?"

"Who do you *think?"*

"The emperor is dead."

The mention of that makes Pei Ming's expression darken—reminded of how many things he wants to *ask* , but...

Later. When Shi Wudu isn't...under such strain.

Now would be a bad time.

"The one who lured you into a *death trap?"*

"...Oh." The Thunder Master blinks.

"Oh?!"

"Pei..." He sighs, pressing his hand against his forehead. "You know what I *did* to him—”

"That doesn't mean I'm going to stand by and let him hurt you."

And while Shi Wudu appreciates that loyalty, he really does—

"...It's really...none of it is what you think."

"Ah," Pei Ming sits back, watching him sternly. "So he *didn't* murder the Earth Master, take his place, insert himself into our lives, lie his way into Shi Qingxuan's bed, get her pregnant, then try to kill you in front of her?"

"...He didn't murder the earth master..."

"Oh," Pei rolls his eyes, "I'll mark that out of his column then. Lovely man. When are we inviting him for tea?"

"Look—he has to make up for what he did to Shi Qingxuan, but..." Shi Wudu grits his teeth. "That's between him, and her."

And in the end—Shi Wudu knows his *intentions* now better than anyone. He knows that the feelings between them were real.

Pei Ming stares at him, his jaw slack.

"...Who the hell are you, and what have you done to Shi Wudu?"

"Look..." Shi Wudu looks up at him, shaking his head. "Whatever he did to me—I did *far* worse, and in the end, He Sheng...was far better to me than I deserved."

Pei Ming's brow creases, hands tight on Shi Wudu's waist.

"...He Sheng?"

"...I'm sorry, that's a family nickname, I mean D—He Xuan—"

"Why are you calling him a *family nickname?"* Pei looks around, like he's waiting for someone to jump out from behind a tree and declare the entire thing some sort of horrible practical joke.

"I just—he's *not* a bad person, Pei. He's actually..." Shi Wudu falls silent, struggling for the right word, particularly with Pei Ming practically breathing down his neck, staring at him like he's lost his mind.

"...Incredible."

"... *What?!"*

Before Shi Wudu can respond, trying to explain again—

(And make it *worse* , most likely.)

—a voice crops up from behind them, making both men fall silent.

"... *Pei?"*

Shi Wudu grows completely still in his arms, his eyes wide.

For a moment, his shoulders hunch with anxiety, and he's reaching back without turning around, fumbling for the discarded mask, but—

Pei Ming grabs him by the wrist, stopping him.

"Don't," he assures him softly, squeezing.

Shi Wudu stares at him, and for a moment—he looks so much *younger* than he is, wide eyed, nervous, and—

A little bit scared.

And when he turns to look back over his shoulder…

He sees her, standing just a little way down the road.

Wearing fine silks, two fans tucked into her belt—and with the distinct glow of a *heavenly official.*

She can't seem to move at first—rooted in place, staring at him, one hand clenched over her heart.

Shi Wudu's is hammering against his ribs, hands unsteady.

Her eyes grow wider and wider, filling with tears.

Part of him can't help but feel happy just to see her, he never thought he would again, but—

Part of him is so scared of how much it will *hurt* when she doesn't—

"GEGE!"

In the next second, she's running to him—dropping to her knees on the ground beside him, not caring about the dirt on her dress, shoving Pei Ming aside without a thought.

Shi Wudu is frozen in shock, not knowing what to expect, until—

Shi Qingxuan flings her arms around him.

Shi Wudu's hands hover in the air for a moment, shocked—as Shi Qingxuan sobs into the front of his robes, holding on for dear life.

"I-Is this real?! Am I dreaming?" She cries, tears soaking into his front, but—

He doesn't care.

His arms are cautious at first, wrapping around her slowly—but once she doesn't push him away—

He crushes her against him, his face pressed against her curls.

"It's real—I'm—I'm here."

Shi Qingxuan's hands tremble in his robes, and—

When Shi Qingxuan was a child, she was used to being pitied for being made an orphan so young. To never know her parents, to have a family that was whole.

In many ways, she felt sorry for *herself* , too.

But not now—holding her entire family in her arms.

“…I’m sorry,” she chokes out, nuzzling her face into his shoulder, “I’m—I’m *so* sorry—for everything I said—!”

“ *I’m* sorry,” Shi Wudu shakes his head, still in shock—but not enough to let her apologize to him. “You have every right to hate—”

“No!” Shi Qingxuan sobs. “No, I—I was hurt, I was angry, but I—” She pulls back to look up at him, eyes red and swollen. “I could *never* hate you, and I—I…” She reaches up, mopping the tears from her cheeks. “I’m so sorry I didn’t…know what you were…”

What was being *done* to him.

Because even if Shi Qingxuan could never agree with his methods—her brother was *always* there to protect her when she needed it. Always attentive. Making sure she always had help, that she had protection—

And it never even occurred to her that he would need those things.

Shi Wudu stiffens in her arms, his lips pressing together tightly.

“…How much did he tell you?”

Unlike Pei Ming—she doesn’t need any clarification with regards to who he means.

“That…you were in so much pain,” Shi Qingxuan admits, “but that he couldn’t say more.”

Because he promised.

Shi Wudu lets out a trembling sigh of relief.

He hasn't wronged many people in his abnormally long life. Not beyond what might be expected of a water deity of his station.

But like everything else, when he *did* wrong someone—he did so spectacularly.

There is nothing He Sheng could do to him that he wouldn't accept. That he wouldn't feel like he deserved in some way.

When he pleaded for him not to tell anyone that day, in the Kiln—Shi Wudu knew that he had no right to privacy or dignity. Not from him.

But he kept his word.

Behind him, Pei Ming has only grown stiffer by the moment, on the verge of asking Shi Qingxuan to drop the subject—

Because unlike her—he notices the persistent hunch to Shi Wudu's shoulders. Too proud to express his discomfort, but—

He isn't ready to talk about that.

But luckily for him, whether it's because Shi Qingxuan noticed or not--the conversation turns.

"...It's been so *hard* since you left, I..." Shi Qingxuan leans against him heavily, hugging him tight. "I had no idea how much you did for me, until..."

"..." Shi Wudu swallows hard, biting down waves of remorse. "I sheltered you too much. I left you entirely unprepared."

"No!" Shi Qingxuan looks up quickly, startling him. "I mean—you *did* shelter me, but I wasn't unprepared."

Her brother shakes his head, grateful for her attempts to comfort him, but entirely undeserving of it. "I should have—"

"I spent my *entire life* watching you protect me." Shi Qingxuan's hands are heavy on his shoulders, looking him in the eye. "Doing whatever was necessary."

Even when he was so young, he shouldn't have had to.

"And even though I was scared, when the time came ...*I* was able to do whatever I had to, to protect him." One of her hands slides down to her stomach.

"I spent my whole life thinking I could never be as smart as you—as strong, or as brave, so I never even tried…"

"Qingxuan, you've *always* been clever—"

"But I realized I *want* to be."

Shi Wudu falls silent, his throat suddenly tight.

Shi Qingxuan isn't ashamed of where she falls short. She's still struggling to reconcile herself with what her brother did—

But she's *proud* of the ways that she's like him.

"And because of all of that...I ascended on my own. Because of what you—”

She can't speak after that—because her brother is hugging her so tightly, she can barely breathe.

"Gege—”

"You *always* had it in you," Shi Wudu murmurs, remembering how heartbroken she sounded, after she learned what he had done on her behalf.

Not just because of the pain and destruction it caused, but—

Because it also meant her brother hadn't believed that she could do it on her own.

"With or without me. And I am so *proud* ." He whispers, his fingers tight in her hair. "I was always proud of you."

A choked sniffle escapes Shi Qingxuan as they hold each other close, tears slipping down her cheeks once more.

"And I'm *sorry* , I should have told you more often, I shouldn't have been so—"

"You were everything I needed," Shi Qingxuan assures him hoarsely. "If I can be *half* of what you were for me for my own son...That's the best I could hope for. And I—I'm sorry I never told *you* that, that's all I could think about, I—I never *thanked* you for anything—"

"And you never had to," Shi Wudu whispers. He presses his face into her hair, hiding his expression—but she can feel wetness there. "It's been the joy of my life."

Her heart leaps into her throat, remembering those words he said in Blackwater Manor. When he thought they would be the last they ever said to each other.

"...I love you, gege," She chokes out the words, never so grateful in her life for the chance to say anything, feeling him hold her tighter in response.

Because he—

He genuinely believed that she didn't.

That she couldn't.

Not after all of his mistakes.

"I love you, meimei," he's barely able to answer, his voice thick and unsteady.

He's shed more tears in the last year than he has in four hundred, and most of them in only the last few months alone.

But he's almost never cried in front of anyone else.

And he still can't bring himself to now, refusing to loosen his grip around her shoulders, or pull his face from her hair until he regains his composure.

But the moment she sees that he's alright—Shi Qingxuan pulls back.

Turning her attention to Pei, of all people.

"What, so you knew he was back—and you weren't going to *tell* me?"

The general sputters, offended. "I only just found out myself! We barely had more than a few minutes alone before you barged in—"

"Barged in?! I'm his *family!"*

"Well kid, do I have some *NEWS* for you—!"

The two of them dissolve into their usual bickering--this time with Shi Qingxuan squawking in outrage at news of the engagement, all while Pei Ming smugly laughs in victory.

"Does this mean you're gonna start calling me gege now?"

"You didn't even ask me first!”

"Hah?! You're—he's OLDER than you, and he's a man!"

"I'm his only living relative, and I feel disrespected—”

"And here I thought we had turned over a new leaf!”

"Not THAT new!"

Shi Wudu can't even bring himself to be annoyed.

(He'll do that later.)

He manages to rise to his feet while they bicker behind him, allowing it to fade into the background as he wipes his hands down his face, erasing any of the evidence of his tears, and when he looks up—

Shi Wudu realizes that his sister didn't come alone.

And it's—

Surprisingly difficult, facing down the man who held you in his arms as you lay dying, who wept for you—even after everything you had done.

And it doesn't seem any easier for He Xuan to look at him.

Standing back from the others, hands tight at his sides.

He looks— *different* .

Not like Ming Yi, or the warped, drowned form that hid beneath.

Taller, broader—with tanned skin, and eyes—

Eyes that Shi Wudu has seen before, a lifetime ago.

And in futures that never came to pass.

Some good, some bad.

The sight of him aches.

Knowing that this is what he should have always looked like, if he had been allowed to ascend as he was meant to.

This—

This was the first man the Water Tyrant ever drowned. His first and only innocent victim.

"...You weren't..." He speaks slowly, unsure of what to say, but—

Somehow, Shi Wudu knows exactly what he means.

"I was, but...when you ascended, the Guoshi of Xianle found me, and he..." He shrugs, fighting the urge to cross his arms, or look away. "It wasn't your fault."

And even if it was—

"I looked."

Shi Wudu grows still.

"...What?"

"After I descended," he mutters, gripping something tightly in his hand. "I just...assumed your soul would have...so I..."

He assumed Shi Wudu's soul wouldn't have moved on, so he...

Spent weeks, searching for the spirit of the man he once *loathed* .

Grieving him.

"...You didn't have to," Shi Wudu finally averts his eyes. Always one to have an intense gaze, but in Blackwater, he's met his match.

"I know," He Xuan does the same, reaching up to rub the back of his neck, "I just...wanted to..."

"...Fix it?"

It's even stranger, for the person you once clung to this world for the sheer purpose of loathing—becomes the one who knows you better than anyone else.

Having walked the length of one another's lives, seeing the best and the worst of each other.

He Xuan finally stops in front of him, holding out what he's been holding in his palm all this time, and when Shi Wudu reluctantly reaches out to take it—

His fingers unfurl, dropping something into the former water master's palm.

A golden locket.

Shi Wudu stops, staring down at his palm with wide eyes. "You..." He whispers, stunned into near silence. "...You had this?"

"I was always going to give it to Shi Qingxuan," He Xuan mutters, his tone slightly gruff.

It's how he sounds when he feels vulnerable.

Shi Wudu knows.

"...But until things were settled, I wanted to know...that she was..."

That she was safe.

Admittedly, he couldn't do as much for her as he would have liked in the last week, but a near apocalypse did make for an exception.

But with He Xuan—

He thinks so much.

There's so much more behind the gesture. It's not simple.

Shi Wudu knows.

He could have given the locket back to Shi Qingxuan before they came to Mount Taicang.

He could have given it to her to give back to him later.

Instead, he gave it to him now, himself.

He wanted Shi Wudu to know he had it. That even while he was gone—someone was looking after his sister.

He wanted Shi Wudu to know that he couldn't let it go.

And by giving it back—a necklace with such a strong bond to Shi Qingxuan…

It's a silent acknowledgement of the fact that Shi Wudu is going to be in her life.

In their *child's* life.

A gift that Shi Wudu knows he doesn't deserve, never dreamed he would ever have.

And for a moment, thoughtlessly, he reaches—not even thinking.

His hand is halfway between them before he realizes what he's done, that it probably isn't wanted, but—

Then He Xuan's arms are there, pulling him in.

Shi Wudu is silent and still at first, struggling to reconcile himself to being embraced by someone he's wronged so deeply.

But it also means more than you can imagine.

To have someone see every part of you. Every memory, mistake, and horror. To crack you open until all of your sins reach the light—

And to embrace you now, like their oldest friend.

Slowly, Shi Wudu returns it.

The last time they fought, He Xuan called him the monster in his story—and Shi Wudu retorted harshly, asking,

'What's it like to be the monster in hers?'

But since then, Blackwater has learned the myth behind all monsters:

They don't exist.

Only people, who make monstrous choices.

Sometimes, the love of someone can make you a monster.

The desperate need to protect them—or to avenge them.

A world that devours little sisters so cruelly can turn elder brothers into monstrous things.

But not beyond forgiveness.

And all of that is hard enough to swallow, mixed with mounting regrets—the ache when he thinks about how easily Shi Qingxuan opened her heart to him again.

Not immediately. Not without pain. But willing to give him a chance.

He didn't deserve it.

Not after all the mistakes he's made, but—

"…You're a good man, He Sheng."

Hearing those words spoken next to his ear, by the man he's spent so many years *loathing* —

He Xuan's arms tighten around him, one hand fisting in the back of his robes.

"Better than me."

No.

No.

"…Just like you," He Xuan corrects him softly, fingertips straying slightly into his hair, tangling in the strands.

Far too much alike for their own good.

His arms don't loosen when something pulls hard, trying to yank Shi Wudu back—and when he looks up, violet eyes stare back at him darkly.

"What are you trying to do?"

"Pei—" Shi Wudu looks back at him, sighing. "I already *told* you, it's not—"

"Yes, you already said, you're *perfectly* fine with it if he wants to murder you, *I'm* not—"

"I don't want to hurt him," He Xuan lifts his head, staring at him coldly. "…Anymore."

Pei Ming's hand tightens on Shi Wudu's arm, his glare darkening.

"Oh, thank *goodness.*"

Pei jumps, startled when Shi Qingxuan gives his arm a solid smack.

"Why shouldn't he get to hug him? He's family."

"I—" Pei rounds to look at her, not letting go of Shi Wudu's arm. "After you just chewed ME out—?"

"He is the father of my nephew," Shi Wudu points out, trying not to sound vaguely disgusted.

Not about the new addition to the family—just the means by which it happened.

"What, so I can't be 'family' until we have a kid? Fi—!"

"Don't get ahead of yourself."

For those words to come from *He Xuan* of all people—who still hasn't let Shi Wudu go—

Pei Ming can't decide whether or not all of this is some sort of delusion induced by a stroke.

"…Like you would have a say—?!"

"Alright, alright, alright!" Shi Wudu finally snaps with frustration, shoving them both back so he's no longer sandwiched between the two. "Shi Qingxuan—he *is* family—"

"What?!"

"He will be, once we're married—"

"Married?" He Xuan's eyebrows raise. Shi Wudu looks away, rubbing his temples. "When did that happen?"

"Just now, apparently," Shi Qingxuan huffs. "He didn't even *ask* ."

"Shameless."

Pei sends him a withering look. "As if YOU can say a word about that."

"I forgave him," Shi Qingxuan crosses her arms.

She's actually in the process of forgiving him—she isn't *all the way there,* but she won't grant Pei the victory of admitting that.

"Besides—I know he's being honest now."

"How?!"

"Because I could destroy him if he wasn't."

Not that she ever would. They both know that.

"…You gave her your ashes?" Shi Wudu mutters, stunned—and He Xuan huffs out a pained sigh.

"And then she used them to cave in a man's skull, yes."

"You *what?"*

"It was a fluid situation, I asked if they were sturdy FIRST—!"

"That's *irresponsible* —"

"Ingenious. Resourceful. You should try it again sometime."

Shi Wudu sends Pei Ming an annoyed look. "You already know he wasn't to blame for most of this, and he has no ill will now. There's no need for—"

Pei Ming's hand is firm on the small of his back.

"Lets see if he goes a century without trying to murder or impregnate one of you again, then I'll be more forgiving."

"You—"

"Gege, it really made sense to use them!" Shi Qingxuan whines, holding onto his sleeve. "They were a discreet option!"

"Discreet—?"

"I'll show you later," He Xuan sighs—and Shi Qingxuan pauses, actually a little jarred by that.

Obviously he wouldn't want Pei Ming to know—

But he doesn't mind if her *brother* does?

"The rest of the court will be here before long," Pei mutters, taking Shi Wudu by the arm.

"We'll have matters to discuss, and…"

While Pei Ming can't imagine everyone within the court will be eager to welcome Shi Wudu back with open arms…

That's a bridge they'll have to cross regardless.

"…There are things you need to know."

He leads him back up the hill, where the others are waiting—their heads bent closely together.

He Xuan hangs back for a moment, the hand that once held a golden locket now curled into a fist.

"…What happened between you two back there?" Shi Qingxuan touches his arm.

When he looks over, she's staring up at him with wide, curious eyes.

"I know you couldn't tell me much before, but with him back…"

He Xuan looks back towards her brother, eyes lingering for a moment as he disappears through the trees, hair gleaming in the sunlight.

"…There are parts of it I can tell you," he replies slowly. "But I'm not sure if you would believe it."

Her hand slides down to his, intertwining their fingers.

"I'll always hear you out, you know."

He tears his gaze away from her brother, looking down at Shi Qingxuan again.

And in a rare instance of openness—

His eyes soften.

Shi Qingxuan's own eyes widen, her face turning slightly pink when he leans down to kiss her forehead, squeezing her hand in return.

"Thank you."

"…You're welcome," she whispers, for once finding nothing silly to say.

A Raging Act of Defiance

Chapter Summary

> He smiles genuinely at the sight of her, holding Shi Qingxuan in a tight embrace, congratulating her on her ascension.
>
> And yet, it can’t help but feel somewhat halfhearted.
>
> “…Where’s Crimson Rain Sought Flower?” She muses, pulling back to look around. “He saved half of the people here, from what I hear—surely he’s welcome?”
>
> Xie Lian’s smile grows strained.
>
> “…He’s taking a rest,” he explains softly. “But he’ll be back.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Just as Pei predicted—the reception among most to Shi Wudu’s arrival is stunned silence.

Some pleased—others less so, with most having no idea what to think.

Except for Ling Wen, who, in a rare display of emotion, embraces him the moment she sees him.

Shi Qingxuan, by contrast, is welcomed back with cries of joy and celebration—widely beloved by all in the Heavens, even following her fall from Grace.

But she stubbornly remains glued to her brother’s side—only removing herself to hug the Crown Prince of Xianle.

He smiles genuinely at the sight of her, holding Shi Qingxuan in a tight embrace, congratulating her on her ascension.

And yet, it can’t help but feel somewhat halfhearted.

“…Where’s Crimson Rain Sought Flower?” She muses, pulling back to look around. “He saved half of the people here, from what I hear—surely he’s welcome?”

Xie Lian’s smile grows strained.

“…He’s taking a rest,” he explains softly. “But he’ll be back.”

He says that, but the look in his eyes is so—

“…Your shackles!” Shi Qingxuan gasps. “I heard you got your powers back—but it must be so strange! Is there anything I can help with—? Oh!” She grabs his hands, her face turning contrite. “I’m so sorry, but back in Gusu…”

“What is it?”

“…I ruined one of the dresses you made,” she blurts out.

“…Ruined?”

"Ah...I needed something to wear, and it got ripped—and covered in blood—but I'll buy you a new one—!"

"There's no need for that," Xie Lian laughs, shaking his head. "I wouldn't have a use for it, but..." He squeezes her hands in return. "I'd love to make another for you."

He's only seen Shi Qingxuan once--through Yin Yu's memories, shown to him by Hua Cheng.

And now, her eyes are just as kind as they were back then, shining with happiness as she embraces him again.

The feeling in Xie Lian's chest isn't happiness--he isn't there yet.

But it's close.

Members of the court have been slowly streaming in ever since Jun Wu's death became widely known, and after only a few more hours—it's deemed to be enough to call it a full assembly.

And it's strange.

When he was sixteen, he stood on this same peak, at the front of an assemblage of disciples, listening as Mei Nianqing stood under the divine pavilion, reading edicts to the others.

There's no pavilion now--and Mei Nianqing is nowhere to be found.

Xie Lian stands by Pei Ming's side now, a silent show of support as the new emperor is announced, his hands clasped behind his back.

The martial and civil gods assembled are silent, anxious, and battle weary.

No one protests Pei Ming's appointment, as Xie Lian expected.

He's respected by both the middle and upper courts—but there *are* questions about the other two thirds of the trio once known as the 'Three Tumors.'

"...What's to be done with Ling Wen Zhen Jun?" One of the Civil Gods speaks up, crossing his arms.

"She was perfectly willing to watch Jun Wu slaughter the lot of us. And then there's that entire business with the Brocade Immortal—”

"As I recall," Ling Wen tilts her head to the side, raising an eyebrow. "I also organized all of you *escaping* from Jun Wu."

Only because Pei Ming worked *very* hard to convince her—but he certainly isn't going to be the one to drag that fact to light.

"That doesn't change the fact that you're guilty of *murder* , and creating a cursed device—!"

"I'll purify the Brocade Immortal."

The assemblage looks to Xie Lian—who has always ended up at the center of such meetings, but never intentionally drawn attention to himself.

But he doesn't look at them—only paying mind to Ling Wen as he speaks.

"Bai Jing deserves the chance to rest."

For humanitarian purposes, and also because the Brocade Immortal is simply too dangerous to continue in its current state.

When Xie Lian thinks back on how *easily* it destroyed Yin Yu's life...

No. A device so deceitful by nature and carelessly handled must not be kept.

He can do little more for the fallen god--but he can do that much.

And regardless of its blood thirst—Bai Jing doesn't deserve to suffer any longer, even if he was willing to be used in such a way.

"...And practically speaking," Pei Ming shrugs. "None of you are qualified to replace her."

That draws a few offended whispers from the crowd of civil gods—but when no one steps forward to offer themselves as a candidate, it becomes painfully clear that Pei Ming is correct.

"So there's to be *no* punishment for her at all?" Another one of the civil gods speaks up with a frown. "How is that right?"

Pei Ming sighs, crossing his arms, deep in thought—and Xie Lian can't help but feel a little sorry for him.

He's been on the throne for a matter of *minutes* , and he's already being forced to pass judgment on his closest friend, but—

"No, you're right." Pei agrees.

But with Ling Wen being irreplaceable, there are limited ways to punish her at all.

"...The Palace of Ling Wen will be suspended from retaining any donated merits from her temples for the next 200 years."

The only other punishment Pei Ming could think of to give her would be refusing to appoint any new deputies to her palace, but that would be impractical.

At that point they would all suffer from the logistical nightmare of having the civil system of the Heavens overloaded, something Jun Wu has subjected them to for the last few centuries *as it is.*

The punishment doesn't exactly fit the crime—but it's still more than a slap on the wrist.

Enough so that any of the other civil gods remaining with discontent are forced to quiet— *unhappy* , but somewhat appeased.

But that's not the only concern.

"What about the Wa—The Thunder Master?" One of the lower martial gods speaks up, turning his gaze to Shi Wudu, standing between Shi Qingxuan and the Rain Master.

A darker emotion flashes across Pei Ming's face—and he can't be blamed.

Up until a matter of hours ago, he thought the man was dead. He can barely stand having him stand more than ten feet away for the duration of this meeting, wishing he could have his arms around him again—

But he *can't* interfere on his behalf.

Not only because it would plunge his own credibility into doubt—

But because, for hundreds of years, Shi Wudu lived under the shadow of being the last emperor's favorite.

If Pei Ming's first act as emperor was to leap to his defense—Shi Wudu wouldn't forgive him for it.

And if Xie Lian was even a little bit less heartbroken, he would find something to laugh about in this situation.

Because, eight hundred years ago, Mount Taicang was the place where he found a place alone to hyperventilate after seeing Feng Xin shirtless during training.

Alone in a dark room, struggling to breathe, feeling as though something was wrong with him—all because he felt that way about a *man* .

And now, on the same hillside, the Heavenly Emperor lifts his chin.

"I suppose now is the appropriate time to announce that I've asked for his hand in marriage, and he has accepted."

That draws shocked murmurs from the crowd—not because people didn't suspect anything about them before—but because *General Pei* proposed to *anyone* .

"As a future member of my family, I cannot pass judgment on him fairly, in which case...I defer to the Crown Prince of Xianle."

Xie Lian starts from beside him, clearly not having expected *his* name to come up—but it makes sense.

Ling Wen is effectively on probation--and as Shi Wudu's close friend, she couldn't pass judgment on him either. And given the Rain Master's...inclinations towards Ling Wen, and her new found (and apparently long standing) fondness of Pei Ming—

She isn't unbiased either.

And with Xie Lian's unofficial position as Pei Ming's second...

This is exactly where he *would* be needed.

His eyes drift over to the former Water Master, watching how tightly Shi Qingxuan holds his hand, her face pale.

"...I don't have enough information about the situation to pass fair judgment," he shakes his head. "And due to it's complexity, it's not a decision I would make here and now."

And in many ways, he doesn't think it's a matter that the general court has a right to be involved in.

Shi Wudu's crime, while severe—affected a very limited circle.

The Heavenly Court is not included among them.

And, arguably, it was this court that *failed* the Shi siblings.

"...Wouldn't there be a trial, then?" Lang Qianqiu has been relatively quiet since he arrived—along with Quan Yizhen, he was among the last to have his injuries treated by Mu Qing. "That's how we've handled issues in the past."

Xie Lian hesitates.

Lang Qianqiu is correct, and given how his *own* family was violently slaughtered—Xie Lian can understand how he would be less sympathetic to Shi Wudu's actions, which resulted in another man enduring the same fate.

But still.

He can't help but remember being a young, exhausted god himself, fresh from the stings of his failures--dragged before the Heavenly Court in what...

What felt like fair judgment at the time, but in reality—his trial was nothing more than planned public humiliation.

But before *Xie Lian* can give an answer—

Shi Wudu lifts his chin, turning his head to look at the crowd. Careful to meet their eyes with an intensity that has most of them looking away.

"I would prefer that, actually."

Pei Ming's jaw locks, and Shi Qingxuan shakes her head.

"Gege, you don't mean—”

"I do." He looks back to Xie Lian, who hasn't spoken again, bowing his head. "And I'll accept any punishment that I'm given."

And Xie Lian—

He wasn't expecting the way that would make him *feel* .

Seeing a young god, once burning so bright with potential—weighed down with guilt and shame.

Begging to be punished.

“…Jun Wu did many things a certain way before,” Xie Lian finally speaks, his voice low. “That doesn’t mean it was justice.”

That was never the goal.

And Xie Lian is *not* Jun Wu.

He will *never* be Jun Wu.

“…If there’s going to be a trial, it won’t be a public spectacle,” Xie Lian shakes his head. “And it isn’t the most pressing matter before the emperor or myself at the moment.”

“How can you take it so *lightly—?”*

The civil god who spoke up falls silent when another voice calls out—deep and cold.

“If I’m willing to accept that, I don’t think anyone else here has a right to speak.”

The other Heavenly Officials grow silent and restless.

None of them are comfortable with having a calamity in their presence—much less one who disguised himself as a comrade for so long—

But as the new Water Master, he has every right to be here.

And as the victim of Shi Wudu's crime—no one dares to speak over him.

There's little else that can be discussed with the full court present—leaving most of them to be dismissed to their previous posts. Some checking the rubble left behind of their temples in affected areas.

Some haven't left the Heavens in so long that they don't know what to do with themselves—and they're left to go through the ruins of the imperial city. Clearing centuries of overgrowth, preparing the site of the new Heavenly Capital.

But some—the emperor, the elemental masters, Ling Wen, and the ranked martial gods—remain.

There's no Grand Martial Hall to hold meetings in at the moment—leaving them to settle for sitting on stones and tree stumps.

Not particularly *grand* , but it will do.

"...Well," Pei Ming sighs, looking around him. "If that's everyone—"

"It isn't."

The newly crowned emperor stops, turning to raise an eyebrow at Yushi Huang.

"The Fire Master isn't here," she explains calmly—unbothered by the confused expressions of those surrounding her.

"...We don't have a fire master," Pei Ming reminds her, his gaze turning skeptical. "Or an earth master for that matter."

"We do not have an earth master any longer," Yushi Huang agrees. "But our fire master is simply away at the moment, and he might not be back soon."

The emperor waits for her to continue, explaining what she means, but when she doesn't—

"So we should continue in his absence?"

"Oh, I think so."

With that settled, everyone turns their attention to the matter at hand.

A small jar, sitting in the center of the circle.

"…I know how to take what remains of his soul and remove it from this world," Xie Lian explains slowly. "But it's not a decision I have the authority to make on my own."

"Is there anything to discuss, really?" Mu Qing mutters, staring at the jar with brimming resentment.

"Any mortal who has committed as many crimes as he has would be executed without question."

"But we're not mortals," Yushi Huang murmurs. "Our laws are different from theirs."

Their methods of punishment are banishment, or imprisonment.

Such measures have never been taken.

"…Imprisoning him would be a mistake," He Xuan shakes his head, watching the jar with the same dark, resentful gaze. "If given time, his soul could reform again—and who knows what damage he could unleash."

Xie Lian doesn't disagree, but it saddens him.

Remembering how certain Jun Wu was, that he would be put down like a mad dog—even if he were to surrender.

And while he did no such thing—he wasn't wrong.

He's too dangerous to remain.

"And what of the God Slayer? Or the shards of Fangxin?" Feng Xin frowns.

"…They're corrosive by nature," Xie Lian mutters, shaking his head.

He suspects that possessing the God Slayer for so long was enough to keep a ghost like Deng Shihong, with limited resentment, going for thousands of years—only for him to wither when he gave it up.

"And each has existed long enough to develop their own consciousness. In all likelihood, they want to be used."

Which means that they will *try* to corrupt anyone who comes too close.

"…Then they'll have to be melted down." Pei Ming sighs.

"I wouldn't even know how to begin with completely destroying them."

Xie Lian turns to He Xuan, who had taken to absentmindedly fiddling with a small trinket between his fingers.

"Would Guoshi Tonglu know?"

It startles him at first, but he supposes that curse is broken too.

"…The steel itself isn't at issue," he explains carefully. "It can be superheated and melted down like any other substance. But the ashes embedded in the God Slayer cause a greater issue."

"Ashes?" Shi Wudu raises an eyebrow from his seat by Pei Ming's side.

"…The God Slayer is forged from the ashes of the fallen souls of Wuyong," Xie Lian answers first.

Offering no subsequent explanation with regards to Fangxin.

That knowledge can stay with those who *need* to know it, and there aren't very many.

"They've been forged into a hard mineral state—shattering them is enough to prevent the souls bonded to them from remaining in this world…"

(Hence why Shi Qingxuan's choice of *weaponry* nearly gave him a heart attack.)

"But you'll never be able to make them harmless."

Pei Ming sits back, staring at the sack by Xie Lian's feet—where both weapons have been carefully wrapped and stored.

"That doesn't leave us with many options, does it?"

"They haven't had much of an impact on me, carrying them." Xie Lian thinks aloud. "I think the corruptive nature of the blades would be more dangerous for mortals who came into contact with them. If the blades can't be eradicated with current techniques—then hiding and sealing them away from mortals and ghosts is the safest option."

"…Do you think cultivation methods could advance to a point where they could deal with that?" Shi Wudu mutters, his arms crossed—

clearly not thrilled with being close to anything that remains of Jun Wu.

“You’d be surprised,” Blackwater answers under his breath.

“…Until we find a proper place to seal them, would you mind guarding them?”

Xie Lian looks up, surprised. “Me?”

“You carried Fangxin for quite some time, and you said it didn’t affect you.” Pei Ming shrugs. “It seems like a safe option.”

Xie Lian can’t argue against it. He carried Fangxin for five centuries without incident—and with the blade shattered, it would have to be reforged to cause any more damage.

And it gives him a way to be useful—at least until…

“Alright.”

At the very least—it’s temporary.

“With that matter pending—as for the remains of Jun Wu’s spirit, I would say the Crown Prince moving him past this world is the right course of action,” Pei Ming concludes. “Unless anyone here has something they would like to add—”

“There isn’t going to be a grave marker for him, is there?”

The question seems so out of left field—particularly coming from Quan Yizhen, who hasn’t said a word since returning from Mount Tonglu, his expression like stone.

“…We hadn’t considered—”

“He shouldn’t have one.”

Quan Yizhen doesn't look up, his hand curling into a fist against his leg.

"He called Shixiong worthless and insignificant before he killed him. He shouldn't have any recognition in death."

Xie Lian's gaze softens with sympathy.

"...You're right," he agrees quietly.

It could hardly make a difference to Jun Wu now, but...if it can bring those who remain some measure of peace—then it's worth it.

With the pressing matter of discussion addressed—the remaining gods assembled begin to go their separate ways.

"Do you need us to go with you?"

Xie Lian smiles at Feng Xin gratefully, his bamboo hat shielding his eyes from the sun. "Oh, that's kind...but Mu Qing needs rest. Both of you do."

Mu Qing frowns, crossing his arms as he looks Xie Lian up and down.

"You realize you don't need to go by yourself, right? Actually, you don't need to go at *all—"*

Xie Lian reaches out to place a hand on Mu Qing's shoulder, squeezing it gently.

"I won't be going alone," he assures them both. "And once I'm finished..."

He glances back over his shoulder, thinking.

"...I'll be splitting my time between here, and Puqi Village," he explains with an awkward smile. "If either of you would like...to visit. You're always welcome."

When he sees the flash of uneasiness in Mu Qing's eyes, as if it might be words, not an actual gesture, Xie Lian squeezes his shoulder again, repeating firmly:

"Anytime."

And wherever they settle—in the new capital or otherwise...Xie Lian can visit them.

But…something tells Xie Lian that wherever one of them goes, the other will follow.

It’s always been that way, and…

Neither of them seem so keen on hiding it now.

“…Lord Thunder Master?”

Shi Wudu is unaccustomed to the new title as it is—particularly when most have avoided addressing him at all since his arrival—so it takes him a moment to look up.

But when he does—he's shocked to find the Crown Prince of Xianle before him.

Pei Ming is only a few meters away, dealing with a few minor disagreements among the other martial gods, smoothing over the tensions that have come with the recent chaos.

And it's been strange, watching him do it.

Pei Ming told Shi Wudu that he had agreed to take on the role before they ever returned to the others—cautious with regards to his reaction.

And Shi Wudu knows without a doubt, if he pleaded for Pei Ming to step back from it all—he would.

Which is exactly why he'll never ask.

Leaving him right where he started—

The emperor's favorite.

And it almost makes it a cruelty and a mercy, the things that he knows now—a veil pulled back with the intention of finding forgiveness, revealing so much more than that.

Now, he knows that was always his fate.

"…Yes?"

"Do you mind walking with me?" Xie Lian nods back in the direction of the ruins atop Mount Taicang. "I was hoping to speak to you alone before I left."

"…Alright."

Most of the actual structures of Mount Taicang have rotted away—but the stone frames of Huangji Temple remain.

"This was the site of my first ascension," Xie Lian muses without thinking, standing over the exact spot—remembering the moment well.

Shi Wudu’s eyebrows raise.

“…Really? Last I heard, there was something about a demon, and a bridge…?”

“That was a few hours before,” Xie Lian shakes his head. “I ascended later, when I was sleeping.”

It was a rather disconcerting experience in retrospect—waking up in the grand martial hall in nothing but his bed clothes.

“…I don’t imagine you brought me here to ask you about that.”

Xie Lian doesn’t turn around to look at him—but he isn’t surprised that the younger god would avoid beating around the bush.

“…No,” he agrees.

“Is this about the trial?”

“Heavens, no.”

“Then I don’t—?”

“Do you want to come with me?”

Shi Wudu pauses, taken completely off guard by the question.

“…What?”

Xie Lian looks down at the jar in his hands—and he broaches the subject carefully.

“…I know what it’s like, being the emperor’s favorite.”

The mere mention makes the Thunder Master grow pale.

“And I know after some things—there isn’t ever really closure, but…” Xie Lian looks down at the jar in his hands. “If going with me would help, you’re more than welcome.”

Shi Wudu remains silent, his eyes lingering on what little remains of Jun Wu.

Thinking.

“…You really think that—after you do whatever you’re going to do—

he won't be able to hurt anyone else again?"

His question isn't necessarily *doubtful* —just affirming.

"…Yes," Xie Lian nods. "I do."

Shi Wudu turns his eyes away from the jar.

"…That's all the closure I'm ever going to get." He mutters. "But… thank you. For asking."

It's not at all the response that Xie Lian would have expected—not from the acclaimed 'Water Tyrant.'

Such a title implies an edge of spitefulness.

"…You're certain?"

"I was always little more than a placeholder for you." Shi Wudu doesn't mean it as a form of condemnation or of casting blame—but Xie Lian winces nonetheless. "So, I'm sure you can understand—there are some things you never find closure for."

The best you can do is try and forget—as much as your mind allows you.

Xie Lian knows.

"…I'm sorry," he shakes his head. "All of this is—"

"His fault." Shi Wudu interrupts him firmly. "And if it had to happen, it's better that it was someone like…"

Someone like him.

Xie Lian's fingers tighten around the edges of the jar—careful not to break it, but his knuckles are white from the restraint it takes.

"…No matter what kind of person you think you are —*no one* deserves that. Never."

Shi Wudu stops, growing tense.

"…Did Blackwater say something to you?"

"No—" Xie Lian assures him. "No, it's just…my Guoshi warned me about the fate switching spell when I was young."

"…Warned you?" The thunder master asks hoarsely.

Xie Lian's eyes brim with sympathy.

"Whoever casts the fate switching spell endures the same suffering as their victims."

Shi Wudu grows silent.

"And…" Xie Lian takes a shaky breath.

He hasn't been able to say it yet.

Hasn't been able to put it into words.

"He tried to…when I was very young…" Xie Lian swallows hard. "And then later, he threatened…"

The prince is *painfully* aware of what he was capable of.

Shi Wudu doesn't ask him not to tell.

He knows he won't.

"…so, when I say some sorry, I *know* —"

"No." Shi Wudu shakes his head, holding up a hand to silence him. "Immortality already gives us too many chances to apologize. There's no need to say sorry for another man's mistakes, too."

At that point, you would always be apologizing.

And in Shi Wudu's experience—the only ones who benefit from that are powerful men.

Men who use others for their own means.

Shi Wudu was a powerful man, once.

He wants nothing to do with that. Not ever again.

"…Thank you again," Shi Wudu takes a step back, turning his eyes from everything that remains of Jun Wu one last time. "But I want no more part in it."

And Xie Lian can't blame him for that.

He almost admires him for his ability to walk away without looking back.

Xie Lian isn’t sure if he knows how.

His shackles are broken. The tyrant has been slayed by his own hand.

And yet he still feels the weight of them like a lingering shadow.

But, the only thing one can do to remedy such pain, in Xie Lian’s experience…

…Is to keep walking.

The space within this hall has never been so quiet.

Lanterns long since burned out. Tables empty.

A throne sits atop a long row of steps—its owner having not yet returned to claim it.

Clack!

Clack!

Dice roll across the table in the dark, over and over again.

Clack!

Clack!

Clack!

But there’s no risk or reward in gambling alone, with only ghost fires floating around you for company.

No glory in being the last one standing—left to rule over the ashes.

“I thought I’d find you here.”

Shuo doesn’t look up, sitting on one of the long benches along the gambling tables, knees pulled up against his chest.

Xie Lian knows he has a tendency to switch to his younger form when he’s in pain—and it’s no surprise to see him like this now.

But it still aches.

He’s also never *seen* him before—so now, when he rests his hand against the back of the boy’s head—he notices how similar their hair is in color and texture, even if Shuo’s has more of a wave to it.

Common for those born in Xianle at that time.

“…It’s so quiet.”

“They had to shut down to accommodate the civil gods when they got to Ghost City,” Shuo explains. “Most of them had to hold out here. And now that they’re gone…”

The Ghost Realm has entered a period of mourning.

And no one mourns like a ghost.

Shuo stares at the dice on the table, streaks of blood stained tears on his cheeks.

“Everyone keeps asking me what they should do,” he whispers. “But I don’t know anymore.”

Xie Lian’s fingers stroke through his hair.

“…We’ll figure it out together,” he says.

Xie Lian knows Hua Cheng. Better than his own heart in some ways.

Even if he hadn’t formed his own attachment to the boy—he knows that his San Lang cared for him.

He just never knew how to say it.

And without meaning to, he told Xie Lian why.

‘Have you ever loved something so much…that you’re afraid to make room in your heart for something else?’

Afraid that he wouldn’t have enough to give.

That he wouldn’t *be* enough.

“…He’s coming back, you know.”

Shuo doesn’t dare believe it.

“How?”

Xie Lian lowers his hand—allowing Shuo to see the familiar red thread tied around his finger.

“Because he promised me he would,” Xie Lian takes his hand, squeezing. “And he always comes back.”

No matter how long it takes. Even when Xie Lian struggles to keep believing.

And in Xie Lian’s experience—while blind faith is absolutely terrifying…

It can also carry you through anything.

And show you that the things you were so *sure* had been lost…never really left at all.

“But for now…I need your help.”

A door swings open to an empty hall, creaking and echoing against cavernous ceilings.

A room of doors, meetings and goodbyes.

Shuo has been here enough times to recognize it for what it is.

Human beings spend most of their lives in hallways—trying to get from one room to the next.

This place is no different.

Ren Song stays back—dice clutched tightly in hand.

And Xie Lian can’t say he blames him.

“…This is where San Lang brings them all?” He asks quietly, tilting his head back, staring into the endless darkness above.

“Lost children, yes,” Shuo agrees, the dice digging into his palm.

“…Good,” Xie Lian sighs, looking down at the small clay pot in his hands.

In all of human existence—he’s the first living person to enter this hall.

But not the last.

Slowly, he lifts the lid.

A dark cloud bursts forth, pulsating and churning for resentment, searching for an exit—

Finding none.

It rattles up towards the ceiling—but no matter how high it crawls, finds no end to it.

Eventually it comes back down, writhing on the floor, screaming—

Until eventually, Xie Lian hears crying.

When the smoke clears, a child remains, curled up on the floor.

Wearing a mask.

White—molded to look like it's crying.

He tears at it, his body trembling with terror, and—

Hands close around his, gently pulling the mask from his face.

Only to find the Prince of Xianle kneeling on the ground beside him.

"It's alright, your highness."

He wipes the Prince of Wuyong's tears with his sleeve.

"It's over, now."

Jun Wu looks up at him, tears still rolling down his cheeks.

Shocked that anyone is showing him kindness—but especially him.

"…B-But…I…"

Even without the mask, he hides his face in his hands.

"I t-turned out here like *him!"* Jun Wu sobs, rocking back and forth.

Xie Lian doesn't have to ask who he means.

"W-why did I do that?!"

Xie Lian doesn't stop wiping his tears—because he knows.

Before you hurt anyone else—your first victim is always yourself.

"…You shut every other door," Xie Lian explains. "Until there was only one left for you to walk through."

Until he felt like he didn't have any choices left. That he didn't know how to turn back.

But when the Guoshi of Wuyong stopped shutting those doors—Jun Wu started.

"…I can't go back, can I?" He whispers, his voice cracking.

Xie Lian's thumbs brush under his eyes, hands cupping the boy's cheeks.

"No," he agrees softly. "You can't."

Jun Wu stares back at him, eyes wide—and so frightened.

Knowing only one door is left for him now.

"…You don't have to go alone," another voice drifts through the hall—so similar, but not quite.

Coming from a boy standing beside the red door—one with the same face, but…

Kindness in his eyes.

Jun Wu looks over his shoulder, tear streaked and distrusting.

"…You waited for me?" He croaks, arms wrapped around himself. "…W-Why would you do that?"

Deng Shihong walks to him, his form flickering around the edges.

So weakened, he can only take shape here—at the end of all things, where everything is made new.

"I'll go with you."

Jun Wu stares up at him, shaking his head, eyes swollen, struggling to wrap his mind around it. "B…but I…e-everything I d…did to you…"

"…And I had chances to help you before," Deng Shihong mumbles, leaning his cheek into Xie Lian's hand when the prince reaches for

him.

“But I didn’t.”

And he could blame it on being spoiled. On never being told no, or experiencing hardship.

But the prince kneeling before them is proof that privilege is no excuse for selfishness.

“Let me help you now, gege.”

Jun Wu is silent, shoulders shaking as he tries to understand it—the *gravity* of such a gesture, and what it might mean.

"...You can reincarnate now if that's what you choose," Xie Lian cautions the ghost, his hand still resting against the boy's cheek. "Are you sure?'

"...Yeah," Deng Shihong nods, pressing his hand against Jun Wu's, urging the boy to look up at him. "It can't be that bad if we go together, right?"

Jun Wu sniffs, rubbing at his nose with the back of his hand--and when he looks up at his brother...

He nods.

The two stand up together, and before they walk towards the door—

Jun Wu looks at his brother, repeating the sentiment he already expressed before, his eyebrows knitting together.

"...After everything I did to you, how...could you do this for me? I don't...I don't deserve..."

Deng Shihong squeezes his hand again, their shoulders bumping together—and it pains Xie Lian, watching them now, realizing...

Such a small gesture of affection is entirely alien to the child.

"I forgave you a long time ago," the younger twin answers simply.

"I just want you to be okay, now."

Jun Wu falls silent, glancing at the door ahead of them—looming and dark, it's mere presence being somewhat oppressive.

"It won't be okay in there," he says quietly.

Knowing very well that these doors aren't for those who rest in peace.

Den Shihong doesn't have to answer, he knows, he already said it before.

'But we'll be together.'

The younger brother looks up, smiling at Xie Lian gratefully.

"Thank you, your highness."

For stopping his brother, but far more importantly...

For being kind to him.

The Prince of Xianle smiles back at him warmly, even if it aches.

"Thank *you* , your highness," he replies, squeezing the boy's shoulder before letting go.

For being brave. For *trying* .

For choosing kindness, and helping others do the same.

Deng Shihong's eyes crinkle at the corners, not *happy* , he couldn't be, not where he's going—

But content.

That is, until he notices his brother's hand trembling in his grip.

"..." He turns his head, frowning. "Ge—?"

Thud!

Deng Shihong's eyes grow wide.

Jun Wu's hand pulled out of his own in the blink of an eye--shoving him in the chest, *hard* .

And now he's stumbling backwards, hands outstretched, but—

Another door has already opened behind him.

"Gege—WAIT, I—!"

The last thing he sees with these eyes, soon to be dissolved and remade as his soul is shaped into something new—is his brother's face.

And he can't say that Jun Wu looks happy.

He looks miserable, watching him go. Frightened and tear stricken.

But he doesn't look like he *regrets* it, either.

Saying the words that neither of them ever said when they were alive. Couldn't have, because they were never taught what they meant.

'I love you.'

After that, there's nothing.

Just a wave of warmth, followed by...

Peace.

BANG!

The red doors slam shut—and for a moment, Xie Lian is too shocked to look away.

Not until the boy who remains sinks to his knees beside him, trembling—tears pouring down his cheeks once more.

"...That was brave," he murmurs.

"No!"

"It—"

"I'm—I'm *so* scared!"

Jun Wu sobs, clutching his chest, shaking his head vehemently. "I'm not—I'm not ready, I don't—I don't wanna go! I don't wanna let go yet! It's—it's not FAIR! It's not..."

He says that. He sobs and protests—

But even if an act of kindness is ungraceful—it's still kind.

"...You know something?" Xie Lian reaches over, carefully pushing the boy's hair from his face. Jun Wu can't meet his gaze. Can't even see through the tears—but that's alright. "...I don't think anyone is meant to suffer forever."

The boy can't quite catch his breath, looking up at him—disbelieving. "...Y-You don't?"

Xie Lian shakes his head, looking at the room around them. How vast and cold it might seem to some. But life is the same way.

Massive, dark, and unknown.

"...There's no pain or hurt in this world that lasts forever," he explains softly. He would know. "Any form of punishment—big or small—is a lesson."

Some of them cruel, some of them merciful. Willingly endured, or forcefully given. Xie Lian doesn't think that all of the lessons he's been given in his life have been fair. He didn't ask for many of them. Some were never intended to teach him.

But goodness, he *learned* .

"...There's no point to them if they don't end," Xie Lian concludes. "So—whatever is waiting for you out there—I don't think it lasts forever."

And Xie Lian *does* think that Jun Wu can learn, because...

One act of love from Deng Shihong pulled a genuine act of selflessness from the boy. One who is capable of such inhumanity.

But, in Xie Lian's experience...sometimes, that's all it takes to remember the goodness in the world.

One act of kindness. One friendly stranger. Just *one.*

And that gives every single person enormous power. Because they, at any moment, could be that one.

Jun Wu grows still, feeling something land on top of his head, reaching up to find...

The rough, woven edges of a bamboo hat.

Old, but well loved.

"Wherever you go, whatever awaits you after this..." Xie Lian murmurs, repeating his words from the last time they fought as he adjusts the strap under his chin. "I hope your next life is kinder to you."

Kindness is not weakness.

Gentleness will never make you meek.

Sometimes, smiling in the face of pain is the bravest thing a person can do.

And in a world like this—prone to cruelty, resentment, and hatred—

Kindness is a raging act of defiance.

A stubborn refusal to allow suffering to change you. For hate to *control* you.

"...Y...You're not going to go?" Jun Wu whispers, staring at Xie Lian in disbelief, the hat slipping slightly over his eyes, but he holds onto the sides tightly, his knuckles white.

Kindness is a choice. One that you have to make over and *over* again.

Xie Lian has failed before. He's been cruel. He's been angry. He's looked at the world, asked for its hatred, and *thrilled* in the power he felt when it answered.

But he's never seen beauty like a small white flower left on an altar.

A bowl of food, given with no expectation of thanks.

A bamboo hat, placed on his head to shield him from the rain.

"...I'll wait," Xie Lian promises, kneeling on the ground beside him. "I'll wait until you're ready to go."

But—no matter how hard it is, no matter how easy it is to fall to anger—

Kindness is always worth the pain.

Jun Wu trembles, pulling the rim of the hat down in order to hide the tears pouring down his face.

Because every act of kindness opens a door for someone, somewhere.

It leaves the world better than you found it, and...

Xie Lian loves this world—and the people in it.

Eventually, the child rises to his feet.

Steps unsteady, stumbling. Hesitantly walking alone towards the dark.

But when doors of black jade slide open, an unseen force pulling him in—

He knows he isn't alone. Someone chose to remain—to bear witness.

And when his hands wrap around the edges of the hat on his head, for the first time...

Jun Wu lets go.

Xie Lian watches as dark doors slam shut with a resounding boom, a rush of wind blowing through his hair.

When he looks back over his shoulder—Shuo is watching him with a silent, wide-eyed gaze—tears in his eyes.

Xie Lian doesn't ask him what's the matter.

He knows.

Instead of asking, he rises to his feet, offering his hand.

"Let's go home."

The newborn ghost king grabs his fingers, holding on tight as he rattles a set of dice against his palm.

The climb back to the world is long and dark—

But easier, when you aren't alone.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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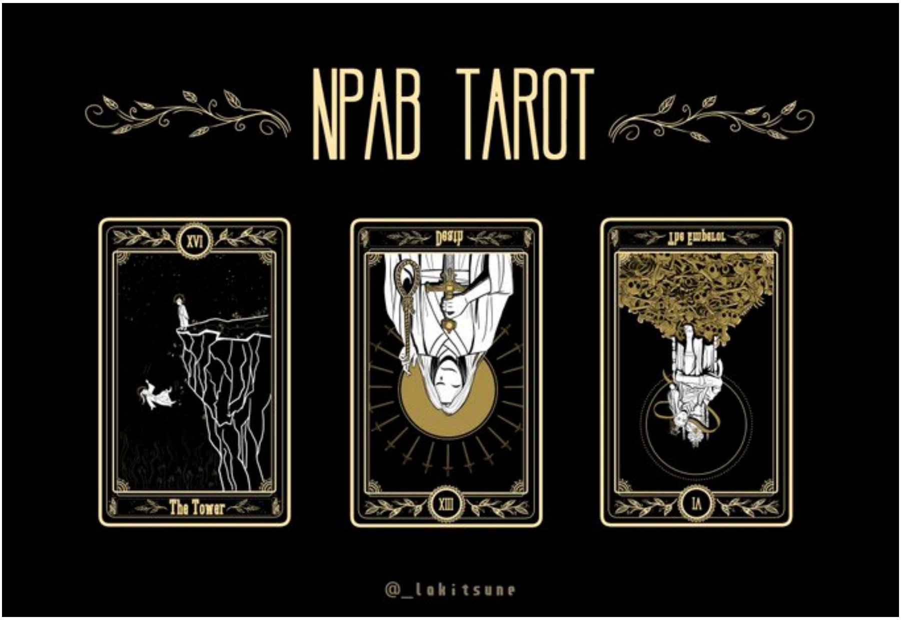
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The Tower
Death
XIII
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IV
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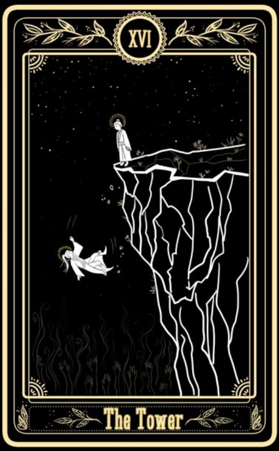
XVI
The Tower

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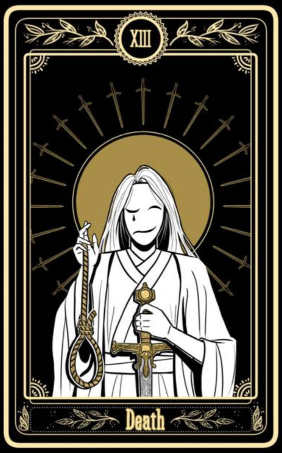
Upright Tower Meaning:
- disaster
- destruction
- upheaval
- trauma
- sudden change
- chaos

NPAB TAROT



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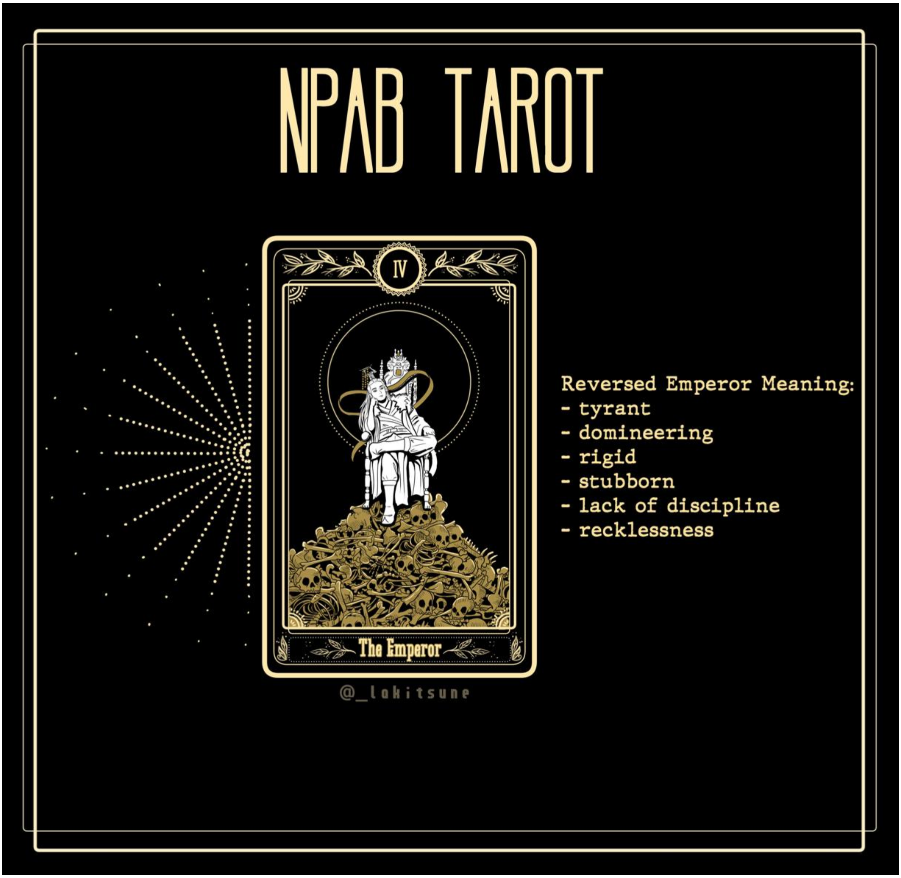
Reversed Death Meaning:
- fear of change
- repeating negative patterns
- resisting change
- stagnancy
- decay



Reversed Emperor Meaning:
- tyrant
- domineering
- rigid
- stubborn
- lack of discipline
- recklessness

CREDIT: **LAKITSUNE**

Chapter End Notes

just want to say, since some of the themes in this chapter are heavy and squishy, the implication here is not that we are obligated to forgive those who abuse us, nor was this a redemption of Jun Wu / Bai Wuxiang's character. This is really only intended to display breaking the cycle of abuse and choosing to move forward. Thank you for reading!

xoxo, Evie

Scar Tissue

Chapter Summary

> Xie Lian spends so many hours laying there. Remembering the first night he slept in this bed. Tangled in Hua Cheng's arms.
>
> He aches for them, now.
>
> And each time he slips off, closing his eyes—Xie Lian desperately wishes he could remember his dreams.
>
> Because he knows if he could—every single one would be about him.

Chapter Notes

> CONTENT WARNINGS: VIOLENCE, SELF HARMING TENDENCIES

Xie Lian doesn't return to the Heavenly Court immediately.

He knows he should. That the sooner he goes and finishes what business remains, he'll have time for himself—to decide what comes next.

And maybe it's that impossible, daunting task that makes him delay.

He spends the next two weeks in Ghost City.

Thanking the residents for their help during the crisis. Watching as Shuo adjusts to his new role, running things in Hua Cheng's absence.

Watches as Lang Qianqiu visits—this time with now disguise—the two of them navigating their unexpected, mutual responsibility: Guzi.

And shared custody aside—Xie Lian catches sight of the two holding hands, tucked away in private corners more than once.

He never says a word about it, knowing such moments are private and fragile and new.

He takes food when it's given to him, no matter how badly he wants to say that he isn't hungry.

And he sleeps now—more than he ever has.

It took him two nights to climb into Hua Cheng's bed. Awkwardly drifting near the door, battling the feeling of overstepping, but—

It smells like him.

That's all he can think about, curled up on his side, his face pressed into the blankets.

Like the forest after it rains.

Xie Lian spends so many hours laying there. Remembering the first night he slept in this bed. Tangled in Hua Cheng's arms.

He aches for them, now.

And each time he slips off, closing his eyes— Xie Lian desperately wishes he could remember his dreams.

Because he knows if he could—every single one would be about him.

Every morning he rolls over, reaching out—and every morning, his hands find nothing but the pillows beside him.

Waking up alone, grasping a ring between his fingertips.

And on the last day of his stay in Ghost City—he can no longer bear the emptiness of it anymore.

Xie Lian sits up, hair loose around his shoulder, his face pressed against his palms.

"…Good morning, San Lang," he whispers.

Knowing that no one will reply.

He bids farewell to Shuo a few hours later—warning him that he'll be off on business for the day.

Then, he makes the trek back to Mount Taicang, and the new capital being built in the nearby valley.

Part of him knows his friends would prefer it if he called ahead, to set up a travel array, or make the journey with him, but…

For now, it feels better to walk alone.

Watching the sun through the trees, and the wind in the grass.

Picking wildflowers as he goes, and…

Talking to Hong'er, mostly.

About how beautiful the day is. Asking him what he would think of it. What he's going to do. What he worries about.

When he passes by villages, the locals stop to stare.

At the beautiful young man, dressed in white—a hood pulled over his head. Flowers in his hands.

And sometimes, when the children walk beside him—lilies bloom in his wake, making them cry out with delight, rushing to pick them.

When he arrives in the Old City of Xianle—it's nearly unrecognizable.

Bustling with life, new palaces being constructed everywhere you look. Old, worn stone replaced with gleaming towers and freshly laid roads.

He greets every god he passes, and unlike before…

Each and every one stops to bow to him, murmuring words of welcome.

Some begrudgingly, others with audible gratitude.

And when word of his return spreads—all in the new capital know…it could only be for one reason.

In previous years, the former Heavenly Dynasty would hold trials in the open, with one judge, jury, and executioner.

Not now.

Now, the cardinal gods and elemental masters are gathered in a newly built council room.

Four lower gods have been randomly selected—two civil, and two martial—to serve as witnesses, purely for the sake of transparency.

Necessary, given the prior administration's history of corruption and abuse.

They sit towards the back of the chamber, on lowered benches—silent observers.

The ranked martial gods sit to the right of the room, on elevated seats—with the elemental masters in mirroring positions on the right.

Pei Ming, however, does not sit in the emperor's chair.

He has taken an empty seat among the other martial gods—having recused himself as judge of this proceeding already.

Across from him, the seat of the Thunder Master remains empty.

Shi Wudu kneels on the ground, hands folded gracefully in his lap—his head held high.

Xie Lian was born to sit upon a throne. Shown to the world from the arms of a king, with royal blood tracing further back than even the eldest gods.

And yet, sitting upon one now feels utterly foreign to him.

Ankles crossed—a white sword scabbard laying across his thighs.

"...Lord Thunder Master, Shi Wudu," he finally speaks, unaccustomed to the eyes looking to him, even now in this smaller, private setting. "You stand accused of performing forbidden spells to steal a man's fate. How do you plead?"

Shi Wudu does not hesitate.

"Guilty."

After having spoken to the man privately—Xie Lian isn't surprised by his response. But in some far, distant way, he can appreciate the irony.

They are both favorites of a man who was incapable of taking responsibility—and neither of them have ever shied from taking blame.

"...Would you like to enter a confession?" Xie Lian asks softly, uncomfortable with how high above Shi Wudu the seating arrangement leaves them, but—

He understands the purpose of it.

"Yes," Shi Wudu looks down at his palm—squeezing the golden locket that rests there.

"...A curse was attached to my family for the sins of my ancestor—

centuries before I was born," he recalls softly. "I've never known why it came back to haunt us the way it did—but when Shi Qingxuan was born...it attached to her."

No matter how old Shi Wudu becomes—no matter how many horrors he lives through—he'll never forget it.

Being a little boy, nearly crushed by a screaming crowd. Fleeing from words painted across the wall in blood:

'WRETCHED BEGINNING, WRETCHED END.'

Shi Qingxuan's lips tremble, her face pale as she watches her brother speak. Caught between love for him, guilt for her own role, and...

Every other emotion possible, tangled in a devil's knot—her fingers squeezing the hand of the very man who suffered from their failures.

“…A monster that hunted her. Hunted our family.” The locket digs into Shi Wudu’s palm. “We took advice. Raised her as a girl, changed her name. Hid her in every way we could…and it killed our parents.”

His words are not an excuse—and they never will be.

He knows as much.

“I did not become a cultivator out of any grand ideals or forms of self-belief,” he shakes his head. “My intention was always to bring Shi Qingxuan to the Heavens with me. To protect her. But…wherever we went, it followed.”

Some of it was from Shi Qingxuan's own folly—but none of that would have changed the fact that she had been cursed from the moment of her birth.

That Shi Wudu, in his efforts to protect her, had left her defenseless.

"I prayed for assistance. Made offerings. When I was a teenager...the emperor answered me." Shi Wudu's nostrils flare slightly, his hands tightening in his lap. "He told me of a spell that could save Shi Qingxuan, but if I were to use it and get caught...he wouldn't help me."

That seemed fair, at the time.

It seemed like, after countless years of struggle, someone was finally giving him a way out.

Now, he's old enough to know better.

To see that it was always a trap. That he was an easy target. Willing to be a victim, for her sake.

“…I ascended as a god in the year that followed, and when I did…I switched Shi Qingxuan’s fate with a local scholar, born on the same day with the same name.”

He doesn’t lower his chin, even when he feels the weight of He Sheng’s gaze on his back.

It’s a familiar feeling now, and it doesn’t frighten him. If anything, it makes the words easier to say.

“I put him from my mind after that. I made no efforts to see what became of him, or his loved ones. From then on, I lived my life as though it had never happened.”

Shi Wudu’s greatest shame is that it wasn’t keeping the secret that was hard.

It was living with the other one who knew it.

“I placed myself and my sister in a life of peace and luxury, while he and his loved ones were forced to pay the price. I have no excuses.”

“…You say that,” Mu Qing mutters, sitting just to Xie Lian’s right, his hair like liquid silver in the lantern light. “But you prefaced it with how much you and your own family suffered.”

“Not for sympathy,” Shi Wudu meets his gaze.

“Then why?”

“Because what I did to the He Family was my only crime as a god—and I don’t want that to be used in my defense.” Shi Wudu mutters. “I committed many more as a mortal. I lied. I cheated. I stole. I killed my own flesh and blood without remorse.”

“That isn’t within our authority to judge,” Xie Lian remains him quietly, having remained silent since he began his confession. “You are only on trial for one crime, Lord Thunder Master.”

Shi Wudu takes a long, slow breath.

“I know. I’m simply asking not to be shown any mercy.”

Xie Lian knows that, after what he's survived, there is no mercy.

"What would you consider to be an appropriate punishment?" He asks the Thunder Master quietly.

If Shi Wudu could ask for execution, he would.

But with that off of the table…

"…Three cursed shackles." He says firmly, his jaw locked with stubbornness.

One for Qin Meirong, He Zhong, and He Sheng.

Xie Lian grows silent again, watching Shi Wudu for a long, painful moment.

Then, he looks to the only other person who *really* matters in this case.

He Xuan.

"…The crime committed was against you." The prince points out. "What would you see done?"

He Xuan doesn't look away from Shi Wudu—can't seem to bring himself to, eyes fixed on his profile.

Pei Ming cannot say a word—but if he squeezes the arms of his chair any tighter, it might shatter.

Shi Qingxuan stares at her hands, her heart hammering in her chest, fingers unsteady—

"I can't."

"…What?"

He Xuan rises from his seat, climbing down the steps.

"I was a good man, when my life was easy," he explains. "But when I was forced to walk in someone else's fate…I lied. I cheated. I stole. I took lives."

He kneels beside Shi Wudu, and the Thunder Master can't look at him—his throat tight.

"I hurt someone who showed me *nothing* but kindness," he looks toward Shi Qingxuan, finding her eyes wide and tearful, hands covering her mouth. "I cannot judge him. Whatever he is, I am. Whatever punishment he faces, I should bear it too."

For the first time since their altercation on Mount Taicang—Pei Ming starts.

Watching He Xuan with an entirely different gaze.

"…Your crimes were committed as a ghost, not a god," Xie Lian points out—moved, but that doesn't change the circumstances.

"If you would like to face judgment for them, that will have to come from the Ghost Realm."

In which case—He Xuan would be forced to punish himself, or wait for Hua Cheng's eventual return.

"…Regardless," He Xuan presses. "I already made him pay."

Shi Wudu reaches up, pressing his palm against his throat—subconsciously touching his scar.

"You fought Bai Wuxiang in the Kiln," He Xuan explains to Xie Lian. "You know what that does."

All of the other gods assembled watch curiously, but—

Xie Lian does.

"He watched my sister grow up," He Xuan explains. "He watched *me* grow up with my parents. My fiancé. He loves them as much as I do. He mourns them like I do."

To He Xuan, that's all he needed to move on.

For their lives and the loss of them to be paid for.

Acknowledged.

"…No," Shi Wudu shakes his head. "It's not enough."

"If I say it is—"

" *You* have forgiven me," Shi Wudu agrees, and he still can't even begin to understand *how* . "He Zhong will never have that chance. Or Qin Meirong, or your parents. You—you could never be like me."

That’s the downside of making Shi Wudu care about someone.

His stubborn, fierce loyalty to them—even at his own expense.

The moment Shi Wudu began to love them as He Sheng did—it was assured he would never allow himself to escape punishment.

He Xuan couldn’t have planned it better—and yet that was never his intention.

“What I did to Ming Yi—”

“Was wrong, but that’s one life—I ruined *so many—*”

“Shi Wudu,” Pei finally speaks, his voice strained. “The man himself is telling you to let it go—”

“There are so many things I can never fix,” he explains, growing desperation in his voice. “There are lives that weren’t lived, children that weren’t *born* —because of me! I can’t take that back! And he *is* different!”

Shi Wudu hangs his head, hands balled into fists.

“Because even when he *hated* me—he tried to fix it. He *never* would have done what I did.”

He *always* tries to fix it. But this—

This can’t be fixed. Shi Wudu broke it, and he doesn’t…He can never…

Xie Lian has been silent, watching him.

“…You’ll accept any punishment, and leave it at that?” He asks finally, watching as Shi Wudu nods fervently in agreement.

In reality—Xie Lian doesn’t believe he needs it. If punishments are meant to be lessons—then his has been learned.

This is guilt.

Xie Lian is more familiar with that feeling than anyone.

But he also knows that telling someone they shouldn't feel a certain way is useless. That no matter how hard he is loved, and how many times he is forgiven—

He'll always regret what he did when he was young.

But having suffered so much in the last eight hundred years, having imposed so much of that on himself—

Xie Lian can't deny that made the guilt easier to live with, even if he knows it was wrong.

He only hurt those he loved in the process.

His friends. The man who loved him. Each of them desperately looking for him--but Xie Lian refused to be helped.

He didn't *want* mercy. He wanted—

He wanted to endure so much pain, that he could take pride in it. That he could absolve himself with it.

During his time in Ghost City, he found a room covered in tally marks—and all he could do was sink to the ground and weep.

Knowing that when he was hurting himself, starving himself, allowing himself to be beaten, abandoned, and used—

Hua Cheng was counting those days.

Loving him. Missing him. Praying for him.

And Xie Lian treated the love of Hua Cheng's life so carelessly. So cruelly.

Those lessons took eight centuries for him to learn—and Shi Wudu's guilt is just as profound.

Xie Lian knows, if he refuses to punish him—Shi Wudu will find a far harsher way to punish himself. That it has to be firm enough for the Thunder Master to accept—

And that doing so might be mercy, because it gives him a chance to feel like he paid.

Like he can move on.

"...Very well." Xie Lian glances down at his sword, running his fingertips over the gold petals inlaid across the pommel.

Missing the hands that painted them there.

"For the next one hundred years, you will be at the Water Master's disposal."

A century of indentured servitude to the man who suffered the most from his crimes is just, on one hand—

And on the other hand, it prevents Shi Wudu from going into seclusion and harming himself.

He'll have to remain near He Xuan, and by extension, his sister.

His family.

But it's not enough, and Xie Lian knows that.

Can see it from the way Shi Wudu's shoulders grow tense with defiance, debating whether or not he might take back his words about accepting Xie Lian's punishment.

Because they both know He Xuan will go easy on him.

That leaves Xie Lian with limited options.

Exile, for reasons he's already considered, would be a terrible idea.

He has already felt what it was like to shackle someone once—and he has no intention of doing that again. Not unless he has too.

Only one other form of punishment remains. Ancient. Harsh. Something that isn't permanent, but severe enough for Shi Wudu to accept it.

It still feels difficult, saying the words—even if they come out easily enough.

"...And fifty lashes."

He Xuan, Shi Qingxuan, and Pei Ming each cry out in unison with varying degrees of anger, anguish, or dismay—but Shi Wudu sags with relief, clapping a hand over his mouth to hide any sound that comes out.

And Xie Lian knows why.

Because it's a punishment that, while harsh, is brief. When it's over—he can try to move on.

And equally important—it's an *actual* punishment. One that will allow him to re-enter life in the Heavenly Court without speculations of corruption or favoritism hanging over him.

"Do you accept it?"

"Like *HELL* he does—!" Pei Ming is already halfway out of his seat. "He *died!* He saved an entire city's worth of mortals—how is that not enough?! He—!"

But when he notices the eyes of the witnesses watching...

He understands Xie Lian's point.

That if Shi Wudu is punished *over* his protests—that will make his position easier going forward.

That doesn't make it any easier to bear.

He Xuan has already pulled who was once his worst enemy halfway behind him, lips pulled back into a ferocious snarl—

"Yes."

Shi Wudu pushes He Xuan away—even when his grip on the man's shoulders feels like iron—he lets go.

"I accept it," he agrees, speaking over the protests of those around him.

Xie Lian waits to see if any of the other gods present protest—and none of them do.

“…Then there’s no point in putting it off.”

Feng Xin steps down from his own seat, ignoring the venomous stare from He Xuan as he binds Shi Wudu in spiritual chains, holding his wrists behind his back.

“Your highness—your highness *, wait!”*

Shi Qingxuan trails beside him, tugging on Xie Lian’s sleeve desperately as they move Shi Wudu from the council chambers—too small for a whip to be used properly—to a secluded hillside, far from where the court could see or hear.

“He did it for *me!* I’m the one who should be—!”

“You’re pregnant,” Xie Lian reminds her firmly. “And it was his choice, not yours.”

“But—”

“Shi Qingxuan…” he stops walking, standing with her, several paces behind the others. “It’s the only thing he’ll accept.”

Her eyes shine with tears—

But part of her *knows* it’s true.

“…But, if you want to help…” Xie Lian’s eyes slide back to the others. “It would be easier for him if you weren’t there.”

Shi Qingxuan knows that’s true, too—but that doesn’t make it any easier to bear.

“…Wait in the city?” The prince suggests gently.

"Mu Qing can help him once it's over, and after..."

After, he'll be brought home.

Shi Qingxuan *hates* the idea of leaving him, but...Her presence would only make things worse, and...he won't be alone.

Yushi Huang takes her by the hand, squeezing gently.

"I'll walk back with you."

Better to have as few people to witness it as possible—and for Shi Qingxuan to have company, waiting for it to be over.

The sun is golden as afternoon sinks over Mount Taicang, bringing some relief from a cold winter's day.

But the ground is hard and unforgiving against Shi Wudu's knees, kneeling before one of the oldest trees they can find.

Sturdy enough that, even if Shi Wudu holds onto it to steady himself, he isn't *as* likely to snap it in two accidentally.

Feng Xin unties his wrists—only to bind them to the trunk, pausing as he does so.

"...Your robes..." He mutters, slightly uncomfortable. "Would you rather leave them as they are?"

Never in a million years did he expect to be in this position with a man like Shi Wudu of all people. Always so proud. So dignified.

But if he leaves them as they are, they'll be in shreds by the time it's over.

"..." Shi Wudu can feel He Xuan tensing, knows what he's thinking about, why he's worried—

"It's fine," He mutters, reaching down to untie his belt, shrugging out of his sleeves.

Being bare from the waist up isn't particularly shameful, compared to the rest of it.

It's just cold.

He pulls his hair over his left shoulder, keeping it out of the way—then offers his wrists for Feng Xin to bind once more.

Pei Ming is pale, can't stop pacing, and when he sees Shi Wudu kneeling like that, he—

"You'll have to bind me too."

Xie Lian lowers his voice, turning to him. "If you don't think this is the right thing—”

"It doesn't matter if it is or not," Pei mutters under his breath. "He's already agreed to it. If we change our minds, he'll—”

With that pride, he'll likely just whip *himself* .

"...I know this is the best thing for his future," Pei Ming adds, even more quietly, his voice dripping with pain in every word. "But if you don't bind me—I'll try to stop it."

He won't be rational once it starts.

And Xie Lian can't suggest *he* wait in the city.

He would never leave Shi Wudu alone in something like this, and...

It's very likely that the Thunder Master will need him after. Sending him away would be cruel to both of them.

And Xie Lian has no desire to make this any more painful than it has to be.

Pei Ming is placed behind Lang Qianqiu and Quan Yizhen, spiritual chains binding his hands behind his back, and Xie Lian...

The only whip from the Heavenly Armory was one that once belonged to Jun Wu, like everything else. Black, the fall covered in wickedly sharp spikes.

And he...can't bring himself to use it.

Rather, he finds himself staring at a ring in his palm—one that was taken from Shi Wudu's person when he was disarmed for his trial.

A normal whip wouldn't leave much of a mark on a god, but this...

Xie Lian's expression twists with a wave of discomfort—so strong, he can't even bring himself to hide it, his mouth set into a firm line as he goes to slip the ring over his finger, but...

Someone grabs onto his wrist, stopping him.

When Xie Lian looks up, his gaze filled with exhaustion, ready to just get it over with—

He finds Feng Xin staring back at him, gently taking the ring from his grasp.

Not out of protest.

Rather, he slips the ring over his own finger.

"It doesn't always have to be you."

Besides—Xie Lian's strength has only recently returned to him, and his control isn't perfect yet.

He could actually kill Shi Wudu accidentally—something Feng Xin was able to recognize from the growing anxiety in Mu Qing's expression.

That doesn't mean Feng Xin takes any comfort in doing it himself. Not when he feels the weight of He Xuan's angry stare, or when he sees the vulnerable slump of Shi Wudu's shoulders.

They straighten when he hears Zidian crackle to life, stiffening apprehensively.

CRACK!

Pei Ming hangs his head, closing his eyes—doing everything he can not to think about that sound, what it means.

CRACK!

With each blow that lands, He Xuan's hand jerks. Fighting the need to intervene, nails biting into his palm until they draw blood.

CRACK!

Shi Wudu has never had any love for pain. He learned to smile through it when he was young, to hide his suffering from a monster that fed from it.

When he grew up, he met another monster—and hiding his suffering went from a means of survival to a habit.

It's almost easier now, because he isn't holding it in to steal satisfaction from the one inflicting his pain—he knows that no one is finding any joy in this. Rather, it's to spare his loved ones the agony of listening to him cry out.

But he isn't like Xie Lian.

He feels every single second of pain, rattling down in his bones. Every inch of split skin, Zidian's length digging deep into his flesh.

CRACK!

After the fourth lash, a pained gasp wrenches from his chest as he sinks forward against the tree trunk—and Pei thrashes.

Feng Xin is methodical—settling into a predictable rhythm—not hesitating when Shi Wudu's pain begins to peek through the edges of his composure.

CRACK!

Something he's grateful for, because by the tenth lash, he can't catch his breath anymore.

Every gasp is paired with a pained whimper on the exhale. Held back by thinning strings of pride and shame—

But after twenty lashes, they cut deep enough for a sob to rip from his chest, and He Xuan almost lunges.

Almost, because one look from Xie Lian locks him in place.

In a sense—if they can't actually punish He Xuan for what he did to Ming Yi—

This might be as close to atonement as he gets.

Forced to endure watching this.

CRACK!

After thirty, he doesn't make another sound.

Fifty lashes.

Ten for every life he stole.

He Sheng. He Zhong. Their mother and father. Qin Meirong.

Even now, his body limp and trembling as the pain begins to bleed into one long blur—it feels like a small price to pay.

But it's still payment.

When it’s finished, he still can’t catch his breath. Can’t move. Can’t make a sound.

But he never asked for it to stop—not once.

He never asked for mercy—and he’ll never feel as though he has the right to.

Mu Qing is the first to go to him—checking his back, making sure that his body is responding as it should.

But when he goes to heal the gashes in his flesh—Shi Wudu lets out a hoarse groan, writhing away from him.

Even now, when he can barely move at all.

“…Later,” Xie Lian suggests quietly, knowing there’s no sense in distressing Shi Wudu any further now.

Not when he’s bound to lose consciousness before long.

He Xuan stands to the side, knuckles aching, like he wants to go to him, but—

Pei Ming gets there first.

He must have been unbound by Quan Yizhen or Lang Qianqiu when it was finished—leaving him free to rush to his lover's side.

Pulling his robes back up to cover his shoulders, carefully lifting him in his arms.

Something Shi Wudu would never tolerate—but he *can't* walk now.

The weight of it all is heavy on Xie Lian's shoulders, nearly making him sink under the weight of it.

But there is one comfort.

Shi Wudu slips out of consciousness as Pei Ming carries him away, but…

His expression is almost peaceful.

"…You didn't have to," Xie Lian mutters.

Feng Xin doesn't look up at him, wiping the blood from his hands.

"Lashes were the punishment for desertion in the army," he explains calmly. "It's hard, if you aren't used to it."

Xie Lian is an old hand at enduring pain, but…

Inflicting it—not in battle, but on someone who can't fight back—is a different beast.

Feng Xin takes no joy in it—but it's something he's already learned.

Xie Lian bites back a grimace, nodding.

"…" Mu Qing watches them both, deep in thought. "…You need a bath," he mutters, giving Feng Xin a light shove on the arm. "And you," he looks at Xie Lian. "I have to go patch him up—but if you've left by the time I'm finished—"

"I won't," Xie Lian clears his throat. "I wanted to visit Huangji Temple, anyway."

"…Good," Mu Qing mutters, turning to walk away.

Xie Lian almost turns to do the same, then pauses, looking back at Feng Xin.

"…Are you going to take a bath now, or would you want to come with me?" He offers.

Knowing that he shouldn't be alone all the time.

Feng Xin is so surprised, he answers without thinking.

"I was going to wait until he was finished, so we could—"

The words are halfway out of his mouth before he freezes, his ears turning red.

"…If you're busy, it's—"

"I'm not," he croaks. "I'll come along, dianxia."

"It's fine if you take baths together, that's your business—"

"—I never said that we did! I just—you—!" Feng Xin presses his face against his palm with a groan as they walk uphill. "It's not something you should trouble yourself with, your highness—"

"Feng Xin."

The martial god falls silent, walking by his side.

Xie Lian tilts his head to the side, shivering when a winter breeze runs down the mountain side.

He really should make himself some winter clothes, he…Just hasn't been able to put his mind to it yet.

In an instant a warm cloak settles around his shoulders, and…Xie Lian can't help but smile, his eyes filled with bittersweet fondness.

"You don't have to do that."

Feng Xin grunts noncommittally, rubbing the back of his neck as they walk. Xie Lian is tempted to fall silent again, to simply enjoy the quiet of the walk, but…

"…I hope I've never done something to make you think I wouldn't be happy for you," he murmurs, pulling the furs tighter around his shoulders. "I know you would do the same for me."

Feng Xin's face is still so red, even underneath a deep tan, rubbing his neck with increasing speed as his embarrassment grows.

"…I…know you are…"

Though the thought that he'll have to return the favor if and when Crimson Rain returns makes him cringe.

"Then why the secrecy?"

Feng Xin grimaces, listening out to make sure Mu Qing is long gone.

"…It's a little hard to stick out your neck for someone who goes from asking you not to leave, to treating you like an infectious *disease* in the same day—"

He sounds bitter, but it's not that.

Feng Xin is loyal. He's passionate. But he does need *some* assurance.

Mu Qing isn't prone to giving that.

"…And it feels like he wants you to be a mind reader?"

"Yes! That's exactly—!"

"You don't need to be."

When they were younger—and even recently—Xie Lian and Mu Qing had the tendency to slip into the same mindset.

That Feng Xin was insensitive. Impatient. A good friend, but never once for nuance.

But after the Mid-Autumn festival…

Xie Lian realized that he *wanted* to understand.

How much it hurts him when he doesn't.

And that it wasn't kind to assume that such things were beyond him.

"…Mu Qing never means that sort of thing," Xie Lian explains carefully. "He's just…frightened."

Feng Xin almost opens his mouth to argue with him, to tell him that Mu Qing is a *lot* of things, but scared isn't one of them—

When he remembers.

Back when they were young, and Xie Lian had just left.

Feng Xin was frantic, looking for him—and, admittedly…he took it out on Mu Qing.

He said things that feel so stupid and immature in hindsight—and when Mu Qing lashed out at him over it…

Feng Xin's response had been that Mu Qing had said just as many cruel things to him.

And Mu Qing's defense, saying it was 'different' for him, it made Feng Xin feel like he was losing his mind—

'BECAUSE I DON'T ACTUALLY MEAN IT!'

…Does that mean Mu Qing thinks *Feng Xin* means everything he says when *he's* angry? That's ridiculous! Who actually—?

"…He can be the most compassionate, caring person I know," Xie Lian looks up the hill, watching the temple come into view. "But he's always going to assume people think the worst of him."

"Then how am I supposed to—?"

"But," the prince interrupts him gently. "If you jump first, if he *knows* that he isn't going to be alone on the landing…he'll always jump after you."

Always.

Xie Lian knows how big Mu Qing's heart is. How deeply he cares.

He just doesn't know how to jump first. Not yet.

"…What if he doesn't—?"

Xie Lian spent a lifetime giving them each a little *too* much space regarding their own emotions, and now…

"He loves you, Feng Xin. He has since we were children."

He's shocked by how *badly* he wants them to be happy.

It's not that he didn't before, he's always wished them the best—

But Xie Lian doesn't want them to know what it's like. Waking up alone, desperately wishing you hadn't wasted so much time.

Feng Xin stops walking, his jaw slack, eyes so wide, they're practically popping out.

Admittedly, Xie Lian was in denial at first, or maybe that isn't the appropriate word—

Sheltered might be best.

Mu Qing was always watching Feng Xin when they were little, always saying rude things, laughing when he tripped up—

But simultaneously, always there when he fell.

Patching him up, while needling him for getting hurt to begin with. Forcing him to eat, while telling him he was an idiot for not doing it on his own.

Mu Qing didn't *have* to look after Feng Xin, not the way he did for Xie Lian—

But he did anyway—and without any thanks.

While he's always been thin skinned, he stews on everyone else's criticism—but not Feng Xin's.

Not because he hates him—but because he cares so much about what Feng Xin thinks of him.

"Don't get so caught up in what he says, Feng Xin. Pay more attention to what he *does.*"

Feng Xin is silent, struggling to wrap his mind around it.

Remembering bowls of congee. Wrestling in the snow. Someone holding his hand at a funeral. And he—

"…I don't think he feels that way anymore, your highness," Feng Xin mutters.

Maybe when they were teenagers, but…

After how many mistakes Feng Xin has made, how many times they've hurt one another—how could he? He—

"Tell him what you really think," Xie Lian suggests. "As kindly and simply as you can—don't give him the chance to misunderstand you."

That's easier said than done, and explaining things calmly has never been Feng Xin's specialty.

And after everything he said by the lake—Mu Qing has to know that he cares, doesn't he? But he's been so skittish since—

"If you tell him, he'll show you. You just have to jump."

Feng Xin falls silent, his expression clouded—but Xie Lian doesn't press him.

Knowing that his friend is actually listening to what he said—

And he's thinking.

Really thinking about it.

Regardless of the outcome—Xie Lian would call that progress.

Mu Qing heaves out a long sigh, sliding the door shut behind him—leaning against it for a moment.

It's been a long month.

No, it's been a long *year* .

And even after waking up from his own near death experience—he had to go straight back into the trenches.

Barely a moment of rest before he was set to healing nearly half of the martial gods who remained…and not all of them made it.

Then, there was moving back to the city he grew up in. Finding a new place to live, and today…

Today was hard.

Watching Shi Qingxuan slumped by her brother's bedside, gripping his hand tightly.

Pei Ming breathing down his neck as he healed the wounds as much as he could. As much as Shi Wudu would allow, once he regained consciousness.

Enough so that the lacerations don't reach the bone anymore, but little more than that.

Caught between Blackwater, snarling at him that he should do more, and Shi Wudu hissing that he shouldn't *dare* .

And now…he just wants…

"…Did he already leave?"

It's partially a matter of practicality that they're sharing a palace at the moment—they guard the same region, it's easy for their palaces to work together, and there's been so little time for construction.

Mu Qing still hasn't slept in a bed here, though.

It's a palace built for one god. There's only one private living wing, with spaces for deputies on the lower floors.

Mu Qing isn't sleeping down there, but he hasn't felt like having *that* conversation with Feng Xin yet, either.

As such, he's spent what few sleeping hours he's had collapsed across a couch in the offices.

There's a better one in the library—one with more leg room—

Mu Qing has never, and will never set foot in there.

"…No," Feng Xin mutters, shaking his head.

He's already taken off his armor, sitting at the table—almost like he was waiting for something, but Mu Qing can't imagine what it would be so late in the afternoon, he's always finished with his work by this time.

"He's spending the night in Huangji Temple."

Mu Qing wrinkles his nose with distaste. "That ruin? He'll freeze!"

"I told him already—but that's what he wanted. Apparently he wants to make it livable again." Feng Xin shrugs, "We can see him tomorrow."

"…You really think he should be by himself after today?"

They both know the trial and the whipping are going to weigh on him—more than it would weigh on most.

"And you didn't even take a bath—you're still—!"

"I think he'd rather have us *here* right now than with him."

And when Feng Xin sees Mu Qing's eyes widen in response, he winces.

"I didn't mean it like that—"

"—I didn't even say anything—"

"—I don't mean he doesn't want us *around* , he just wants us to—"

"—Wants us to what?!"

"I—you—do you want to take a bath with me?"

Mu Qing pauses, staring at him with his mouth hanging open.

"You're telling me…he wants us to take a bath together?"

Feng Xin's face drops into his hands.

"No!" He groans, chanting one word in his head like a mantra:

Jump. Jump. Jump.

"I want to take a bath with you?"

Mu Qing's gaze hasn't gotten any less confused.

"…You don't sound that fucking sure."

"I am!"

"—and what does this have to do with Xie Lian?"

"He thinks—he told me that you…I…"

"What's wrong with you?"

“Nothing, would you just shut up and let me get it out?!”

“You already said, you want to take a bath with me, and apparently Xie Lian has an opinion on the—did you tell him we take baths together?!”

“No!”

“Because we *don’t!”*

“I obviously know that!” Feng Xin snaps. “He just—he said that we should talk!”

“About a *bath?!”*

“No! I don’t know why I asked that, I just—”

“—So you *don’t* want a—?”

“Are you fucking with me right now?” Feng Xin groans between his fingers. “Because I’m *really* trying—”

“Fucking with you?! You’re the one that isn’t—”

“I’m *trying* to—wait.”

Feng Xin looks up from his hands, staring at Mu Qing like, for the first time, he’s actually seeing him clearly.

Thinking about what he’s *doing* , not what he’s *saying* .

“…You don’t want to talk…” He mutters slowly, and Mu Qing’s eyebrows crease in confusion.

“Huh?”

“…You don’t want to talk,” Feng Xin repeats. “You’re nervous, and you’re dragging it off topic on purpose.”

Mu Qing looks like a small creature caught under a floodlight, frozen, eyes wide.

Not really prepared to be seen at the moment.

“…Is that what you always do?”

“I—the fuck?!” Mu Qing sputters, snatching his cloak back up from where he tossed it down before. “No, I don’t, I’m *not* , you’re just—not making any sense, waiting around here, like I’d want to take a—”

“…Are you running away?!”

“No!!!”

Mu Qing shakes his head vehemently, nearly stumbling as he reaches back for the doorknob. “It’s just freezing, and he’s probably going to get frostbite or something and *I’m* gonna have to take care of it—”

“—He’s *fine.”*

“And you—you’re acting *weird* —you need to work out whatever the fuck is going on with you, I can’t—”

“Because I want to *talk?!* You don’t even want to know what it’s about!”

“Whatever you’re pissed at me about, can it wait until later? I’m not in the—”

“Pissed at you?!”

“You don’t want to talk to me unless it’s something like that—”

Well. That’s something Feng Xin is going to have to take some time to digest.

“I’m not! Would you just stop—?!”

Mu Qing starts to open the door, only to feel it slam back with a *thud!*

Feng Xin’s palm rests against the wood over his head, and Mu Qing sputters.

“You—You can’t *lock me in here* you fucking cretin—”

“Cretin? I wanna have a conversation like two adults, and I’m a fucking cretin?!”

“It’s not like adults if you’re *forcing* me—!”

Mu Qing won’t stop pushing at him, wrestling for the doorknob, and Feng Xin is exasperated.

“I wouldn’t have to force you if you didn’t run away every time and not let me *talk!"*

"I DO *NOT!* IF YOU WANT TO TAKE A BATH TOGETHER THAT BAD—!"

"IT'S NOT ABOUT THE GODDAMN BATH!!!"

In the struggle, they end up sliding down the door—with Mu Qing's wrists pinned above his head, Feng Xin kneeling between his thighs, both of them glaring at one another.

Because Feng Xin's arms are stupidly strong—and now he's stuck.

It isn't calm, or gentle—not like Xie Lian would have wanted, but…

"I *MISSED* YOU, YOU STUBBORN LITTLE ASSHOLE, OKAY?!"

Feng Xin is breathing hard, and Mu Qing's expression shifts from a glare, to just…

Pure, blank shock.

"…But I didn't go anywhere…"

"You didn't HAVE to!" Feng Xin shakes his head. "You—you stopped talking to me, you stopped *kissing* me—"

"You missed kissing me that much?" Mu Qing mutters snidely, averting his gaze, but—

"Yes!"

Feng Xin is leaping head first.

"Half the time when We're arguing, it's all I'm thinking about! And Jian Lan—what she did to you was bullshit, and I'm sorry—"

"You're bringing her up *now?"*

"She hated you because I said *your name* so many times when I was with her!" Feng Xin snaps.

"And I never meant to, I was just angry at you and I missed you and I *wanted* you, and I just—"

"But you said—" Mu Qing's voice is softer, his stomach lurching painfully.

“I didn’t mean to say dianxia that time!” Feng Xin pleads desperately. “You tripped! And he was tripping all the time back then! And I just—you left and you never let me *explain—!”*

“You were crazy about him, what was I supposed to—?!”

“I had a crush on him when I was a kid!” Feng Xin groans.

“The only person I’ve ever been crazy about is *you!”*

Mu Qing’s eyes grow round as words leave him, his breaths growing shallow.

“I—” Feng Xin grits his teeth.

It’s hard, being the one to lay your sword and shield down first.

Hard , showing someone where you’re the weakest.

“You’re the smartest person I’ve ever met,” he mutters, trying so hard to keep his tone gentle. To be patient. To be simple. To be *clear* . “And when I look at your eyes, I kind of feel like I’m going to be sick—but in a good way?”

“… *Sick?”*

“And your hair—is *really* —beautiful—” Feng Xin mutters, his cheeks so hot, it feels like he might faint. “It was before, too. And you—I lied before, I was touching it on purpose—”

“You acted like I was *crazy* —!”

“I don’t mind if I have to keep arguing with you forever,” Feng Xin continues hoarsely. “And I’m not trying to sabotage you, or ruin your cultivation. I—I *really* want you, but if we never do that, it’s fine—I just—I don’t want to lose you, alright?!”

It’s terrifying, but…

“…And I know you’re a good person,” he mutters. “I’m sorry I didn’t say it back then, I was just *surprised* —I don’t know why you did what you did to that guy—but I know you must have had a good reason.”

Mu Qing’s heart is in his throat.

…Some people are worth jumping for.

“I should have said it sooner, I don’t know why I didn’t—and I know I’ve fucked this up *so* many times, I shouldn’t have waited until you were dying to say anything, I know you probably think it was just because of that, but I—!”

Mu Qing lurches forward—as much as he can, with his wrists pinned over his head—sealing their mouths together.

Kissing Feng Xin in a way that always manages to send him out of orbit, spiraling.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard you talk that much,” he mumbles against his mouth.

“…You never give me the chance,” Feng Xin croaks, breathing shakily. “So, I figured I had to say it all at once while I had you stuck—”

Mu Qing kisses him again, pulling at his wrists insistently.

“Let go,” he mumbles, feeling Feng Xin grumble in protest. *“Let go.”*

But when he does, half expecting Mu Qing to hiss and shove him away —

Mu Qing’s arms wrap around his neck, hugging him close, his lips never leaving Feng Xin’s.

“…You really…” Their mouths part between breaths, gasping. “… Mean that? All of it?”

"Yeah," Feng Xin croaks, his arms tight around Mu Qing's back. "All of it, I'll swear on anything you want me to, I wouldn't lie about something like—”

Then...Mu Qing does something new.

They've kissed so many times in eight centuries, in so many different ways, but...

He presses his face into the side of Feng Xin's neck, holding him so tight, it almost aches.

But only in a way that makes Feng Xin hold him tighter in response.

"...I..." His hands tighten into fists in the back of Feng Xin's robes. "I..."

In all this time, they've barely been able to do more than dance around each other, screaming and running back to their corners before they got even a little bit close, but—

Xie Lian was right.

"...I want you *too* ," Mu Qing croaks weakly, his voice breaking.

And he sounds—god, he sounds so...

"...And I know I'm not...not *easy* ..." Every word sounds like a struggle, forcing himself to spit it out. "I just...I get..."

He gets scared.

He gets *so* scared.

"Just...if you're gonna do this...don't..."

Feng Xin stiffens, feeling wetness against the side of his neck—Mu Qing's arms trembling as they hold onto him.

"...Don't...let me go, okay?" He pleads quietly. "Even if I...I'm not easy, don't—"

Feng Xin's arms crush him close, stealing his breath.

"I won't." He promises so *sincerely* , holding onto him like a lifeline. "I don't *want* you to be easy," he rests his cheek against the top of Mu Qing's head. "If you were...you wouldn't be you."

That's almost insulting—but so earnest...it makes the other man laugh wetly.

After a moment he grows quiet, his mouth pressed against the side of Feng Xin's neck—just over his hammering pulse—and he jumps.

Mumbling something under his breath, into Feng Xin's skin--too muffled to hear.

"...What?"

Mu Qing huffs, knees tightening around Feng Xin's hips.

It shouldn't be so hard. Not after how long they've known each other. Everything they've been through.

It almost feels like spending a lifetime insisting you don't need someone, then forcing yourself to bend your pride and admit that you *do* .

It's terrifying. It's vulnerable. It's embarrassing somehow, even though it really shouldn't be—

But all you have to do is jump.

After that, falling is easy.

And when Feng Xin hears the words—it's like the entire world grinds to a halt.

"...I love you."

'Mu Qing loves you. He has since we were children.'

It's one thing to hear that.

The noise that comes out of the back of Feng Xin's throat makes Mu Qing shudder.

It's another to hear him *say* it.

One hand slides into his hair, yanking his head back—drawing a gasp from Mu Qing's lips—

Then, they're tangled in each other again, mouths locked together.

Feng Xin whispers those words back, like he would speak them directly into his heart if he could.

I love you. I love you. I love you .

It's you. It's always been you.

Don't let go. Please don't—

I won't.

I won't .

They're flushed and panting, lips swollen as Mu Qing whispers.

"Can I tell you something?"

"...What?" Feng Xin rasps.

"...I've never liked my cultivation method," Mu Qing admits in a rushed jumble, fingers tangled in Feng Xin's hair, half of it falling down from its usual style.

Feng Xin is still—unsure of how to react—but cautiously euphoric.

"...You don't?"

Mu Qing shakes his head vehemently.

He hated it from the beginning, how ashamed he was made to feel of something that was never his choice. And then when he did want to make that choice...he couldn't.

"I want to drink," he admits first, then tags on— "And...you."

Besides—the cultivation world is rapidly moving away from celibacy as a widely cultivated path.

Sects are becoming more and more familial in nature—some of them looking to make a full switch to inheritance by bloodlines.

With that in mind, Mu Qing already relaxed the rules centuries ago for cultivators who wanted to practice in his name, not limiting himself to a shrinking number of sects who still practiced celibacy.

His base of power isn't the way it was before, when his 'chastity' was prized.

"...Which is the priority?" Feng Xin mutters, breathing hard. "Me, or the drinking?"

He feels Mu Qing smile against him, a laugh bubbling out of his chest.

"Well, you're the reason I *want* to drink—" He gasps when Feng Xin shifts closer, hands gripping his shoulders.

"...But mostly...you," he admits faintly, his heart beating *so* fast. "I just need... *slow* ..."

Feng Xin expected nothing less, given how long he's been trained to avoid anything and everything to do with that, even if he doesn't know...everything.

But he will.

"I can do slow," Feng Xin breathes against him, their foreheads resting against each other. "As slow as you want."

It's hard, telling a story that no one wanted to hear.

But the last time Mu Qing told the truth—someone listened.

Someone *helped* him.

When someone promises to hold onto you, to never let you go, even when you're not easy—when they promise to love you in spite of all of your flaws—

Telling the truth becomes easier with every act of faith.

And when he's ready—Mu Qing will jump again.

"For now...taking a bath sounds nice..." he mutters, feeling a little ridiculous, given how much shit he gave Feng Xin for the idea before, but—

Feng Xin smiles, their noses bumping together.

"Yeah?"

"...If you can handle it, anyway—”

"Handle it?"

"I don't know," Mu Qing shakes his head, a little haughty. "You mentioned how much you 'wanted me' *twice* in that speech of yours—”

"And you said you wanted me *too* you—!"

"Yeah, I did, but I've been trained in self restr—”

This time, when Feng Xin kisses him—there's teeth, making Mu Qing's legs tighten instinctively, wrapping around his waist without thinking, just doing, and it's—

It's *so* good.

"And I've wanted to taste you for eight *hundred* years," Feng Xin growls against this mouth, and—

Mu Qing thinks he might go into Qi Deviation once again on the spot, his toes curling.

"My self-restraint is pretty fucking good."

For once, Mu Qing is left relatively speechless, breathing hard against his mouth, hands tightening on his shoulders.

When Feng Xin lifts him up like that, carrying him towards his—their—private chambers—

It *is* just a bath.

Admittedly tense at first—far more mutually than Mu Qing would like to admit—

But eventually, he's relaxed. Leaning against him, his head against his shoulder.

There are still things they have to do. Things he has to tell him.

And he does.

Not the hardest things. Smaller bits and pieces, breaking off when it gets too hard, when his words start to break off and become unsteady, but...

Feng Xin just listens.

One arm around his shoulders, fingertips tracing patterns across his back.

His hands never stray past where Mu Qing wants them—

Even if he thinks he might want them everywhere.

And when they're dried off, for the first time since Mu Qing left...they go to bed together.

Legs tangled together, Feng Xin's face against his back—arms around him.

They'll talk more, later. They'll *do* more, later.

They'll find Xie Lian in the morning, and when they do...Mu Qing is going to have to find a way to thank him without dying of embarrassment.

But for now—they'll stay like this. Quiet—safe.

And Mu Qing won't let go.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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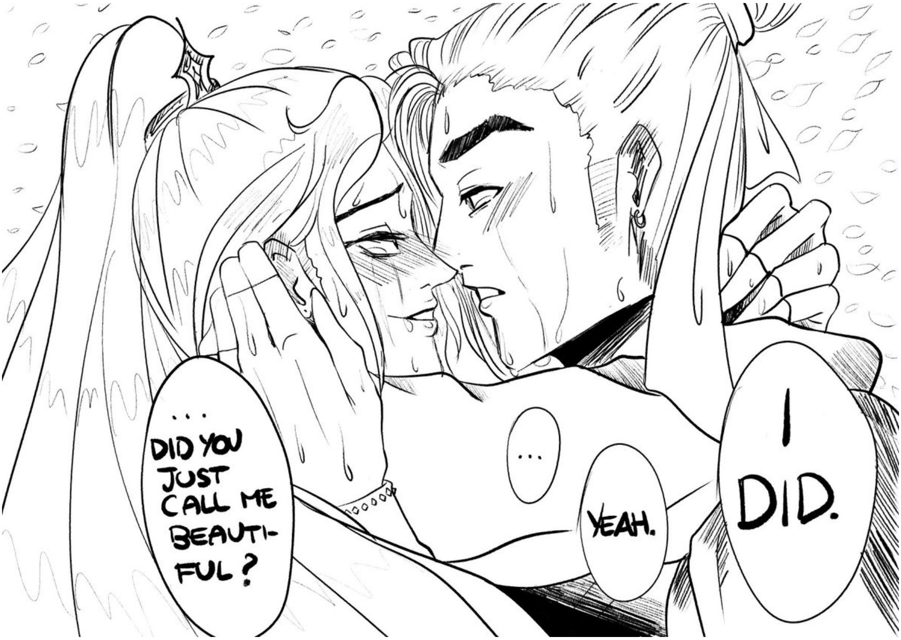

. . .
DID YOU JUST CALL ME BEAUTI-FUL?
...
YEAH.
I DID.

CREDIT: **MORGANNING**

Tidal Forces

Chapter Summary

Days pass. Palaces grow up from fractured ruins, taking shape across a once abandoned horizon.

A new emperor walks the streets among his subjects—greeted wherever he goes. Lending his ear or his help to those who ask, leaving none unheard.

It's too soon for historians to look back on the Jun regime and give it a proper post-mortem—but the first month of the Pei Dynasty, despite beginning in the depths of winter, has been like a breath of warmth.

Chapter Notes

CONTENT WARNINGS: existential issues, mentions of pregnancy related topics

Days pass. Palaces grow up from fractured ruins, taking shape across a once abandoned horizon.

A new emperor walks the streets among his subjects—greeted wherever he goes. Lending his ear or his help to those who ask, leaving none unheard.

It's too soon for historians to look back on the Jun regime and give it a proper post-mortem—but the first month of the Pei Dynasty, despite beginning in the depths of winter, has been like a breath of warmth.

Even among the mortals, stories have begun to spread—aided by Pei Ming and Ling Wen broadcasting Jun Wu's words across the mortal realm.

His temples that were razed by the new Thunder Master are now being rebuilt—

Dedicated to the new emperor, or the crown prince.

The Martial God of the Central Plains is just as much of a hero of the story—but regarded as a tragic one.

Left wandering the hills, waiting for his beloved to return to him.

But his love is a star, shining high above—and he must wait for him to fall again.

The new emperor, however, is regarded as a triumphant savior.

Casting down the tyrant, the king of pretenders—a hero of war and revolution.

Bound now to one last battle: rule.

And when the new temples of Ming Guang begin to rise across the continent—he is still worshiped as a god of love and war—

But now, he is worshiped as God of the Sun, golden shingles and dragons framing the entryways of his halls.

And, ironically, today is when he should be at his weakest—the winter solstice.

The shortest day of the year, followed by its longest night.

The day when Xuan Zhen's followers gather and feast in his temples, celebrating the peak of winter.

This year he celebrates among old friends, the three sitting together on the mountain peak they once called home, telling stories around the campfire.

A bowl of congee split three ways, and enough for each to have their fill.

They lay beneath the stars after, counting them, recalling all the constellations they can remember. Some old, some new.

Xie Lian holds the grass this time—and Mu Qing holds Feng Xin's hand.

Neither let go.

They sleep long before the prince does.

He keeps his eyes on the stars, thinking of the stories the mortals are telling.

Wondering, out of all of the stars, which one his San Lang would be. One of the brightest, surely.

Most wish on falling stars—and now, he wishes for one to fall.

But the peak of winter has never been a holiday that belonged to Xuan Zhen alone.

The day belongs to him—but the night, the longest night of the year—has always been dedicated to the Goddess of the Moon.

Once associated with the Water Master, now fallen and made new.

As thunderstorms rage across the coast on this day, lightning crashing between gusts of wind, new celebrations are held in new temples.

Worshiping the God of Thunder, crafting new stories in his name.

A goddess of the moon, beloved by the sun god, cast down and drowned—only to be reborn as a god of thunder and wrath.

Still loved by the sun. Born in both lives to be the one who sits beside the throne.

Before, the longest night was celebrated with offerings and sacrifices.

Gold overflowing in his coffers was one thing—

But Jun Wu found it amusing to spread rumors that mortals should sacrifice doves in his name.

Every year, Shi Wudu would awake to bloodstained feathers on his doorstep. Intended by his worshippers as a gift, but...

This year, there is a new emperor. A god reborn.

And now, they have new traditions.

Up and down the coast, on the banks of rivers and lakes, small lanterns are sent floating across the water—each with one gold coin tucked inside.

Praying for the moon goddess's safe travels, and future rebirths. Reaching her in the only tangible way they can. Honoring her old title, and...

Because the only place you can *touch* the moon on earth, is when you brush your fingers across its reflection in the water.

Shi Wudu has almost always spent this night alone.

Some nights, Pei Ming has joined her. Secret moments, shared in private rooms, her voice always silenced.

Because it would be *dangerous* if anyone else knew.

Because she feared what Jun Wu would *do* .

But not this night.

She spent the first few hours with Pei Ming, tucked away in the sitting rooms of their new palace. Still healing, unable to do more than laugh and drink with him and Ling Wen—but it's still more than she thought she would ever have again.

But they are overworked, and the alcohol did little to help matters—leaving each sleeping on either side of the couch while the long night was still young.

Pei Ming's hand held onto hers tightly, even in his sleep—but she carefully slipped away.

Now, she spends the night as she always has, in one way or another.

Sitting in the new courtyard, alone beneath a blanket of stars.

On the banks of a freshly dug pond—but unlike the one Jun Wu gave her, there are no koi swimming beneath the surface.

Now, she only sees reflections of offering lanterns shining back up at her. Countless, from all across the continent.

It's a full moon tonight—shining so brightly, she can see them all clearly. One knee pulled against her chest, fingertips playing delicately over the surface.

"...Aren't you cold?"

Shi Wudu stiffens, pulling her hand back—and in an instance her shape changes. Still elegant, lithe, bathed in moonlight—

But now, he sounds almost irritated by the intrusion.

"Not particularly."

It's not that He Xuan isn't welcome in the palace. He is, with Pei Ming growing more tolerant upon every visit. It's just...

"I thought I'd never hear you sound anything but contrite again," he mutters, sitting down beside him. "I'm relieved."

Shi Wudu raises his eyebrows in silent acknowledgment, not looking away from the surface of the pond.

"How is Qingxuan? I didn't see her today."

"Her usual self," He Xuan shrugs, leaning back on his hand. "But she's started craving lemon cakes *ferociously."*

It's all anyone can do to keep them in the kitchens. And if they run out, it's somehow He Xuan's doing, when he doesn't even—

Well, he did eat a few, but he didn't eat them *all* , and he bought *more* .

But when he looks up...

He notices Shi Wudu is smiling.

"...What?"

"...My mother sucked on lemon slices when she was pregnant with her," he explains, his eyes filled with a fondness that He Xuan knows all too well.

"I remember," He Xuan squints. "She used to terrorize him with it, didn't she?"

That draws a laugh.

"She did—she'd chase him all around the house, trying to get him to kiss her—"

"Because it was sour," He Xuan finishes the sentence for him, smiling faintly.

Shi Qingxuan must take after her—because she tried to do the same thing to him this morning.

Only to discover, tragically, that her lover could not be tormented by any kiss from her, sour or not.

"...I'm surprised you didn't see her, given that it's an important night."

"She could always come and see me if she wanted," Shi Wudu shrugs.

He's made a point of seeing her every day since his return. She knows she can always return the favor, and often does.

"But she also knows I don't like being seen in that form."

And as such, she leaves him be, always sending a gift—but respecting the desire for privacy.

"...Yes," He Xuan leans his chin on his hand. "She's very considerate like that."

And he also knows that he is being passive aggressively scolded—because *he* is not.

"But in my case, I've already seen you that way—and every other—so I didn't think you would mind."

Shi Wudu sends him a look.

"I've already had to field *so* many questions from Pei Ming about that. And Shi Qingxuan."

"Yeah," He Xuan frowns. "We should have compared stories before either one of us spoke with her."

"Why?"

"Because I thought you had moved past your sugar coating everything you think she doesn't need to hear phase—”

"Oh, like *you* can talk?"

"When she agreed to give me another chance, I promised her honesty." He Xuan shrugs. " *I* told her that I saw everything."

Shi Wudu scowls, pressing his face against his hand.

"...I told her I tuned the *inappropriate* parts out," he mutters, which is true.

He tuned out as much as he could. But with regards to blackwater, there was a *shocking* amount of...

"...Yes, well, she wasn't even upset about me seeing you in that situation, she just didn't want to hear anything about it," He Xuan drawls. "It actually bothered her more that I had seen Pei Ming."

Shi Wudu's scowl intensifies, and now he's rubbing his temples.

"...It's too bad you missed it, they were actually very sweet to one another while you were gone." He Xuan looks back over his shoulder, eyeing the blooms surrounding the pond.

An engagement gift from Xie Lian—moon flowers, blossoming deep into the night.

"I'm sure."

"No, they really were." He Xuan shakes his head, resisting the urge to pick one, knowing they aren't for him to touch. "I was moved."

"Shut up, He Sheng."

Blackwater *laughs* . "I'm really not making it up—I swear. He was...very good to her."

The sincerity in his tone gives the thundermaster pause.

"...He promised me he would take care of her, if something ever happened to me..." He reminds him quietly. "That's not the part I find hard to believe."

"I know," He Xuan turns his head back to look at him.

"But...I think *not* having you around made her appreciate that he wasn't so bad. But, once you were back..."

She went back to being jealous all over again—even more so, because now, they were *engaged* .

Shi Wudu knows she's happy for *him* , but...not unconditionally.

"...Part of me hopes she'll relax about it when the baby is born," he mutters. "It's always been just the two of us. She doesn't...know how to share that part of our lives with someone else."

Shi Wudu was family—the one constant in her life—and she didn't want it to change.

But he's been willing to accept *her* partner into the family, despite...a far more complicated situation.

"She will," He Xuan agrees. "But I don't think it's *just* jealousy, you know. She's actually pretty protective of you."

Shi Wudu doesn't reply, but He Xuan can see it in the slump of his shoulders...

He doesn't think he deserves to be protected, regardless of what Shi Qingxuan might have to say about it.

"...Did you visit to ask me about that?"

"No," he admits, looking away.

"I came, because I knew you'd sneak off alone."

Shi Wudu stares back down at the water, his expression impassive. "Conniving."

"A tiger can't *completely* change its stripes."

"And you are no tiger."

"Oh, what am I?"

Shi Wudu sucks in a breath, blowing it out slowly.

"...A shark, maybe."

(Though really, the more he thinks, the tiger analogy might be more *apt* , which isn't surprising--when he wants to be, Blackwater is rather self-aware.)

"Why did you want to find me alone? You've seen me often enough since I got back."

He Xuan shrugs, tossing around a few options in his head.

"Well, I didn't expect you to go and change forms on me as soon as I arrived," he shrugs. "Since I've already seen—”

"You said."

"...And, I wanted to ask you about something. But..." His tone turns wary.

"...It's not something anyone else needs to hear."

Particularly not those who care for Shi Wudu—because it's...

"What?"

"During the trial..." He Xuan's eyes trail down his throat, to the bandages peeking out from beneath his collar.

Remorseful.

“…You sounded so *certain* about things that…you just couldn’t know. And that made me think…”

Shi Wudu’s shoulders are stiff, his eyes remaining on the water.

“Think what?”

He isn’t looking—so he doesn’t see the look in Blackwater’s eyes.

“…The Kiln doesn’t normally work that way, you know.” He mutters. “The way it did for us, I mean.”

Shi Wudu doesn’t react—and he certainly doesn’t seem shocked.

He Xuan can *see* that he isn’t surprised.

“…It showed you something,” he doesn’t ask. He says it firmly.

“Right before the end.”

When He Xuan asked if things could have been different, and Shi Wudu tried to say they would never *know* .

And minutes after he saw *that* —

He took his own life.

So easily. Without any hesitation or deliberation.

And Shi Wudu isn’t *denying* that was the case.

“…And you want to know?” He whispers, and He Sheng…

Is surprised by how *hollow* he looks.

“…Was it that bad?”

Shi Wudu shakes his head. “No. It's just…”

“Just *what?”*

“…It showed me what our lives would have been like, if I never switched your fate with Shi Qingxuan’s,” he mutters.

He Xuan guessed, and now that he knows…

A hungry curiosity crops up inside him, squeezing in his chest.

"…What was it like?"

"…You married Qin Meirong," Shi Wudu explains, struggling with his own remorse, what He Xuan *deserves* to know, and what no one should. "You passed your exams, but…you came back to Fu Gu, and you built a shipyard there."

What became, in that life, the largest port on earth.

In this one, it's still little more than a small fishing village.

"…Did we have children?" He Xuan's voice is quiet—tight, remembering something else Shi Wudu said, but—

"…No," he whispers. "There was another wave of plague, and she…"

That seems to jar him.

Whenever He Xuan considered countless different what ifs—

The hypothetical image of what his life *could* have been was always perfect. Free from suffering. Like Shi Qingxuan's was, in his stead.

But fate doesn't work that way.

"…You ascended ten years later."

"As a civil god?"

Shi Wudu's lips quirk, and he shakes his head.

"As the Water Master."

He waits, feeling the confusion passing over He Xuan's face, counting the dates in his head.

"…But you would have already—?"

"I wouldn't have been an elemental master."

In retrospect—it makes sense to him.

Shi Wudu met He Xuan just after his ascension, and proceeded to change his fate immediately.

When Jun Wu appointed him as Water Master, Shi Wudu had *already* destroyed that future.

"…Then what kind of god were you?"

"…" Shi Wudu's eyes turn upwards, and when He Xuan's gaze follows—

He sees the moon shining down on them, clear and bright as ever.

"…Oh," he whispers, his fingers tightening in the grass. "That…makes sense."

Shi Wudu doesn't ask him what he means.

"…What about Shi Qingxuan?"

"I still appointed him as my deputy," Shi Wudu's hands are tight around his own knees, fingernails digging in. "But…He wasn't able to leave the Heavens. At all."

Every time he did—the Reverend of Empty Words would appear.

"…Did we know each other?"

Shi Wudu's silences have never lasted quite this long.

"Did we—?"

"We did," he answers, his tone clipped. "You were mourning your wife. I was…struggling with Shi Qingxuan's situation. We became close."

"…Close?"

"…We were friends."

He Xuan grows silent again, listening to that, trying to understand how it could have been so horrible, that it would have pushed Shi Wudu so far, just from seeing it.

"…And how long was Shi Qingxuan—?"

"A hundred years," Shi Wudu wraps his arms around himself.

One *hundred* years, trapped in the Heavens. A gift for some, but a free spirit like him…

It was torture.

“I didn’t know until later—but Jun Wu…” Shi Wudu swallows down a lump in his throat. “Was hoping I would give in, eventually.”

He had no intention of allowing Shi Qingxuan to ascend, even if Shi Wudu’s brother did possess the ability to do so.

He suppressed him. Sabotaged his cultivation. Undermined him at every turn.

“And he—he was in *so* much pain, He Sheng, and I couldn’t *fix it* , I—”

But by that point, he couldn’t bring himself to switch his fate with He Xuan’s.

Because by then, he *knew* He Xuan.

They were *friends* .

“…Then I don’t understand—?”

Then, so much of Shi Wudu’s guilt becomes so much easier to understand.

“ *You* fixed it.”

He Xuan grows still, his eyes wide, struggling to take that in.

“…I…tried…to do something to myself, and you stopped me,” Shi Wudu recalls, his voice thick. “And you—you got me to tell you everything, and once you knew…”

Even now, tears slip down Shi Wudu’s cheeks.

“You switched your fate with his.”

He Xuan didn’t even hesitate, didn’t show an ounce of fear.

Because he has always, in every future, been a good man.

One who *always* tried to fix it.

And in that future…he did.

“…What happened to me after that?”

“…Jun Wu got rid of you,” Shi Wudu mutters, his voice bitter from memories of a life he never *actually* lived, but—

It *feels* like he did.

“Or, well…he tried to.”

“Tried?”

His lips quirk tiredly.

“…He may have cast you from the Heavens, but you fell straight into the Kiln.”

Maybe not the exact same path as the one he walked before, but…

“…It’s hard to imagine myself doing that for something besides revenge,” He Xuan mutters.

He’s never been the ambitious type.

“…You were trying to get back,” Shi Wudu’s breaths have grown calm and slow, almost meditative. “You left family behind.”

…Just as he has family now.

He Xuan’s brow furrows, thinking. “So…I still would have had children?”

“…Yes,” Shi Wudu agrees, his tone softening, filling with sincerity. “And while there were circumstances beyond your control…you did everything you could for them.”

“But they were happy?” He Xuan presses, thinking of his unborn son.

“…Yes,” Shi Wudu nods.

And his son will be. He has absolutely no doubt of that.

“And you were more than their mother could have asked for.”

Which *does* explain his sudden lack of animosity towards He Xuan’s relationship with Shi Qingxuan, after…

…Because he had *seen* …

In a way, it almost sets him at ease, thinking about how, if he had the choice—he still would have chosen her.

That their lives always would have been intertwined.

For so much of his life, he's resented his lack of choice.

It doesn't make the hurt go away, knowing that he still would have ended up here. But it brings some measure of peace.

And yet—he can also see how much anguish it must bring Shi Wudu, and he loathes it.

Knowing that his suffering was unnecessary.

And that seems like more punishment than any lashing. Any death. Any banishment.

Being broken and violated in so many ways, and knowing it could have been—

"What about you?"

Shi Wudu doesn't look up from the water, his reflection pierced by dozens of small specks of light.

"…Jun Wu and I were never…involved in the same way," he mutters. "You spared me from that."

He never had anything to blackmail Shi Wudu with.

"…And you were happy?"

The thunder master bites his tongue.

"…I…my life was never going to be easy," he cautions.

There was no changing the childhood he lived through. The losses and pain he experienced, shaping him into someone he almost didn't recognize.

And spending a century watching Shi Qingxuan suffering…

"I felt so guilty for telling you, and so *relieved* for Qingxuan…" He swallows thickly, shaking his head. "…But Pei Ming helped me."

Shi Wudu suspects that, if he could see the entire range of possibilities —every scenario and outcome, Pei Ming always does.

As lovers, friends, or anything in between.

And he'll never deserve it.

"…And you were happy?" He Xuan repeats.

"…We all were," Shi Wudu shrugs, remorse settling around him like a weight.

Blackwater sighs heavily, his lips twisting into a frown.

"I really have forgiven you, you know."

"I do."

"…I'm going to be happy."

He Xuan never imagined himself here.

Reassuring him like this.

"I have a family again. And…" he glances at Shi Wudu from the corner of his eye. "It makes it less confusing, knowing I was always meant to be your friend."

Shi Wudu wraps his arms around himself.

"It does?"

"…I always knew taking you to the Kiln would make it possible for me to forgive you," he explains.

It's impossible to hate someone you know so *deeply* .

"But I never expected it to be so hard not to *like* you."

After so many years of living to *hate* him—it caused friction.

"…How successful have you been?"

"Not at all," He Xuan says softly, watching the same reflection in the pond. "But I've always had a soft spot for family."

Shi Wudu knows.

"…And are *you* going to be happy?"

Shi Wudu's lips purse, caught between emotions.

"…There were moments…Back then, when I really thought I never would be," he admits. "When I didn't want to get better. I still have them, sometimes."

But Pei Ming—he makes him want to try so *badly* , no matter how much it hurts.

"The things he did to me…" Shi Wudu's hand drifts up to his throat, remembering the shackle that was once placed there. "I still feel it. Almost like some sort of phantom limb."

The healing lashes on his back hurt less.

"Are you ever going to tell him?"

His breath catches, and his hand tightens.

"…I don't know," he mutters. "Some days I want to. Others I wish I could pretend it never happened. That must sound unhealthy—"

"Who cares?" He Xuan shrugs. "Treading water is treading water. As long as you make it back to shore."

…And Shi Wudu thinks he will.

Watching the Crown Prince of Xianle in these last few weeks—he's almost certain of it.

Pain isn't something you outgrow—but it doesn't grow with you.

Someday, he'll have enough time and distance.

Someday, the memories won't feel so instant and harsh.

This will pass.

"…I'll be happy," he finally says—almost like a promise.

Like he's assuring *him* , too.

"In so many ways, I already am."

The rest—the rest is just water to tread through.

"…Then that brings me to my final reason for coming to see you."

Shi Wudu looks up, only for He Xuan to set something in his lap.

"From what I understand, everyone else in the family gives you gifts today."

Shi Qingxuan and Pei always have. Small trinkets and mementos that he hoards with a characteristic greed.

"You don't have to."

"I know," He Xuan agrees. "But I *did* worm my way into this family right under your nose. I suppose a gesture of respect here and there couldn't hurt."

He hasn't asked for permission for anything with regards to Shi Qingxuan, for example—and Shi Wudu doubts he ever will.

But he almost prefers that, now.

Such choices always should have been hers—and unlike him—He Sheng has always believed that she could make them.

Shi Wudu's fingers pick apart the simple white cloth, wrapping the gift—and when he sees it…

"…I can't accept this," he whispers.

It's a small hair comb. Far less elegant than any he's ever owned—hewn from wood, painted black, waves carved into the handle.

It belonged to He Zhong.

"…I know you took those lashes for her," He Xuan says. "I wouldn't give this to someone who didn't love her as much as I do."

Shi Wudu *does* .

Remembering her is almost what hurts the most.

"And she would have loved you," He Xuan concludes, having no way of knowing how true that is. "Keep it."

"I can't—"

"According to the trial—you're at my disposal," he drawls. "So, you can consider it an order."

Oh, and his orders so far have been so cruel and *tyrannical* .

Forcing Shi Wudu to play Xiangqi with him at least once a day. To pour tea, if he’s feeling truly diabolical.

And now, he’s forcing him to accept gifts.

A harsh punishment indeed.

“You really are…”

“Incredible?”

Shi Wudu was going to say that he’s either insane, or a Saint—but now, he’s laughing.

“Are you ever going to let me live that down?”

“You asked not to be shown mercy, why should I?”

They stay like that for a few hours more.

Talking, counting offerings.

Reminiscing, laughing.

And slowly, with every passing moment, Shi Wudu feels an ache somewhere inside become less profound.

Acceptance.

From now on—he doesn’t think he’ll spend the longest night of the year alone.

He returns to his palace before sunrise—gently waking Pei Ming, pulling him back to their bed.

Still too injured to do much, but that doesn’t stop the emperor from holding him close, kissing every inch of skin that practicality allows.

The days keep changing from one to the next, like dominos falling in a gentle cascade.

Xie Lian makes new tally marks on a wall, pressing his palm against it every morning—holding a ring to his lips.

Shi Qingxuan's body changes--and the more it does, the more they whine and gripe about missing their old body, how He Xuan should be prepared not to see their breasts for *years* , as soon as they give birth —

(Only for them to collapse, remembering they'll have to nurse.)

The halls and streets of Ghost City begin to come to life, one by one—a new king roaming among them.

But he never takes the Gambler's Throne—only guards it, waiting for its true owner to return.

Days turn into weeks, winter slowly beginning to thaw—and the world slowly begins to settle into a new pace.

In the mortal realm, cultivation clans become more concentrated—worshiping fewer, more powerful gods, with larger names beginning to move to the forefront.

The Jiangs of Yunmeng, the Nies of Qinghe, the Lans of Gusu—

(Well, there's only *one* Lan at the moment, despite Lan An's cultivation partner constantly needling him to change that.)

Jin Feng starts his own sect in Lanling, cultivating under the Thunder Master.

Now, word has it that Wen Sicong's only surviving son, Wen Mao, has been taken in by a cultivation sect in Qishan—out in the far west.

Still young, but showing great promise—and with a rather unique idea beginning to form in his mind.

Having seen his father and grandfather both fail in their own ways to form lasting legacies—

He begins to think that cultivating in schools is a mistake. That one man can only achieve so much in a lifetime of cultivation, with so few destined to ascend as gods.

But, if sects begin to prioritize bloodlines—even if a man doesn't become a god—he leaves a lasting mark upon this world, and the people in it.

And now, while he's still so young—people have no idea just how true that belief will prove to be.

As the snows begin to melt, life begins to slowly return as it was—

And in the far south, a female ghost is found—hiding in the wilds with a savage fetal spirit.

Less violent incidents than before—but no one could argue that it's under control, either.

Cuo Cuo snarls and hisses, clutched tightly against his mother's chest as she hangs her head.

No longer welcome in Ghost City—left to wander, getting by as best as she can, but—

"…Is that what this is?" She mutters, backing away from the two martial gods before her.

"…You're here to take him?"

"He's *our* son," Feng Xin averted his eyes from her before, keeping his gaze cast downward with shame.

He doesn't now.

As a matter of fact—his tone is remarkably cold, considering his normal deference toward women.

"You don't get to *decide* whether or not I have a part in this."

Mu Qing must have told him.

She can see it in the anger behind his eyes. The disgust in his voice.

Feng Xin never gets that bothered on his own behalf—

Only if you hurt something he loves.

"…What, so he's going to live with you in the Heavens?" She mutters, trying to scoff, but—

There's an audible tinge of fear in her voice.

Fear of losing her child.

Fear of being alone again.

“…Yeah,” Mu Qing mutters under his breath. “I see it.”

Feng Xin has a type.

Presuming that they’ll be rejected—making the worst assumptions, and lashing out because of it.

It isn’t particularly flattering, but he can see it.

“You—”

“You’re *both* a mess. This should only be about what’s best for him. That’s all that should matter.”

“…And you think his father dragging him around out of some misplaced sense of honor is what’s best?!” Jian Lan glares. “I saw how my kind was treated in the Heavens! He’ll be called a monster—”

“That was Jun Wu,” Feng Xin shakes his head.

“We have a ghost king for a Water Master now. Things are changing—and he is *my* son.”

Feng Xin is among one of the most respected martial gods living. If he claims the child—he’ll be treated well.

“And what if he attacks one of the—?”

Normally, especially in a situation like this, Mu Qing would respect a mother’s boundaries.

But after what she did to *him* , well—

He’s not particularly concerned about being polite.

As such, he promptly snatches the spirit from Jian Lan’s arms.

“HEY—!”

Cuo Cuo doesn’t seem that thrilled about being snatched either—snarling, sinking his fangs into Mu Qing’s forearm—

And the martial god barely even winces, not pulling his head back, allowing the fetal spirit to latch on.

"I told you, this is about what's best for *him."*

After a few moments, Cuo Cuo's form begins to shift, shrinking down to the shape of a normal infant once more.

One with soft, dark hair—and his father's eyes.

Lifting his shrinking fangs from Mu Qing's arm, cooing curiously.

"What, so you're going to carry him around for *all eternity—?"*

Jian Lan falls silent, her eyes widening with shock when…

Mu Qing hands her son back to her without a word.

And this time—

Cuo Cuo doesn't change back.

Squirming slightly in her arms, grasping at her hair.

"I always told you I was looking for a more permanent solution," he mutters, crossing his arms.

He said, but he was so angry, and he—he made it seem like she didn't *deserve* —

"H- *How?" S* he whispers, pushing her fingers through her son's curls, lips trembling with emotion.

"…Spiritual power dissipates fairly rapidly in a child's system. They aren't strong enough to handle it," Mu Qing shrugs. "Blood is different."

And *his* blood was recently changed by the process of surviving Qi Deviation.

That's not normally how it works—but people don't normally Qi Deviate in the way Mu Qing did, either.

He had death qi injected directly into his bloodstream. The same type of energy that has Cuo Cuo trapped in this state.

Surviving it meant purifying Mu Qing's soul and body, including his blood.

Those purifying properties are still there.

It isn’t permanent—Cuo Cuo is going to need infusions going forward, but If he can grow the way other ghost children, like Ren Song have…

Eventually, he won’t need them anymore.

“…And I never said that it wasn’t best for him to have his mother in his life,” Mu Qing mutters, pressing his palm against the bite mark, healing it in an instant. “Regardless of what you’ve done to me in the past.”

It isn’t about him.

"...You're...not going to—?"

"Ren Song has extended another offer of sanctuary to you within Ghost City," Feng Xin interrupts her flatly. "He'll split his time between my palace, and your residence there."

The exact ratio can be discussed later—but for now, it's a solution.

Admittedly, given the fact that she set Paradise Manor on fire the last time she was there—Ren Song wasn't eager to break Hua Cheng's revocation of her permission to enter the city.

Xie Lian had to ask on Feng Xin's behalf, and Feng Xin has to pay her rent.

Indefinitely .

“You can go and try to mend fences now, because last I heard—they’re all pretty pissed at you over there.”

Jian Lan grimaces at the reminder of her brief foray into arson. Not to mention the fact that she had already offended Autumn Twilight when she met the Crown Prince…

She's interrupted from her train of thought when Feng Xin reaches out, pulling Cuo Cuo from her arms.

It's the first time he's ever gotten to hold him--not without the boy trying to bite his arm off, anyway—and...

He's surprisingly light.

Irritated, too—whining and reaching for his mother. Then, when he's standing too far away, Mu Qing.

"You'll get used to me," he mutters, listening to the beginnings of a boiling tantrum before he looks back at Jian Lan.

"Since you got a pretty big head start—I'm taking my time with him first."

Jian Lan forces her mouth shut, wrapping her arms around herself as she watches him go.

It's better than what she thought she was going to get, if they ever decided to come for him.

That doesn’t make it any easier to listen to her son’s confused, angry cries as his father carries him away.

But Mu Qing stays where he is, his arms crossed.

Defensively, almost. Like even a martial god like him feels as though he needs to be on guard around her.

“…I would have thought you said everything you needed to last time,” she mutters. “When you threatened to—”

“Disperse you? It was tempting,” he replies coldly.

Jian Lan falls silent, her jaw locked.

“But I was never actually going to.”

She snorts, like she clearly doesn’t believe him, but—

“Because your father was a good person,” he mutters, his arms tightening around his ribs until it aches. “He saved my life.”

Mu Qing had been prepared for his head to land on the executioner’s block next.

Jian Lan’s father had no obligation to him. His life might have been easier if he had allowed that to happen—but he didn’t.

Mu Qing’s life was destroyed by men who abused their power. But it was also remade by those who chose to use it with kindness.

“I know my father would be proud of me,” he concludes, the grass crunching beneath him as he shifts his weight. “Something tells me you can’t say the same.”

Her expression twists with a reactive kind of pain—burdened with shame.

“Is that your way of calling me a cheap whore? Because I’ve already heard it all—”

“You know what happened to me. Do you really believe I would think that?”

She falls silent again, lips trembling as she’s forced to bite her tongue.

"...But I don't think my father would have been proud of the things I did when I was nineteen," Mu Qing admits. "I don't think he would have been proud of most of the things I did for a long time after that, either."

Because Mu Qing was in so much pain back then, and he...

He said and did so many things that he's ashamed of now. And he didn't know how to admit that he was wrong, because clinging on to that projection of pride...was all that he had left.

If he admitted it, he would have nothing. He would *be* nothing.

"...But I got lucky," he mutters. "Because I had people that weren't willing to let me go."

No matter how awful he was, or if he deserved to be alone.

He's lucky—and she—

She wasn't.

Mu Qing doesn't forgive her—but he also found room in his heart to pity her.

"...Are you trying to gloat—?" She grouses, and Mu Qing finds Feng Xin's 'type' less and less flattering by the second, but—

He can still see it.

"If I can get my shit together, so can you." He interrupts her flatly.

Because Jian Lan isn't a monster.

She's self-centered, stubborn, and judgmental. She speaks without thinking. Her fears and temper control her.

But she cares for Feng Xin. She didn't want to shame him before, admitting who Cuo Cuo's father was to the court.

And she loves her son.

Blindly, maybe—but she does.

"...You could be someone that your son can be proud of," Mu Qing concludes. "Because he's always going to need you."

Mu Qing would know.

He *does* think, with time, Jian Lan could get there—however much he might resent her now.

And this isn't about him.

This is about what's best for Cuo Cuo, and—

For the love of—they really need to give him an *actual* name, now.

Mu Qing's words aren't exactly glowing encouragement—but as much of an olive branch as he's willing to give.

Which is more than he'll do for most.

Then, they take him back.

He’s confused at first, holding the front of his father’s robes as he’s carried through the doors of his palace.

But when the child sees a familiar face following behind, fussing, telling Feng Xin how to properly hold him—

He’s home.

Spring begins to settle in—flowers begin to bloom, animals crawling out from their burrows, shivering off memories of the cold.

Firecrackers shoot off in temples across the continent, praises and celebrations offered as the emperor kneels with his dearest friend.

Two families are joined, and when Shi Qingxuan watches her gege cross cups of wine with his husband, hardly able to contain his smile—

She's always loved having a big brother.

She supposes she could stand having one more.

"I can't believe you."

"Hmm?"

He Xuan is kicked back beside her, an entire lamb shank in his hand—most of the meat long gone, leaving him to gnaw on the bone.

"That kiss was far too long—I thought you were going to leap over the table."

"Gege would have *murdered* me—but it was pretty shameless…"

Shi Qingxuan sighs, then shrugs—looking away—and He Xuan raises an eyebrow.

"…Are you crying?"

"Hahahaha—what?! N-ahaha, no! T-that would…haha…be so…hahaha…" She dabs at her face with her sleeve, struggling not to smear her makeup—

And He Xuan softens.

Reaching over to wipe a few away with his thumb—and he's never been particularly affectionate, especially not in public—

But he presses a kiss against the side of her head.

"Crybaby."

She knows.

But she also knows he's always loved her for it.

And even then, with two families joined—they don't stop growing.

When winter came, Shi Qingxuan thought her brother was gone. That she could never look at the man she loved the way she did before.

That she would never see her son.

But by the end of Spring, her brother is holding her hand—soothing her as she pleads that she can't do it, that it hurts, that she's scared—

And the man she loves is on her other side, dutifully allowing her to punch his arm as hard as she can when the pain is too much.

He Bai is born in the early hours of the morning—with his father's hair, and his mother's eyes.

His grandmother's, too.

He Xuan is quiet. Sitting beside them later, when all of the others have gone.

Shi Qingxuan barely has the energy to ask—But she does.

"What…what is it?"

He hasn't been able to take his eyes off of either one of them this entire time—sitting on the edge of the bed, watching his son sleep against Shi Qingxuan's chest.

"Nothing, he just…" His eyes slide up to meet hers. "I didn't expect him to be born past midnight."

It's an odd thing to say—but Shi Qingxuan pays that no mind, her head sagging against the pillow.

"He took his time, that's for damn sure…"

And she hopes he enjoys being an only child—because she is *never* doing this again—

But that isn't what He Xuan means.

This entire time—he assumed Shi Qingxuan had forgiven them for the child's sake. That they would work together to support him, but…

It would never be as it was before.

But then, he came today. Early in the morning—

Born under a star of solitude.

Shi Qingxuan leans into it when he reaches for her face, pushing her hair back, fingertips brushing across her cheek.

Love surprises you, sometimes.

It can come from the most surprising places—even when you think it's gone.

All you have to do is allow yourself to see it. To feel it.

It'll find you.

And when He Xuan lays down beside her, hand resting against his son's back, feeling the rise and fall of his breaths—

It finds him again.

It's rare enough for a goddess to have a child—an occasion that draws celebrations across the new Heavenly Capital—and even rarer for a Ghost King. Albeit, not the most popular calamity—

But a feast is held in Ghost City, nonetheless.

The Crown Prince of Xianle is among the first to visit, bringing a trunk filled to the brim with clothes, worrying about whether or not the size is right, explaining he'll grow into it if not—

And Shi Qingxuan has never hugged anyone so tightly.

Her brother holds him every chance he gets—sometimes letting his nephew sleep in his lap during games of xiangqi with his father, fingers stroking through his hair.

His gaze is bittersweet, but less so with every passing day.

The Grandmaster

Chapter Summary

> The rest of Xie Lian’s time is spent roaming.
>
> Nights spent in Ghost City, watching as Ren Song wrangles patrons in the Gambler’s Den. Sleeping in Hua Cheng’s bed, crimson robes pulled around him.
>
> It’s been too long now, it should have faded—but they still smell like him.
>
> And, just because the world has changed with Jun Wu gone, doesn’t necessarily mean it’s gotten quiet.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As they creep closer to summer, the days growing longer and warmer, farmers begin to return to their fields—sowing rows of crops as far as the eye can see.

In Puqi Village, it's always been one of the busiest times of the year.

"...Make sure you help your sister carry the basket! It's too big for her to do by herself!" A mother calls down the street.

Her son groans, heaving a basket of water chestnuts up in his arms rather than having his little sister help him at all.

"I've got it!"

"And make sure you burn some incense in the Crown Prince of Xianle's shrine before you take that to your grandparents!"

"I *know..."*

"What was that?"

"I mean yes ma'am!" He calls back to her, holding back a groan as he walks down the dirt road leading past the fields.

"Ge, I can help!" His younger sister whines, reaching for a corner of the basket—only for him to grumble, pulling it out of her reach.

"Forget about it, you'll just make me drop everything again."

"I won't, I won't!"

"You ALWAYS do!" He snaps. "Then I have to pick it all up!"

"Don't be mean!"

"I'm NOT! I just—"

"You just wanna go play with those older boys from up the hill—and it's not fair! I never get to go!"

"It's not my fault they don't wanna play with a girl—”

"And it's not my fault that I'M A GIRL!" She pleads.

"It doesn't matter!" He shakes his head, walking down the road a little faster. "None of them have been around all day anyways, so I don't know why you're—!"

They come around the bend in the road, and he falls silent—tilting his head to the side.

"...Huh?" He mutters.

Puqi has a small, countryside shrine—but it's grown popular in recent months, with the Crown Prince of Xianle's surge in worshippers.

And, according to the stories—he lived in Puqi Village for months as a *blind priest.*

But he hasn't been back since the last emperor fell.

There's always a line of worshippers—sometimes big, sometimes small—crowding outside the temple, waiting to leave offerings or burn incense.

But today, it seems like every child in the village has crowded around the shrine steps.

"Me! Me! Do me next, gege?"

He has to strain on the tips of his toes, nearly dropping the basket on his own—

And there’s a teenager on the steps of Puqi shrine.

No more than sixteen or seventeen, his hair pulled up in a wide ribbon—a single white flower tucked behind his ear.

Wearing white robes, with a red layer beneath them.

“…Who…?” He mutters under his breath, only for one of the boys standing nearby to overhear him.

“He’s a disciple cultivating under the prince of Xianle—he’s friends with Xiao-Hua!”

The reminder of the teenager makes him perk up a little—he hasn’t been back in *months* —

And people are beginning to wonder if he’ll ever return.

The newcomer has a line of children in front of him, plucking flowers from a basket, weaving them into their hair.

“What brings you all the way out here?” One of the village girls asks, sitting beside him as she waits for her turn.

“Oh?” He looks up, glancing back over his shoulder. “The Crown Prince has tapestries in all of his temples—my Shizun had me deliver one here.”

That sends a few children rushing inside to see—staring at the new piece curiously.

The divine statue of the crown prince has always been there—as beautiful as ever—

But this tapestry almost seems meant to pair with it.

Made from silk threads of crimson, silver, and gold—so vivid, it looks more like a painting.

Showing a young man with dark hair and crimson robes, walking down the mountainside—

An umbrella in hand.

“…That’s not the crown prince…” one of the children points out, confused.

“No,” the young cultivator agrees, finishing one child’s hair, only for another to rush forward for her turn. “Its Crimson Rain Sought

Flower.”

That draws rounds of gasps, more children hurrying over, sitting close to listen.

“The ghost king?!”

“The very one.”

“…Can ghosts be worshiped in temples?”

“This one can,” the teenager smiles, plucking a lily from the basket, weaving it with other blooms into a crown. “In fact, if you really want good luck—you have to worship them together.”

“Really?” The girl before him breathes.

He hums in agreement. “I can tell you why, but it’s a *very* long story.”

Several more children sit down—some adults, too, having come to see the commotion.

“We’ll listen!”

Xie Lian’s eyes hold an aching warmth.

It’s been so long since anyone listened to him talk.

"Long ago, in the Central Plain—there was a kingdom known as Xianle," he explains, tucking lily stems into the little girl's hair. "And within that kingdom, there were four great treasures. Rare beauties, vibrant music and literature, gold and fine gems, and—”

"The Crown Prince!" Several of the children crow dutifully—having heard these lines from Xiao Hua *many* times during his stay in Puqi Shrine.

The smile that crosses his lips is fond, if not somewhat tainted with longing.

"Everyone always said that, yes—but there was another treasure, far greater than him. But no one else could see it."

"Like a secret weapon?" One of the boys sits forward. "Was it the sword he used to slay the demon of Yi Nian Bridge?!"

"No, no..." The teenager shakes his head.

All of the wait with bated breath, and—

"It was an orphan."

"...Huh?!"

"An orphan who grew up on the streets of Xianle," he murmurs. "He came to see the prince during a festival—but fell from the city walls, right into his arms."

"...What was so special about him?" The sun comes out from behind the clouds, shining down upon the shrine—soft and golden. "Did he have special powers?"

"Not back then," Xie Lian admits.

"Did people love him?"

"Actually—they called him a monster."

"How come?!"

"He was born under a Star of Solitude," Xie Lian recalls Mei Nianqing's words—said so casually back then—and how they devastated Hong'er, sobbing in his arms. "And with one red eye."

That makes several of the children shrink away, unsure.

"...So... he was cursed?"

"No," the teenager shakes his head emphatically. "He was blessed. And his eye..."

He smiles faintly, remembering the glimpse he was shown of Wu Ming before his form began to fade.

"It was *beautiful."*

"...Then why did people treat him badly? How is that a blessing?"

"People are often frightened of things that are different from they are," he finishes again, one of the younger boys hurrying over, sitting down for his turn. "That doesn't make them monsters—or cursed."

"...But people were cruel to him?"

"Yes, but..."

Xie Lian pulls out another set of flowers, rolling a petal between his fingers. "That's what made him so special. You see—when people were cruel to him...it only made him stronger. But if someone was *kind* to him..."

He lowers his voice, making the crowd of children lean closer—as though he's telling some great secret.

"He would turn it into a miracle."

"Miracles?" One of the girls sits up straighter, her voice slightly awed. "Really?"

Xie Lian hums, nodding. "He fell from the city walls—but right into the prince's arms, remember? That isn't bad luck at all."

That makes some of the children pause, realizing...

That *is* good luck, even if it didn't sound that way at first.

"Later, he was dragged behind a carriage by a cruel noble, breaking half of the bones in his body—and he survived," Xie Lian recalls. "And even after that, when the prince saved him again—he was so strong, he wouldn't let him go."

Even back then, when he was so small—his arms, bleeding and broken, held onto Xie Lian so fiercely. Feng Xin could barely pry him away to hand him to the doctors.

The children seem startled, but they remember—

Suffering made *this* boy stronger.

"He was so strong—he was one of the youngest soldiers in the army of Xianle," Xie Lian pulls his hand back for a moment, touching the chain hanging around his neck—remembering.

His Hong'er was a soldier.

"So strong, so brave—he saved the Prince from an ambush."

Xie Lian can barely remember that night—he was so disoriented and lost—

But he remembers Hong'er, watching over him until it was safe to return.

"And when the Crown Prince lost his Kingdom, his believers, and was banished from the Heavens...the boy stayed with him."

His hand reaches down, patting the porch beneath him.

"When the Crown Prince was hiding in *this* very shrine, powerless and blind—the boy left food on his doorstep every night. Found a blanket to keep him warm. He prayed to him every single day."

"...Why would he pray to a god that couldn't answer?" One of the children asks—and Xie Lian's smile becomes so...

"That wasn't why he prayed," he says quietly. "They lived here, side by side—and the boy grew into a man. Brave and handsome."

"...But if he was always there, why has nobody ever heard of him before?"

"He had a different name back then," Xie Lian returns to braiding flowers into the little boy's hair. "And one day, when the prince was sleeping..."

His fingers almost tremble.

"A monster came."

More villagers have come, more than thirty of them sitting around the shrine now, listening raptly

“…It wanted to find the prince,” Xie Lian takes a deep breath. “To hurt him. But the boy went out to fight it—in the dark. Alone.”

“…That’s *really* brave…” A girl whispers, standing next to an older boy, holding a basket of water chestnuts.

“Did he win?”

“Not then—but he didn’t make a sound,” Xie Lian murmurs. “No matter how much it hurt—because he didn’t want the monster to find his prince.”

Part of Xie Lian will always wish that he had. Will always wonder how much of his life has been lost to dreams that he can’t even remember.

“…He…died?” One of the children asks slowly, many of them shaking their heads. “How is that a treasure?”

“Gege—This story is so *sad!”*

"I know it sounds that way," Xie Lian agrees, "But dead doesn't mean gone. Even if you can't see or feel them anymore. Even if it feels like you're alone. He didn't leave this world."

"...How?!"

"Because he still had someone precious to him," the teenager murmurs.

"And his prince kept his ashes safe--so, he was able to come back as a Ghost Fire."

"Did he find the prince again?"

"Yes, but Prince Xie Lian didn't know it was him," several children look at each other in confusion, because in all of the stories, ghost fires can *talk* .

"...Why didn't he just tell him?"

"Because,"

Fairy tales are fickle things. Harsh on the monsters and heroes that fill their pages. Nothing is as it seems, and so much lurks between the pages.

"When the monster killed the young man—it took his name."

But they also grip you.

And Xie Lian has always *adored* them, ever since he was a child.

He can see that adoration, that rapt fascination in their eyes too.

Telling the story of a ghost fire, following a god, exiled and blind, to the ends of the earth.

How, after so many days of watching him suffer—the monster game for him again.

The children were passive at first, hearing about the great treasure of Xianle, the one that no one knew—an orphan boy.

But now, hearing about the black armored ghost, Wu Ming, their eyes are alight.

Fighting for his prince, embodying all of the lost souls of a fallen kingdom--and saving the exiled god from himself.

Part of Xie Lian *wants* to confess what he almost did.

To unburden himself from the guilt.

But his San Lang wouldn't want that.

He's vague about Wu Ming's demise—and even still, several of the adults looking on have tears in their eyes.

"...But he came back!" The boy sitting in front of Xie Lian cries. "He tried so hard!

"He did," Xie Lian agrees. "But—"

"And Prince Xie Lian took those shackles for him? It's so unfair!"

"It's not always about what's fair," Xie Lian points out. "But this has never been a sad story."

"How?!"

The young man smiles.

"Because Wu Ming never left this world."

The boy from before has long since set down his basket of water chestnuts, standing towards the edge of the crowd awkwardly, rubbing his arm.

"...The way you tell the story, they sound like they were in love with each other," he mutters, freezing up when the cultivator replies;

"They always have been."

Admittedly, Hong'er fell in love with him first—Xie Lian didn't even begin to realize the depth of what he felt. Not until he lost him.

But he's held onto that love tightly ever since.

"...But..." the boy swallows hard. "You...said they were both..."

In so many ways, Xie Lian looks back on himself—and he sees a stranger.

The teenager he used to be could *barely* say these words to Hong'er—much less a crowd of his worshippers.

But not anymore.

"Loving someone is the most beautiful thing a person can do," he murmurs.

"Man or woman—it doesn't make a difference."

"...The Crown Prince of Xianle believes that?"

It's not that such relationships are *unheard* of now, not the way they were when Xie Lian was a teenager.

After all, the Heavenly Emperor's consort is a *man* —but Pei Ming was never known for his piety before. A hedonistic figure—with his worshippers never holding him to...

Strict standards of what would be *appropriate* in his personal life.

(It also doesn't hurt that several regions worship the patron of the moon is a woman, rather than a man.)

But Xie Lian can't help but think about how much less he might have hated himself when he was young—if he knew even *gods* might feel the way he did.

"...He does," Xie Lian agrees. "That's his teaching."

And if his new worshippers won't follow him for loving Hua Cheng—then that's fine.

Xie Lian doesn't need devotion that comes with such conditions. If you have to lie about who you are to be loved...

It isn't love at all.

All Xie Lian needs is *one* person's love, one person's acceptance, and he can carry on through anything.

He has that.

And he can't help but notice...more than one of the sets of eyes in the crowd has a new light in them.

Cautious hope.

"...What happened to Wu Ming?" One of the girls presses, sliding up another step to sit closer to Xie Lian. "You said he didn't leave—but where did he go?"

The young cultivator smiles—and he continues the story.

Braiding crowns of flowers for all of the children who ask.

Somehow, the basket never seems to grow empty.

He tells them how Wu Ming rose through the trials of Mount Tonglu—watching as they gasp and cry out in shock, learning that little boy who fell from the walls of Xianle...

Grew into the Great Calamity, Crimson Rain Sought Flower.

How the Crown Prince and the Ghost King wandered the world for eight *hundred* years, loving each other every single day.

That even when they found each other again—Hua Cheng still couldn't tell his love who he was. His *true* name.

But even still—he found his way back to Xie Lian's side. Even if he had to wear a new face and bear a new name. Even if it was thankless, and his suffering went unknown.

He never minded.

He tells them how Hua Cheng freed the Gods from the Heavens.

How he broke Xie Lian's chains.

And this time, when he explains Hua Cheng's recent departure—the children don't seem heartbroken anymore.

Not the way they were the first time.

“But he's coming back, right?” One of them asks.

Xie Lian looks down at the red sting on his finger.

“…He always comes back.”

But now—if you want to worship the crown prince, you must pray in equal measure to the ghost king.

His love and greatest treasure.

Xie Lian has temples and shrines rising across the continent—and every single one of them has a tapestry.

He's told this story over and over again

"…Are they married?" One of the children asks—and Xie Lian nearly loses his footing, clutching the basket of flowers to his chest.

"I'm sorry?"

"If they've loved each other all this time—how come they aren't married yet?"

The teenager pauses, a blush spreading across his face

"I…don't think they had time to discuss those details before he had to leave again…"

"But you know so many other details, gege!" One of the girls complains. "How do you not know that?"

"I'll—ah—have to check with my fellow disciples and get back to you!"

The young cultivator, later introducing himself as Bolin, appears in Puqi Village often throughout the late spring and following summer. Helping farmers in the field, maintaining Puqi Shrine—

(Shooing a curly haired teenager with bars of gold away from his offering box.)

The rest of Xie Lian's time is spent roaming.

Nights spent in Ghost City, watching as Ren Song wrangles patrons in the Gambler's Den. Sleeping in Hua Cheng's bed, crimson robes pulled around him.

It's been too long now, it should have faded—but they still smell like him.

And, just because the world has *changed* with Jun Wu gone, doesn't necessarily mean it's gotten quiet.

An earthquake rattles the continent in the peak of summer—ancient beasts, long kept in silence by Jun Wu's authority, come to walk among men once more.

Thunder rolls across the region of Qishan, the sun shrouded with darkness as mortals and gods alike clash against a beast that crawled from the ruins of what was once Wuyong.

A tortoise the size of a palace—with the head and speed of a viper.

A Xuanwu of Slaughter.

The Gods have entered a new period—one where mortal cultivators are gradually being given more power—

But this is far beyond them.

They prayed with little expectation of being answered—the region of Qishan has always been poor, and gods are rarely dispatched.

This time—the Martial God of the West, Qi Ying, descends immediately.

Facing the beast with a mighty fervor—but even with the help of local sects, the creature is beyond his ability to suppress on his own.

Nan Yang is sent next—but even his arrows cannot pierce its shell.

Which is how they've found themselves here.

With two martial gods struggling to keep the beast occupied as mortals flee east.

The Water and Thunder Masters working in tandem—golden chains holding it in place as the river is redirected, swirling around him—lighting striking.

The electricity surges through the water, making it flail with agony—

But it still won't *die* .

"This isn't working," Shi Wudu mutters, wiping the sweat from his brow. "I'm calling—"

"Your husband is busy with that beast in the north, remember?" He Xuan grouses.

"I swear—killing that bastard was like flipping over a rock in the mud. Every cockroach you can imagine comes crawling out…"

"I'd prefer to deal with the roaches," Shi Wudu replies under his breath—and the water master has no response to that.

“It’s fine!” Feng Xin lands beside them, wiping the blood from his cheek with the back of his hand. “You don’t need to call him—reinforcements are here.”

He Xuan doesn’t have to ask what he means—

Not when a golden petal lands on his sleeve.

The beast turns its head, still slashing around viciously, trying to catch anything it can between it’s jaws—

CLANG!

Only to be met with a clash of silver, sending even a beast of such massive stature sprawling backwards, crashing onto the water.

The scimitar lashes backwards, spinning through the air until it returns to its current master.

Xie Lian turns his head to the side, pressing a kiss just above the pommel—making the eye inlaid there swivel and spin with excitement.

“Thank you, E’Ming.”

The blade hasn’t left his side once in the last few months—and it’s become surprisingly protective in its master’s absence.

Once, it tried to cut Lang Qianqiu’s hand off for pulling a leaf out of Xie Lian’s hair.

His own blade gleams in his left hand.

“Have you made any progress with it?”

“Besides irritating it and slowing it down?” He Xuan rasps, still clutching at the wraith chains being used to hold it in place. “Not particularly.”

Xie Lian watches the creature right itself, thinking.

The shell itself likely isn't penetrable with anything that they have available. Not unless Xie Lian were to unleash blasts of pure spiritual power—and that would place the surrounding area at risk.

The neck is the best point of attack—far more exposed.

But it's quick—quick enough to evade Feng Xin's arrows, leaving them to bounce off of the impenetrable surface of its shell.

Decapitation seems like the only option—but with a neck so *thick* ...

It'll be slow and bloody.

"...Your highness!" Feng Xin gasps, reaching out to grab Xie Lian's shoulder and pull him out of harm’s way when the Xuanwu's head whips around, surging towards him with deadly speed—

Only to watch Xie Lian stop it with the palm of his hand.

It's startling, sometimes—remembering that he isn't shackled anymore.

The creature seems so *vast* compared to him—and yet he seems to hold it at bay with little effort, its body thrashing around—but its head held in place.

"...He's kind of a monster, isn't he?"

Shi Wudu mutters the words under his breath—startled by the raw strength the prince displays at times...

And Blackwater doesn't disagree—he just doesn't dare *say* so.

"Should I hit it again?" Quan Yizhen sits upright, his hair sticking up in every direction.

"No," Feng Xin sends him an irritated look. "Wait for his highness to tell us the plan."

Speaking of.

He looks toward Xie Lian, "What *is* the pl—?"

He stops when he sees the look on Xie Lian's face. "...Dianxia?"

"He Sheng?!"

Feng Xin whips his head around to look behind them--only to find Blackwater having sunken to his knees, one hand clutched over his chest.

Shi Wudu kneels beside him, holding his shoulders, looking up at the others.

"What's going on—?"

"Resentment," Blackwater rasps, wrapping his hand around Shi Wudu's wrist to steady himself, his eyes burning bright—

Not so dissimilar from how they looked in the Kiln.

"That thing...Isn't...It has..." He grits his teeth, nostrils flaring.

If that's the case--it makes sense that it would be affecting him, as a calamity he would be more sensitive, but...

"Your highness," Feng Xin shakes his shoulder. "What are you—?"

"Be *quiet* ."

The sound of Xie Lian's voice startles all of them—low and harsh.

Even Quan Yizhen's eyes grow noticeably wide, but...

Xie Lian isn't even looking at the Xuanwu of the Slaughter.

His eyes are averted—and Feng Xin can't recognize the look inside of them.

How cold and numb they look, staring at...

Ostensibly, nothing.

Just rubble from the battle—limp bodies of cultivators who lost their lives fighting the beast in the last few days, strewn across the field.

Xie Lian isn't looking at them.

But he is looking at *something* , his eyes are so focused—

Xie Lian doesn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Because logically, he knows that what he's seeing isn't real.

The white robed figure with long mourning sleeves, standing upon the battlefield. Wearing an ever-familiar mask.

Half smiling. Half crying.

Xie Lian still sees him, sometimes.

Even when he knows that Jun Wu's soul is gone from this world. Sometimes, out of the corner of his eye--he sees that mask.

Pei Ming says it happens, sometimes. He says that he sees things, too.

Fallen enemies. Lost friends.

But not like this.

"...Your highness," Feng Xin repeats—this time far more quietly. "We have to do something—”

"You think I don't—?" Xie Lian starts to ask, his voice *frigid* , but—

The image of Bai Wuxiang begins to waver, a noose forming around his neck.

"Stop it," he whispers, shaking his head.

This isn't like what Pei Ming said.

"...Dianxia, nobody is doing anything.”

This isn't *like* a waking nightmare, it's too sharp, too vicious, it—

The small pouch on Xie Lian's belt has never felt so heavy, field with metal shards.

"You still feel them, don't you?" Bai Wuxiang's voice echoes in his ears —

For Xie Lian to hear, and him alone.

"Every single cut. It still feels like the blade is inside of you, doesn't it?"

Xie Lian watches as he's dragged upwards—contently hanging from invisible gallows.

"A piece might have broken off, back then. Do you think your body just healed around it? That maybe, somewhere between your ribs, a piece of me is still there?"

Xie Lian yanks his hand back with a strangled sound, and when he begins to turn his sword on himself—Feng Xin grabs him by the arm, shaking him hard.

"What the hell are you doing?!"

"I have to get it out," Xie Lian mutters, face pale, eyes out of focus. "Have to get it out—”

He yanks his wrist back, his sword clattering to the ground as the others are forced to leap into action, blocking the Xuanwu when it tries to attack again—

And Xie Lian falls down on all fours, gasping.

This weight...this *agony* ...what—?

Then, everything goes dark.

Xie Lian is left breathing raggedly, unable to stand up—hearing Blackwater's voice, a hand on his shoulder, but everything is fading...fading...

Cold. And heavy. And *dark* .

"What the hell is happening to him?!" Feng Xin snaps, watching as He Xuan tries to shake him out of it.

"That creature—I don't know how the *hell* it's doing it, but it amplifies resentment," He Xuan mutters. "His highness is alive—he's not meant to *ingest* that—"

And carrying the shards of Fangxin and the Godslayer while coming into contact with the Xuanwu...

It triggered something.

"...Can't you just suck it out of him or something?!"

"Excuse me?!"

"I don't know! You're a ghost!"

They shout back and forth in a panicked daze—

But Xie Lian can't hear them anymore.

Can't see them anymore.

He only hears one thing:

A flute.

Shrill, haunting notes drifting across his senses.

He sees three lotus blossoms grow.

One burns. The other wilts. The last blows away in the wind.

He hears the throaty, screaming caws of ravens. Feels their wings as they rush past him in a cloud, swirling into the night.

Xie Lian lifts his head, following them with his eyes.

He sees a sun that casts no light. Watches as an arrow pierces it, and black rain begins to fall—

Then, the cloud of ravens devours it—pecking away until nothing remains.

‘Traitor…’

Whispers echo all around him, drifting in between the flute’s haunting sound.

‘Blasphemer…’

The cold is so sharp—it steals his breath.

‘Murderer…’

And for a moment—Xie Lian thinks they’re talking about *him* .

‘Everyone admired you once.’

Xie Lian opens his mouth, ready to beg for it to *stop* —but then he hears it.

Laughter.

Cold, brimming with bitterness.

That’s when he sees him.

Standing alone in the darkness, hair loose across his back—wearing robes of red and black.

Clutching a dark amulet between blood stained fingers.

The young man looks back over his shoulder—revealing a wickedly handsome face, lips pulled back into a lopsided smirk.

Eyes burning an unnatural shade of red.

“…Your admiration is a bit too cheap, isn’t it?”

But there's another voice, softer than all of the others.

Roughened with emotions that are constantly pushed far beneath the surface. Still waters that run so, so deep.

"Come back with me."

But there's longing within those words—and pain.

So much pain.

Xie Lian cannot tell if the man before him is in danger, or *the* danger.

If he's a devil, or an untamed hero.

But before he can see much more—the ravens from overhead swoop back down, surrounding the youth in a cloud, and when they clear...

Nothing remains.

The god watches, his breaths slow and labored, as the sun rises again—this time moving backwards across the horizon. Over and over again—until it stops, hanging in the center of the sky.

Shrouded again in shadow—but not shot with arrows, or devoured by ravens.

It's an eclipse.

Followed by the shrill cries of a newborn child.

"Help?"

The prince turns around—this time following the call of a little boy—

And he sees one, sitting alone in the snow. So *small* , heartbreakingly thin.

Wearing little more than rags—and when he looks up, Xie Lian...

Somehow, he knows it's the young man from before.

His lips turning blue from the cold, holding himself as he shivers—looking up at Xie Lian hopelessly.

"...Help me?" He whispers.

And Xie Lian *wants* to, he does—

But when he reaches out—the child disappears.

In his place, Xie Lian sees a set of dark scales.

Swinging back and forth wildly—and each time they shift, the ground quakes and rumbles.

"...Breach from within..."

"...Chord assassination?"

He hears the familiar roar of the Xuanwu of the Slaughter—and all he can do is clutch his head, curling downwards.

Struggling to think, struggling to breathe, it's so—

"It's okay."

Xie Lian can barely lift his head—and when he does, that boy is standing before him again.

Holding the pouch Xie Lian *knows* should still be hanging from his belt—

And his hands seem so small, to be holding it.

The prince groans, panicking as he reaches out--but the child shakes his head...and he smiles.

Like the bigger and brighter his expression is, it might hide the loneliness in his eyes.

It might be one of the most heartbreaking smiles Xie Lian has ever seen.

"It's okay," he repeats, turning to walk away from him.

Talking a narrow, lonely path into the darkness.

Xie Lian gasps, his chest heaving—

And he sees the sky above him.

Feels hands shaking his shoulders. Hears the roar of the beast.

"...Where did you go just now?" Blackwater's voice is close, suspicious—

And Xie Lian's heart aches.

He sits up, pressing the heel of his palm against his forehead—feeling E'Ming rattling against his side, pressed close with worry.

"Gege, come back."

He mutters the words under his breath—barely gives them sound.

The words *his San Lang* would say.

"...You—?"

Xie Lian rises to his feet—his eyes no longer out of focus—instead, they're sharply narrowed, and his expression has turned grim.

"I need someone to open its mouth for me."

"...It's *mouth?"* Blackwater mutters, Feng Xin and Quan Yizhen occupied fighting the creature.

"How the hell are we supposed to—?"

"Just do what I did to you that one time," Shi Wudu cuts him off, summoning a new wall of storm clouds.

The Calamity scowls.

"What? Haven't learned it yet?"

"I haven't even had a *year—!"*

"Do it. *Now."*

Xie Lian is rarely ever forceful—and he's certainly never deemed to give He Xuan orders before, but the moment he does...

Without even thinking, the Ghost King complies, attempting to control the cursed blood within the Xuanwu's body, slowly forcing its jaws open.

Xie Lian surges upwards, riding his blade high into the sky, E'Ming whipping around him—and when he reaches eye level with the beast —

He Xuan watches with shock as he snatches the sack from his belt, hurling it down the creature's throat.

The Xuanwu of the Slaughter *howls* , its neck whipping around wildly, eyes burning with hatred—

But before it can close its jaws around anyone else, the crown prince comes surging back to earth, plunging E'Ming deep into the ground.

Forming a rift in the earth itself.

A deep, winding cavern forming beneath the hills of Qishan—large enough for the Xuanwu to go plunging within, its roars fading as the earth swallows it whole.

Xie Lian sinks to his knees as the ground closes once more, sweat forming at his brow, breathing hard.

Feng Xin rushes back to his side, dropping down beside him. "...Did you just—?!"

Seal the shards of Fangxin and the God Slayer inside of the beast?

He certainly did.

"...It took care of both problems," Xie Lian mutters faintly, swaying slightly, his friend holding him steady.

The Xuanwu's soul is sealed within the pit--it'll never escape.

Hopefully, over enough time alone in the darkness, it will fade. And if it doesn't...

Xie Lian can't imagine a mortal cultivator strong enough to extract the shards from the creature's belly.

“…Did you hear what you said?” He Xuan asks, watching as the others move to deal with the aftermath.

“What?” Xie Lian clears his throat, stroking E’Ming as the blade settles in his lap.

“…When you passed out…”

The prince’s eyes grow round.

“…I said something?”

Oh, he did.

And the words—heard by four different gods—could have been kept a secret.

If not for Quan Yizhen’s tendency to share his battles with worshippers in their dreams.

They will repeat it, whispers flooding across the cultivation world—a prophecy that will fade into legend.

Of a child, born during a total eclipse.

One who would not only defy death twice, but become its master.

A boy who would save the world or destroy it.

No middle ground.

Centuries will pass—and the memories of this day will fade, leaving it old, guarded knowledge.

But those who *do* remember will alter the shape of their own destinies—some permanently.

Walking a narrow, single plank bridge into the dark.

Chapter End Notes

> set up for a potential mdzs sequel? in my tgcf fic? it's more likely than you may think

Home

Chapter Summary

> Summer ends, the leaves turning with Autumn.
>
> Xie Lian can't help but love this time of year the most.
>
> Can't help but see crimson leaves, and think of him. Smelling campfires in the air, and wishing he was here.
>
> See children playing with lanterns, and ache for him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

By the longest day of the year—the Summer Solstice—the great beasts awakened by the changing of the Heavenly Dynasty have been put to rest.

A festival is held for the new god of the sun—and he doesn't even attend, seeming content to remain in bed from dawn till dusk.

But not alone.

The Crown Prince of Xianle returns to Mount Taicang once more—clearing centuries of underbrush and overgrowth.

Huangji Temple isn't so easily restored—he works slowly, methodically—and He Xuan is kind enough to offer assistance on architectural matters.

Well—he says that, but it isn't actually kind.

As the calamity flatly tells him one afternoon—he owes Hua Cheng money: and quite a bit of it.

Assisting Xie Lian when the chance arises is just a proactive means of attempting to chip away at that debt.

Xie Lian finds himself unable to mind.

When you've lived as long as he has—almost anything can become a habit.

That makes it even harder to break them.

He still doesn't eat every single day—but sometimes, even if he isn't hungry…

He'll sit down and make himself a meal.

When help is offered, he tries to think a little harder before he turns it down.

He tries not to smile when he doesn't mean it.

Stops himself from falling on his own sword.

Because there's one thing more precious to his San Lang than anything else…

And Xie Lian promised that he wouldn't treat him so carelessly.

He still isn't perfect.

There are stretches of days where he doesn't eat a bite. When he'll lay on his side, staring at the growing number of tally marks on the wall, and not move until the sun sets.

But not every day is so bad.

Some days, Ren Song and Banyue spend the entire day—helping him move stones, or clear out abandoned rooms.

They sleep beside him, and the void aches a little less.

Sometimes, Feng Xin and Mu Qing are there too.

Mu Qing will fuss and complain until Xie Lian takes a bath, combing his wet hair after, just as he did when they were children.

Feng Xin will shout for his son to play nice when he bites Guzi's hand, the mortal child trying to say through the tears that it doesn't hurt so bad.

It's been eight hundred years since he had so much company—and the days have never passed so slowly.

But still, they pass.

He visits the Heavens. Sits on council meetings—spends afternoons with Shi Qingxuan, making flower petals dance over her son’s crib, summoning sweet dreams

He walks with Shuo from Ghost City, red lantern in hand, as countless souls of lost children pass from one life to the next.

Never afraid. Never alone.

By the end of summer, he’s made the cottage on Mount Taicang comfortable—but he saves the temple.

He thinks Hua Cheng would want to do that with him.

Bolin returns to Puqi Village, helping farmers with their harvests—sweeping the shrine steps.

And one day, walking back from the fields, he hears a sound.

Children laughing—but unkindly.

A pair of boys standing at the top of a grassy hill, throwing pebbles—

And low, pitiful whimpering.

Thud!

The children whip around—only to find a familiar face, arms crossed, eyes stern, his basket set down beside him.

"What's this?"

"...N-Nothing, gege!"

Both of them hide their hands behind their backs, looking appropriately ashamed. "We—we were just on our way home now!"

They scramble, practically tripping over one another to rush away, and when Xie Lian walks towards the edge of the hill...

There's a small, pitiful mass of dark fur—whining as it tries to drag itself back into the bushes.

His eyes widen for a moment—then he's rushing down after it, skidding on the grass.

It seems terrified at first, growling and shrinking away, but—

"Don't be scared."

Mu Qing is a bit exasperated, being summoned from the Heavens to help a puppy with a broken leg, but...

It's hard to tell Xie Lian no, when he gets that look on his face.

A local stray, abandoned by its mother—tormented by local children for only having one eye.

"I can't do anything about that part," Mu Qing mutters, examining the scar tissue around the socket. "It must be some kind of birth defect..."

"That's fine," Xie Lian murmurs, rubbing his hand against the creature's side. "As long as he isn't in pain anymore."

He had no intention of keeping it—not at first.

But Mu Qing is stern, asking him what he expects—leaving food and water outside of the shrine all the time. Of course it keeps on coming back.

Tail wagging with cautious hope whenever it sees Xie Lian's face.

But one night, when Xie Lian allows it to come in and take shelter from the rain...

He feels it crawl onto the bamboo mat behind him, its side pressed against his back.

The same way the hounds they kept in the palace did, when he was small.

The same way Hong'er did, later.

It's funny, sometimes—how cruel life can seem.

And all of the things it ends up giving back to you.

Xie Lian doesn't sleep alone again.

"...Hong Li?" Feng Xin mutters, holding the pup in front of him, watching its scruffy, panting face.

Xie Lian hums from behind his loom.

"Because he's strong."

Growing every single day. Becoming less and less uncertain about whether or not he gets to stay.

There's something healing, about watching something come to trust you. To earn that faith, step by step.

He sleeps by Xie Lian's feet during council meetings. Trots by his side on the trek to ghost city, excitedly yipping, leaping up to try and catch sparrow ghosts between his jaws.

The children of Puqi learn to scratch him behind the ears each time they come to pray.

Sometimes Ruoye has to keep him in line, giving him gentle swats when he tries to start barking at the Ox that Xie Lian got to pull his cart on Mount Taicang—

But just as often, Xie Lian will find the two resting together under a warm patch of sun.

Summer ends, the leaves turning with Autumn.

Xie Lian can't help but love this time of year the most.

Can't help but see crimson leaves, and think of him. Smelling campfires in the air, and wishing he was here.

See children playing with lanterns, and ache for him.

And with the seasons changes, old traditions rear their heads—or in some cases, are made new.

Cities across the continent toast to the new emperor, feasting, preparing their blessing lanterns along the streets and hills.

And in the newly built capital—it’s full of life.

Firecrackers going off—acrobats and dancers performing in the streets.

Gods of the upper and middle courts laughing and dining together.

No swords are passed to test chastity—and no plays are shown as a form of teasing.

Instead, they toast to one another.

Celebrating their achievements in the last year—cheering in gratitude for the heroes of the battle of the Heavens.

Glasses of wine are passed—but when the drums stop, the god it lands upon throws a shower of merits, blessing one worshiper in the mortal realm.

Among the mortal realm, however—plays are still performed.

Showing the burning of the Heavens. The Windmaster's Battle in Gusu. The Thunder Master ascending from Lanling, marrying the newly crowned emperor. A birth of a new calamity, Autumn Twilight.

But among all of these, the most popular play in the mortal realm is a love story.

One that seems to end so many times, but always begins again.

Of a prince and an orphan.

A lost soul, and a fallen soldier.

A king of the dead, and a god in chains.

Crimson rain and the flower that he seeks—no less lovely for being bloodied or downtrodden.

Still deserving of shelter from the rain.

The new emperor still hasn't joined his subjects—rare, for a man known for being social and jovial.

Rather, he watches the festivities below from the balcony of his palace, elbows leaned against the railing.

Arms wrap around his waist from behind.

"Well," his consort sighs, kissing his shoulder blade. "You certainly have a leg up in the battle of the lanterns this year."

Pei Ming's lips curve into a faint smile, watching as heavenly officials below begin to gather and wait for the count to begin.

He turns around, leaning back against the railing as he gathers his husband up in one arm, cupping his face in his hand, his thumb stroking over his cheek. "The emperor is disqualified from the contest, remember?"

“Ah,” Shi Wudu leans his cheek into his palm. “Silly me.”

Besides—even if Pei Ming *was* participating—he would have stiff competition.

And Shi Wudu already seems to have the man in question in mind.

“He isn’t coming, is he?”

Pei Ming glances back down at the festival below.

“I don’t expect him to, no.”

And after everything he’s been through—Pei Ming really can’t blame him for wanting to be alone.

“He has the freedom to make that choice now.”

The mention of that makes Shi Wudu’s face fall—and Pei’s thumb pressed against the corner of his frown.

“What is it?”

It takes the thunder master a moment to meet his eyes—and when he does, his own gaze is remorseful.

“I know you never wanted to be doing this,” he mutters. “You should be doing whatever you like, with the people you love.”

If Shi Wudu hadn’t made his own mistakes—he could have carried the burden for him. It isn’t fair. Pei has done so much, sacrificed so much —

The emperor leans down—kissing him until the thoughts spinning around in Shi Wudu’s head begin to slow.

"I get to spend the rest of my days with the people I love," he reminds him gently. "And for that, I will always consider myself a lucky man."

Not to mention the fact that Shi Wudu *is* helping, and Xie Lian promised him a long retirement. Eventually.

Until then, this is enough.

Now, Shi Wudu takes Pei Ming's face between his hands, raising his eyebrows--trying not to be so easily distracted by his embrace.

"Then what's been on your mind?"

The warmth of Pei Ming's smile doesn't quite meet his eyes.

"...I know who will succeed me. The throne of the Heavens has never been determined by blood right," he explains slowly. "But what does a man have a legacy for, if not..."

Shi Wudu wishes he didn't understand the pain in his eyes.

If not for your children.

The Thunder Master's expression falters, his eyes filling with hesitation.

"Are you...saying you want—?"

"...Someday, maybe," Pei Ming admits. It would be a lie to say that he never imagined having children together, but... "But that's not what I mean."

"Then I don't...?"

He doesn't now, but he will.

When Pei Ming tells him of what he lost before he ever even knew he had it.

A sorrow that he's carried alone for too long—but not anymore.

Now, there's someone to listen as he confesses what has always been his greatest regret.

His failure.

Now, he has someone to hold him through it. To be *with* him, in that pain.

And once he does—he doesn't feel so alone anymore.

In his husband's arms, lights floating overhead, and this year...

General Pei Ming doesn't bother to count how many lanterns there are.

Across the valley, a young man climbs the hill in quiet solitude.

Content, listening to the gentle wooden creaks of the wheels on his ox cart, Hong Li sleeping in the back after a long day running up and down the mountain.

Ren Song came earlier, explaining that he was accompanying Lang Qianqiu to the festival. He brushed it off with some long-winded explanation about wanting to show good will from the ghost realm—and Xie Lian didn't argue.

He asked the prince to come, but...

Xie Lian can't seem to bring himself to celebrate.

He knows he should. He knows it's ungrateful, after everything he's survived, after how many worshippers he's gained in the last year, not to be thankful.

And he *is* , but he...

He doesn't want to fake a smile tonight.

Maybe tomorrow, or when he goes to visit Shi Qingxuan again. Maybe he'll manage it when Feng Xin and Mu Qing come to see him next.

But for now, he just wants to return home, and place another tally mark on the wall.

Sleep away another night without him.

His grief is fully grown now. It’s come up with him. Beside him. It’s as much a part of him as all of the good, all of the bad.

The price of loving a man who has fallen on the sword for you a thousand times, and would do so another thousand times over again.

But dead doesn’t mean gone.

There is no pain in this life that does not one day begin to ease.

And one day, if you hold on long enough—you’ll look up at the world, and you’ll see the beauty in it again.

When Xie Lian looks up now, he sees lanterns, drifting from all around.

Trickling in towards the Heavens from temples and shrines across the world, the names of different gods etched across every single one.

Above all of them, a red star shines in the sky. One that's been beaming down for weeks now.

A comet, according to Ling Wen.

The very same one that shone over Xianle, when Xie Lian was a little boy.

Back then, everyone assumed it was the light of a dying star. An omen of bad luck—but this makes more sense, if you ask Xie Lian.

Comets always come back.

Then, something else catches Xie Lian's eye.

What almost seems like another sunrise, even though it just set behind the hills less than an hour before.

A slow explosion of light, and when Xie Lian follows it.

He sees as many lanterns as stars in the sky.

Rising from the peak of Mount Taicang, even though Xie Lian knows no one should be up there, it's been empty all day, but...

Clink!

The prince's fingers slip free of the lead to his ox, his eyes growing wide--hearing that familiar sound, even from down here.

Clink!

Xie Lian has spent almost the entirety of his life wandering through the dark.

Has stumbled over more bridges than any mortal could cross. Nearly drowned in every corner of the sea.

He's spent nearly three hundred thousand days saying good morning to a memory.

And now, after so many years looking for one another in vein—

It only takes the span of a few moments to find each other again.

Xie Lian scrambling up the hillside, his feet barely touching the ground, the lights from above reflected in his eyes.

There was a time when the entire world chanted his name. When he held more jewels than a man could touch in his lifetime.

And none of that could compare to the euphoria he feels, reaching the peak--and seeing crimson robes, shifting in the breeze.

Releasing one last lantern into the air, head tilted back as it floats away from him, his face cast in a golden glow.

And when he turns to look at him—

The tears won't stop falling down Xie Lian's cheeks.

He's been waiting.

He waited *so long.*

His name doesn't come out the first time, not on the first try. Only a choked sob as he takes the last three steps, leaping into his arms.

But the second—it's loud and clear.

"San Lang!"

His love stumbles backwards slightly, his arms solid as they wrap around his waist, holding him close.

Strong, familiar, *real* .

Xie Lian's face presses into his neck, breathing him in. A man who once lost the ability to cry—now weeping in his arms.

From pure happiness.

Hua Cheng manages a weak laugh, holding Xie Lian closer as his face presses into his god's hair.

He's always had a penchant for leaving the man he loves in tears. Now, he does the same when he returns.

Xie Lian's feet are dangling far from the ground—and he doesn't care.

He could never touch the ground again, and that would be fine by him.

As long as he gets to stay here.

"...You came back," he whispers, his voice trembling with emotion—not that he ever doubted him—he *always* comes back, but—

He's *here* .

Hua Cheng closes his eye, taking a moment to compose himself before he answers--and even still, his voice is thick with emotion when he replies—

"I'm home, gege."

Xie Lian's eyes burn with emotion.

Home .

And he's never smiled like this before.

"...Welcome back, Hong'er."

He's dreamed of saying it so many times. In so many ways. Across so many years, kingdoms, and seasons.

And now that he *can* —he'll never let go again.

"...Stay, this time?" He asks, his voice small, struggling to find the audacity to hope—

And his love holds him closer.

"...Heaven could fall, the ghost realm could turn to ash—this world could end and be reborn anew, and I would never leave you again," he whispers into Xie Lian's ear, holding the words deep in his heart.

An oath to never leave his side again...

And he never did.

For those who would like to catch up on twitter, you can continue from here !

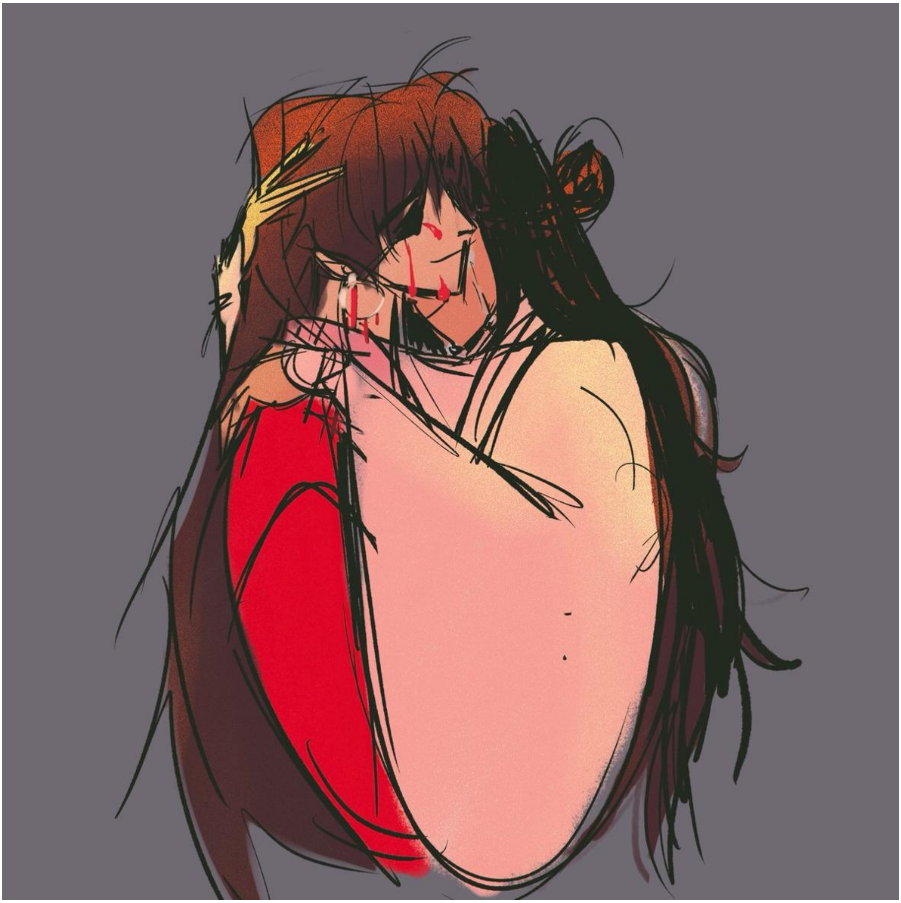
ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

Do not repost or reuse.

@_lakitsune
"How long?"
"Always..."

@_lakitsune

CREDIT: **LAKITSUNE**



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CREDIT: **CASS**

[image]

CREDIT: **ROWAN**

Chapter End Notes

> this officially brings us to the end of the canon tgcf timeline! This story is not over, I have post canon content and an epilogue, but we're entering the final stretch!
>
> I will also be going on vacation (I get on my flight in the next couple of hours), so I won't be updating on Ao3 until I get back. That pushes the next update to at least Sunday, probably Monday. I will still be updating on twitter at @cataclysmicevie if you want to keep up on there in the meantime!

Anything You Want

Chapter Summary

> There’s so much Xie Lian wants to say—so much he needs to tell him, but he can’t seem to bring himself to.
>
> He can’t even lift his face from Hua Cheng’s neck—or loosen his arms around him in the slightest.
>
> And Hua Cheng makes no complaints.

Chapter Notes

> hey, so sorry for the long break in updates! I got home from vacation, ended up testing positive for COVID, and have been struggling to shake that for the last week or so. I was finally feeling well enough to edit and post this today, but I didn't get much work done during my time off--so updates are going to be a little slower while I write the end of the story! thank you for your patience!
>
> CONTENT WARNING: This chapter contains a NSFW scene

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Xie Lian isn’t sure if his feet actually touched the ground once, going from the peak of the mountain to the cottage at the base.

They must have, he doesn’t think Hua Cheng carried him the entire way—

Or maybe he did, because Xie Lian’s arms are still wrapped around him.

It’s almost difficult to believe, after everything that’s happened—

They’ve still barely had any time alone together, not since Xie Lian realized who he was in Mount Tonglu.

There was a stolen moment in the Heavens—a final walk before they faced Jun Wu…

And that was all.

There’s so much Xie Lian wants to say—so much he needs to tell him, but he can't seem to bring himself to.

He can't even lift his face from Hua Cheng's neck—or loosen his arms around him in the slightest.

And Hua Cheng makes no complaints.

There's a brief moment of hesitation when they step inside, clearly silently evaluating where to set the prince down—but when Xie Lian shows no sign of loosening his grip…

Hua Cheng takes a seat beside the kitchen table, with his god carefully placed across his lap.

His arms are still holding most of Xie Lian's weight, keeping him tight against his chest—

And the prince wouldn't have it any other way.

"…Does anyone else know that you're…?" Xie Lian's voice is raw—hardly coherent after so much crying, but Hua Cheng understands.

"No," he assures him—and Xie Lian isn't surprised, even if he knows there *are* people who would want to know that he's back… "Was gege planning on attending the festival? I can—"

"No," Xie Lin shakes his head vehemently. The idea almost sounds insane now.

That he could want to go anywhere, to see or speak to anyone else.

For now, he almost wishes they were the only ones in the entire world—and they may as well be.

"I…don't want to see anyone else right now," he admits quietly.

He knows that must sound so selfish. He isn't the only person who missed Hua Cheng in his absence. And he's had duties left unattended, but—

When he shifts his head to the side, peeking up at Hua Cheng's expression through his lashes…

He looks *blissful* .

"…Was it hard?" Xie Lian's hands press flat against his shoulders—finally able to relax from being balled up in his robes. "Were you in any pain? Or…do you not remember—?”

“It wasn’t painful at all,” Hua Cheng shakes his head. “But I knew I was keeping gege waiting…”

He pauses, his gaze slipping down to Xie Lian’s throat.

Bare. Not shrouded by Ruoye, or a cursed shackle.

A sight he didn’t have the chance to appreciate, in their last moments together.

His eye turns upwards—words the curve of his jaw, his cheek, and…

Xie Lian can’t help but shiver when Hua Cheng’s fingertips brush against his earlobe—finding an earring there.

A red pearl.

“…You haven’t worn this since the day we met,” he murmurs, watching it reflect in the lantern light.

When two pearls were still a set, and they were strangers to one another.

Before a child refused to let him go—and when he was forced to, he took something with him.

Xie Lian would never begrudge him for taking it.

Shameless, but everything he has is San Lang’s to take.

Xie Lian’s fingers are slightly more hesitant, sliding down to tangle in his hair, rolling the Pearl braided into the strands between his fingers.

“I knew you had the other. Wearing it made me feel…”

Closer to him.

Even his ashes weren't enough.

Nothing is, when he’s gone.

Hua Cheng leans forward on instinct more than thought, pressing a kiss to the hollow behind his ear.

They both grow still, each for very different reasons.

Xie Lian's eyes are round, a blush slowly building across his cheeks…

And Hua Cheng is contrite.

"…Apologies dianxia," he pulls back.

They've kissed one another many times now—mostly under false pretenses, but also without.

He didn't seem so contrite when he was healing Xie Lian's arm on the way to Qi Rong's lair. Or when he was collecting a gambling debt.

Or when he was teaching Xie Lian about certain positions.

Against a *tree* .

"…What for?" He mutters, clearing his throat.

Hua Cheng leans a little further back, to what must seem like a respectful distance.

"I forgot myself—it will not happen again."

There's nothing he could do to Xie Lian that he wouldn't want.

But the prince doesn't have the confidence to say that.

Not yet, anyway.

Instead, he opts for lifting his head—craning his neck slightly as he presses their mouths together.

They've kissed desperately, shyly, through tears of joy and grief. But never like this.

Never with the un-rushed, bone deep affection Xie Lian feels in a small, contented sigh against his mouth, lips parting.

The weight of Hua Cheng's hand against the small of his back.

Why would this have anything to do with Hua Cheng forgetting himself?

Who else would Xie Lian want this with, if not him?

But there's a restrained edge to every touch the ghost king offers him.

Gentle. Careful. Always so thoughtful—as Xie Lian has come to expect.

It was hard to adjust to at first—how treasured Hua Cheng makes him feel after being abandoned for so long.

But now—he stretches into his touch, like a flower towards the sun.

Twisting in Hua Cheng's arms until they're facing one another properly.

Before his legs were thrown across Hua Cheng's, but now he's sitting in his lap fully—fingers interlocking at the nape of his neck, breaths shallow and unsteady.

Hua Cheng's hands are rigid, stubbornly remaining on the same point at the middle of his back.

If Xie Lian notices, or it bothers him—he doesn't say so.

He leans back, lips flushed in a way that makes Hua Cheng sharply avert his gaze—

But Xie Lian can't take his eyes off of him.

Hands sliding up from his neck to press against his cheeks. Thumbs sliding over his jaw.

They've been in a similar position before—when Hong'er was a teenager in Puqi Shrine, allowing his god to see his face with his hands.

That was hard enough then—and Xie Lian wasn't in his *lap* , lips slightly swollen, staring at him with eyes filled with so much wonder, he doesn't understand it—

"Handsome," he whispers.

Xie Lian is shy about so many other things—but that isn't one of them.

Not when he remembers what Hua Cheng said back then.

'I'm not like you.'

'I'm not beautiful.'

Liar.

Just looking at him makes Xie Lian ache in a way he's never felt before. Like someone has reached inside his chest, squeezing his heart with an invisible force.

"…You don't have to say those things to me," Hua Cheng's voice is low—

And it still makes Xie Lian's eyes grow wide with confusion.

"I'm sorry?"

"I was impudent before, trying to trick dianxia into saying it—"

The prince pauses, his lips parted.

"When did you do that?"

Hua Cheng won't look at him, and—

Xie Lian supposes, in retrospect, posing as Lang Ying in an attempt to fish for compliments from him *was* a bit mischievous.

But even before he knew who Hua Cheng actually was—he found it endearing.

"…Do you think I'm lying?" Xie Lian's head tilts to the side—and when Hua Cheng replies, his voice is strained.

"No."

He knows Xie Lian wouldn't lie to him. Logically—of course he knows that.

"…Then I don't understand," the prince frowns. "…Did I…upset you?"

He was just as overjoyed as Xie Lian was before—then suddenly became so still, clearly stressed by something—

"No," Hua Cheng shakes his head. "You could never—"

"…But you're upset, San Lang."

The Ghost King falls silent, his mouth twisting with discomfort...and when he finally does answer, it leaves Xie Lian even more confused than he was before.

"I've never had any expectations, your highness." He murmurs.

"All I ever need is to be close to you. I..." His lips press into a tight line, struggling to admit it, but—

"When we met again, I took liberties that I shouldn't have. I don't want you to assume based on my past actions that...that you have any *obligation* to—"

"...Obligation?" Xie Lian's voice grows smaller, his eyebrows knitting together. "San Lang...I've told you how I..."

He's kissed him, said 'I love you,' multiple times—was it...unclear?

Hua Cheng's lips press against his forehead softly.

"The fact that this lowly one has a place in your heart is the greatest treasure I could ever ask for," he promises.

This lowly one.

"But you should never push yourself beyond your own comfort just to please *me."*

Oh.

It's slowly beginning to dawn on him.

Xie Lian is more than aware of the way that people have perceived him for the last eight centuries. Particularly those that once knew him well.

There were rumors about what he *almost* did, but...

The Prince of Xianle never expressed a desire for any of that.

And there are people who never do. Xie Lian has met plenty over the years. Who are completely content to live in chastity. Some of them are even repulsed by the idea of breaking it. And for a long time...

Xie Lian *thought* that might have been how he felt.

"...Can I..." Xie Lian's voice is slightly strained when he finally speaks, his forehead still resting against Hua Cheng's chin. "...I need...to...talk about something, but...I'm not sure I'll say it correctly."

He isn't confident in his vocabulary around the subject.

"...There's nothing you can't say to me," Hua Cheng's fingers tangle in his hair gently, pushing it back over his shoulder—and Xie Lian releases a shaky sigh.

"Do you...remember that day, before..." He closes his eyes. "When...Bai Wuxiang wore Feng Xin's face?"

The mere mention of it is enough to make Hua Cheng go completely still in his arms. He doesn't have to answer at that point, he clearly does remember, but—

"...I do, dianxia."

It's become fairly obvious to Xie Lian since then that Hua Cheng...interpreted that event *very* differently.

"That...was..." Xie Lian takes another deep breath, fighting back the *shame* , knowing it isn't something that Hua Cheng would love him less for, but...

That doesn't make it any easier to say.

"I didn't want to do that," Xie Lian explains finally, his voice small. "When he kissed me—I don't know why, but—it *hurt* me."

Because he thought his only friend left in the world remained for one thing: his beauty.

It was his first time being kissed, and it was also the first time he could think of, other than the day he found Hong'er's body, that he had ever felt so alone.

"...But I also couldn't think of another way...to make sure that he wouldn't leave me by myself."

It feels so shameful to admit. Xie Lian didn't *have* anything back then. No wealth, power, or protection to give.

If he hadn't realized it was Bai Wuxiang *sooner* ...

"And later, when I asked Wu Ming to..." He swallows hard. "...I wanted to feel like he hadn't...actually taken anything from me."

And Xie Lian almost asked for too much because of that. Things he wasn't ready for. Things he didn't actually want.

He doubts Wu Ming would have been ready for it either.

"...So, I know...what you're worried about, when you're asking me not to push myself, or do things out of obligation..." Xie Lian explains carefully.

Because he *has* done that before.

"...But that's...never been how I've felt with you."

That finally gives Hua Cheng pause.

"I don't...think you're going to leave if I don't want the same things that you do," Xie Lian assures him quietly.

After how much they've been through to remain by each other's sides—he has no doubt.

Hua Cheng wouldn't leave him again. Not for anything.

"…If I kiss you, it's because I…want…" He bites his lip, and he can practically feel Hua Cheng preparing to make some kind, understanding speech about how he might want more than Xie Lian does, and that's okay—

And Xie Lian changed forms in that coffin for a *reason* .

If Hua Cheng could remember what happened between them in the forge after Mount Tonglu reopened, he would know.

But this is all so painfully new, and it's already hard enough to say as much as he has.

"…I love you…in many different ways," Xie Lian could have never even said this before, but…

Mourning someone for eight centuries changes you.

"When…I *said* it, I meant…"

"Your highness, I never meant to distress you, you don't have to say —"

"As lovers," Xie Lian concludes hoarsely, feeling so—

But that's clear, isn't it? That is demonstrably, undeniably obvious?

Hua Cheng falls silent—clearly thinking about what he's saying, and his question, while fair—

“…When you say lovers—how do you envision that?”

Xie Lian still feels like he might die.

Struggling to think of a way to explain that, before he closed himself off to such things—he just knew he liked adventure novels with…

(He lied to Feng Xin, he *did* read them for the kissing.)

Like…husband and wife do? But they’re not…

He almost offers Shi Qingxuan and Blackwater for an example, but when he remembers how furious Hua Cheng was over that entire thing, he might be insulted—he certainly would be if Xie Lian compared it to Feng Xin and Mu Qing—

How did Mu Qing navigate this so *easily?*

It's not that Xie Lian's friends approached them and proudly declared that they were being intimate at some point in the last year—but it's fairly obvious.

As in Feng Xin appeared in a council meeting with a black eye, zero complaints, and Mu Qing seemed mortified.

Which implies that it probably wasn't easy for them, but at least Mu Qing of all people was probably able to verbalize it, and if Xie Lian can't even meet that low, low bar—

"I think I want the same things you do, San Lang," he croaks, fighting the urge to hide his face in his hands.

And while Hua Cheng has taken him at his word up until now, only asking for clarification—

Now, when Xie Lian peeks at his expression—he seems utterly disbelieving.

"You wouldn't say that if you knew what I wanted," he shakes his head firmly. "And that's alright—”

"You could tell me?" Xie Lian swallows hard, and now Hua Cheng looks like he might disperse for a *third* time.

"I would never insult you that way."

"I wouldn't be insulted—”

"You should be, your highness—I don't have any right to—”

Before Hua Cheng can even finish that sentence, he lets out a surprised grunt—yanked down by the shoulders, and this time—

This time, Xie Lian kisses him differently.

Sliding forward in his lap until they're chest to chest, his eyes tightly squeezed shut, face burning with embarrassment—

And Hua Cheng makes a small, shocked sound in the back of his throat when he feels teeth against his lower lip, tugging lightly.

He doesn't even think before opening his mouth to him, he just *does* , shuddering when their tongues slide together, his mind going blank when he feels the prince speak into his communication array, saying words he would struggle to say out loud—

'There isn't a single part of me that you don't have a right to, San Lang.'

Hua Cheng is still underneath him, palms flat against Xie Lian's shoulders, almost hovering there, like he doesn't quite dare, but—

Those words make him think of what Xie Lian said to Jun Wu, before.

That Hua Cheng hadn't taken anything that wasn't already his.

His.

And Xie Lian finds himself pinched between several different emotions.

Mild frustration, embarrassment, *want* , and—

When he feels that Hua Cheng is shaking, restraining himself, his heart aches.

Their lips part, and even though Hua Cheng has no need for air, he's breathing hard, and—

Xie Lian presses their foreheads together, his voice softening.

"San Lang?"

"...Yes?" He replies weakly.

"You love me."

The ghost king shudders—and repeats an affirmative without being asked, not realizing where Xie Lian is going with it—

"I love you."

Xie Lian's hands are on his cheeks again, fingers tenderly tracing the shapes of his features.

"...There's someone precious to me," the prince explains softly. "I love him more than anything else in this world."

If Hua Cheng's heart could still beat, it would be pounding in his chest.

"Please—try not to think so little of him," Xie Lian whispers. "It hurts me."

What little remains of his self-restraint almost makes an audible sound as it snaps, and the noise that rips out of Hua Cheng's chest doesn't even sound *human* .

The grip on Xie Lian's waist is suddenly like iron, and before he can fully gasp from surprise—

Hua Cheng swallows it with his lips, surging into Xie Lian with a force that might have frightened him, not so long ago.

But not now.

Now, he just finds himself trying to meet it as best as he can, shuddering every time Hua Cheng's hands squeeze him tighter, when his teeth scrape against him, when his tongue does this absolutely *wicked* thing against the roof of his mouth, making the prince's toes curl.

Their lips part again, and Xie Lian makes a small sound of discontent, trying to chase him—only to feel Hua Cheng's fingers tangling in his hair, pulling until Xie Lian's head tilts back, and when the prince feels teeth against the side of his throat—

He makes a sound he didn't even know he could make, and when he feels Hua Cheng stiffen, clearly fearful that it might have been a step too far—

Xie Lian's hands tighten against his shoulders almost frantically.

"Don't stop."

Hua Cheng's lips close around his pulse point and suck, and Xie Lian—

He feels like a marionette with the strings attached in the wrong places.

Hua Cheng nips and bites at different points along the column of his neck, and Xie Lian's stomach lurches, his legs trembling.

He mumbles something against the prince's neck, and there's a slight delay—between Xie Lian hearing it and *understanding* it.

"It's…harder…if you try to stop later…"

The solution is obvious in Xie Lian's mind: not to stop at all.

Then, he picks out another word:

'Cultivation.'

Oh.

Xie Lian's response is so nonchalant, Hua Cheng almost isn't sure if he heard him right.

"D-Don't worry about that…"

After he *just* got his powers back?

"But—"

"I promise it's…a-alright, San Lang…"

And as much as Xie Lian wants him not to worry—he wouldn't say that unless it really would be alright. He would never want Hua Cheng to feel responsible for ruining his cultivation, so…

It must be *true* .

Hua Cheng's hands slide down from his hips—skirting around the edges of his thighs through his robes, fingers hesitantly curling, like he's trespassing on sacred ground.

But the ragged intake of Xie Lian's breath isn't fearful—just nervous.

It's slow, when he rises from the chair, slow enough for Xie Lian to say whatever he likes—but he just tightens his arms around Hua Cheng's neck.

The cottage has only two rooms—Xie Lian saw no need to build it out further when it was just him, and that makes the trip short.

There's maybe three steps through the kitchen, once through the doorway, then he's sitting on the edge of his bed.

Slightly more comfortable than what he keeps at Puqi Shrine, and since everything that happened...

Xie Lian tries not to sleep on the ground anymore.

Hua Cheng stands over him for a moment—doesn't sink down over him, like when they were in paradise manor, or slink in behind him from an appropriate distance, like he did in Puqi Shrine.

Now, he just stands in front of him, hands resting on Xie Lian's sides.

At first, Xie Lian mistakes it for more hesitation, and part of him doesn't think he has the nerve to say anything more, because at that point it might seem like *begging* , but...Hua Cheng reaches up, gently prying the god's hands from where they've been clutching his shoulders.

Not to push him away, no.

He turns his head, pressing a soft kiss to both of Xie Lian’s palms. Slow, with a tenderness that leaves the prince watching him with round eyes and bated breath.

“Just…” He still hasn’t lifted his lips from Xie Lian’s left hand. “Just let me…” his voice is so soft, strained with longing. Xie Lian’s fingers curl around his chin, gentle, loving.

“Yes,” Xie Lian whispers, hearing the ghost king’s breath hitch in response. “Whatever San Lang wants.”

He says that, even though he really has no idea what might come next.

Xie Lian has overheard plenty, spending the majority of his life living on the streets—but that isn’t the same as knowing what to expect.

But if it’s with him—he knows he *wants* it.

Xie Lian wants everything. He’s been taught not to crave, to sacrifice that which he desires—

But Hua Cheng makes him greedy. Makes Xie Lian want to experience every single thing he's missed by his side. To spend every moment in each other's arms.

To be selfish.

And isn't that alright?

When he glances up at the ghost king through his lashes, watching the way Hua Cheng keeps his face pressed against his palm—breathing him in—he thinks it might be.

But of all of the guesses he could have made for what the ghost king would do…

He wasn't expecting Hua Cheng to reach for the pin in his hair—the clasp he left for Xie Lian in Puqi Shrine many months before—gently pulling it free, sending the prince's tresses tumbling loosely down his back and shoulders.

Such a small gesture—

But…intimate.

For a moment, he doesn't even say anything—just quietly admires the sight of him in the shifting patterns of light coming in through the window, lanterns drifting through the air outside.

"…Beautiful."

Xie Lian has always known that he thought so—

But he rarely says it.

He's called Xie Lian so many other things, sung his praises in ways that made him sheepish—and Xie Lian has spent a lifetime being told that, if nothing else, he *is* beautiful—

But it's never affected him like this before, hearing it from Hua Cheng's lips.

There were times he resented being thought of as beautiful, thought it was the only thing people wanted from him—

But when *he* says it, Xie Lian feels his lungs tighten in his chest, fingers trembling against the edge of the bed.

He's confused at first, watching as Hua Cheng sinks to his knees in front of him, fingers tightening against the mattress when the ghost king's fingers find the backs of his calves—

Only to gently ease off the prince's boots, one after the other, carefully setting them aside.

When he straightens up, he's far more careless with his own belongings. Kicking off his own boots—unfastening his silver vambraces, allowing them to fall to the ground with a heavy clank, and Xie Lian can't help but wince.

"San Lang, those are so nice, you shouldn't—"

But then the mattress is dipping beneath the weight of his knees, and Xie Lian finds himself tongue tied.

Which is fine—because Hua Cheng seems fully intent on kissing him breathless, anyhow.

Slow, his body hovering over Xie Lian's as he lays back—but not pinning him.

Xie Lian is almost only distantly aware of hands helping him shrug out of his outer robe—he certainly never noticed anything touching his belt—

And somehow, he ends up on his side with Hua Cheng pressed behind him, lips against the nape of his neck, holding him close.

It's less than Xie Lian expected, but somehow more, too.

They've laid side by side in bed together. Xie Lian has had his hair down in front of him before, slept in only his inner robes—

But this couldn't be any more different.

It's not a surprise that his neck is sensitive, kept from any form of contact for years due to the cursed shackle—but every brush of Hua Cheng's mouth against his nape makes him *burn* , feet jerking, trying not to accidentally kick him—

And then, there's his hands.

Xie Lian has always liked them. How he could feel the slight roughness to his skin from years or working with a hammer or saber. How big they are—

But they’ve never felt bigger than they do now, pressing against his body through the thin layer of his inner robes.

One of them is splayed across his ribs, thumb rubbing slow circles just underneath the muscles of the prince’s chest—and he *must* feel his heart pounding, but he never says so.

The other is on his thigh, easing higher, and Xie Lian—

Xie Lian almost can’t take it.

“Ah…San Lang?” He’s barely said a coherent word since Hua Cheng laid him down, and he’s struggling with it now, his breaths turning slightly labored. “Shouldn’t…shouldn’t I be…touching you, too?”

There’s a small rumble of acknowledgement against his back—and he shivers.

“Later,” He replies, and Xie Lian wishes—he just wishes Hua Cheng wouldn’t do that against the nape of his neck, it makes him squirm even more, and…

“But…what about you—?”

“Gege said whatever I wanted,” Hua Cheng reminds him gently, fingertips drumming against his thigh.

“I-I did…”

“Do you want me to stop?”

There’s no apprehension in Hua Cheng’s tone—and despite him speaking of how difficult it would be to stop, before…Xie Lian knows he would, if he said so.

He shakes his head, his heart thudding unsteadily. “Not unless you want—”

Hua Cheng’s hand tightens against his thigh and he falls silent, biting his lip so hard, it starts to feel almost numb.

“…I just want to take care of you,” his voice is soft in Xie Lian’s ear. “Can I?”

The prince can barely manage more than a terse nod, his head moving woodenly as Hua Cheng’s hand slides higher, resting over his hip.

“Have you…have you ever…?” He struggles to think, eyes fixed on the sight of Hua Cheng’s fingers pulling at the strings of his inner robes.

“…Only on my own,” the ghost king admits, his nose resting against Xie Lian’s pulse point. “I was never interested in doing this with someone else.”

Xie Lian couldn’t have predicted the way hearing that would make him feel.

It’s not that he would have been upset if Hua Cheng *had* , or that he would have thought less of him.

But there’s a pleasant leap of relief in his gut—followed by an emotion he’s never…

A thrill in the idea that this is something that is *just* for them, together.

Hua Cheng's mouth is slow—in a fashion that could almost be mistaken for lazy if not for the fact that Xie Lian knows how seriously he's taking this—making its way across his skin, pressing at the hollow beneath his ear once more.

The prince is so distracted by that, arching his neck, he almost doesn't notice when Hua Cheng's hand slips downward, dipping beneath that final layer of fabric, and—

A strangled gasp wrenches itself from his lips, eyes blown wide against the dark.

It—It doesn't feel *bad* , not at all—Xie Lian's heels are already digging into the mattress, legs shaking. It's just—

Even the barest brush of Hua Cheng's fingers *there* feels wrong. Like someone is about to burst through the door and tell him this is wrong. Like *he's*—

But then, the other man's voice is in his ear—shushing him. Fingertips slowly dragging down sensitive flesh, warmer than Xie Lian expected, but that's probably intentional—

"Beautiful..." He murmurs into his skin, fingers wrapping around him fully—and Xie Lian shudders.

The irony of it all is that part of cultivation is control over the mind and body. A significant part of Xie Lian's is control over this very part of his body, but now—

It feels utterly unfamiliar to him. Hot, pulsing between his thighs, and —

Good.

Hua Cheng's hand slides down, moving thin, sensitive skin with it in a slow, deliberate slide, and Xie Lian is too distracted by the sensations running down his thighs to even be embarrassed. Muscles tensing, breaths growing more and more shallow.

But once they reach the end, the roughened bed over his thumb sliding over the head, gathering slickness there—

A high, mortifying sound makes its way out of Xie Lian's throat, his face turning into the pillow, thighs jerking.

And Hua Cheng's teeth are on his earlobe.

Dragging over one half of the pearl set that connects them together, his hand sliding back down, slicker this time—far more so than what could have just come from Xie Lian alone. Though the prince supposes of all of the other things Hua Cheng can summon from storage, that isn’t—

"How does it feel, gege?" His voice is different from how Xie Lian has ever heard it.

Low, rough, and hungry in his ear—but from the way his fingers squeeze slightly after, making Xie Lian choke—

It wasn't a rhetorical question.

"I..." His words are trembling, half formed.

"San...San Lang...I...can't..."

"I said I want to take care of you," Hua Cheng reminds him gently.

And Xie Lian said himself—

'Whatever San Lang wants.'

"How can I do that if gege won't tell me?" He purrs, his hand moving slightly faster, and Xie Lian--

He makes a sound embarrassingly close to a whine, trying to muffle it in the pillow, hips squirming, unsure of what to do with himself, but…

"…Good," he rasps, shuddering when Hua Cheng buries his face in the crook of his neck. "I-It's good…"

His thumb teases at the tip again, drinking in the sounds falling from the prince's lips.

"Thank you for telling me," he breathes, feeling Xie Lian writhe, unsure of how to move, but unable to stay still.

"…You…you do this…on your own?"

Thinking about that helps—makes Xie Lian feel slightly less mortified. It's not that he doesn't want it, or that he isn't *enjoying* it—

But when you've spent the majority of your life thinking about certain parts of you like they may as well not exist, being reminded that they *do* in such a vivid way is…

An adjustment.

But Xie Lian could never think of anything about *Hua Cheng* as distasteful, uncomfortable, or wrong. If *he* does it, then there's nothing wrong with…enjoying it. There isn't—

"Sometimes," the ghost king agrees, making Xie Lian ease slightly against him, even if his thighs are tense and trembling.

And it's not something that he would normally say—he's never been able to admit it before, too ashamed of his own coveting, craving something he *knows* he doesn't deserve—

"Whenever I can't stop thinking of you."

He doesn't know if he consciously meant to say it, but…

Xie Lian's reaction—the way his body shudders, curling inwards, turning his face completely into the pillow beneath him, trying to muffle the moan that tears from his throat—

It's the best encouragement there is.

Xie Lian feels Hua Cheng's other arm slide under his head, keeping him from turning his face into the pillow anymore to hide, his cheeks *scorching* —

Lips brush beneath his jaw, humming.

“Thank you,” Hua Cheng somehow manages to exude gratitude, even when he purrs.

“Letting your San Lang hear you like this…feel you,” as he says it, his thumb brushes over Xie Lian in a way that makes him keen.

His San Lang.

His San Lang.

“…I would…wouldn’t want anyone else to…” Xie Lian can barely speak, but still feels Hua Cheng’s approval.

If anyone else heard Xie Lian like this—they wouldn’t live to tell.

They wouldn’t get the chance to draw another breath.

“Just me?”

Hua Cheng was so hesitant to admit that he wanted it at all, and his questions might be mortifying, but—

They also mean he’s starting to *believe* what Xie Lian said.

That he wants this. That he isn’t just forcing himself for Hua Cheng’s sake.

“…Just you…” the prince whispers, voice trembling. “I…I’m just sorry that I…don’t…”

He breaks off with a soft moan, his cheek pressed against the ghost king’s forearm. “Know how to…”

Hua Cheng shushes him again, his cheek cool as it presses against the flushed skin of Xie Lian’s cheek.

“You’re perfect,” he whispers.

Not because he has to be. No expectations placed upon him—

He just *is*.

“Just breathe, gege.”

Xie Lian lets out a shuddering sigh, inhaling sharply—and Hua Cheng's answering chuckle is breathless with affection.

"Move with me?"

Xie Lian doesn't understand what he means, not at first—not until he feels Hua Cheng's hips rock against him from behind.

A gentle, subtle demonstration—but one that makes an entirely different form of desire crop up inside of him, powerful and unfamiliar.

And he likes it like this—loves Hua Cheng, for how tender and careful he is with him—

But part of him found the unrestrained, near animalistic side displayed after the Kiln reopened easier to deal with, because it didn't give Xie Lian so much space to think.

Now, he finds himself wondering if he sounds strange. If he's reacting too much. If he isn't reacting enough.

If, after giving Hua Cheng an entire speech about how he *did* want these things and practically demanding that they do them, he's as stiff and unexciting as a statue—

But then Hua Cheng's hips rock into him again—not firmly enough to gain any friction, it's not for his own pleasure, just subtle encouragement—

Xie Lian's breath trembles anyway, his heart fluttering around in his rib cage like a hummingbird's wings.

And when he moves with him, finally moving his hips forward, into his hand instead of squirming away from it—

It feels like a sudden realization. A trembling sigh of relief, his body growing languid, even as his toes curl.

Oh.

It's—

It's supposed to feel like this.

The more he moves, the more his body seems to just *know* , rocking into Hua Cheng's touch in movements that feel more fluid, more natural with every single pass.

And with Hua Cheng’s voice in his ear, telling him how lovely he sounds, how beautiful he is, how he’s—

"So well..." His voice is like a touch in itself, the only part of him that Xie Lian knew by heart months ago, wrapping itself around him. "You're doing *so* well..."

And it's—the same thing they said back then.

Hua Cheng couldn't remember, but—

Back then, Xie Lian had been so sure that there was someone else Hua Cheng wanted. This amorphous, faceless, presumably perfect special, precious someone who held an immovable place in his heart.

When Hua Cheng touched him like that, Xie lian thought he was thinking of them.

And even with everything that's happened since—Xie Lian never took the time to revisit that night in his mind, and realize that Hua Cheng was thinking about *him* .

That he wanted to touch *Xie Lian* like that.

When he felt like he was on the verge of being devoured. Hua Cheng's fingers wrapped around his throat. His teeth on shoulder. His—

Xie Lian's head tilts back, resting against Hua Cheng's shoulder as his breaths become ragged and short.

His nose nuzzles against Xie Lian's cheek, soft kisses pressed along his jaw as he eases the prince into it. Guiding Xie Lian to thrust into his hand, stroking in time.

Xie Lian thought this would be embarrassing at best, awkward at worst—and at first, it was.

But now, something about it feels so natural. So safe, so wanted, as though there’s nothing he could do wrong right now.

It’s just—

It’s just *good* , and Xie Lian feels himself building towards something he doesn’t quite understand, but…

For the first time, he doesn't run away from it, or tell himself that it's wrong. That he should stop.

In a way, it felt like a knot formed in his chest, the day he realized that he was different.

That he didn't *want* the things that he was expected to.

A part of him that he could never change—and something he spent so many years trying to reassure others about—

But never himself.

It never felt as though he had permission to embrace it as something that could be beautiful.

Something that could feel like *this* .

He opens his eyes hazily, his gaze taking a moment to adjust to the dim light of the room—

And the first thing he notices is ink.

Black ink scrawled across Hua Cheng's forearm, cradling his head.

Characters nearly illegible, but here, this close—

Xie Lian always knew that Hong'er had a tattoo. One of the farmers mentioned it, after he…

But seeing it now—

Xie Lian never expected to decipher the characters of his own *name* .

It feels like something in his gut snaps like a broken string—and his vision goes white.

His body trembles through it, muscles in his thighs and torso tensing in ways he's never experienced before as a burning heat consumes him in the sweetest inferno he could imagine.

He doesn't know how he moves, what sounds he makes—but Hua Cheng drinks all of it in.

His hand working over him until Xie Lian squirms, because it's *too much* , pulling back—kissing his prince as he starts to come back down, his breaths still stuttering and uncertain.

“Beautiful,” he breathes again as Xie Lian shudders in his arms. “You did so well…”

Xie Lian isn’t actually sure that he did anything other than not actively get in the way as Hua Cheng’s hands took him apart—

But the way the ghost king says it, like it was some sort of wondrous privilege…

It makes Xie Lian feel like he *did* do well.

His body is limp and relaxed—almost floating, in the aftermath of so much sensation. He’s vaguely aware of Hua Cheng cleaning off his hand, but too mortified by that part to give it much attention.

“That…was what you wanted?”

In its mildest form, yes.

Considering how Xie Lian has never even touched *himself* , Hua Cheng was never going to act on more…intensive desires. If he had the self-control that his god does, he never would have considered—

But he doesn’t. What he *does* have is a very vivid imagination.

He could never even bring himself to detail the half of it to Xie Lian. Not now, when he already feels as though his god has been more generous with him than he ever could have asked for.

“But…there’s more, isn’t there?”

Hua Cheng’s fingers grow still against his side.

“…There can be,” he admits warily. He could be content with just this for eternity, if that’s what Xie Lian wan—

“Can we?”

It’s such a simple question, but it seems to leave the ghost king lightheaded, taking a moment to respond.

“…Gege,” his tone makes Xie Lian’s face grow warm again.

“I’m alright…really—”

“We have time,” Hua Cheng’s palm settles against his side, fingers splayed across his ribs.

"I know," he mutters. It's actually strange to think about—because for the first time, they do.

There's no lurking enemy waiting to drive them apart, no battles they have to hurry off to fight.

This may as well be the first night of the rest of their lives, because they'll be spent together—

"But—"

"Be gentle with your San Lang," Hua Cheng's chin rests against his shoulder. "Gege can take his time."

Xie Lian is more than aware of the fact that Hua Cheng is helping him save face—mostly because he knows the prince a little *too* well.

And Xie Lian can say the same.

Just from what he remembers from the forge—he knows, free of restraints, exactly what Hua Cheng would want to do.

And Hua Cheng knows how badly Xie Lian wants to give something back to him—and even if that's something Xie Lian *also* wants—

He saw the way Xie Lian reacted to his praise. How heady and addictive it can be, thinking you're doing well for someone you love.

That you might push yourself further than you're ready for—just to please them.

And Hua Cheng would rather be careful than risk that.

Even if that seems to leave his god somewhat frustrated.

"Patience, your highness."

"I—" Xie Lian opens his mouth, surprised by the way he sounds almost petulant.

I am.

…Why did that almost feel like a habit?

He's silent for a moment, contemplating that, content to allow Hua Cheng's hand to slide up and down his rib cage, leaving him content and pliant in his hold.

When he finally rolls over in Hua Cheng's arms, he's completely relaxed—pressing close, arms around his neck.

There's a contentment that settles over Hua Cheng, rumbling quietly in his chest—when Xie Lian chooses to speak again.

"What about you?" He murmurs, his voice low, so relaxed, Hua Cheng doesn't understand it at first.

"Hmm?"

"…Can I take care of you?"

And He promptly chokes.

Xie Lian doesn't seem particularly surprised by that reaction, waiting until he's properly cleared his throat.

"…There's no obligation for you to reciprocate, dianxia." He explains hoarsely. "It doesn't have to be give and take."

He's perfectly happy to give, give, and give—

"I want to," Xie Lian's reply is quiet, riddled with shyness—but when Hua Cheng peeks at his expression…

He seems sure.

"I just…don't know how," he admits, seeming almost contrite about that fact. And before Hua Cheng can reassure him that it's perfectly alright not to—

"…Could San Lang teach me?"

He asks so delicately, so earnestly, his cheeks stained pink, all the way to his ears—

And what else can Hua Cheng *do?*

"…Alright," he mutters, averting his gaze. "But you don't need—"

"I know," Xie Lian whispers.

After a moment of long, contemplative silence—Hua Cheng shifts, sitting up against the pillows and headboard, guiding Xie Lian to move with him.

He does so easily, sitting up on his knees beside him—and the ghost king takes a deep breath.

He doesn't ask Xie Lian again if he's sure, having had that conversation enough times to know what the answer is going to be.

But before he can pull the prince to him—he feels hands on the front of his robes.

When Xie Lian sees the way his eyebrows raise, he pulls back.

"…that…I thought…since that was what you did…" he fiddles with the hem of his sleeve. "But if that's not the proper order—"

He falls silent when Hua Cheng's hands envelop his wrists, pulling them back.

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about—gege's already done it."

Xie Lian is baffled at first, because they have *definitely* never done anything like this before, but—

Then he remembers the dice game they played in Fu Gu with 'Ming Yi' and Shi Qingxuan, and how, when they lost…

"…Right," he swallows hard.

That was a little different back then—because Xie Lian couldn't actually *see* what he was doing—

But now, he's just as careful as Hua Cheng was with him before. Delicately removing the silver jewelry around his neck, setting it aside.

His fingers are a little less self assured, compared to Hua Cheng's before. Carefully pulling at the clasps on the front of his robes, trembling slightly when they pull at his belt.

And it isn't any easier when the robes slip down his shoulders.

It's actually not that Xie Lian is unfamiliar with Hua Cheng's physique—he's bumped into the man while he was shirtless more than once.

Likely because Hua Cheng felt more comfortable knowing that Xie Lian couldn't see anything—he can't imagine another reason for it.

And it's not as though he's shirtless now—he still has his white inner robes beneath.

But they’re thinner—cut close to his body, unclasped in the front. Enough to show more bare skin than Xie Lian was expecting.

The smooth, toned planes of his chest, leading down his torso…

Xie Lian reaches out without thinking, pressing his palm against Hua Cheng’s chest, surprised to find that it isn’t as cold as he expected, but —

There’s something else he wasn’t expecting.

A scar.

Other than calluses on his hands and his missing eye—his body has been largely unblemished. All of the scars Xie Lian felt on Hong’er’s face, the broken nose. All of it gone as death wipes away all imperfections like waves on the sand.

Except for this.

The death scar.

Xie Lian has spent too many nights laying awake, thinking of the way he died. How much pain he must have been in. How scared and alone.

Part of him knows he should have been sad when Qi Rong dispersed. That it was an almost pitiful thing. He was his last family in the world.

And part of him knows that coldness, that harsh streak of anger that he discovered in himself when he was young—it remains.

Because he's glad.

He never tried to forgive Qi Rong. Never tried to show him kindness.

He knows that's ironic, given the grace he showed to Jun Wu at the end.

But of all of the things that man did—none of them could have ever caused Xie Lian as much pain as this scar.

He can't forgive that. He won't even try.

It's vertical—slashing across where his heart once beat. A signal of its now permanent silence.

And it aches sometimes, remembering the nights that Xie Lian would sleep next to the fire of Puqi Shrine, comforted by the sound of Hong'er's heartbeat.

He'll never hear it again.

Hua Cheng watches him silently, the emotions of sorrow and remorse in his eyes, wishing he could wash those away—and knowing that he can't.

But before he can say anything to take his mind from it—the prince leans forward, pressing his lips over the mark.

The ghost king grows still under his touch, fingers tangled in his hair—and Xie Lian considers it more of a silent oath than a kiss.

That he will *never* let someone take him from him again. No matter what he has to do. No matter what it takes.

This scar will be the last.

But once his fervor fades, and he realizes that his lips are pressed to the bare skin of Hua Cheng's chest—

His cheeks slowly begin to warm as he pulls back, opening his mouth to apologize--even if that's silly, given what they're *doing* , but—

Then, Hua Cheng's hands are on his waist, pulling him forward until he's sitting astride the man's lap, and their lips are moving together again.

There's a harder edge to it than there was before—still passionate, always loving—

But slightly less controlled.

His hands are heavy through the thin fabric of Xie Lian's inner robes—dragging it upwards when his hands slide up the small of his back, pushing him closer, and when the prince feels fingertips against the bare skin of his spine, that familiar feeling crops up in his gut again.

"Should—” He tries to speak only to find his mouth tongue tied, eyes rolling back as they part, Hua Cheng's lips finding his jaw again. "What should I—?"

If he were mortal, Hua Cheng's grip on his hips might be considered bruising.

Should he just do it exactly how Hua Cheng did it to him? That makes sense, but he isn't sure—

"I probably won't be as good—" He starts to warn, audibly concerned about being *disappointing* compared to Hua Cheng's performance, and something about that strikes a nerve.

Because in a departure from his prior caution—Xie Lian feels fingers wrap around one of his wrists, dragging his hand down, and—

When his palm is pressed against the hardness between the ghost king's legs and he hears a low, guttural moan in response, his heart pounds.

It actually isn’t the first time Xie Lian has felt him like this—and even if it wasn’t, he felt it pressed against him before, when Hua Cheng was touching him. He was just politely ignoring it up until now—

But feeling it against his thigh and having it against his *hand* are…

“Dianxia couldn’t touch me in a way I wouldn’t enjoy,” Hua Cheng’s voice is ragged, practically undone by even this much.

Xie Lian swallows hard—wishing Hua Cheng would realize he feels the same way, but…

For now, he tries to focus on the matter at hand.

Literally.

His palm slides up slowly—the added friction earning a soft hiss as he reaches for the hem of his robes, grateful for Hua Cheng’s assistance when he helps pull them down.

And it’s—

It’s not that Xie Lian has never seen a man naked before—he has.

Well, he’s seen himself.

Which he supposes leaves him better off than if he was doing this with a woman, which he’s utterly clueless about.

But when he says that he’s ‘seen’ himself—that’s actually being a bit generous in description.

He paid attention to his physique when he was younger—because everyone else did.

Which—considering he was very much a child back then, wasn't appropriate—but that's not the point.

The point is that he *couldn't* see himself for the last eight centuries. At all.

Ironically—he even forgot what his own face looked like, and he hasn't gotten reacquainted in the last year.

Part of it was adjusting to his sight. He lives with his eyes shut as a habit, and has to remember that he *can* open them now—and adjust to the brightness when he does.

But it's also because he's avoided mirrors—or looking at himself at all.

He's never changed forms often, either—but in the last year he has.

Masquerading as 'Bolin,' or using his female form to show some solidarity with Shi Qingxuan in the latter stages of their pregnancy.

He isn't sure why he did—but if he was avoiding looking at his own appearance, he certainly wasn't going to strip down to examine himself *down there* either.

So, for all purposes, the sight of Hua Cheng's body is jarring.

In a good way—a way that feels so natural, it's almost jarring—but it still leaves the prince unsure, eyes sliding up to meet the ghost king's.

"Should I…?" He swallows again, his ears burning as Hua Cheng reaches down to take his hand once more.

He knows that it won't always be like this—that he might occasionally be a slow learner, but he does learn—but there's something…

Something about the gentleness in Hua Cheng's touch as he guides him through it that somehow, impossibly, makes the prince love him even more.

He never even saw what was used to slick Hua Cheng's hand before—everything was so smooth and quick, and Xie Lian was too embarrassed to open his eyes half of the time.

Now, he watches as oil is rubbed into his palm from a small vile—and his fingers are carefully guided down, wrapping around—

Oh.

Xie Lian bites his lip, fingers gripping slightly tighter—feeling him pulse and groan underneath his touch.

He didn't realize that touching someone else could be just as—if not *more* —exciting than being touched yourself.

Watching with round eyes and bated breath as Hua Cheng's fingers overlap with his. Xie Lian's never had small hands, but he's enveloped nonetheless, his knees tightening where they rest next to Hua Cheng's thighs, watching his fingers are guided up and down.

Watching the way his body reacts—how flesh darkens and somehow gets even *bigger* —

"Dianxia," Xie Lian grows still, having heard his title said in countless different ways, but—

Never like *that* .

"L-look at me…"

The moment he tilts his face up, Hua Cheng takes his mouth.

Teeth dragging over his lower lip, drinking in his gasp as their tongues move together.

It seemed sudden to Xie Lian, but if Hua Cheng was forced to watch the prince watching him like *that* any longer—

It would have ended embarrassingly quickly.

(Not that drinking in the noises he makes as his hands are on him makes it any easier.)

Xie Lian steadies himself with one hand on Hua Cheng's shoulder, his stomach lurching every time he thrusts into his other hand.

(Remembering. Remembering *vividly.)*

Part of him thinks he wouldn't mind if they stayed like this forever. Here, alone—wrapped up in each other. Not having to worry, not having to think. Hua Cheng moving his body, using it to make something that feels as beautiful as this.

One kiss falls into the next, and Hua Cheng is louder than he was—grunts and moans sending shivers down Xie Lian's spine, hungry for more.

But when they pause between kisses, if only because Hua Cheng wants him to breathe—

“I love you,” Xie Lian pants against his jaw.

Hua Cheng's head sinks back against the pillows, cheeks flushed, and Xie Lian follows him, pressing clumsy, earnest kisses against his chin, the side of his throat.

“I love you so much,” he shudders when Hua Cheng's fingers tangle in his hair, dragging him back up.

It's hard to get words out between kisses, but he *tries* , remembering how Hua Cheng spoke to him before. Gasping out praises and compliments every time his lips are free.

“You—you're *so* good, San Lang, I love you, I—”

The ghost king lets out a broken cry against his lips.

The last few jerks of his hips up into Xie Lian's hand are so forceful, the only thing that stops him from toppling over is Hua Cheng's palm against the small of his back, holding him in place.

He's trembling one moment, boneless and gasping the next, and when his vision clears, he pulls Xie Lian back into him.

The prince's hand was halfway to his lips beforehand, not even thinking—and now he's too embarrassed by what he was *going* to do to comment as the ghost king cleans his hand off, kissing him deeply.

“Was that…” Xie Lian's eyes are half-lidded, and he feels…almost hazy.

Even more so than he did after his own climax—warm all over, his limbs impossibly light. “Was that good—?”

He sighs into the next kiss, melting into Hua Cheng's arms as the ghost king cradles him against his chest.

Each of them half dressed, relaxed, and sated.

“It was *so* good,” he assures him, one hand cradling the back of his head, the other wrapped around his back. “You really are going to be the death of me.”

Xie Lian makes a low sound of disapproval in the back of his throat, burying his face in Hua Cheng’s chest.

"No more of that," He mutters, shaking his head.

He's been the death of him three times too many—and that's more than enough to last for the rest of eternity.

Hua Cheng smiles faintly, sitting back against the pillows with his love in his arms.

"If dianxia insists."

Xie Lian does insist, and Hua Cheng should know that by now.

That if he ever goes charging off the cliff by himself again—Xie Lian will just go jumping after him, plunging down into whatever pit awaits by his side.

"There's so much I want to tell you," he whispers.

So much that's happened since he left last--so much that Xie Lian wanted to tell him before that--

He doesn't even know where to begin.

But that's alright—

Hua Cheng already has his own priorities in mind.

"Sleep first," he murmurs. "You need rest."

It’s not a bad suggestion, not when they’re both limp and pleasantly tired.

And when Hua Cheng sees the flash of anxiety in his eyes at the suggestion…

He leans down to kiss his cheek.

“I’ll be there when you wake up your highness—I swear.”

Even when he says that, Xie Lian finds himself fighting the clutches of sleep. Fighting to keep his eyes open, but the feeling of Hua Cheng's fingers in his hair, his hand against his back—

It feels safe.

And it's been so long since Xie Lian felt…

Hua Cheng watches as he slowly sinks down against his chest, his body growing slack, breaths growing deep and slow.

The lantern lights still drift past the window outside, the Heaven's cheering in celebration as the final counts are tallied.

In spite of everything, there are more lanterns this year all around—mortals looking for comfort in the chaos through prayers.

Prayers to the elemental masters, the martial gods of the south, east, and west—to the new Emperor.

But above all of them, standing tall above the rest, are the lanterns sent into the sky in name of the Crown Prince of Xianle, and as his teachings have said, far and wide across the continent—

Any lantern given in his name is also given in the name of the Ghost King.

Praying for his return, so that the prince will never be parted from his greatest treasure again—forever together once more.

And that night, across the world, they see their prayers come to fruition.

Countless believers scattered across the continent, hands clasped in prayer as they stand before the statue of the Crown Prince, the Ghost King's tapestry always standing sentry behind him.

They watch with bated breath, a red comet burning in the sky above, fireworks exploding like falling stars, as the statue of the Crown Prince begins to change.

White marble turning into gleaming veins of gold.

A secret that only faith can tell—where true worth lies.

In the Heavenly Capital, when the tallies are counted—even with the great generals and elemental masters in tight competition—the Crown Prince sits firmly atop the heap.

With six thousand and one lanterns.

Nearly a thousand from grateful worshippers across the country, scattered temples halfway constructed, but sending up as much as they can muster. Another thousand from Qiandeng Temple in Ghost City. Thirty from Gusu, one from Puqi Village...

And four thousand from Huangji Temple, on Mount Taicang. More than any other release of Blessing Lanterns on record, beating the record of three thousand from the year before.

It doesn't take much guesswork to think of who could have done such a thing.

But no one goes to investigate the matter—not just yet.

Such matters can be left for the morning—no matter how badly some of them want to look, they understand.

Some reunions are best had in private—giving them time and space to breathe.

To sleep until sorrow becomes a memory, and longing is replaced with the beautiful ache of no longer waking up alone.

UPDATE ON THE NO PATHS ARE BOUND COMIC

As mentioned before, ImaginaryCanvas has been making a beautiful visual adaptation of this story! They uploaded the first two chapters on the WEBTOON platform today, and you can check their twitter @imaginarycanvas for more updates on new chapters as they go up! It's a huge honor to have such a wonderful artist putting so much time and energy into a project based on my story, and I'm so grateful! If you want to follow the comic on WEBTOON, you can do it here!

Chapter End Notes

> if you noticed that I went the entire chapter without describing male genitalia once, it's because I went semi-viral for making a tweets about synonyms for the word "cock" and got embarrassed.

See you next time!!

xoxo, Evie

Legacies

Chapter Summary

> The prince lifts his head, eyes peeking out from blankets and folds of fabric—and when he sees a familiar, adoring gaze staring down at him…
>
> Xie Lian sits up, pushing himself forward until he can press their lips together in a slow, lingering kiss.
>
> Saying the same thing he’s said hundreds of thousands of times—but this time, to the man who was always meant to hear it.
>
> “Good morning, San Lang.”

Xie Lian's eyes open to the gentle warmth of morning sun—and something that sounds suspiciously like a heartbeat, but not in the chest underneath his cheek.

His gaze drifts to the side, and…he finds a silver wraith butterfly nestled in his hair, wings beating softly, mimicking a pulse.

He never thought such a simple thing could bring him to the verge of tears.

It’s overwhelming, to be known inside out. To be loved so carefully, so wholeheartedly, that the man holding him would think of such a small thing. That Xie Lian would miss the sound of it.

The same man who wore silver bells for 800 years, so Xie Lian could hear his steps.

The sudden surge of emotions has him burying his face in the front of Hua Cheng’s robes, nose brushing against his chest—earning a sigh in response.

He’s awake, then.

The prince lifts his head, eyes peeking out from blankets and folds of fabric—and when he sees a familiar, adoring gaze staring down at him…

Xie Lian sits up, pushing himself forward until he can press their lips together in a slow, lingering kiss.

Saying the same thing he's said hundreds of thousands of times—but this time, to the man who was always meant to hear it.

"Good morning, San Lang."

He doesn't say that it's going to be a good day, a mantra he used to use to will hope into existence—and he doesn't need to.

It's *going* to be a good day.

As long as Hua Cheng is here—it couldn't be anything less.

Arms tighten around him, pulling the prince closer, their foreheads pressing together.

"Good morning, gege…" He replies, voice slightly roughened with sleep.

Xie Lian loves him.

Loves the way his robes feel against his skin. Loves the familiar way he smells. Loves the sound of his voice, loves it even more when it's rougher and deeper just after he wakes up. Loves the way he holds him.

He loves him, he loves him, *he loves him*—

"…Did you get a dog, or is it just a persistent stray?"

Xie Lian pulls back slightly at the reminder, looking back over his shoulder to see Hong Li standing in the doorway, his head tilted to the side as he takes in the newcomer.

The prince's eyes brighten, then soften as he sits up, patting the space on the bed beside him. All the invitation the animal needs to trot over, climbing up, his tail thumping against the mattress.

"He didn't have anyone," Xie Lian explains.

(And sometimes, neither did he.)

Hua Cheng sits up, resting his chin on his shoulder as he looks the little beast over, arms wrapping around Xie Lian's waist.

"Does he have a name?"

Xie Lian hums, leaning back against him as he scratches the dog behind the ears. “Hong Li.”

“…”

The silence stretches on long enough for the prince to realize, his face growing hot with embarrassment.

“Not—not like red—”

(Like Hua Cheng’s birth name.)

“—just—like strong! He’s strong, for a dog…”

But when Xie Lian surveys the missing eye, the wild dark fur, and the protective way the animal lays across his lap—

…He can understand what it looks like.

If he put an eyepatch and a red collar on him, someone passing by might think it was one of Hua Cheng’s other forms.

“…He really is good company,” Xie Lian explains awkwardly. “He’s good for protection—”

As if the man who decapitated the former emperor in one blow *needs* a guard dog, but Hua Cheng is generous with his god—and as such, does not dispute that fact with him.

“…And I used to keep dogs when I was a child,” the prince adds sheepishly. “I know that sounds silly—”

Hua Cheng’s arms tighten around his waist as he shakes his head.

“No,” he murmurs, his cheek pressed against Xie Lian’s jaw. “There’s nothing you could tell me about yourself that I wouldn’t be grateful to hear.”

He wants to know everything about him. From the moments they couldn’t share. What he thinks. What he remembers. What he worries about. What keeps him awake at night.

Xie Lian isn’t so sure, doesn’t see how that could be true, but…

He smiles, nuzzling back against him, fingers tangled in Hong Li’s fur.

“…I’ve never liked sleeping alone,” he admits. “When I was small, I used to cry and ask to sleep with my parents every night.”

He can feel Hua Cheng's smile against his neck. "Did they indulge you?"

"Yes," Xie Lian nods. "I think my father liked it better when I was… whining. It made him feel like I needed him, I suppose? But as I got older, I was embarrassed about sleeping in their bed."

"Naturally."

"The solution was to have one of the guard dogs sleep in my room with me until I got used to it, and I did, but…the dogs never left," Xie Lian concludes. "Thinking about them was…one of the few things that made me homesick."

Even before his first banishment.

And once he says that—Hong Li's fate is sealed.

Hua Cheng reaches down, scratching the dog's side—and Hong Li's tail thumps in appreciation.

In general, animals have no aggression towards ghosts—knowing they don't do the same harm as the living.

"…Did your father find you less endearing when you were older?" It's a narrow question, and Xie Lian's surprised that Hua Cheng picked up on such a minute detail in his phrasing so quickly—but he doesn't avoid it.

He just thinks carefully before he speaks.

It's notable, because in all of the questions that Hua Cheng has asked Xie Lian—he can't recall the man having ever asked about Xie Lian's father before.

Not once.

"…We both disappointed each other, I think." Xie Lian explains carefully.

"He loved me, but…sometimes I felt like it was conditional."

On Xie Lian being *perfect* . On Xie Lian never failing. On Xie Lian never disagreeing with him.

On Xie Lian being a dutiful son. A glorious prince. A righteous god.

"And he loved his pride more."

But it's not simple.

And the more he talks to Mu Qing, cautiously unveiling more and more of the things neither of them dared to speak of before—he struggles to reconcile himself with two facts:

Xie Lian's father was not a good man.

And;

Xie Lian still loves him.

Still mourns him. Still goes to visit him, along with what's left of his mother in the family mausoleum.

He doesn't know how to stop—because he's always loved his father, and he's almost frightened by the void that would be left behind if he let that go.

"…But you would have liked my mother," Xie Lian concludes, shifting the topic slightly. "And she loved you, when I told her about you."

Hua Cheng stiffens, surprised. "You told her about me?"

"…How you took care of me," Xie Lian whispers. "And that you made sure I was never by myself."

Her love for her son was unconditional—even if she didn't always understand Xie Lian, or know what to say in the face of his struggles.

For so many years, Xie Lian looked back on her reaction to learning that he was in love with a man—and thought she was ashamed of him.

But now, he understands.

She thought *Xie Lian* was ashamed—and to some extent, she was right.

But she never loved him less.

And she would have loved Hua Cheng. Would have been thrilled to see them now—because Xie Lian is happy.

That's all she ever wanted.

His father would have *hated* him by contrast—but tolerated him, for Xie Lian's sake.

And that makes all the difference between the two.

The potential of a father's disappointment should be motivation, never a burden.

A parent's love should never be conditional.

If Xie Lian ever had children—he'd like to make them understand that.

"…What about your father?" He asks quietly. "You've never mentioned him."

Hong'er spoke of his mother sometimes—very briefly—and she isn't a subject that he speaks on often, but he doesn't outright avoid it either.

"…I never knew him," Hua Cheng mutters, arms tightening subtly around his ribs. "But my mother said he was a soldier. And she loved him."

Xie Lian waits for him to continue—hands slipping down to cover where they rest over his stomach.

But he doesn't, turning his head to look out the window, eye narrowed—and a small, annoyed grunt draws Xie Lian's attention.

"San Lang?"

"…It's nothing, really." He frowns, pressing a lingering kiss into the side of Xie Lian's throat until he squirms, but isn't effectively distracted. "Just useless trash making a nuisance of themselves."

"…San Lang…"

"Hmmm?"

"Did you put an array around the mountain?"

There's a pause—and after a moment, he shrugs.

"Gege needed rest. Your attendants are too impatient."

Xie Lian wouldn't call them *attendants* anymore, but he doesn't argue that point.

"Thank you San Lang, but I'm awake now..."

So he is.

Hua Cheng sighs deeply.

He doesn't release the array immediately—no.

First, he helps Xie Lian back into his outer robes, combs his hair until it's perfectly smooth, and his gaze shines when Xie Lian insists on doing the same for him.

And...there's something different now.

It's not that it was *hard* to touch Hua Cheng before. As a matter of fact...even though Xie Lian had learned to dread being touched over the years, he's never minded it from him.

But there was tension before. One that still exists now...in a much more tolerable amount.

Xie Lian couldn't have put his finger on it before their encounter in the Forge. And after, he had assumed it was only on his end of things. That he just had to...deal with it. And if he *did* get the chance to act on it, the vast unknown of that possibility was...intimidating.

But now that he's seen what comes of it...

There's nothing frightening about it at all. Not when it's with the right person.

And now...there's this added layer of intimacy every time Hua Cheng touches him, and...he thrills in it, even in the smallest of ways.

When they step out of the cottage, they're hand in hand--and Xie Lian watches as the barrier around Mount Taicang fades with a golden glimmer, disappearing into the air. And the moment it does...

"...Your highness!"

Familiar voices follow.

It's only moments later that Feng Xin and Mu Qing burst into sight, stumbling through the underbrush.

"You—!" Feng Xin sputters, pointing to Hua Cheng's chest, "You're back?!"

The Ghost King arches an eyebrow, his thumb rubbing over Xie Lian's knuckles.

"What gave it away?"

He made absolutely no efforts at subtlety with his return, after all—and the reminder has Feng Xin glaring at him sheepishly.

“And you had to lock his highness into an array all night? For what—?!” His gaze drifts toward Xie Lian, and he falls silent, eyes bulging out.

Xie Lian can’t understand what he’s looking at, turning to peer over his shoulder, only to find Hong Li and Ruoye playing in front of the house.

But when he turns back around, the issue becomes obvious.

Feng Xin is pointedly staring at his *neck* .

Xie Lian’s mind flashes to Hua Cheng’s teeth scraping across his skin the night before—and he claps a hand against the side of his throat; ears turning read as he looks to him, looking for an explanation, but—

But the ghost king looks perfectly smug about it all.

Mu Qing rolls his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest as he sends Feng Xin a pointed look. “Stop staring at him like a show pony, you’re making it worse.”

Poor Xie Lian looks like he might faint at any moment—and Hua Cheng’s ego doesn’t need the boost of watching them panic.

“But he—! He can’t just—!”

“We’ll talk more later,” Xie Lian mutters frantically, waving his fingers—summoning Ruoye to wrap around his neck, hiding the evidence from the night before. “San Lang has a busy day—lots of things to catch up on—thank you for stopping by!”

“So—what, we’re not gonna talk about—?”

“Give it a rest, Feng Xin,” Mu Qing sighs, tugging on his sleeve. “I doubt his highness is going to pay attention to anyone else for the next month anyway.”

“…Who’s side are you on?! Am I the only one who remembers that the last time we tried to talk things out, he punched you in the face?!"

Mu Qing wouldn't call that 'talking things out,' they were just trying to sneak Xie Lian out of that cavern to get him away from him.

He doesn't regret that—the ghost king seemed freakishly obsessed at the time.

They just didn't realize that it was, as Xie Lian put it…mutual.

And looking back on it—the punch was the thing Mu Qing resents the least about that interaction.

Words were said that certainly crossed a line—on both sides—and now that Feng Xin has *context* …

He obviously isn't as forgiving of it either.

But Mu Qing can't say he hasn't said worse when pushed—and they'll have time to talk about it.

Later.

Now, when a white robed figure walks across the central plains—he does not go alone.

A young man walks by his side, one in crimson robes, tilting an umbrella over his head to shield him from the sun.

And everywhere they step, orchids grow.

The ghost king occasionally steps, bending over to pluck one of the white blooms, tucking them into the prince's hair—stealing a kiss every time.

And every time, Xie Lian tilts his face up, leaning onto the tips of his toes to reach him.

The path isn't long—and they don't rush, though Hua Cheng's leisurely pace is less from a lack of urgency, and more to give someone *else* the chance to notice his approach.

And when a rush of autumn leaves blows past—a small smile grows across his face.

A pair of eyes peer out from around the corner of a nearby oak—cautious, almost as though he's terrified to look and be wrong—

But when Crimson Rain turns to meet his gaze, it only takes a moment for him to start running.

In the year since he left, Ren Song has spent nearly all of that time in his adult form. Occasionally turning small on the nights he visited Puqi Shrine, wriggling his way into Xie Lian's arms before he fell asleep.

But by the time he reaches Hua Cheng now—

Shuo doesn't care about growing up. He doesn't care about looking stronger or braver than he is.

All he can think about, when he jumps into the ghost king's arms, is that his family is back.

All of his family.

"You—" Xie Lian's heart almost breaks for him when he hears the ghost weep, small arms clinging around Hua Cheng's neck. "You came back!"

Xie Lian told him that a million times, that he *always* comes back, but —

This was Shuo's first time losing him. Being alone.

He had Lang Qianqiu. He had Guzi. He had Xie Lian. He mended things with Blackwater—and even formed a tentative friendship with Xie Lian's attendants.

(Who hates being called that.)

But the one constant that he always had—Hua Cheng—was gone.

And now...he can't make himself stop crying. Wiping bloody tears on his sleeve, not caring.

"You—you can't *ever* do that again!" He snaps, hugging him tighter. "D-Dianxia missed you so much and he was *scared* and he didn't know what to *do* and it was lonely—”

Xie Lian nods sagely, not disputing a single word—perfectly willing to let the youngest calamity say it was just him in order to save face—and Hua Cheng holds the boy close, resting his chin on top of his head.

"He won't lose me. Not ever again."

Now, he cries harder.

An ancient ghost, one who now holds immense power—but none of that *really* matters.

No matter how old you are, no matter how much you change—you're always small in the hands that raised you.

"...I had the chance to speak with Blackwater in the array this morning."

Shuo grows still, listening to the low, stern tone in Hua Cheng's voice.

"He told me what you did."

And that, for a time, he was *gone.*

That Hua Cheng could have lost his last—

That's when Shuo notices how tightly he's being held—almost painfully.

Hua Cheng's protective nature is always limited when it comes to Xie Lian--because he's always been above him. Never even equals in Hua Cheng's mind. He can't make demands of him, only plead with him.

In Shuo's case, however, there are no such reservations.

"You are *never* doing that again," he hisses. "Understood?"

Shuo leans back, wiping his eyes with his sleeve, sniffling. "But if I hadn't, you would have been—”

A low snarl makes him shrink, nodding in agreement.

"Fine, fine, not doing it again! Don't be such a—!"

But when he sees the look on Crimson Rain's face, he grows silent.

Because he's never seen Hua Cheng look...not quite afraid, but close to it.

Pained.

"...I won't," he promises, quieter this time—and he's pulled into another tight hug.

They'll return to Ghost City soon—and the entire Ghost Realm will break out in a celebration like no other—but for now, it's just them.

And when Hua Cheng speaks again, his voice is softer, and he says something that leaves Shuo frozen, his mind blank with shock.

"I'm proud of you."

As frightened and angry as he was, learning what Shuo had done—it was brave. There's a chance it bought time that saved them all.

And when Hua Cheng remembers a frightened little boy, crying out for help on Mount Tonglu—

He's *so* proud.

"..." Shuo's eyes well up again before he buries his face in the front of Hua Cheng's robes, arms clinging tightly around his neck, mumbling the words—

"I'm proud of you too."

And there's something else. One word tacked on timidly, almost as if he thinks it's safer to say it quietly, half muffled, to the point where Hua Cheng barely has a chance at hearing it.

Something Hua Cheng never expected to hear, after the brief, miserable life the boy lived.

'Baba.'

It's not something he'll ever say at full volume, he'll never have the nerve.

But it's a cautious offering of something he was always too nervous to ask for. And now, instead of rejection...

Hua Cheng holds him tighter.

And when he answers to it, simply saying—

"I know."

The void that has always existed in Shuo's life—one that he was always too afraid to fill...finally seems to disappear.

He doesn't lift his head from Hua Cheng's chest, reaching one hand out—and when Xie Lian takes it, stepping close to hug the other side of him...

The ghost realizes quietly, to himself, that this is what it was always supposed to feel like.

Wanted. Safe.

Never alone.

Xie Lian leans his head against Hua Cheng's shoulder, holding both of them in his arms.

Thinking of how it's almost hard to believe that the ghost king never knew his father.

Because *being* one seems to come to him so naturally.

The gates of Ghost City await them, and a man feared from one end of the globe to the other is welcomed like a returning hero. To screams and cheers of euphoria, celebrations breaking out all over the ghost realm.

(And in the mortal realm, too.)

But even now, in a time of celebration—he can't stay.

There's someone else that's been waiting for him for far, far too long.

The journey is far quicker than their last—as simple as a roll of the dice.

This used to be such a lonely place.

An enormous glass box, built by a cruel, lonely child, to hold a butterfly.

He could never stand the thought of her flying away.

But not anymore.

Journeys end in reunions—and she’s been waiting for *so* long.

And now, she’s not alone.

Held in the arms of the only man who loved her selflessly.

The oldest spirit left in this world, holding on valiantly—but growing weaker with every second that passes, butterflies drifting around them sluggishly.

Mei Nianqing's fingers brush through her hair, just as they did when she was a girl. Young, too shy to admit her feelings for her Shizun ran deeper than she could ever say.

"…How are you still as beautiful as the day we met?" He whispers. "That doesn't seem fair."

Everything else withers in decay—but not her.

She is beautiful in death. Love that endures through sorrow.

And for two thousand years, he watched over their descendants.

For two thousand years, he fought to find a way to the Kiln.

To her.

And when she was free—he was there.

There to show her the mountains again. The sunrise over the sea. To share the memories of their son, what he built, and the legacy of his descendants.

But as her strength began to wane—she wanted to come back here.

To where her sons were born. Where two of them were buried.

"Liar…" She whispers, smiling as she turns her cheek into his palm.

Hair streaked with gray. Laugh lines around her mouth that weren't there the year before.

But he still loves her the same.

He only wishes his body could show the wear of time. That he could fade with her.

There are so many things Tonglu Hudie never got to be. So many dreams that were stolen from her too soon.

But she gets to have one;

Passing on from this life surrounded by the ones she loves.

There’s a gold flash in the corner of her eye—and her smile trembles.

One hand reaches out, weak, frail.

Ghosts need resentment to linger—or something precious to hold onto.

Hudie has no hatred left in her heart—and her sons have already passed on. Except for…

“…My boys…” she whispers, eyes full when they kneel beside her.

San Lang and He Sheng.

Both have grown so much in the time since she met them. From bitter, lost souls, into men who can hold their heads high.

He Sheng brought his son, barely old enough to crawl—to meet the closest thing he’ll ever have to a grandmother.

When Hua Cheng watches her holding He Bai in her arms, eyes bittersweet and far away—he knows who she’s remembering.

But there’s no room for sadness now.

Not when she sees Bolin in Xie Lian’s face.

Or the newfound peace in Ren Song’s eyes when he hugs her goodbye.

There's nothing like the passing of a ghost. A lingering presence finally letting go in a final sigh.

No funeral rites. No desperate pleas for a soul to hold on longer than it wishes.

There's only fondness, gratitude, and bittersweet goodbyes.

Even her ashes have long since found their final rest, a golden ring that has sat on the hand of the man she loves as kingdoms rose and fell, as all memory of who they were and what they became faded into ash.

Where her remains rest, he'll rest with them.

She shares a whispered conversation with the Crown Prince of Xianle, their heads tilted close together.

And when he pulls back—she sees flowers growing through the ashes around them.

The same flowers that filled a garden planted for her, when she was young.

Hudie smiles faintly, sharing one last kiss with Mei Nianqing as the guoshi tucks those very same flowers into her hair—a crown finer than any she wore in her mortal life.

And then, it's time.

It ends the way she always knew it would—ever since the day they met.

She's lifted into a familiar pair of arms, too weak to make the final steps on her own.

Shares one final look with He Sheng, and the little boy in his arms.

Remembering the sons she once held.

Clack!

Clack!

They were always meant to end up here.

A mother fading in the arms of her favorite child.

Frail fingers press against a ghost king's cheek.

"You...aren't supposed to cry when you win, boy." She whispers.

At first, Crimson Rain cannot bring himself to speak.

He's lost a mother before. Known the helpless grief that comes from having no power to protect those you love. To only watch them suffer and wither in front of you.

But now, with all of the power in the world, it's even harder to let the people you love go—knowing it's best.

Kneeling before a red door in a dark hall, holding her palm against his cheek, two tears of blood slipping down his chin.

And now, he can give her one last gift. Ease one final hurt, before the end.

"...You deserve to follow your children," he murmurs. "All three."

Her eyes widen slightly against the darkness, wraith butterflies reflecting in her irises. "A...all...of them?"

San Lang fell to the volcano. Bolin lived a long, peaceful life. But—

"Zhang Wei's soul wasn't destroyed," Hua Cheng tells her quietly. "He was able to pass on."

And just like that, her eyes fill with tears, lips trembling.

Remembering that first pain, one that haunted her like no other—a theft that left a void inside of her for the rest of her days.

The fact that he was stolen. Not missing, not lost—just *gone* .

"How...do you...?"

There are some mysteries that humans will never know. Recognizing souls between lives has always been one of them.

But the Kiln is the place where all souls are rendered bare, and lines between them become blurred.

"I've seen him. Who he'll become. He's not gone."

Part of her must have always known. Dreaming of a boy in the garden, playing a flute—lulling her into peaceful sleep throughout the centuries, waiting to be free.

Hudie's lips tremble, her hand tightening against Hua Cheng's cheek.

"...Then I'll find him again," she whispers.

No matter what she has to do. Who she becomes.

She was able to give all of her sons something. Raising San Lang with all of the love she had left to give. Letting Bolin go, when he had a chance for a better life.

But Zhang Wei, her first, her sweetest...

He was taken from her before she could.

Hua Cheng knows that humans have little control over their next lives. That you can only live this one as well as you can. And hold on long after, if something precious remains.

He knows that—but he believes her.

"...I'm sorry," he finally whispers—her eyes drifting up towards him, surprised.

"...Sorry?"

"I wasn't a good son," he explains, eyes brimming. "I always made trouble."

Her form flickers, and her laugh is weak—but affectionate.

“Y...you were perfect...” she reassures him. “It...It was the best trouble of my life.”

Hua Cheng falls silent, his cheek resting against her head.

She watches the butterflies drifting around them—old and new, a mother's and son's, here at the end of all things.

Beautiful.

And Zhao Beitong is so, so proud.

Rebirth is a terrifying process.

The action of a host being ripped apart in order to be forged into something new. An inherently violent cycle—but you never fear the creature that will spring forth.

Because it has always been a part of you.

"...Thank you, San Lang," she whispers.

The name she gave him when he didn't have one. When he was powerless, she gave him strength.

When he was lost, she gave him a mother.

And when she did, he made a promise—

That he would set her free.

A promise made—and a promise kept.

Hua Cheng watches as her form fades, butterfly wings rushing past him—until only one wraith butterfly remains.

Not silver anymore—but burning gold.

Resting on his forehead for one final moment, before flying through an open door.

There are so many things that he could thank her for. Things she taught him that could have been lost to time.

How terrifying and destructive love can be.

That you can love someone selfishly, as long as you don't cage them in.

That you love the man, not the name he carries.

He clasps his hands together as the door slams shut.

There is only one man he will ever kneel for—but he has always bowed before his teachers.

She was his first, and his last—and now he bends deeply in one final show of respect.

Taking up the mantle she once carried—and in many ways has carried since they met.

She forged the first calamities—and he will forge the last.

A forge master. A god of fire and death.

Bound to this existence by love and love alone.

"Thank you, Guoshi Tonglu."

Nearly a thousand years after their kingdom fell, a master is reunited with his students.

Leaning heavily on Feng Xin as they walk through the new Heavenly Capital.

The streets that used to be their home.

"You three…have grown up so much…" He murmurs.

Far from the three lost teenagers he knew so many years before. Naive, argumentative, and cynical respectively.

Now three fully fledged gods in their own right—who accomplished far more than he ever could.

"Circumstances will make that happen," Mu Qing mutters.

Mei Nianqing takes the tone in stride, glancing up at Feng Xin as he's led through the street. "I hear you two have a child now."

That makes both of his former students go red around the ears.

"It's HIS kid, I just—!"

"—he just helps out, dammit!

Cuo Cuo, now known around the Heavens as Xiao Feng, has called out for Mu Qing in the same way as he does for his mother at least three times in Xie Lian's presence alone—but the prince doesn't see fit to contradict them.

"Well—I'm sure the boy is well looked after."

Most of the palaces in the new capital are recent constructions—but one is a renovated ruin. Far more ancient in its architecture than the others.

But when Xie Lian trails his fingertips against the wall, he remembers running through this hall with Feng Xin on his heels.

His mother shouting for him to slow down. Pretending to sword fight on the balconies—reading books with Mu Qing on the terraces.

Listening to lectures from his Guoshi all afternoon long, falling asleep sometimes—and never being scolded for it.

For so long, Xie Lian wished he could have made memories with Hong'er here, before everything became so...

And now, in a quiet, happy realization...he understands that he can.

They reach the terrace outside of the apartments that once belonged to their Guoshi, helping him sit.

He leans against the wall, head tilted back to watch the beginnings of the sunset, the sky burning soft shades of gold and red.

Slowly spinning the ring on his finger.

When Mu Qing and Feng Xin make to leave—he holds up one hand, stopping them in their tracks.

"I have something to say to each of you," he murmurs. Words that should have been sooner, but now is still better than never.

"Feng Xin—you performed with distinction, and have served this family with honor like none other. From the bottom of my heart—thank you."

Before, Feng Xin would have found receiving such a thanks from a guoshi on behalf of the royal family...odd, and more of an empty gesture.

But now, knowing the truth of the Xie family's ancestry...

He finds himself choked up—barely able to nod in acknowledgement.

Mu Qing doesn't speak, his arms crossed over his chest.

He can sense that there's some desire for closure. To make amends, but...

When Mei Nianqing turns his gaze towards him—he has the same reluctant air.

The last time they parted—it wasn't on the best of terms. Even if Mu Qing can't exactly remember being on *good* terms with him to begin with.

The Guoshi of Xianle always made him feel like he didn't know his place. Like he was lucky just to *be* there, and shouldn't complain.

He was never praised. Never encouraged. He was able to sit, listen, and learn—but he was never entirely welcome.

And even now, Mei Nianqing’s words aren’t glowing.

“I never thought you’d amount to much,” he admits. “I always thought that personality would get in your way.”

Feng Xin’s hackles raise momentarily. They still bicker constantly, but he doesn't tolerate listening to anyone *else* complain about Mu Qing anymore.

Mu Qing is just as offended—but in part, he doesn't disagree.

His personality got in his way *so many times.*

"…And then you made a fool out of me," Mei Nianqing admits, looking him over with an emotion that Mu Qing never expected to see from him:

Respect.

"I'm sure that must please you."

A servant, son of a kitchen hand and an executed criminal—

And now, a respected martial god.

Not only that—but one who came closer to anyone other than Xie Lian to actually outmatching Jun Wu with a blade.

Mu Qing watches him for a moment, then shrugs.

"I stopped placing value in what old men think of me centuries ago."

With little else to say, he leaves—flicking his hair back over his shoulder as Feng Xin goes to follow him after a moment of hesitation—

And Xie Lian sighs, left alone with him on the balcony.

"You didn't have to say it like that, Guoshi."

"He wouldn't have thought the compliment was sincere if I wasn't mildly insulting at the same time," Mei Nianqing shrugs. "He's far quicker to believe praise that comes begrudgingly."

He isn't wrong—but it surprises Xie Lian that he put so much thought into such a small matter.

"…Is that why you were hard on him back then?" He raises his eyebrows, almost pleasantly surprised—

But his teacher shakes his head, reaching for the flask on his hip.

"No. I just…" he closes his eyes for a moment. "Saw shadows of him around every corner."

He doesn't claim to be fair, or rational—and Xie Lian can see what he means.

Mei Nianqing knew an underprivileged child who grew close to a prince once, too.

And he watched as that boy grew, destroying everything he ever loved.

"…And he wasn't the only child I did wrong by."

Xie Lian doesn't need to ask who he's referring to.

The boy who he stated should have had one of his senses sealed for falling from the city walls during the parade.

The child he claimed was cursed, sending him from Mount Taicang.

A day hadn't gone by without Xie Lian wondering how things couldn't have been different, if he had stayed.

If he could have protected him more. If they could have suffered less.

"…I don't know how…or when," his Guoshi frowns.

"But that wheel we were trapped in, in Wuyong…it began rolling again. But I wasn't the one being crushed by it."

He was the one pushing it down the hill.

A cycle he was never able to break.

But now…it's over.

Instead of being crushed underneath the wheel, someone dug their heels in. Bearing the weight on his shoulders in order to stop it.

And it never should have been his responsibility.

"…You're nothing like him, you know."

If Xie Lian can offer him any comfort—he can offer him that.

Mei Nianqing had his own flaws and failings—some greater than others—

But he isn't Jun Wu. He isn't *responsible* for Jun Wu, either.

"…I know," he agrees softly.

Part of him wishes he could be more like his student.

Someone who, when faced with two men dying of thirst and one glass of water, would try to save them both.

And it infuriated Mei Nianqing once—because that would mean pouring water from his own cup.

That he would have nothing left for the next person who needed him. That it would be a waste, and it would be in vain.

But that willingness to put everything on the line…

Mei Nianqing often wonders how things would have been different if he just…

"…You should go rest," he murmurs, reaching back to find Xie Lian's hand, squeezing it softly. "Or wait for him."

After being reunited so recently, every moment apart must ache.

Xie Lian doesn't let go of his hand immediately.

"I can sit with you, if you like…"

Mei Nianqing smiles faintly, shaking his head—squeezing his hand one more time before letting his own drop to the ground.

"That's alright. I used to watch the sunset like this every night. Go on—the others are waiting for you."

Xie Lian is reluctant at first—but he goes.

Allowing him to rest there, overlooking the same hills where he watched his son grow. His grandchildren, and their children. On and on.

One hand resting over his heart, a gold ring on his finger.

When they find him in the morning—he's still. Peaceful.

With a smile on his face.

He was never a god, even if he always managed to tower in the lives of those who dominated the upper court.

And when your immortality is dependent on your cultivation rather than your believers…

Surviving becomes a choice.

Though Xie Lian wouldn't call this willful surrender.

It's returning home when the battle has ended.

It reminds Xie Lian of something his father told him when he was still small, whining and begging to be carried, or held in his lap.

When his grandmother passed, he first became aware of what death meant.

Xie Lian barely remembers her now. She's become a kind face in the furthest recesses of his memory. But back then…he was suddenly painfully aware of the fact that life was a story with a definitive ending.

And that *terrified* him as a little boy.

The thought that one day, he just wouldn't exist anymore. That his mother and father might *die* one day.

(Painfully sooner than he ever could have guessed.)

He couldn't bear the thought of losing someone he loved.

As such, when he was six years old, he went to his father, his favorite person in the world at the time, and made what he thought was a perfectly reasonable request:

Xie Lian asked him to never die.

And it was the first time the King ever told him no.

It frustrated him, pushed the little prince to the verge of a panicked tantrum, full of tears—

But his father held him close, telling him that there was nothing to be afraid of.

That death is the only universal destination among human beings.

And when you reach that point—you won't be among strangers.

No one is ever really gone—it's more like they're waiting in the next room, and all one must do is wait for their turn to go through the door.

While that might have soothed Xie Lian's fears of losing his loved ones—it did nothing to resolve himself to the idea of his own eventual death.

And that was when his father told him about what their family once was;

Descendants of warriors. Defenders of the central plains.

That if Xie Lian was brave, if he grew to become strong, like they were—death was nothing to fear.

A man who lived honorably and fiercely would meet death with a hero's welcome.

And now, laying the last blood relative of his family to rest—

Xie Lian hopes that's true.

He's cremated on a traditional pyre, his final students standing sentry over his final rites.

A funeral that, for once, isn't a heartbreaking affair.

And when it's finished, his ashes are laid to rest in the family mausoleum—

Next to the love of his life, and their son.

Xie Lian realizes then, sealing the tomb--that Mei Nianqing is the last man that will ever be buried in this place.

Even if the crown prince eventually leaves this earth—as far as he's concerned, the time the Xie name, all that it meant, and all the history it held...has passed

His blood relatives are gone—and even if Xie Lian intended to have children of his own at any point…he wouldn't want them to have his family name.

He isn't ashamed of where he came from, but…

Some legacies don’t need to be passed on, even with love and good intentions.

If you lay them to rest, and let them go…

You leave room for new legacies to form. New stories to be told.

When Xie Lian returns from the family catacombs, he finds a familiar face sitting on the front steps, scratching Hong Li behind the ears,

They don't need to exchange words before they embrace one another, Hua Cheng's arms wrapping around his waist when Xie Lian comes to stand on the steps in front of him, pulling him in.

He leans his head against Hua Cheng's shoulder, hugging him tightly.

"...I know saying goodbye to her must have been difficult for you," he murmurs, fingers tangling in long locks of raven hair. "I'm sorry."

Hua Cheng is quiet for a moment, aware of where Xie Lian has come from, and what happened the night before.

But he can't bring himself to offer the same words of remorse. He feels sympathy for his god's loss of a mentor. Would do anything to spare Xie Lian from any source of pain—

And even still, he can't say he's sorry that Mei Nianqing followed Hudie into the afterlife.

Better for her, and...

With every ounce of love he carries for his prince, he's also aware of the fact that they are not the same. He isn't capable of the same kind of grace.

And there are certain things that he does not have the capacity to forgive.

Eventually, his lips press to the side of Xie Lian's head—arms holding him even closer, somehow.

"It's not so hard when moving on is what that person wants," he explains gently.

A reminder that makes Xie Lian press his face into the ghost king's throat, remembering his words;

'I pray to never rest in peace.'

A promise that dispels the fears of a man who was once a little boy, terrified of losing the ones he loved.

Because death might be the only universal destination—but it doesn't always mean parting ways.

He leans back, pulling him in for the softest kiss he knows how to give—an embrace that Hua Cheng leans into gratefully, palms pressed flat against the small of his back. And when they part, Xie Lian notices a gleaming light from the corner of his eye.

A lantern, hanging from the corner of the porch—a purple flame flickering beneath panes of glass. So small, it seems to be on the verge of burning out...but it never does.

"San Lang...what's that?" He asks curiously, craning his neck to get a better look.

The ghost king follows his gaze. "Oh, just a project. Gege will see when it's finished."

Xie Lian might have been curious enough to ask more—but Hua Cheng takes advantage of him craning his head, leaning forward to kiss the side of his throat, and...

Then he's distracted.

Allowing himself to be swept off to bed and kissed until he can't remember any of the woes or worries from the day before. Until he can only think to breathe through his nose, to hold onto Hua Cheng's shoulders, and whisper his name.

It isn't like the night before—there's no destination in mind when Hua Cheng touches him like this, and even though their hands wander...it finally begins to slow and soften. Until sleep finds the prince somewhere between what feels like countless kisses, lulling him to dream.

The Fire Master

Chapter Summary

Waking up in Hua Cheng's arms—kissing him awake, whispering good morning—is the first thing that Xie Lian has ever felt so desperate to get used to.

Staring into his face, memorizing new facets of him with a hungry fascination that only seems to grow the longer he looks.

A newfound habit that the ghost king dutifully endures—at least until it’s time for the day to begin.

Chapter Notes

Hello! I have officially finished writing the main story for No Paths Are Bound, so place expect more frequent updates as I edit the final portion of the story! The next time the chapter count updates (if it does), that will be the final increase!

I also plan on doing a post-word / Q & A chapter, so the actual final chapter will be second to last.

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A newfound habit that the ghost king dutifully endures—at least until it’s time for the day to begin.

Xie Lian has no assignments from the Heavens for the moment—and accompanying Hua Cheng to Ghost City could never feel like a chore.

Watching as he's eagerly greeted by its ghostly citizens, looking on as he handles business here and there. None of them comment on the prince's presence either.

Almost as though seeing Xie Lian by their lord's side has become a welcome, expected sight.

There isn't much amiss—not when Ren Song took such care of the place while he was gone—but Crimson Rain's presence seems to bring back a sense of ease over the city. Becoming lively and carefree once again in his wake.

Before, Hua Cheng never would have said that Paradise Manor resembled anything like a home. In fact, he once told Xie Lian that he never viewed it that way.

But watching the prince sit on the edge of his bed, Ruoye slithering out of his hair as it falls around his shoulders...

Taking his place behind him as he carefully begins to comb it out, occasionally bowing his head and daring to press a kiss against his shoulder here and there, thrilling as Xie Lian shivers in response...

That feeling begins to change.

Realizing with slow, cautious delight, that they *do* get to spend every day together. Finding ease and comfort in each other's company.

And some of those days are spent exactly where they started.

Walking a country road, red maple leaves falling from trees overhead.

The god is still fond of visiting Puqi Village, helping the farmers with their work, playing with local children—and Hua Cheng would never miss the opportunity to accompany him.

As such, he's quick to take on the form that he used when he first met Xie Lian again on the ox cart, the bright-eyed teenager the locals have come to call 'Xiao Hua,' who has been away for such a long time.

But it doesn't occur to him until the villagers are greeting them that *Xie Lian* might have changed forms as well.

"Bolin!" One of the children cries, squeezing her arms around Xie Lian's legs. "You brought Xiao Hua back!"

That's when Hua Cheng turns to look at him again, only to find a teenager standing beside him. Wearing familiar white robes, but with red lining underneath--his hair pulled up into a high, neat ponytail.

Still perfectly beautiful, but the only sign that it's *his* prince is the red pearl earring glittering in his ear.

"I did promise you he would come back someday, remember?"

Hua Cheng does seem utterly fascinated by the sight of him as they go about the village together—and Xie Lian can't say that he blames him. The prince has never been prone to changing his appearance.

He never had the ability to do so when he was in exile, and when he was a beloved prince he never had the desire.

But in the last year, Xie Lian has hardly worn his own face anywhere outside of the Heavens.

Hardly felt a need to, when Hua Cheng wasn't there to see it.

And now, in moments like this—wearing a disguise is perfectly reasonable.

Not to mention the fact that there's something so...pleasant about being with Hua Cheng like this. Wondering what their lives might have been like, if they had been two teenage disciples together.

It would have been happier. There are so many ways where, if life had brought them together sooner—Xie Lian would have been grateful for it.

But that doesn't mean he isn't happy now. Working with him out in the autumn sun—taking in Hua Cheng's teenage form with his own eyes.

How handsome he is—not that different at all from his true form, just younger, leaner, with a boyish ease about him.

But his smile, and the mischievous light in his eyes are still the same.

"Gege, could you hand me that?"

It takes Hua Cheng a moment to realize that someone is speaking to him—not even lifting his head from his work until 'Bolin' repeats himself.

"Gege?" He glances up, only to find Xie Lian pointing towards one of the farming tools on the ground nearby.

"...Of course."

Xie Lian isn't aware of exactly *why* , but he feels a subtle change in the air as the afternoon wears on. The weight of Hua Cheng's gaze on the nape of his neck, everywhere he goes.

Pleasant, but unusually...intent. Like a fox with its eye on a rabbit.

But there’s no sign of any incoming danger—and Hua Cheng’s attention being so narrowly focused upon him is nothing new. As such, Xie Lian doesn’t pay it any mind. Not when they’re finishing in the fields, or when the children walk back to the shrine to listen to more stories.

It doesn’t occur to him to think that anything is amiss at all—not until the shrine has begun to clear out for the evening, and as the final stragglers slip back towards their homes, and Xie Lian turns to tidy a few empty baskets, he notices something.

A small white flower, left by the feet of his divine statue.

Easily missed, but not to him.

Xie Lian’s gaze softens as he reaches out to touch it, fingertips stroking over soft ivory petals, only to hear movement behind him.

“…Everyone was excited to see you again,” the comment is almost redundant. Aside from the heavens, *everyone* is excited to see his return in any shape and form. “They missed you when you were…”

He turns around, startled because—

When did he get so close?

“San Lang—?”

He doesn’t mean to take a step back—only in instinct, when the other man stands so close, he feels that he might fall over—

But when he bumps into the table behind them, Hua Cheng’s solution seems to be to lift him up, setting him down on top of it.

Rarely has he ever been quite so forward—not unless Xie Lian initiated first, or there was some intervening circumstance, like when they were in the forge—

But it would be dishonest of the prince to say his entire body didn’t grow warm in response.

“You—?”

“…I love your hair like this.”

Those are the first words from his lips, uttered softly as they press against his pulse, feeling it throb under his touch.

He always has. The way Xie Lian used to wear it, when he was a young prince—living in a kinder world.

"…I know," Xie Lian admits hoarsely, hands gripping the edge of the table tightly when he feels Hua Cheng's smile against his skin.

"You do?"

The god swallows hard, struggling to find his composure when every brush of breath and flesh derails his thoughts.

"…You…when you do my hair for me," Xie Lian explains faintly, fingernails scraping into the wood, "You almost always choose that style."

"…Would it be terribly presumptuous of me to ask if you wore it like that today for my benefit?"

"…It wouldn't be…" Xie Lian admits.

It's not that he often puts very much thought or effort behind his appearance—but if it's something Hua Cheng enjoys…why wouldn't he?

And any doubt he could have had about whether or not it was a good idea is silenced by the calamity's mouth against his own.

Not having to bend as far as he normally might, not with Xie Lian sitting higher than usual—and when he steps between the prince's knees, it draws a shuddering gasp.

Remembering being inside the forge. Or against a tree. Or in a *coffin*—

"San Lang—"

"That isn't what you called me before."

It's different, kissing him like this. In these forms, the difference in their sizes isn't so exaggerated—but his voice still feels wickedly hot and enveloping in Xie Lian's ears.

"…You mean gege?" He repeats curiously.

Is that so strange? Hua Cheng calls him the very same thing every single day.

"I thought it was reasonable, you look older than me when we're like —"

"Forgive me for interrupting, your highness—but I'm afraid I look older than you when we *aren't* like this, too."

Xie Lian pauses for a moment, considering.

It's not that he could have known beforehand. He didn't know what Hua Cheng's true form actually looked like—and had practically forgotten the sight of his own face.

He still doesn't make a point of observing his own countenance now—but Xie Lian knows that he hasn't aged a day in the last eight hundred years. That he still looks like a youthful prince in his early twenties.

And it's not that Hua Cheng *has* aged very much at all—he hasn't.

But when he always called Xie Lian 'gege' before—it made him envision someone who would look younger than him…and he doesn't.

He looks more like a man in his late twenties when he's in his true form—a detail that makes little difference to Xie Lian, but still…

It doesn't change the fact that he has a point.

"…I don't understand why that's—?"

"Say it again." He would never command—but his words certainly have an authoritative ring, even if he means them as more of a plea.

And when his teeth scrape against Xie Lian's jaw…

The prince's knees spread a little wider, silently beckoning him to press closer.

"Gege…" he barely manages to repeat the word before his mouth is stolen once more, swept up in a hungry, burning kiss.

Part of him can't stop thinking about the fact that this is still very much a shrine, one that now has frequent visitors. Someone could walk in at any moment, but—

But this feels like more, and Xie Lian *wants* more.

He didn’t know how to ask for it, the first night they spent together. And he’s been willing to go along with Hua Cheng’s desire to take their time every night after.

But if it feels *this* good—why not keep going?

They start to slowly tip backwards—until Xie Lian's back is flat against the table, with Hua Cheng hovering over him, palms flat against the wood on either side of his head as they drink each other in, and it is *far too good* to ever consider stopping—

Knock!

Knock!

It could be a testament to how distracted Xie Lian was that he didn't hear anyone coming until there was a knock at the door—or to Hua Cheng's equal diversion, a surprised, annoyed snarl ripping from his throat.

(One that makes Xie Lian shiver, his neck arched and bared.)

"Don't fucking start," a voice snaps from the other side of the door. "I tried calling his highness in his private array several times without an answer. You're lucky I got here before Feng Xin could show up and kick the damn door down."

Xie Lian bites back a groan.

Obviously, Feng Xin storming in would be worse. As far as he knows, Xie Lian is still intent on a path of celibacy. The prince didn’t exactly feel obligated to inform anyone other than Hua Cheng of his change of heart. But if Feng Xin walked in on *that* , he might…well…

It wouldn’t be the first time one of Xie Lian’s friends had made less than generous assumptions about the ghost king’s intentions.

When he sits up he realizes—rather embarrassingly—that the reason Hua Cheng hasn’t moved back has been Xie Lian’s legs firmly locked around his hips

“…Apologies, San Lang,” he unfolds his limbs carefully, unable to look him in the eye, and—

“Dianxia isn’t the one who should be apologizing,” the ghost king answers darkly. Still, he steps back—helping Xie Lian collect himself before he answers the door.

"Mu Qing," he smiles—maybe a little too brightly, in a misguided attempt to compensate for Hua Cheng glowering menacingly from just behind his shoulder. "It's so nice of you to visit."

"Since he couldn't take the hint when someone doesn't answer in their communication array..."

Xie Lian says something quietly disparaging—but there isn't enough sincerity behind it for Hua Cheng *or* Mu Qing to pay him any mind.

"It wasn't dianxia that I needed to get into contact with," the martial god explains, arms crossed over his chest. "It was you."

Xie Lian's eyebrows raise, but Hua Cheng doesn't seem particularly impressed.

"And why would you want to get in contact with me?"

"I don't—the Heavens do. More specifically Lord Rain Master."

"And she sent *you?"*

Mu Qing's eyes narrow.

"No. Initially the emperor was going to have Blackwater summon you, but he's off on a family trip with the Shi siblings and won't be returning for two days. Ren Song has been away on his own business, and as such, his highness was the easiest way to get in contact with you."

And because of that, Feng Xin and Mu Qing had been sent to fetch him together, only...

When Xie Lian didn't answer in his private array, Mu Qing correctly assumed that he was walking into a scene that Feng Xin needed to stumble upon.

"Where's Feng Xin now?" Xie Lian asks.

"I told him you were wearing a female form and to wait until I said the coast was clear," Mu Qing explains blithely, and Xie Lian is slightly mortified by being used to delay Feng Xin's arrival, but...the alternative...

"And why would the Rain Master want to speak to me?"

“She didn’t specify, but you two seemed to be on good terms when she snuck you into the Heavens before,” Mu Qing points out dryly. “So, I imagine it’s not for unpleasant reasons.”

As he comes to that conclusion, Feng Xin appears behind him in the doorway, panting.

“S-she’s gone—?” He starts, his expression melting into that of relief when he sees Xie Lian’s younger, but decisively male form.

Relief that lasts for approximately two seconds—the length of time it takes for him to notice the red marks blossoming on the prince’s jaw.

“W—WHAT WERE YOU DOING TO HER HIGHNESS—?!”

“Feng Xin…” Xie Lian hides his face in his hands, hiding his embarrassment. “I wasn’t—”

Mu Qing’s eyebrows raise. “You think they don’t do that sort of thing when he’s a man?”

“Mu Qing—” His voice is even higher pitched now, but—

“That’s DIFFERENT—!”

“How is it different?!” If Mu Qing’s eyebrows raised any higher, they would disappear into his hairline.

“Because then he would be violating an unmarried princess!”

“Do I need to remind you that *you* have a history of fraternizing with unmarried women?!”

“She wasn’t a princess and I OBVIOUSLY *REGRET IT—!”*

“I really don’t change to that form very often,” Xie Lian tries to comfort him, just as Hua Cheng speaks—

“I’m already acquainted with dianxia’s female form, there’s no point in making a fuss over it now.”

Xie Lian doesn't think that Hua Cheng is even aware of just how familiar he *almost* became with his female form, but he would never dare say so. Especially not *now* , when his face is about to burst into flames, and Feng Xin is on the verge of a stroke.

"YOU—!”

"And he's acquainted with mine, so I don't see what the problem is."

It takes Feng Xin a moment to understand what he means, his face growing deathly pale.

"You...you have a..."

Xie Lian certainly doesn't need any reminder, lifting his hand to his cheek, instinctively remembering how it felt when...

"Of course he does," Mu Qing snaps. "Any of us can if we decide to, and he changes shape more than the rest of us combined. *I* could turn into a—”

" *Don't* even start with that, I don't need to think about that today—” Feng Xin grouses, to which Mu Qing has the nerve to look slightly hurt, and Xie Lian offers,

"I think you would look very nice, Mu Qing. But I really don't see why it matters—”

"Because he doesn't actually WANT to take on a form like that, your highness," Feng Xin explains with a groan, "He's only trying to SCARE me—”

"...Are we just going to continuously gloss over how *strange* it is that he's terrified of an entire gender?"

Hua Cheng mutters under his breath, and Xie Lian pauses, rubbing his chin.

"I agree that it's unusual, but I don't think it would be considered so strange if he was a woman terrified of men."

"Yeah," Mu Qing tilts his head, rubbing the back of his neck. "But the power dynamics at play are different..."

"I always assumed that he had some sort of childhood trauma—”

"The Wind Master asked him once if he had been attacked by a giant pair of breasts as a child."

"Did they really?" Mu Qing's eyes brighten for the first time in any conversation with Hua Cheng, and Feng Xin finds that development horrifying.

As a matter of fact, they've been noticeably less hostile to one another since Hua Cheng's return, and the martial god *loathes* it.

"If there actually WAS some sort of traumatic reason, you're all being REALLY insensitive about it!" Feng Xin snaps. "Clearly he's got the message about the Rain Master—so we're going!"

"Going where?!"

"There's supposed to be an inn near here that serves wontons that taste kind of like the ones you used to like but if you'd rather fuckin' sit around here and make fun of me with that asshole then I guess you can eat them by your damn self—!"

"No," Mu Qing shakes his head quickly, allowing himself to be pulled along—a faint smile spreading across his lips. "I'll go."

Leaving Xie Lian standing in the doorway awkwardly, the blush slowly fading from his face as Hua Cheng's hands reach for his waist.

"Would dianxia like to return to Ghost City for the evening? Or Mount Taicang?"

Xie Lian's lips quirk with temptation, but...he sighs.

"Don't you think we should see why she's summoned you first?"

"Tomorrow," Hua Cheng's tone is half firm, half pleading. "It's already late—”

“It’s still afternoon,” Xie Lian points out gently. Late afternoon, but still. “Aren’t you curious about what she could want?”

In truth, he doesn’t particularly care—but Xie Lian is clearly curious, and that, regrettably, is reason enough to go.

During the previous administration, seeing the Rain Master in the Heavens was about as frequent as the sky raining frogs.

Actually, raining frogs was a more frequent event. Xie Lian would know, he inadvertently caused such an event after an incident with a few goats—

Point being, her presence used to be quite rare. But, since the beginning of the new dynasty, she’s been known to appear with more frequency.

More often than not to visit Ling Wen—but still.

Which is how they find her new palace strewn with books and manuscripts.

See, part of the conditions of Ling Wen's probation is that she isn't exactly allowed to live in luxury—but if the palace of a 'friend' she often visits just so happens to be filled with all of her favorite things… what is there to be done? It certainly isn't *her* fault.

Yushi Huang is aware of the fact that she's being used to flout the mechanisms of justice—but Ling Wen often leaves her feeling pleasantly used, and she never particularly minds.

Which is what leaves her stretched out on a terrace now, in a rare moment of relaxation.

Examining a book that she isn't particularly interested in, hat tilted forward to shield her eyes from the late afternoon sun—and when she feels a shadow pass over her, she snaps the tome shut.

"I see Xuan Zhen was able to reach you."

Hua Cheng smiles as fakely as possible.

"Thankfully, yes."

This was a conversation she would typically have alone, and she knows that the prince of Xianle would be happy to give them privacy—

But there's clearly no desire on Hua Cheng's part for her to do so.

"…You and I have always forged a path separate from the Heavens—and for similar reasons," The Rain Master explains calmly, her method of speaking as slow and methodical as ever. "But with the new situation, your stance may have changed."

Xie Lian glances back and forth between the two of them curiously from his seat in the corner—and Hua Cheng sighs, crossing his arms.

"I don't see how my stance would change anything. I resigned the position as soon as it was offered to me."

He did—and the Rain Master didn't fault him for it then, nor does she now.

"Yes—but...as we're all discovering in the wake of Jun Wu's death, there are many things that...he *allowed* us to believe he had control over. But as it turns out—that isn't true."

The Rain Master sets her book aside, uncrossing her ankles as she sits up.

"Things have moved quickly recently. It's...left one with little time to think. But Jun Wu would not have appointed He Xuan as Water Master, or accepted him into the Heavenly Court. Not willingly."

Hua Cheng has thought about that himself—but, like she said, there wasn't exactly time in the events that followed to do anything more than ponder it.

But in the year that followed, Yushi Huang found answers.

"The Heavenly Emperor does not determine what god you will be."

Absent some interference like fate switching—a circumstance that allowed him to interfere in Shi Wudu and He Xuan's lives, along with the Wind Master's from an early stage—the type of god a person will be as immovable as their ability to ascend itself.

Xie Lian can't fathom where the conversation is going—not until she says something that makes him freeze with shock.

"Jun Wu didn't make you the Fire Master—fate did." The Rain Master concludes quietly. "And absent death or resigning the role—you still hold that title."

Hua Cheng falls silent, thinking, and Xie Lian can't help but turn his gaze toward him, eyes round with shock.

"You…ascended, San Lang?" He breathes, wracking his mind. "When?"

He doesn't answer, but makes no effort to interrupt Yushi Huang when she does so in his stead.

"Nearly eight centuries ago, a young ghost defended a group of lost humans on the hills of Mount Tonglu. He could have used their souls to forge a weapon to protect himself, but instead…he used his own eye."

Xie Lian's gaze is drawn to the dark leather eyepatch on his face.

For a man who makes it so clear that he never intended to play the part of a hero…

It’s one of the most heroic things that Xie Lian has ever heard.

“…Does anyone else know?” Hua Cheng murmurs, his arms still tightly crossed over his chest.

"I didn't see a reason to inform the emperor until I knew where you stood upon the matter," Yushi Huang shrugs. "And if you wish to continue to live separately from the court, no one ever needs to know."

Hua Cheng has always had a...complex relationship with the concept of divinity.

He's only ever acknowledged or prayed to one god—despite his mother's efforts, when he was a small child—and even now, so many years after he spoke down to thirty three officials in battle...

His perspective on the gods remains the same.

Ascension might be a matter of chance—but not everyone who has the opportunity to ascend will do so. That's a matter of which path you choose to walk.

But ascension isn't the only thing that makes one worthy of being a god.

Gods should embody what they teach. And while Hua Cheng has never wanted nor felt entitled to anything in return for his prayers to his own god—he *does* believe that gods should care about the world around them, and those who worship them.

And he doesn't.

Or maybe that's the wrong way to phrase it—he doesn't care *enough* .

Hua Cheng cares about the world because he still has someone precious in it. And that precious person loves this world, and everyone in it.

That is worship—but does it make *him* worthy of being worshipped?

Does he have any interest in participating in a system that has treated his love so poorly? One that he's always scorned?

Jun Wu is gone. Xie Lian is very clearly near the top of that system now. But he can't just forget what happened before.

...Can he?

"...I'm surprised any lingering godhood didn't fade over the years," he mutters. "No one has been worshipping a fire master all this time."

It's true. And while children might have been praying to him all this time...that was for Crimson Rain Sought Flower.

They didn't even know it was a god that they were praying to. Could that still count?

But from the way that Yushi Huang is staring at him...apparently it does.

Part of him wishes that he knew Xie Lian's opinion on the matter—even if the prince would never tell him what to do.

But on the other hand—Hua Cheng can see how Xie Lian would benefit from him taking on the title.

If he was a *god* , then no one in the Heavens would have reason to reproach Xie Lian about their relationship. The prince wouldn't want him to agree for such reasons, but...

It's a valid item to place in the 'pro' column. And...

When he glances to the side, he notices that Xie Lian doesn't seem anxious, waiting for his answer. As though he's at peace with whatever the Ghost King chooses.

Then, in a moment of sudden clarity—he knows what he wants.

"If you're telling me that title came to me by my own will—then I have no intention of relinquishing it." Hua Cheng replies calmly.

Not yet, anyhow.

(He will later, when he has a successor—and a new title that he likes far better.)

"...But I have no intention of recognizing any emperor."

He didn't before—and he won't now. He's held the role of king in the ghost realm long enough to have earned the right to not kneel unless he *chooses* to.

And there is only one he chooses to be ruled by.

"And any assistance I give, or role I play will be decided by myself."

With the tacit understanding that he would obviously help if Xie Lian was in danger, or if the prince asked him to—but the latter is highly unlikely.

"That's fine by me," Yushi Huang agrees breezily. She's always been notoriously gentle natured—but even Xie Lian is surprised by her easy acquiescence. "We haven't been this close to a full host of elemental masters since my ascension—and I suspect we'll have a new earth master before the century's out."

"Does it really matter if the roster is full?" Hua Cheng asks blithely, and she nods with surprising seriousness.

"Balance in the three realms is conducive to peace. The world functions best when there are four cardinal gods, five elemental masters, four great tales, and—"

"Four calamities." Hua Cheng recalls quietly, remembering his unspoken promise to Zhao Beitong.

Three calamities remain now, after Bai Wuxiang's death—slain by Hua Cheng's own hand, and pushed into the next life under Xie Lian's gentle guidance.

There will be another.

"I'll inform the emperor of your position—and your decision," Yushi Huang smiles mildly—as though this was a perfectly normal conversation, just another chore to tick off of a to-do list at the end of the day. "Thank you for meeting with me, Lord Fire Master."

Hua Cheng makes a face, his smile growing thin.

"I still prefer Crimson Rain Sought Flower."

With that, he returns to Xie Lian's side—and while he makes no attempt to drag him out, the prince can sense that he wishes to leave, standing up to follow.

He doesn't speak until they've left the new capital behind, holding Hua Cheng's arm as he rattles the dice to take them back to Ghost City—but once they're alone in the halls of Paradise Manor, he reaches up to touch the patch over the calamity's right eye.

Hua Cheng pauses, slightly surprised. Xie Lian rarely touches him there—probably because he assumes that the ghost king is sensitive about it. And he *is* , but...not when it's him.

"...When I asked you how you lost this, you said it was over something stupid," he murmurs.

"It was," Hua Cheng agrees instantaneously.

"San Lang..."

"I almost never saw you again," he recalls, his voice low and tense with guilt. Recalling that final moment, when his soul was on the verge of tearing apart. And instead of saving himself, to find Xie Lian again...

He chose to protect strangers, instead.

And what if he had failed? What if he had been destroyed, and Xie Lian still had to face all of those challenges, eight hundred years later? What would Jun Wu have done to him? Would he have been shackled forever?

It's one moment in his life that has always stood apart as a definitive marker of his own humanity.

And yet it also stands starkly separate from all of his choices—because it's the one he has always remained conflicted about.

Because, by his view, it was so *stupid* .

Xie Lian hums for a moment, his fingertips trailing down over Hua Cheng's cheek, then to his jaw—guiding the calamity to look down and meet his gaze.

And Hua Cheng's mind grows blank, because—

His god looks so *proud* .

"I don't think it was stupid at all."

Not of his ascension—even if Xie Lian had known from the very beginning that Hong'er had it in him to do so—but of his actions.

"You were always going to make it back to me," Xie Lian reminds him gently, his arms sliding around his neck. "You always come back."

For a man so ambivalent to his own godhood—he certainly has a way of inspiring faith.

And he shouldn't regret, or doubt himself for being the person that Xie Lian has always known him to be.

His handsome, brave San Lang.

He just wishes everyone else could see him so clearly.

Others will, over time. Never so deeply or openly as Xie Lian does. But the claws and thorns that shroud him from others will recede for some, even if only a limited few.

As the ghost king falls in love with the world through his beloved's eyes.

It's too early for bed—but never too late in the day for Hua Cheng to stretch out on a couch beside him, carefully feeding him bits of fruit—which Xie Lian dutifully accepts—watching a pink tongue dart out to lick up any escaping juice.

He's gained weight.

Not so much that it's entirely noticeable to anyone who looks at him—but his cheeks aren't as hollowed as they were before. And, if you get the chance to see beneath his robes, as Hua Cheng has in the last few days...

His bones don't jut out anymore.

Most noticeably along his rib cage and spine, though Hua Cheng hasn't dared to examine him too closely without his robes to know exactly how much his body has changed, but...

It shows he was *trying* , in the last year.

And that thought warms a long unbeating heart.

"...San Lang, why do you think they weren't able to get a hold of Ren Song in order to reach you?" Xie Lian eventually asks, delicately chewing a slice of peach. "I just realized I haven't heard from him since we left the Kiln. Do you think he's alright?"

"Oh, he's fine."

Hua Cheng assures him with ease. "He's been bound to Ghost City in my absence, looking after things for me. But now that he's a calamity in his own right, he needs to forge his own domain."

Even if Hua Cheng suspects he'll take after Blackwater and use it relatively rarely.

But if Guzi is going to be in his care for the rest of the boy's childhood—it might be good for him to have a home that isn't in Ghost City or the Heavens. Something a little *close* to normalcy, since he's a mortal child.

“And that's where he is now?”

Hua Cheng hums in agreement. “I've spoken to him since he left. He won't be gone too long.”

He says this as if it's all to reassure Xie Lian—and he wasn't the one who reached out to check on him to begin with.

Xie Lian knows he's right.

Home has a way of finding you.

There's a rumor forming, deep in the cultivation world. Born from the lips of a god himself.

The major sects view it as a matter of academic fascination. A story that will one day fade into myth and become lost.

But in the smaller villages, the tale is fresh—and it breeds paranoia.

“YOU CAN'T HIDE IN THE BRUSH, MONGREL!” A voice booms through the trees, echoed by the barks of hunting dogs and other men through the village, hacking through the underbrush. “BEST COME OUT NOW!”

She can't breathe.

If she does, they'll find her.

If they find her, they'll hurt her.

That's what her mother said. And her mother won't be able to stop them this time.

Oh, but she wants to cry, wants to scream as she listens to them coming closer.

She can't stay still.

She's bleeding. The dogs will catch the smell of it, and when they do, they'll find her.

When they find her, they'll hurt her.

But if she runs, she'll breathe. And if she breathes, they'll—

The sound of a snapping twig nearby sends her staggering out from her hiding place.

Scrambling through the dirt, rocks and twigs cutting into the bare soles of her feet as she desperately tries to climb the mountainside faster than her pursuers.

The men who used to be her neighbors.

Some called her cousin, not so long ago—when her parents still lived.

Maybe they never would have looked at her the way they did, if her father hadn't gotten sick. Then her mother. If the harvest this year had not failed.

Maybe then, they wouldn't have whispered the word 'cursed' behind their hands, and looked at her as though she were a beast.

She is not old enough to understand *why* the people who had once embraced her turned to loathe her so quickly. With an ease that frightens her almost as much as the hounds.

How every illness, death, and misfortune became *her* crime to be punished for.

But today, the magistrate's favorite concubine fell into the river and drowned.

Today, the village decided that they'd had enough.

Today, they had to kill her.

Water splashes loudly as she staggers through the river, unable to reach the bottom, paddling clumsily.

She knows the noise will only draw them faster—but there's nowhere else to run. Like a fox chased up a tree, she has no choice.

Coughing and shivering when she somehow reaches the opposite bank, slipping in the mud as she struggles up the hill—

Thud!

A rock bounces sharply off of the back of her head, skin splitting, blood pouring down the nape of her neck as she falls to her knees with a pained sob.

"P…please…!" She sobs, nails ripping as she climbs the embankment.

"DON'T LISTEN TO IT!" The magistrate shouts. "IT PRETENDS TO WEAR THE SKIN OF A LITTLE GIRL, BUT IT'S A DEMON!"

She is no such thing.

She's frightened of snakes, she does not like spicy foods, and cries when she gets angry. Her mother once said she was too shy, and she needed to try harder to make friends.

No one wants to be her friend now, no matter how shy she might be.

Because of something that was innocuous, a few months ago—something that only made her unique.

She was born during the totality of an eclipse.

And the features that were once considered a rare medical condition—unusually fair skin, white hair, and light-colored eyes (and the poor vision that came with them)—were suddenly viewed as deformities.

Demon marks, they said.

Proof that she was cursed.

That she would end the world.

(And it's always the paranoia that makes people forget the less dire aspects of that story.)

Her head aches and pounds as she struggles fruitlessly, the knowledge coursing through her, cold as ice—

She can't get away.

There is no escape.

She is going to die. It's going to hurt. She cannot stop it. And she's scared, scared, *so scared*—

And with little other options, she frantically tries to pray.

First to Nan Yang and Xuan Zhen. This is their territory, and they are the gods her parents prayed to, but—

She doesn't have anything to offer, and asking for something from a martial god without even burning incense in return is rude.

She cannot do that.

But who else can she pray to?

The child stumbles into the forest clearing, shivering, bleeding, and filthy.

"H…Hua Chengzhu…" She croaks, teeth chattering, knees knocking together as she struggles with the last of her strength, tears carving tracks through the filth on her cheeks. "I…I'm s-sorry I don't have…a lantern…p…please help me…!"

CRACK!

She feels pain. Sharp, searing pain, unlike anything she's ever felt before—tearing into her left leg.

A shocked scream falls from her throat as she falls to the ground, looking down to see her ankle caught in a hunting snare—one with long spikes, meant for wolves and bears.

She sobs, too frightened to move, afraid she might rip her entire limb off if she does—but they—they're—

"Hua Chengzhu helps abused *children,"* one of her pursuers sneers, leveling his bow with her chest. "Not *monsters."*

"DON'T—!"

"ROAAAAAAR!"

A thunderous bellow rips through the forest—that of a ferocious beast—and like the men chasing her, all she can do is cower, throwing her arms around her head, shrinking on the ground.

“WHAT FOUL CREATURE HAS IT SUMMONED TO IT’S AID?!”

Her…aid…?

She cracks one eyelid open, vision swimming, only to see something shaped like a bear, but it’s far too big.

What…?

But it stands over her, fangs bared, snarling at the men who approach.

And now, a new voice appears among the crowd.

“There are much more frightening things in the woods than scared little girls, I assure you.”

They look around for the newcomer—only to see a pair of eyes gleaming through the leaves.

One brilliantly green, the other burning like a forest fire.

“…This doesn’t concern you!” The magistrate shouts, not even knowing that with which he speaks. “This creature is not worthy of pity or sympathy, I assure you!”

“What if it summoned another demon to help it—?”

“Then I suppose it’s already too late for you.”

She doesn’t actually *see* anything happen. Only hears the rattling of the tree boughs, a rush of wind—screams, then…nothing.

But the next pair of hands that find her don’t *hurt* her.

They’re gentle, carefully releasing the snare around her ankle.

And when they brush against bleeding, torn flesh…the pain seems to melt away, followed with a feeling of warmth slowly blossoming in her chest.

“Where are your parents, little one?”

“…Gone,” she whispers, lips dry and cracked.

"And your home?"

"Don't have one," her voice shakes, eyes stinging with tears. "I'm lost."

Her savior happens to know that feeling all too well.

He was a lost child on a mountain once. Without parents or a home to return to.

"No," he corrects her gently. "You're not lost. I found you."

She feels herself being lifted up into his arms, but, for the first time in so long…

It feels safe.

"What's your name, little one?"

"…Sanren," she whispers, the forest folding around them in a dark embrace as he carries her away, repeating her name weakly.

"Sanren."

It's not a particularly kind thing to call a child, but…Ren Song suspects that she's forgotten her birth name, at some time or another.

Either way, she seems to genuinely believe that's what she is called.

But there are worse things in this world than cruel or false names.

There are harsher fates than being found by a ghost king on a lonely mountain, accompanied by a golden martial god.

And Guzi, much to his delight, finds that the first mortal company he's had in over a year *isn't* on the menu.

It's funny. After he traded in one cruel and unfeeling father for another slightly less cruel and *certainly* not unfeeling replacement, then lost him again—

Guzi just assumed he'd already had a second chance at a family, and he wouldn't get a third.

But sometimes chances aren't limited—and you get as many as you need.

The same could be said for another.

A small lantern, flickering from the roof eaves of a cottage on Mount Taicang. Growing brighter with every passing day. Until, finally, it's carefully moved to Ghost City.

Left flickering and rattling on a table, ghost children and butterflies flying by day after day—cracks slowly forming in the panes of glass.

And one afternoon, seemingly out of nowhere—it shatters.

The world is out of focus, hazy—and every sound has an echoing quality.

It takes him a moment to lift his head—and when he does, he finds himself in a familiar position.

Sitting behind his desk.

Well. Other than the fact that he's naked. Is this another one of those dreams? Because at this point Blackwater usually shows up and—

"Oops."

When he looks up, he finds his benefactor stretched across the desk on the opposite side of the room, dressed in the leather gear he usually uses after a night working in the forges—an apple clutched between his claws.

"I forgot the clothes don't reincorporate like the spirit."

"I…" Yin Yu swallows dryly, squinting in order to see clearly. "I thought I…?"

"Died? Yes. Rather heroically, from how Ren Song described it," Hua Cheng agrees, reaching for whatever can pass for clothes that happens to be within reach. Which, at the moment, is a black cloak.

He's slow to pull it around himself, struggling to process the reality of his situation. "H…how long—?"

"A little over a year," Hua Cheng replies evenly. "But your soul hadn't passed on when I found it, and Qi Ying has taken good care of your ashes. So, here you are."

The mention of Quan Yizhen makes him pause, the tip of his nose slightly flushed as he pulls the cloak tighter around him. "…And I wasn't even able to come back as a ghost on my own?" He murmurs, slightly morose.

Hua Cheng examines him with one raised eyebrow, arms crossed.

"Ghost fire."

"…What?"

"You were a ghost fire when I happened upon you, which is more than what happens to most souls after death." The ghost king explains curtly.

It's easy for people to forget in a place like ghost city—but most mortals don't become ghosts at all.

That doesn't seem to comfort him very much, and the ghost king adds icily—

"I came back as a ghost fire, the first time I died."

Yin Yu immediately blanches, holding his hands up apologetically.

"I-I only meant that I clearly needed your help, sir."

"That's overstating my efforts quite a bit."

All he did was stabilize him, and stop anything else from eating him. An unfortunate but common end for most low-level ghosts.

"But if you're certain, so be it."

Clack!

Clack!

A set of dice rattle around in his palm menacingly, and Yin Yu swallows hard, rocking back in his seat.

"…Sir?"

"If you think you didn't have the means to stay on your own, that must mean you're at peace. In that case, we can go to—"

"No, thank you!" He croaks.

Hua Cheng closes his fingers around the dice, a ghost of a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth now that he's proved his own point.

"The bangs aren't bad."

Yin Yu's palms fly up to his forehead.

"I…have bangs?"

"It would seem so."

It takes him a moment to digest everything, hands tight on either side of his head.

"…Do I still have my job?"

"I didn't hire a replacement, if that's what you're asking."

That one bit of security seems to make him relax.

He doubts anyone took the time to go through his quarters either—in which case, he should still have clothes there to change into.

"…Does anyone else know that I made it back?"

"I don't plan on keeping it from his highness—and Ren Song and Blackwater are bound to find out."

There's no avoiding any of that. Hua Cheng never willingly keeps secrets from Xie Lian, and the other two calamities know the goings on of the ghost realm.

"…And no one else has to?"

"No." His confirmation is calm—indifferent even, but…

He disapproves.

He has never been the sort to meddle in the affairs of others without reason—but Yin Yu has worked with him long enough to sense the silent judgment.

He lifts himself from his chair, careful to keep the cloak around himself—prepared to go and dress, but…

The ghost pauses in the doorway, biting his lip.

Hua Cheng says nothing, fangs gleaming as he takes a bite from the apple, skewering it on one of his claws to hold it in place as he works around the core—

“Hua Chengzhu?”

Crimson Rain has heard his assistant in many states.

Typically resigned, exasperated, or exhausted. Less often frightened or anxious.

But now, he seems…timid isn’t the right word.

Vulnerable, maybe. But not a fragile kind of vulnerability. More like a man who is about to jump off of a cliff.

“Yes?”

"...What do you think of me?"

There's a pause, and the calamity repeats the question slowly, working the words between his teeth, as though he's trying to determine exactly what Yin Yu means.

"...What I think of you."

"I was always too afraid of the answer to ask."

Understandably. Hua Cheng thinks it's completely self-destructive of him to ask now, because he isn't going to be dishonest or gentle in his answer.

"...You're practical. And efficient."

"As an employee," Yin Yu agrees, nearly losing his nerve, but...

When you've died, plenty of things become slightly less terrifying. And prior to this...

Yin Yu took his position as Hua Cheng's employee in order to flee from his banishment--and his shidi, as it stood.

But he isn't banished anymore.

And he doesn't necessarily have a reason to hide from Quan Yizhen anymore, even if he...isn't sure...

Part of him just feels adrift. Without a sense of self, direction, or...

"I meant...as a person. If you have any opinion of me."

Hua Cheng lowers the apple core from his lips.

"I don't think you're a bad person, if that's what you mean."

He seems slightly relieved to hear it—but that's clearly *not* what he meant, and...Hua Cheng sighs, tossing the remains of the apple into a nearby bin, licking the juice from his fingers.

"...You're prone to self-pity, and you resent others for passing absolutely impossible standards that were placed upon you by your family that you have never managed to meet, but now you're the only one left holding onto them."

In short, he's often the creator of his own misery.

"...Oh." Yin Yu didn't have high expectations for what Hua Cheng was going to say. He didn't think it was going to be nice—he expected the ghost king to call him pitiful.

But not *that* .

"Then my situation...has always been my fault?"

"...Not necessarily..."

Hua Cheng sighs, tilting his head back. "That deputy of yours was the one who got you banished. But you're a capable person, so I don't pity you for what you've made of your life since then."

Yin Yu bites his lip, considering that.

That he's 'capable.'

"If that's true...then why am I still so...?"

The question is unspoken, but what he's thinking is clear.

'Then why do I still feel so worthless?'

"...I'd say you look for validation in places where you know you won't find it."

Like with Hua Cheng, as a present example.

It's hard to hear—but painfully true. Something he remembers thinking about in the moments of his death.

That he spent his entire life thinking he had been passed over, that he wasn't good enough, that he would never be good enough...

But there was someone who *always* thought he was good enough. Who placed him first. Who thought he was special.

Yin Yu allowed his own lack of self-worth and jealousy to blind him to that. And in his final moments...

It felt like he had wasted his own life on self-pity.

"…And if I stay…before, most of my duties surrounded the search for his highness. But now…"

"I have different needs now," Hua Cheng agrees. "But in large you could keep doing as you've always done."

And by that—he means looking after the city.

A prospect that Yin Yu can easily wrap his head around. It's familiar, secure—something he already knows and understands. And...

It leaves room for him to put his mind to the one other thing that he needs to sort out. Instead of avoiding it for another century and a half.

And it isn't as easy as walking into the Heavens and into open arms. Even if he didn't find the idea mortifying—he died.

He isn't a heavenly official anymore—not even an exiled one.

He's a ghost—and as such, his options are limited.

Which brings him to the simplest option—even if it feels like a trope in some silly romance novel—it's practical.

Dropping a few gold pieces into an offering tray near Yiling, kneeling down as incense burns to offer a prayer.

A few worshippers watch the average, lanky teenager with smirks—wondering what he's doing in a place like this.

(It’s the only convincing skin he could manage, and it isn’t particularly impressive.)

Qi Ying is a god of battle—prayed to by career warriors.

Some of them find it comical, watching such a scrawny kid pray to him—and those who don’t find it pitiful.

But that’s alright. Because, for the first time in his life—he’s learning not to care what other people think.

The incense stick is halfway burned by the time he straightens up, wiping the dust from his knees—not particularly hopeful that he was heard.

He never appointed any deputies, and he barely cares about his duties anyway, but…

Then again, how could he know how long it will take? Yin Yu has never prayed to him before. Not even anonymously. It never occurred to him to offer that much.

And once he realizes that, his stomach twists with guilt.

It’s not something Quan Yizhen would have neglected to do.

And it’s going to take him a long time to untangle the knot of history, friendship, mentoring, and romantic feelings between the two of them —

But what Yin Yu does know is that, at its core—he willingly stepped into an important role in Quan Yizhen’s life in the beginning.

He knew that he was different. That he didn’t have any friends or family. He wasn’t so oblivious that he was unaware of the fact that he was the only one who showed him kindness.

Of *course* Quan Yizhen clung to him. Of *course* he was attached to him.

And looking back on it, while Yin Yu was never malicious—he can’t help but feel like he allowed his jealousy to give him permission to abandon him.

Which makes the fact that Quan Yizhen would never do the same hurt even more, and—and it makes Yin Yu wonder.

Why did he never let go? How could he have such strong feelings after everything they've been through—and still see Yin Yu as something…

Yin Yu is halfway down the temple steps when he hears a *crash.*

And he wishes he could say that dying cured him of his near pathological desire to never make a scene, or be in the center of attention—

But the minute he hears shouts of shock and prayer from the temple, he starts walking down the steps faster, covering his head.

Why didn't he do this at night, when no one was here? Or maybe in a temple of Qi Ying on a deserted island? There has to be one like that, right—?

"SHIXIONG!"

His voice booms across the pavilion—and any chance Yin Yu has of maintaining his disguise is lost when he cringes.

Why didn't he think this through? Did harsh feedback from Hua Chengzhu and one moment of self reflection make him forget all of his instincts regarding self preservation—?

THUD!

But then someone slams into him from behind, and there are arms around him.

Crushing. Too much, to the point where Yin Yu has to croak out for relief until they loosen with a muttered apology.

"You…you were gone," the words are whispered with such pain and—and not exactly disbelief.

Shi Wudu came back. Hua Cheng came back. There have been recent examples that people can return from seemingly dire circumstances.

But time went on and on, and Yin Yu didn't. And—

Quan Yizhen was accustomed to him *not* returning.

"…I'm back now," Yin Yu replies softly.

He's back now.

And he came to Quan Yizhen on his own. He didn't run. He didn't hide.

(Well, maybe he ran a little—but only out of mild embarrassment.)

"…Don't go again," Quan Yizhen mumbles, trembling slightly. "Or let me go with you next time."

His arms still aren't loose enough for Yin Yu to turn around—but he leans back into him, placing his hands over Quan Yizhen's where they wrap around his middle.

"…okay," he agrees, his shidi's curls brushing against his cheek. "But…stop telling people we're getting married!"

"Why?" He actually has the nerve to ask, his eyebrows raising, and Yin Yu could pull his hair out.

"You never even asked me—and we only *just* started—!"

"Will you marry m—?"

"No!" He takes a deep breath. "You're too young to get married! And it's too fast!"

"…I am?"

"Yes!"

"Oh," Quan Yizhen frowns. "Just a few more years then."

Yin Yu gawks, prepared to protest even more, but—

He never said that *he* wasn't old enough to get married, and Quan Yizhen must be thinking of their age difference. He—

"Just *slow down* , okay?!"

Before, he never would have expressed his distress—only suffered in silence.

And before, Quan Yizhen would have steamrolled ahead, unaware of his distress.

But not anymore.

"…Okay," he agrees, still draped around him heavily, hugging him tighter. “Slow.”

And it *surprises* Yin Yu, who would be the first to admit that his expectations had gradually become quite low.

He’s not used to being listened to, or considered, or *valued* —

But with an open mind, people start to surprise him.

“…Let’s go home, A’Yizhen.”

Things move smoother, with him back in his old position—even more so, now that he’s finally content.

A Selfish Man

Chapter Summary

> "...San Lang?" He turns his head, and the moment he does, the ghost king presses a kiss against his temple.
>
> "Yes, gege?"
>
> Xie Lian tries to be considerate of the fact that he might not want to talk about it--and Hua Cheng never pushes him, when the tables are turned.
>
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Between the Ghost Realm and the Heavens, things seem to grow calm as people ease into their new roles.

And it occurs to Xie Lian, nearly a month after Hua Cheng's return—

That this is the longest stretch of peace he's had in eight centuries.

Waking up every morning in his love's arms. Spending their days together. No longer running or hiding or investigating or planning.

They settle into ways of managing their time, coming to the unspoken understanding of splitting their time between Ghost City and Mount Taicang, occasionally visiting Puqi Shrine during the day.

As Xie Lian expected—the ghost king was thrilled to renovate the temple with him.

Admittedly far more difficult than patching up Puqi Shrine—but with Xie Lian's powers returned, and Hua Cheng doing far more than his share of the work…

It starts to resemble a childhood home once more.

With a few noticeable changes.

First being the lack of other cultivators and servants running around. Xie Lian has no need for them, and even if he did—Hua Cheng quickly attends to his needs before he even realizes them.

And they can’t exactly have mortals wandering in, so Ren Song is kind enough to help with enchanting the forest around the base of the mountain, trees growing taller and denser—and any mortals who *do* wander in quickly forget why they came, turning back towards home.

It doesn’t work on gods or ghosts to Hua Cheng’s eternal dismay, but Xie Lian enjoys having guests occasionally, so he doesn’t always complain.

(He usually does, though, when it’s his former deputies.)

But while the halls are usually empty—they’re rarely quiet.

Crumbling flagstones are patched and repaired. Holes in the roof are filled. Faded frescoes and mosaics are remade in new images.

Flowers bloom from the terraces and down the hillsides, vines forming natural curtains along the windowsills.

And Xie Lian always wakes up to one white bloom tucked behind his ear, lips pressed against the nape of his neck—smiling as he whispers a small prayer of his own, even if he didn’t always realize that was what it was;

Good Morning, San Lang.

San Lang, who makes happiness feel as easy as breathing—and Xie Lian feels as though he’s been holding his breath for his entire life.

Some mornings, if he has to leave bed before Xie Lian does, he kisses him half awake, murmuring a gentle goodbye—and always leaves something.

Sometimes small things, like a bowl of orange slices on the table—a gentle reminder to eat. Other times Xie Lian wakes to a new ring glimmering on his finger, or a gem encrusted comb in his hair.

The gifts aren’t needed, but it pleases Hua Cheng to give them.

And slowly, Xie Lian is learning how to accept them.

It's been so long since he owned anything of substance. He's always had the ashes that hang around his neck, and used to have the bamboo hat he had been given so long ago—but those were the only constants.

Everything else was lost, stolen, or broken—and it's still difficult for him to look at anything, big or small, and think of it as 'his.'

(With one exception.)

But he's slowly learning to *have* things again.

Like the hair piece Hua Cheng gave him a year ago.

Or the choker he gave him when he briefly didn't have Ruoye to cover his cursed shackle—one he wears often now, unaccustomed to leaving his neck bare.

(And even more often, he has to hide certain things on his throat.)

But he's more comfortable with the word *ours* .

Learning to think of a bedroom as *theirs* , or the gifts left on his pillow as things that bring Hua Cheng equal joy and value.

Their time, their home, their—

Their life. Together.

And the more he thinks of that, the more tightly he holds onto it.

The more he treasures their time alone—the less he scolds Hua Cheng for grumbling when people visit, even if he knows the ghost king is slowly becoming spoiled from having him all to himself.

The more he reaches for him first, stretching up like a growing stem to kiss him.

The more he treasures afternoons spent in the sun, knowing it should be cold, this late in autumn—but every point of contact between them is warm.

Sitting underneath a maple tree, Xie Lian reading to Hua Cheng as he leans back against his chest—one of his favorites.

With dragons, sword fighting, magic—and the occasional kissing scene. Which Xie Lian wouldn't find particularly embarrassing at his age if Hua Cheng didn't tease him so sadistically about it, but—

Well, he never *really* minds.

Hua Cheng seems content to listen to him for as long as Xie Lian wants to go on, wraith butterflies sometimes fluttering over, offering a flower petal for the calamity to braid into the god's hair.

E'Ming tries to join in on the help too—but the moment it gets close, it's batted away.

"Who asked for your help?”

The saber rattles pitifully, shrinking as it slinks down into Xie Lian's lap.

"San Lang..." His tone is mildly chastising, fingers stroking over the blade. "E'Ming is very helpful, it's alright to let it try..."

The way Hua Cheng treated the saber always struck Xie Lian as odd—but more so, when he sees how respectful the ghost king is to Ruoye.

Or to the blade he made for him, forged into a divine weapon when he killed Jun Wu.

It moves and behaves similarly to E'Ming now, named Mo Ye by its master—and Hua Cheng treats *that* blade with respect as well, even though it was also forged by his own hand.

At first, Xie Lian thought it was because Mo Ye and Ruoye were *his* tools. He tried borrowing E'Ming often, thinking that maybe showing affection and preference for the saber would make Hua Cheng a little less frigid towards it, but...

Now, staring down at the pommel, he...

Oh.

"...San Lang?" He turns his head, and the moment he does, the ghost king presses a kiss against his temple.

"Yes, gege?"

Xie Lian tries to be considerate of the fact that he might not want to talk about it--and Hua Cheng never pushes him, when the tables are turned.

"...You don't have to answer if you don't want to," he murmurs. "But...do you treat E'Ming so coldly...because it carries your right eye?"

The eye he was cursed for. Treated like less than an animal. Called a hideous, foul, *loathsome* thing.

Hua Cheng grows quiet—and Xie Lian is more than happy to move on, not wanting to ruin the happy easiness of the afternoon, but...

"...It brings back bad memories for me, I suppose."

But it's also living proof of a brave, selfless act. Something that made him a god.

Is that a bad memory for him, or—?

The deep, profound pain in Hua Cheng's remaining eye tells him it's not about that.

"...You don't have to tell me, San Lang—”

"It's alright, dianxia."

He says that, but the breath he takes is slightly unsteady.

"...My mother left her husband when I was born," he explains quietly, a subject that he usually never touches, and Xie Lian never dares to ask. "Because she thought he would kill me for being born deformed."

Among other reasons, but his eye was the most pressing and dangerous concern.

"I knew it made me different. Even from the way she named me after it—but I almost never saw my own reflection when I was a child, so I didn't know what it looked like."

That doesn't surprise Xie Lian—back then mirrors were especially expensive, even small ones. Mu Qing was absolutely fascinated with them when he came to the palace, to the point where Feng Xin would needle him for constantly looking at himself.

"But...when she died, it was near water," he recalls, his tone so carefully guarded and controlled, it makes Xie Lian's heart *ache* . "I saw my reflection...and *her* ...and knew she was killed because...because I was..."

Suddenly, Xie Lian is reminded of being on this mountain eight centuries ago. Holding Hong'er as the boy clung to him fiercely, weeping the words—

'I'm not cursed! I'm not !'

"..." The prince closes his book, setting it aside as he turns in Hua

Cheng's arms.

“She died because someone decided to take her life,” His voice is gentle, but firm—fingers stroking through Hua Cheng’s hair. “Not because of you.”

He knows, when logic rules his mind, he knows.

But that never seems to strike deep enough to make the pain ease.

And it’s just as easy to think that she died because he was *born* , because he couldn’t *save her.*

Because he was a deformed, hideous little monster.

(“In love with a princess,” a long dead voice echoes in his mind.)

Xie Lian is quiet for a long, long time.

Hesitant to use the comparison, not sure of how Hua Cheng would react, but…

“You would suffer in order to protect Shuo, wouldn’t you?”

The ghost king pauses, surprised—but he doesn’t deny it.

“Would you want him to hate himself for that?”

No—because when you have a child, you keep them safe. It’s not a question. It’s not something you hold a grudge for, or want them to carry guilt for later.

“Should I hate myself for all of the times you’ve suffered for me?”

Or *died* for Xie Lian—three times, no less.

“You *do.”* Hua Cheng points out, his tone strained.

A sign of how difficult the subject is for him—because normally he would never point that out.

Xie Lian winces—knowing that he’s a bit hypocritical.

“…Then why don’t we both try to stop?”

It’s easy to say that. To make bold promises about trying. But sometimes it doesn’t matter how hard you try, or how badly you want to—feelings don't change.

Still.

He doesn't take any joy in Xie Lian hating himself. It pains him.

And it would probably pain his mother, if she knew…

If she could see just how much her son had come to see himself the same way the world did.

"San Lang?"

"…Hm?"

Xie Lian's request is so sudden, it takes him off guard.

"Could I see Wu Ming?"

He pauses, eyebrows knitting together in surprise—

But he obeys.

And Xie Lian bites back a woeful smile when that mask comes into view—a white ceramic smile, hiding what lies beneath.

"Kiss me?"

Even that doesn't coax him out—his face tilting forward, the cool, hard surface of the mask pressing against Xie Lian's lips.

That draws a small, silent laugh from the prince—shoulders shaking slightly.

But when he lifts his hands to slip the mask away from the ghost king's face—Wu Ming doesn't stop him.

His first kiss. His most devoted believer.

In so many ways, his first love.

Xie Lian sets the mask aside, allowing it to sit on the grass beside Ruoye and E'Ming. Takes his love's face between his hands.

Looking into both of his eyes.

And it hurts, but in a good way.

Like the relief one feels after crying their heart out.

When Xie Lian is with him, he feels like a teenager again. Young and thoughtless and scared but held.

Fragile, but protected.

And he's so beautiful, the prince can hardly bear it.

But he does.

Moves into his lap, sliding his arms around his neck—pressing their foreheads together.

The ghost's eyelids tremble when Xie Lian kisses him there, one after the other.

"Handsome," he whispers, feeling him shudder in response, arms tightening around Xie Lian's waist.

Because *he is.*

Because the eye he views with such contempt shines up at Xie Lian like a precious stone in the sunlight.

Because he's never been a curse. He's always been Xie Lian's greatest blessing.

"I wish I could have seen you, back then." The prince admits. "Though I can't imagine I was much to look at—"

"You were beautiful," Hua Cheng responds with immediate faithfulness, and Xie Lian manages a wry smile.

He would have been a wraith. Filthy, bloody, sleep deprived.

It must have pained Wu Ming so much to see him in that state.

Xie Lian hasn't always felt beautiful himself. Sometimes, he still doesn't.

Even if he knows that he has a body that will always heal, and a face that will never age.

He remembers every cut, wound, and broken bone. How much of him has been cut away and regrown.

He doesn't feel connected to his own body or image of himself anymore. Only finds meaning in it when Hua Cheng is touching him, only recognizes his reflection in his lover's eyes.

His hands don't feel like his own, but his strangers. His own body is foreign to him.

And in some strange surge of awareness—he remembers a conversation they had not so long ago, in an inn with questionable customer service.

Hua Cheng asking if Xie Lian ever wanted children. If so, how many. Boys or girls.

How Xie Lian said three, and he didn't care—maybe both.

But he didn't want to have children anymore—because he never wanted to outlive them.

That's still true.

But if he *did* , and he had them with him—he would want them to look like Hua Cheng, not him.

Wouldn't want to see a stranger's eyes in his own child's face.

He would rather see the eyes of the person who has always come back to him. The face of the man who has always loved him selflessly.

"…I love you," Xie Lian says it far more easily than he used to, the words falling from his lips when he has no other way to voice his feelings.

He presses his lips just underneath Wu Ming's right eye, and he says it again.

With such sincerity, such openness—Hua Cheng would never have a choice but to believe him.

And all he can do is hold him closer and say it back, letting that reality wash over him.

That Xie Lian loves him.

Loves him *this much.*

Loves every single part of him, beyond Hua Cheng's wishful thinking or impetuous fantasies—it's the truth.

Somehow, he does.

"…I hope one day I'll be worthy of it," he sighs, breathing in the smell of chamomile in his hair.

The prince clicks his tongue disapprovingly, resting his face against the side of his neck.

"If one of us isn't worthy, it's me."

"Forgive me, your highness—but I'm afraid you're entirely incorrect."

"No, it's true—you're the one who's always doing things for me."

"You did so much for me *first*—"

"And you've more than paid it back by now," Xie Lian admonishes him gently, even if he knows that Hua Cheng has never viewed their relationship as one of give and take.

His worship has never worked that way.

"I haven't paid you back at all…"

Then Xie Lian pulls back sharply, remembering. "I didn't even pay Wu Ming back for turning down his request—you never got the chance to make another one!"

Back then, the first time he made a request from Xie Lian—it was only to kiss his hand.

But the next thing he asked for—to release Human Face Disease on Xie Lian's behalf (to spare him from the inevitable guilt, as Xie Lian would later come to understand)—the prince refused.

Saying Wu Ming could make another request of him instead—but he was never able to.

"…Oh," Hua Cheng bites back a smile, shaking his head. "I only had one other thing I wanted to ask of you—and I never would have asked for it back then, anyway. Gege shouldn't worry himself with it."

Xie Lian's eyebrows knit together.

"Why wouldn't you have asked?"

Hua Cheng sits back against the trunk of the tree with Xie Lian in his arms, black armor gleaming in the sun.

“Because it wasn’t what you would have wanted at the time. And I had no right.”

“How could you have known if you didn’t ask me?”

“I knew.”

He didn’t want to hear it from *Wu Ming* , at the very least, Hua Cheng was painfully aware of that at the time.

“But I didn’t mind, gege—I was happy to wait.”

For as long as it took—even if the opportunity never presented itself, he could have waited for all eternity.

“…What was it?” Xie Lian stares, tipping his chin to look Hua Cheng in the eye. “What did you want to ask me?”

He averts his gaze for a moment—then shifts back to his true form. Loose hair, a missing eye covered with dark leather. Red robes rolled up to the elbows.

And Xie Lian had so many guesses for what it could have been. Some far out and ridiculous. Others less so. But—

“…For dianxia’s hand.”

But the actual answer manages to steal the breath from his lungs and leave him frozen for a moment, dumbfounded.

“…In marriage?”

Hua Cheng doesn’t even have it in him to tease Xie Lian about what else he could have possibly meant—only nods silently, his eyes fixed in the middle distance.

“Ask me,” the prince says breathlessly.

Hua Cheng pauses, and…

He can hear Xie Lian’s heart *pounding* .

“…Gege—”

"Please ask me, San Lang," his eyes are round and bottomless and hopeful and neither one of them can seem to breathe. "Unless you don't want to anymore—"

Any self-doubt is silenced with a kiss, arms crushing him close, stealing what little breath remains in his lungs.

It's long and deep, rendering the prince a half-melted piece of clay in his hands as the ghost king struggles to compose his thoughts.

Almost wishing this hadn't come up so soon. That he could have planned something elaborate and profound. Worthy of a prince, worthy of *him.*

Desperately cursing the fact that he wasn't born a writer, or a poet. That eloquence seems to fail him now, his tongue growing slow and clumsy, his lips quivering for a brief moment.

"…I've been yours from the moment I saw you," he explains, his voice low and hoarse. "When my life had no meaning, you allowed me to take you as my meaning."

Words that Xie Lian later called foolhardy and arrogant, but now, seeing the ripples of them through time…he's left speechless.

"This one could never be discontent, as long as I'm by dianxia's side." He reaches up, pushing a lock of hair behind Xie Lian's ear. "This time with you, everything you've already given me, it's more than I could have dreamed of—"

"—San Lang—"

"But I'm not like you, gege," he admits breathlessly, arms tight around his back. "I'm a selfish man."

He closes his eyes, taking another deep breath.

"I want more. I want to know everything there is to know about you. I want to share every moment you have ahead of you, to take every single step beside you. I want to give you everything I have."

And he doesn't even know how to say it, but he wants every single thing that Xie Lian has to give.

His attention. His thoughts. His heart. His mind, his body. His past and his future. His world.

Hua Cheng wishes he knew how to love as selflessly as Xie Lian does, but he's a different animal entirely.

If he could, he'd live in the hollow places around his ribs, existing somewhere between his heartbeats.

And somehow, he got his way—because his ashes rest there.

"…And I know it's not enough," he mutters, shaking his head in a reflexive act of self-deprecation. "I know you deserve more than this servant could ever give you. But—"

"San Lang—"

"All I want is to spend the rest of my time in this world trying," Hua Cheng concludes.

"And I don't expect anything in return, that isn't *why* I want those things, but…if you ever decide to share your entire life with someone, I want that person to be me. So…"

The one thing Hua Cheng doesn't think he could bear to do is *share* him.

"…Would you marry me?"

He barely has the words out of his mouth before—

"Yes."

His God's voice is slightly thick, and when Hua Cheng looks up—

Xie Lian has tears on his cheeks.

"Then, now, and every day after —*yes.*"

He didn't know it back then—but Xie Lian's been his since the day they met.

From the moment he first caught the boy in his arms, and felt small hands clinging to him so fiercely.

He's been his every day since. In every moment of loneliness, in every dream he can't remember.

With every sunrise that he whispered good morning.

He was always his.

If Xie Lian couldn't have had him—he wouldn't have had anyone.

And he fell in love with him over and over again. In different times, with different faces and names.

He would have said yes before he realized the truth on Mount Tonglu.

By the time they were in Blackwater Manor…some part of him knew exactly what he felt.

"…You're sure—?"

"Yes," Xie Lian reaches up to wipe the tears from his face, only to have the ghost king do it for him—leaning forward to kiss them away. "I would have asked you, if I'd known to think of it."

And in Xie Lian's defense, he came from a portion of society where marriages were arranged. Even concubines were selected for a monarch far in advance.

He was never raised to believe that he could choose who he loved.

And even if he could, it would have been a woman. That was his only option back then. But now…

Now, Xie Lian gets to choose *him* .

Marriage might sound like a small, inconsequential step, compared to everything they've already been through together.

There was already the tacit understanding that they would spend the rest of eternity together, but—

This is more.

At its core, marriage is taking someone as a partner. Not a servant, or a worshipper.

Traditionally, it's the joining of two families.

Hua Cheng was an orphan, left without one at a young age, and Xie Lian…

He chose to walk away from his family name and legacy long ago, not wanting to carry a torch for something with such a painful history.

But there was loneliness in giving that up.

A sense of no longer belonging anywhere. Having no roots left connecting him to this world.

And he wants to feel like he *belongs* to something again, to someone. To feel grounded.

To try and build something again, believing that it will actually last.

Hua Cheng can't seem to take his lips off of him. His cheeks. His mouth. His nose and chin. Trailing along his jaw, fingers tangled in Xie Lian's hair.

"I can't imagine your attendants will be thrilled…" (But he seems to enjoy the thought of that.)

Maybe not initially—but they'll be happy once they see how happy Xie Lian is. The prince has faith in that.

Still, the thought of listening to bickering during the process makes him frown, and…

"Could we tell them after, you think?"

Better to ask forgiveness than permission.

Not that Xie Lian *needs* their permission—he's a grown man, and they aren't his parents.

But he doesn't want to hear what anyone else thinks or feels about the matter—

He just wants *him* .

A slow smile spreads across Hua Cheng's face as he realizes what he means.

"It doesn't sound like you're planning on a long engagement, gege."

Just the word 'engagement' makes the tips of Xie Lian's ears a little warm, but he still admits—

"I'd marry you today, if I could."

Hua Cheng's lips pause against his jaw.

"…And who says you can't?"

Xie Lian pulls back to look at him in surprise—and then they smile at one another, slowly realizing what's to come.

Which is how they end up in a rather familiar position.

Xie Lian sitting beside his loom, working with threads of red and gold, Hua Cheng holding them around his fingers as he works.

"How do you think we should do it?" The prince murmurs, his brow furrowed.

When you've lived for as long as they have—wedding traditions come and go.

Currently, most grooms will negotiate some sort of price with the father of the bride—she'll be brought to his home in a bridal sedan, and the rest is a glorified party between both families.

In their case there is no bride, though Xie Lian wouldn't mind playing that role—he has before, even if it was only as a disguise

"I was assuming gege would want to follow the traditions of Xianle," Hua Cheng muses, silk threads gleaming between his fingers.

That *is* how Xie Lian always imagined it, but…

"Didn't you say you were from Xuli initially, San Lang?"

The ghost king looks up from his blissful staring, raising an eyebrow. "Yes. But we came to Xianle when I was young."

"Do you know what the traditions were like there?"

He thinks about it for a moment, one leg pulled up against his chest as he lounges by Xie Lian's side.

"…I'm sure you would have seen some of it at the emperor's wedding to the thunder master," he recalls, his tone slightly…distant, for some reason. "They're both from Xuli."

They are—but Shi Wudu is younger, and the ceremony was far more updated as a result.

"They crossed cups of wine—I know that much is traditional, but the rest seemed a bit more contemporary."

Hua Cheng doesn't seem particularly surprised, but…

"Kidnapping, technically."

Xie Lian pauses, an awkward smile in place as he processes—well—

"…Pardon?"

"Not *really* , but…my mother's family was from western Xuli, and there was a tradition of the groom's family 'stealing' the bride. But it was always agreed upon ahead of time—so it was just for show."

Though, when he thinks about his mother's attitude towards her husband…he suspects it wasn't entirely performative. And in some cases—in different regions and generations, the concept of prior consent varied.

"…Like taking her from a bridal sedan on a mountain side, for example?"

Hua Cheng lets out a surprised laugh. "My intention was never to *abduct* gege."

"And if I was being carted down a mountain to marry someone I didn't want, you wouldn't come and steal me away?" He doesn't look over his shoulder as he speaks, unaccustomed to teasing Hua Cheng the way he always does to him—not wanting the look on his face to ruin the effect.

"I wouldn't let anyone else take you, obviously," the ghost king agrees. "But that's more of a rescue than an abduction, isn't it?"

Xie Lian supposes so, but Hua Cheng did abduct him much more literally from his own palace once. And spirited him away on Mount Tonglu.

They settle on something more traditional for Xianle in the end—the place where they both grew up.

And Xie Lian can't help but feel a growing warmth in his chest, holding the robes to Hua Cheng's shoulders to make sure they fit. Checking the length of the sleeves.

They're the first robes he's made for him since his death. And technically, Hua Cheng is always dressed for a wedding, but…

He’s only worn the robes of a bride groom once—the day he died.

This feels like painting over a painful memory with something joyous.

He’s lost count of how many sets of bridal robes he’s made over the centuries. For countless couples, rich and poor, happy and miserable.

But he’s never been fighting back a smile the entire time, accepting kisses from Hua Cheng each time he leans down to steal another.

His own robes aren’t that different from what he made for his disguise on Mount Yu Jun—except this time, they’re clearly made for a man.

(There’s no need to disguise himself as someone else’s bride anymore.)

Hua Cheng takes care of his hair—with the same loving grace he always has. Carefully combing it back into a high ponytail—the same he wore when he was young, pinned back with a gleaming gold butterfly pin, one he seemed to procure just for this, and orchid blossoms.

“Well,” Xie Lian sits back, looking his work on Hua Cheng’s robes over, making sure they fit perfectly—

And of course, they do.

“How’s that?”

The ghost king sits back on his own, taking in the sight of him—eyes filled with an emotion that Xie Lian can barely fathom.

"Perfect," he murmurs, pushing one loose lock of hair behind Xie Lian's ear, fingertips curving briefly around his jaw, taking him in.

The prince leans into the touch, smiling up at him.

He used to loathe being called beautiful, or perfect. The expectations that came with it.

But not from him.

Because Hua Cheng doesn't *need* him to be perfect. Knows that he isn't, and wants him regardless.

It makes it easier to accept the fact that the ghost king finds him beautiful. That he wouldn't change him, even if he could.

Autumn leaves fall around them as they walk to the family catacombs, arm in arm. Kneeling before his parents' remains in a sign of respect.

And while Xie Lian isn't sure what his father would have made of any of this...his mother would have been happy.

He knows that much.

There's something almost surreal about it, a man born with nothing—an orphan, cursed and deformed, kneeling before the graves of a king and queen on his wedding night, paying his respects as he prepares to take their son as his husband.

And yet...he doesn't feel out of place.

His own mother is buried too far from here to pay respects to—even though Xie Lian offers, he tells him not to worry.

He'll show him one day, just not tonight.

Xie Lian says a silent prayer to her instead. A quiet thank you, hoping that she would approve.

And when they make their way to leave the catacombs...Xie Lian lets out a soft sound of surprise, holding his arms around Hua Cheng's neck as the ghost king sweeps him off of his feet. Something the prince easily could have prevented, but he allows him to.

"San Lang—?"

"You wanted me to incorporate a tradition from Xuli," his love reminds him impishly. "I might as well steal you away," he concludes, carrying him up the hill in his arms, wraith butterflies flickering around them as the sun begins to sink low over the horizon.

Weddings in the days of Xianle were large, highly ceremonial affairs—particularly among royalty. But for now, they opt for a far more stripped down version of the rites Xie Lian witnessed as a child.

They don't stand together inside of Huangji Temple, or a royal palace. Instead, they stand beneath the maple tree where Xie Lian coaxed him into asking. The sun setting as the autumn breeze carries the smell of the forest, campfires, and home.

Rather than an elaborately carved array on marble floors, they stand in an octagon of eight candles—and when the time comes to pay their respects to the Heavens...

For the first time in his life, Xie Lian doesn't know who to pray to.

Before, it would have been Jun Wu. And now...

The very point of eloping is *not* to tell anyone until after the deed is already done, and if he prayed to Mu Qing or Feng Xin, that would decisively let the cat out of the bag.

But for Hua Cheng, it's exceptionally easy.

Xie Lian has never wanted to be kneeled to in prayer—and with that in mind, he bows low. Takes the prince's hand, placing a reverent kiss to the back of his knuckles, saying a silent prayer of thanks.

And watching him...Xie Lian feels as though he's grasping something elusive.

It takes Hua Cheng off guard when the prince bows low in return—reaching out to mimic the same gesture, lifting larger, calloused hands to his lips. Pressing a kiss to the back of each knuckle—slow and methodical, as the ghost king watches him in wonder.

"What are you...?"

Xie Lian glances up through his lashes, carefully lifting his head. "Praying to the fire master for a blessed marriage."

The thought that Xie Lian would pray to *him* seems to leave Hua Cheng utterly stunned, even if he *is* a god, and—

Hua Cheng couldn't actually know, but he's the only person that Xie Lian has prayed to for quite some time. Even if he didn't know that was what he was doing.

Living with grief can often be an act of prayer in itself. Going on with the desperate hope of being reunited again.

Hua Cheng watches him with one wide, shocked eye—unable to speak.

And with their families (well, Xie Lian's) and the Heavens shown due deference, there's only one left for each of them to kneel to--

One another.

Sinking to their knees together, surrounded by candles in the twilight, silently promising to keep and honor one another, allowing heaven and earth to bear witness.

Whispering ancient words of promise, and when the last leaves their lips—the candles blow out.

Xie Lian closes his eyes, breathing in the smell of smoke and maple leaves--and when he opens them again, he meets his husband's gaze.

Watching how the final rays of sunlight seem to set his eye aflame—the soft curve of his smile sending aftershocks through the prince's heart.

When you've lived as long as he has, and memories start to blend together—you start to see your life in phases and seasons. Some good, some bad. Occasionally easy, often painful.

Xie Lian will look back on his life, and divide it in two.

Before today, and after.

Almost like a long delayed divide between childhood and adulthood;

Before he became a husband, and after.

For some people, the difference might not seem so inextricable. They might say that they went from one day to the next, and they didn't feel any different.

That they didn't feel changed.

But Xie Lian isn't one of them. In an instant, he feels reshaped. Made into something new.

Something that he chose to be. Someone he grew into.

Someone he grew up with.

And he doesn't ever want to go back to the way he was before.

One half of a life, waiting to be made whole.

Silver bells chime softly as they walk away from the tree, the sun setting behind them as Hua Cheng helps him over the threshold of the temple.

Autumn sunsets on Mount Taicang are famous, a sea of reds and golds.

But Xie Lian can't look at anything but him.

He went most of his life without sight, and there's still nothing else he would rather see.

And it's only now that he pauses to wonder, still living in a warm, happy daze.

"…San Lang?"

"Mmm?"

"Was there something you wanted from the temple?" The rite itself is finished, and it's already evening, when they would be making a meal or retiring for the evening—but Hua Cheng has led them into the worship hall. Braziers alight, marble floors gleaming.

"…I didn't pray quite enough during the ceremony for my liking," he explains softly.

"But didn't we both—?"

"Oh, but I didn't give nearly enough thanks," he shakes his head.

"You don't need to thank me, San Lang—"

"Don't we always give thanks for a blessing?"

Well, *yes* , but in that case Xie Lian should be just as thankful, and he doubts Hua Cheng would want him doing the same.

"If so, then I'm just as blessed—"

"Forgive me, dianxia—but I'm afraid we'll have to agree to disagree," his husband shushes him gently.

Xie Lian doesn't get another word in before hands wrap around his waist, lifting him up onto the altar before his divine statue.

One Hua Cheng carved himself upon his return, putting all of the other effigies from Xie Lian's youth to shame.

(As is to be expected, from a man who's had so much practice.)

At first, Xie Lian had thought he might skip the step of a statue, similar to Qiandeng Temple—but when he asked him about it, Hua Cheng simply explained that there was no need for a statue when he had the real thing

That embarrassed the prince enough to suggest that maybe Huangji Temple *did* need a divine statue, so he made one—but somehow he always ends up praying like this, anyway.

With Xie Lian sitting on the edge of the altar, his cheeks aflame as the calamity kisses his hands.

Each knuckle, the tips of his fingers, the bones in his wrists, and Xie Lian can *hear* his prayers, even if they aren't spoken aloud.

The wonder, the happiness, the adoration, the kind that leaves him floating in a sea of warmth, comfort, and belonging.

A small crack forms in that concentration when he kisses Xie Lian's palms, first his right—then pauses when he reaches his left, finding a scar there.

The only scar on the prince's entire body, left when Bai Wuxiang pierced him with the God Slayer on Mount Tonglu.

Xie Lian can feel the frown tugging at his lips and sneaks his fingers under his husband's chin, tilting his face to look up at him.

"That wasn't your fault," he assures him, knowing that it's fruitless—he'll blame himself no matter what Xie Lian says.

"You nearly brought the entire mountain down trying to get to me."

"Nearly," Hua Cheng agrees, turning his face into Xie Lian's palm—kissing the scar twice for good measure. "But I should have ripped it apart before he ever had the chance."

"...I don't mind it," Xie Lian abandons trying to ease his sense of responsibility, instead aiming to make the scar itself not seem quite so bad. "I just wish it had come from you."

That statement seems to startle Hua Cheng, and not in a *good* way, so he rushes to explain himself.

"I don't mean that I would want you to hurt me, San Lang, just...if I had something permanent on my skin, I mean--I would want it to remind me of you."

He reaches down to squeeze the ghost king's forearm, reminding him of the tattoo that lies underneath.

"Like this."

Hua Cheng's expression freezes—likely surprised because Xie Lian had never admitted that he knew what the tattoo *said* , not until now.

If he could have Hua Cheng's name written on his skin in ink, he would. If he could carve it in and let it scar, he would. But he's been blessed and cursed with a body that shows no passage of time or pain.

But he's almost a little jealous of the tattoo's permanence.

Hua Cheng considers that, slowly rising to his full height—and even with Xie Lian sitting on top of the altar, he still manages to tower over him.

"But you've always had me against your skin, dianxia."

Xie Lian raises an eyebrow, slightly flushed, but...

When Hua Cheng reaches down to tug at the chain around his neck playfully, his meaning becomes clear.

Xie Lian has had him close, all this time—keeping his ashes against his skin with all of the constance and permanence of a tattoo. Still.

He can't help but want him closer.

In his skin, not just against him.

“…I suppose I’m a selfish man too,” he finally admits, looking up at the ghost king through his lashes. “I want more.”

It’s almost laughable that Xie Lian would call himself selfish—but Hua Cheng’s eyes soften regardless.

“You have all of me,” the ghost king reminds him, leaning down to kiss the side of his jaw. “For as long as you’ll have me.”

As if Xie Lian would ever let him go.

He turns his head, pressing their cheeks together, until Hua Cheng can’t bear to go another moment without his lips

And he kisses him the way Xie Lian always wanted to be kissed, even before he knew what it felt like.

As though the only way he can breathe is through the prince's lungs, rather than his own.

The kind of kiss that flits around the pages of the novels he once adored.

He used to be so clumsy in his arms. Mortified and flushed, wanting more but having no idea how to show it. Terrified of his own excitement, stammering and running away from him when he saved him from the fetal ghost in the lake.

There's nothing frightening about it now.

The Most Beautiful Thing a Person Can Do

Chapter Summary

> The warmth in the pit of his stomach is welcome and familiar. His heart skips a beat when fingers cradle the base of his skull, tilting his head back so Hua Cheng can deepen the kiss—but with thrill, not nerves.
>
> And there's no shame in it, either.
>
> There might always be some lingering sense of taboo from spending so long with celibacy vows, but—
>
> There are so many other feelings inside of him, Xie Lian doesn’t have room for shame or self-loathing.
>
> Just him. Wanting him.

Chapter Notes

> CONTENT WARNING: this entire chapter centers around an explicit scene, if you don't want to read that sort of content, feel free to skip. The dynamic is Hua Cheng/Xie Lian, if that is not your preference, you don't have to read this scene to understand the plot.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The warmth in the pit of his stomach is welcome and familiar. His heart skips a beat when fingers cradle the base of his skull, tilting his head back so Hua Cheng can deepen the kiss—but with thrill, not nerves.

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There might always be some lingering sense of taboo from spending so long with celibacy vows, but—

There are so many other feelings inside of him, Xie Lian doesn’t have room for shame or self-loathing.

Just him. *Wanting* him.

His knees parting in silent invitation when Hua Cheng steps closer, elbows bracing against the edge of the altar as Xie Lian sinks back, arms wrapped around his neck, pulling the ghost king with him.

Shivering when their bodies press together, chest to chest, hip to hip, even through the layers of robes, he can't help but arch into it. Gasping against Hua Cheng's lips, fingers tightening in his hair.

And when Hua Cheng reaches for his belt—that isn't nerve wracking anymore either.

They've done it again since the night he came back. Not every single night, but definitely more often than not.

Only ever with hands, but enough for Xie Lian to grow familiar with the stirring excitement in his gut.

But this time—he grabs Hua Cheng's wrist, stopping him. A gesture that has him immediately pulling back apologetically—

But that's not it.

"Could we…do more?"

The question gives the ghost king pause, both eyebrows raising as he stares down at him, observing the rising blush on the prince's cheeks.

"More?"

"The…the rest of it, I mean."

Oh, and now Hua Cheng is caught.

Between the instant inferno in his gut, his nerves pounding with excitement—and the irresistible urge to tease.

"That could mean quite a few things, your highness."

Xie Lian pauses, his brows knitting together. "It could?"

Hua Cheng nods sagely, leaning over him on the altar, one elbow propped over Xie Lian's head.

"There are countless ways to be with someone in that sense—if you wanted *all of it* , it would take quite some time."

He says this as though *he's* experienced most of it.

And that’s not entirely removed from the truth—but only if doing that sort of thing on your own or with a clone is included.

In any cases, the teasing gaze and cheshire grin leave Xie Lian hot around the ears, muttering—

“What usually happens on a wedding night, I mean.”

And that phrasing leaves little room for Hua Cheng to be sly or wink around what that could possibly mean, because they both know.

Of course, most wedding nights have very different circumstances and intentions, the first being that they aren’t typically between two men.

Second being that the bounds of what dictates a wedding night between a man and a woman is often governed by the overarching goal of producing an *heir* , a burden they don’t have, but—

Hua Cheng knows what he means, even if Xie Lian likely doesn’t grasp the finer details.

But he can’t say that the prince doesn’t have some idea of what he’s asking for, because, well—

Hua Cheng already gave him a brief, albeit rudimentary lesson in Puqi Village.

Against a tree.

And he also can’t say that he doesn’t *want it,* he just…

“…You’re certain?”

Xie Lian’s heart betrays his nerves, hammering loudly against his ribs —but his voice doesn’t falter.

“Yes.”

Even if he’s terribly embarrassed about being so forward—if he wasn’t, Hua Cheng would never take that step unless he knew in no uncertain terms that Xie Lian wanted it

And Xie Lian has noticed—once Hua Cheng knows he welcomes and enjoys a certain type of touch, he becomes far more demanding and greedy towards that kind of contact himself.

He knows Xie Lian enjoys being kissed—and now he’s constantly sneaking a taste of his lips.

He knows Xie Lian enjoys what they did that first night, and hasn't been shy about sneaking in moments in paradise manor, Puqi shrine, or the cottage here on the mountainside—using his hands to make the prince writhe with want.

But he wants more—and Xie Lian can tell.

Can feel it in the way he touches him—in the palpable restraint every time they're together.

And he won't ever take it further on his own, would never dare push Xie Lian into something he doesn't want—and the prince loves him for that.

But he thinks he wants it *too* .

Hua Cheng takes a deep breath, pulling back to look him in the eye.

"If you change your mind, or decide you want me to stop—you must tell me." Xie Lian nods, but that isn't enough. "Promise me that you will."

"…I promise," he agrees quietly, looking up at him with round eyes.

Hua Cheng leans down again—but it's different, kissing him now.

Hands that always remained politely on his back or waist begin to wander.

Teeth lightly scraping over his lower lip as fingertips tug at the laces of his outer robes.

And if his hands were cautious before—his mouth never wandered below the neck. But now, Xie Lian feels his lips wandering lower as he breaks the kiss, leaving the prince breathing hard, staring at flickering shadows across the marble ceiling.

Back arching as his robes part under the ghost king's hands, and teeth nip at his collarbone. A place he never thought of as sensitive, but every part of him seems to catch fire under Hua Cheng's touch.

"Oh—" he shudders when fingers slide under his robes, thumbs sliding over sensitive skin, flattening his nipples in a slow, gentle drag of pressure, and—

Xie Lian's *never* been touched there, never even thought of that part of his body, but now, he moans.

"Do you want me to stop?" Hua Cheng asks—and Xie Lian knows that he already knows what the answer will be, because he *purrs* when he says it.

"Nnngh… *ah!"* He gasps when lips replace fingers, giving a slow, undeniably sensual suck, shaking his head vehemently. "N…no…"

Technically, Xie Lian only promised that he would tell Hua Cheng if he *wanted* him to stop—he doesn't have to play along with the teasing questions as the ghost king abuses his chest, sucking and biting until he's flushed and nonsensical—

He doesn't *have* to, but he does.

It isn't cold when his robes slip down around his waist, leaving his torso bare—the braziers burning brightly around them, a thin layer of heat filling the air.

(Hua Cheng's doing—knowing how his love has never enjoyed the cold.)

And for a moment, he stops to look at him.

He's always kept his gaze above the neck unless necessary, has never stripped Xie Lian's skin bare, but now—he takes it in.

The toned planes of his stomach and chest, the latter of which is flushed and marked from his previous attentions, rising and falling with quiet pants.

Swollen lips, half lidded eyes.

And Xie Lian—

His fingers tighten around the edge of the altar, heart thumping harshly in his chest, wondering…what he's *supposed* to look like right now.

He's always been beautiful—but he's never given much thought to his body.

Hua Cheng has fostered enough security in their relationship that Xie Lian knows he would be accepted regardless, but that's not the same as knowing that every single part of him is desirable—

But Hua Cheng doesn't leave him time or space to doubt that either.

Placing one hand on his stomach, long fingers splaying across his ribs, watching the muscles of his abdomen contract and shiver under his touch. Pupils blown, lips slightly parted with desire.

And in the next moment, the prince feels as though he's being devoured.

Lips pressing against the spaces between his ribs, a tongue slipping past his navel—sending a sharp sensation down the prince's spine, legs jerking, a surprised little laugh escaping his throat, and when the ghost king looks up with one raised eyebrow—

“I-I think I'm ticklish there,” he explains breathlessly, his cheeks burning as an answering laugh rumbles in Hua Cheng's throat.

“And what about here?”

His teeth brush over the god's hipbone lightly, teasingly, a hint of the tip of a fang scraping, and—

Xie Lian *shudders* .

“N-Not there…” he admits weakly, eyes rolling back into his head.

Sensitive, maybe—but ticklish isn't the word he would use.

He has to fight the urge to close his legs when Hua Cheng is kneeling like this, not wanting to crush his head between his thighs, but it's hard.

Every touch makes him writhe, and there's something so embarrassing about having his face so *close* , even if it's equally exciting—but nerve wracking too, watching as his inner robes are untied and pushed down, until they fall aside, landing on the floor in a pile of silk.

Leaving the prince completely undressed—wearing only the jewelry from the ceremony, gleaming under the torch light.

By comparison, Hua Cheng is still completely clothed—and it's intimidating in part, but also…

Exciting in ways that Xie Lian couldn't even begin to explain.

And for one tense moment, he actually thinks he might put his mouth *there* , from the way he's staring—a thought that is just as thrilling as it is mortifying, and he feels a mixture of anticipation and anxiety building in his gut, but—

Hua Cheng seems to sense that.

His hand wraps around him—a warm, familiar touch. Even if it makes him shudder, hips stuttering slightly—but that's *nothing* compared to when his head sinks down, turning to the side, pressing open mouthed kisses against the inside of his thigh as his hand works over him.

"S...San La...ng...!" He jumps almost violently when teeth sink into the tender flesh where his leg meets his hip, certainly leaving a mark, and he almost kicks him—but one arm wraps around his leg, pulling it over the ghost king's shoulder—firmly holding him in place

It's not often that Xie Lian could have been manhandled before he got his powers back, and for the last year no one has come close to matching his strength, much less being able to hold him still.

And if the god wanted to get loose, he could—but the strength Xie Lian feels in his arm as he holds him down makes his heart beat even faster, blood rushing confusedly between his face and between his hips.

His bicep flexes powerfully against his outer thigh, long fingers splaying across his hip and stomach, holding him in place—

And Xie Lian thought the hardest part was asking for it.

Oh, he was wrong. So, *so* wrong.

"Your highness..."

"H...ha...what...?

In retrospect, Xie Lian should have known that he was trying to cow him sooner than this. Stripping him bare so quickly, kneeling between his thighs like this—pushing him, just to make sure that he was absolutely certain, but...

"Would you rather have my mouth instead?"

Now, the heat is decisively rushing to his face, his cheeks turning scarlet as Hua Cheng stares up at him with one raised eyebrow. "It seems like you *do."*

If Xie Lian is too embarrassed for *that* , then he certainly wouldn't be ready for the rest.

A test.

Xie Lian knows that, but—

He shakes his head vehemently, his heel digging into the ghost king's shoulder blade.

"N...No..."

Hard to believe, when he's pulsing and flushed—only two inches from Hua Cheng's cheek, embarrassingly enough—

"I...don't want to finish...before..."

"I can make you do that as many times as you like," the calamity points out, his expression turning just a little smug when Xie Lian's eyes grow wide with shock.

"...You can?"

The more accustomed they grow to touching one another, Xie Lian begins to see a new side of him.

Almost like a cat. Xie Lian knows that Hua Cheng would *never* hurt him—but there are moments when they're like this, and he has the prince decidedly at his mercy—

"I didn't want to push too hard before and make gege *cry."*

(There's an unspoken 'yet.')

...He has a tendency to play with his food.

Or, more accurately—he can be a bully.

And Xie Lian is shocked and bewildered by how much he...

Enjoys it.

"So," Hua Cheng repeats, now that they have that snag settled, "Where do you want your San Lang to touch you, dianxia?"

The prince is flushed all the way down to his chest, and the only reason his knees aren't knocking together with nerves is because Hua Cheng is *between* them, but—

"...If you promise...we'll still do...the rest..." he struggles with every single word, his voice hoarse.

Trying to dig deep, find the part of him that still wants to reflexively recite ethics sutras, and strangle it.

Hua Cheng's gaze is half amused, half stunned by his determination.

"...I promise, if you still want it—I will."

It's not an attempted diversion, at least.

He's done that before—when Xie Lian tried to say he could take *more* if he wanted it, their first few nights together. As if he thought the prince was offering it as an enticement to stay, and—

Maybe that was part of it. Xie Lian can't deny he feels almost desperate for any possible layer of commitment he can pile between them, to chain them together until they could never be separated again. Not because he thinks Hua Cheng would leave, but...

Part of him can't shake the fear of things being lost, stolen, or fading away—like waves beneath the sand.

But that didn't mean that he didn't actually *want* it, it just meant he felt this overwhelming need not to wait any longer.

"...Then...if you want to..." He starts, only for his voice to break off into an embarrassingly high-pitched moan when Hua Cheng dips his head forward, lips parting—

And then he's surrounded with this wet, maddening heat—and he can't think.

He can't even sit up, sinking back until his elbows hit the marble surface of the altar with a quiet *thud* , muscles in his torso flexing as he fights the urge to thrust forward into that warmth, not wanting to hurt him, but—

Then he feels the ghost king's cheeks hollowing out around him, sucking, the flat of his tongue sliding down the underside of his length, and Xie Lian can't *breathe* . If his heart stopped, he wouldn't know. He can only gasp, moan, and writhe.

How did he get so *good?*

Xie Lian often feels like a newborn fawn with such things, moving about on clumsy, shaky legs—but Hua Cheng is utterly confident with every touch. His tongue sliding over Xie Lian's flesh as though he knows it by heart, like his body is a beloved instrument.

And all the prince can do is clamp one hand over his mouth, muffling gasps and keening moans, his heel digging into Hua Cheng's shoulder until it must be painful, but...

Somehow, he manages to swallow him even deeper, until Xie Lian feels himself hit the back of his throat and keep *going* , buried halfway down the ghost king's throat—something that couldn't possibly be comfortable, but—

It's *so* tight, squeezing around him until he sees stars dancing behind his eyelids.

A strangled, broken whimper tears itself from his lips—whining and desperate, hands grasping the edge of the altar until marble begins to crack in long, spidery fault lines.

The desperate, vulnerable sound of pleasure sends the ghost king's gaze snapping up to meet his, and his eye almost seems to burn.

And Xie Lian can't look away.

Not from the sight of his lips stretched around him—the hunger in his expression, as though he would swallow him whole if he could.

Then, he swallows *around* him, and the prince practically shatters.

His shoulders hit the cold, hard surface of the altar as he loses the ability to hold himself up, his back arching into a perfect bow—arms wrapped around his head as he bites back a *scream* .

The muscles in his thighs tremble around Hua Cheng's ears as he becomes nonsensical.

"I...I can't...I...!" His hips rock forward, despite his best efforts—and rather than choking, or complaining in the least—

Hua Cheng just takes him deeper, until his nose brushes against skin—his gaze never leaving the prince's body, his expression.

Half hidden underneath his forearms, but every single glimpse of his flushed, contorted expression—lost in the throes of pleasure—is *delicious* .

His hands lock around Xie Lian's hips, so broad and long his thumbs nearly meet—and it's a silent demand.

One that Xie Lian couldn't put to words, but instinctively understands—and he can't, he can't, he *can't* , it's too much, it's—

Hua Cheng's throat constricts around him again in another slow, controlled swallow—and he *groans* , vibrations shooting through the prince's body.

He's drawn more than a few climaxes from his god since his return—but this crests even higher than the others. His entire body trembles and convulsing, always trying to be quiet, but now, he can't stop the moans and cries that rip from his throat.

And he keeps thinking that Hua Cheng must pull off *now* , because they've been intimate enough times for Xie Lian to understand what doing otherwise would entail, but—

He doesn't.

He holds on, fingertips carving bruises into Xie Lian's hips like wet clay—swallowing everything he has to give. Until Xie Lian is limp and quivering in his grip, feeling as though whatever remains of him might melt down into a puddle on the temple floor.

It's *cold* when he releases the prince's softening length from between his lips, prompting another sharp shiver—but Hua Cheng's mouth never leaves him, not even for a second.

His lips return to Xie Lian's thighs, licking away anything that escaped during his ministrations.

Sucking occasionally, teeth teasing his flesh until he's left behind a trail of marks and bruises from the bend of his knee to the curve of his hip—and when Xie Lian comes back to himself enough to look down, he loses his breath all over again.

Seeing wet, swollen lips—his gaze still ravenous as he takes in the sight of Xie Lian's limp, shivering body.

And the strangled groan that leaves the prince's throat takes them both by surprise as he reaches for him desperately, pulling him up and into a frantic, clumsy kiss.

It tastes different from before—and after a moment, he comes to the mortifying realization that he's tasting *himself* , but Hua Cheng leaves no room for him to linger on it.

The silk of his robes sliding against the prince's bare, over sensitive skin as they press close.

Hands sliding up Xie Lian's back, making him gasp and arch into him when he brushes over sensitive points, and when the prince feels the familiar press of his arousal against his thigh, even through his robes —

His stomach lurches in anticipation.

After a minute or two of being kissed breathless, arms hanging loosely around Hua Cheng's neck—he finally begins to notice the fractured, crumbling edge of the altar, and he winces apologetically.

"I'm…sorry," he mumbles against his husband's lips. "Didn't…mean to break…"

But Hua Cheng is quick to hush him, cupping the back of his head, fingers stroking through his hair tenderly.

"I'll be happy to make gege another."

He could carve ten thousand more, if it meant they could do this just as many times.

Xie Lian shivers, beyond trying to tell him that it isn't necessary or that he doesn't expect it—because he knows that's pointless, and—

"Do you want to stop?"

Of course, he acts again—and the subtle reminder of what's to come makes his toes curl in anticipation.

"No," he whispers, his words uneven, weak from how much deeper, *rougher* Hua Cheng's voice sounds now. "Not…" the prince falters. "Not unless you don't want…"

This entire time, he assumed Hua Cheng never pushed further because he didn't want Xie Lian to feel obligated.

But should he have assumed? Was he being inconsiderate this entire time? Now that he thinks about it, it seems presumptuous at best and self-centered at worst.

If he has to be this determined to convince him, maybe he's the one pushing *him* into something that he doesn't want—

"…Because if you don't, I won't be upset," the prince continues quickly, biting his lip. "We could do something else, I could try using my mouth on y—"

Hua Cheng's hands slide down, tightening around his hips, and Xie Lian falls silent, his throat tight.

"…Apologies, your highness—it would seem that your husband has been unclear," hearing Hua Cheng refer to himself that way makes his heart flutter, his cheeks pleasantly warm. "I want it *too much.*"

"…Too much?" Xie Lian asks faintly.

Hua Cheng's face presses against his throat, nose brushing over his pulse, then lets out a rattling sigh.

"I want it *so* much that I'm…concerned about my ability to control myself." He mutters—as though admitting to some mortal weakness. "And if I hurt you, or did something that you didn't want, I…"

Xie Lian's arms tighten around his neck.

"You wouldn't. Even if you lost control, you wouldn't."

"You can't know that—"

"I do," the prince promises him softly. "There's nothing you could do that I wouldn't want."

He can feel Hua Cheng's frown against his neck—and Xie Lian resolves himself to tell him *why* he's so certain.

But that can come later.

For now, he hugs him tightly, shivering at the coolness of the ghost king's silver jewelry against his skin.

"I trust San Lang completely."

And he *could* stop him, even if he did lose control. Hua Cheng must know that—but he doesn't want to put Xie Lian in a position where he would need to.

Still, with him completely bare and flushed in his arms, thighs around his hips, hugging him like this…

Hua Cheng shudders.

Xie Lian's breath catches in his throat when the hands on his hips slide underneath his legs, lifting him from the now crumbling altar, wondering if Hua Cheng intends to carry him to the living quarters from here—

But they don't make it that far.

He's surprised when they sink down to the floor here, in the middle of the temple, only to feel blankets and cushions beneath his back—certain that they couldn't have been there before, he would have noticed, but—

Then Hua Cheng is over him, *on* him, and he stops wondering.

Rarely had the ghost king ever gotten on top of him, allowing Xie Lian to feel his weight over him, around him, and now that he is—the prince feels as though he would rather be crushed by the gravity of him than ever be free of it.

His hands slide down from Hua Cheng's neck, palms flattening against his shoulder blades—feet dragging against silk blankets as he squirms underneath him.

Fumbles for the ties in his robes, knowing exactly where he'll find them—

Because he made them.

His fingers slide beneath the collar as soon as it loosens, hesitant at first, then drifting downwards, feeling the muscles in Hua Cheng's back as he arches into the touch.

His hands grasp against Xie Lian's sides again, moving as if he means to turn him over—but the prince resists, shaking his head.

"…It's more…" The ghost king struggles to form words for a moment, almost drunk on his God's lips, his body underneath him. "More comfortable…"

Xie Lian can imagine why—but he doesn't want to give up the feeling of him in his arms, his lips against his.

"Can we…like this…?"

As if his husband would ever deny him anything.

Shrugging out of his sleeves, resting one forearm next to the prince's head—and Xie Lian's eyes are half lidded, taking in the sight of him in the candlelight.

Hair mussed, bare from the waist up—covered in lean, hard muscle, dark hair falling around him in a curtain.

His other hand trails downward, lips soothing along his jaw as the prince's body tremors beneath his fingertips. Heart pounding, stomach tightening—and he must have been right, saying he could push Xie Lian over the edge as many times as he wanted, because he's already burning.

But unlike the other times when he's touched him like this—his hand turns, pressing against the prince's inner thigh—hitching it higher around his hip, then pushing his other open wider, until his knee is pinned against the ground, and—

Xie Lian has never felt so exposed.

Spread bare beneath his hands, shivering, but that has nothing to do with the cold—breath hitching in quick, uneven breaths as Hua Cheng's palm slides back up his leg, further, further, and—

When he feels the wet, slick press of his finger, his first instinct is to tense.

Not because it *hurts* , not at all—but because of how reflexively embarrassing it is, being touched somewhere so private, even if he was the one who asked—

And it's slow, so slow that it's almost maddening—like Xie Lian can't take a full breath, squirming with anticipation.

For once, he doesn't need to ask what Hua Cheng is doing, or why—because it's intuitive at this point, even if Xie Lian doesn't think it's necessary, he isn't going to hurt him if he just goes on and—

"Oh—"

A shocked, bewildered gasp escapes him, and Hua Cheng smirks.

His finger curving inside of him—sliding back over that same point, and—

It’s not like anything else they’ve done. That instant flash of pleasure, this—

This is burning pressure, lurching up and coiling in his stomach, but not painfully, no—it’s *good.*

So good, that when Hua Cheng’s finger slides back and forth over the same point, it coaxes out a strangled whimper.

“It doesn’t hurt, does it, your highness?” The ghost king purrs against his jaw, completely ignoring Xie Lian’s arousal, hard and leaking against his stomach.

“If you don’t tell me, I’ll have to stop…” he muses, moving as if he’s starting to pull out, and it’s remarkable, because the prince was silently mortified only a few minutes ago, and now—

“It doesn’t h…hurt!” The prince chokes out, tightening his leg around his waist.

Asking Xie Lian if something hurts at all is a pointless exercise—they both know that—but the prince would willingly indulge any whim at the moment if it meant that Hua Cheng wouldn't stop doing *that* .

It's a struggle to even describe the feeling.

The stretch is something he would have assumed would feel unpleasant, but his body actually shakes in silent delight when Hua Cheng adds another, rocking his hips down *into* it instead of away from it.

Every time his muscles clench down—the resistance around the fingers inside of him feels *good* . The friction when they move, pressing and curling deeper, hitting that spot again with a slow, merciless precision that has the god on the verge of tears, but not from pain.

"...S...San...L...La..." His breath hitches between every syllable, thighs trembling with every crook of the ghost king's fingers, and when he manages to look up through his lashes—

He finds Hua Cheng staring at him in wide eyed wonder, lips parted, pupil blown.

And Xie Lian can barely stand it, turning his face into his husband's forearm in a desperate bid to escape the embarrassment of being watched so intently in *this* state, almost wishing he had turned over when he had the chance.

"Don't...please don't...look at m...me like..."

In a rare instance, he makes a request that Hua Cheng cannot grant. Or, more accurately— *will not.*

"Oh, but I can't help it..." he leans down, his breath fanning over Xie Lian's cheek, teeth scraping against his earlobe as his fingers crook inside of him, making him cry out. "I shouldn't be surprised, gege is always naturally gifted in anything he tries, but…" his fingers shift inside of him, spreading—bracketing that spot, massaging around the edges of it until Xie Lian actually *whines* , muffling himself against his husband's arm.

"I think you could get there again with just this, couldn't you?"

Hua Cheng knows enough to understand that not everyone enjoys being taken like this. If Xie Lian had been one of them, he would have been perfectly content to perform that role himself, but—

He never expected this to suit the prince so *well* .

His pain tolerance is such that discomfort was never a hindering concern—but for him to *enjoy it* like this, rocking down into his fingers, tightening with every press at just the right angle.

"Or this?"

A third finger slips inside to join the others, and Hua Cheng has *never* had small hands, but they feel impossibly long and thick, every knuckle brushing past his muscles as they slide deeper, and—

Xie Lian really thinks he *could* .

"S…San Lang, please…"

"Hmm?"

Xie Lian doesn't lift his face from Hua Cheng's arm, reaching down to wrap his hand around the ghost king's wrist, making the fingers inside of him grow still.

And for a moment, the prince struggles to find the words.

Tossing them around in his head, trying to find something that isn't so mortifying and crude, but—

The words he does use, while not necessarily explicit…

“T… *please* , just…take…”

“Take what, gege?” The ghost king raises an eyebrow, and—

“Me,” he answers hoarsely.

While not lewd in nature, they have quite an *effect* .

Xie Lian hears a soft swear, muttered halfway under Hua Cheng’s breath—startling, because he normally never curses at him, or even in his presence, but—

He doesn’t even make his god say please.

Xie Lian bites back a groan of loss when he feels Hua Cheng’s fingers slip out of him, lifting his other leg to hitch around his husband’s waist as he pushes his robes down past his hips—but a hand catches him under the knee, lifting his leg over the calamity’s shoulder.

A position that somehow feels even *more* exposed than he already was, but—

Xie Lian feels lips press against his temple, and his heart softens.

Remembering that, even if some part of him can't help but feel mortified—he's safe. He's taken care of. *Adored* .

For so long, it felt like this was something that could be stolen from him. Regarded with only anxiety and dread as just one more thing that Bai Wuxiang could use against him, turning it into another scar, another painful memory.

But it isn't.

There's pressure when Hua Cheng guides himself in, but no pain. Only this feeling of satisfaction that Xie Lian never could have understood until now. Feeling so deeply intertwined with another person that the lines between their bodies begin to blur.

Before, it’s always been one of them focusing on the other. Giving, then taking.

This isn’t that.

Now, they're *both* feeling it. Hua Cheng's face sinking into his neck, breathing hard—Xie Lian's arms tight around his shoulders, trembling faintly.

He always knew that he was big—he's felt the ghost king's arousal in his hand, against his thigh enough times by now to know that, but—

But this is different.

Sinking further and further until Xie Lian's breath feels punched out of his lungs.

Until he can practically feel him in his *throat* .

His cheeks are scorching, breaths coming in shallow, hitched gasps, his thigh trembling where it's trapped between their chests, his foot dangling over his shoulder, toes tightly curled.

When their hips are finally flush, it feels like an accomplishment in a way that he really couldn't explain, but—

The low, almost animalistic groan that echoes in the back of Hua Cheng's throat steals his thoughts.

He can feel it in the pit of his stomach like a pleasant pull.

Practically trembling from the effort it takes to hold still, one hand holding his prince by the hip, the other propped over his head.

Giving him time to adjust, even Xie Lian doesn't *need* that.

But seeing how careful he is with him makes his heart ache pleasantly.

After a long moment of struggling to catch his breath, his body tensing and relaxing over and over again as he slowly begins to control his breathing, adjusting to the sensation of being so *full* —one of his hands reaches over his head, finding Hua Cheng's on the floor.

Intertwining their fingers, squeezing, turning his head until his cheek presses into his husband's hair, breathing him in.

And when he closes his eyes, there's only the weight of his husband on top of him, inside of him. The smell of the forest, the sound of crackling flames.

Xie Lian finds himself surprised by the quiet realization...that even if he'd never gotten his sight back, he could have been happy with this.

With the way that Hua Cheng can occupy every other sense, and it feels like home.

The ghost king finally seems to collect himself enough to press a kiss to the underside of his jaw, squeezing the prince's fingers in return.

"Still alright?" His voice is soft, gentle—all from a man who was so worried about his self-control.

"Mmm..." Xie Lian manages to hum quietly in affirmation, his nose tickling in Hua Cheng's hair. "I just...don't understand..." He's almost incoherent, thoughts falling straight from his mind and out of his lips without any restraint.

"Understand...what?"

The prince squirms for a moment, legs tightening around him until Hua Cheng has to bite back a hiss, and he eventually mumbles—

"How...all of this comes so...naturally, for you..."

It's certainly not easy, but he knows what Xie Lian means.

He's never been ashamed of the simple existence of desire, or lust. And while he's never felt worthy of taking pleasure in his god's body like this—the simple fact of physical attraction was never something he was taught to be repulsed by.

And it's not Xie Lian's fault that he *was* taught to feel that way.

But he also wasn't as lucky as Hua Cheng was.

He didn't have someone to tell him something different.

"...Well," the ghost king slowly lifts his head, kissing his husband's chin, then his nose—and finally his lips. "Someone told me something when I was young...and it always stuck with me."

"They...they did...?" Xie Lian cuts himself off with an unsteady moan when Hua Cheng pulls back slightly, only to rock his hips back into him in a gentle, experimental movement. One that sends bolts of pleasure radiating down his limbs, pooling in his stomach.

"He did," Hua Cheng murmurs, his tone slightly roughened and distracted with the pleasure—but that doesn't deter him from pressing their foreheads together, holding Xie Lian's even more tightly. "He told me that loving someone was the most beautiful thing a person could do."

Xie Lian grows silent, his throat suddenly tight as he remembers that day.

Knowing now that even back then, Hong'er must have been in love with him. And all of the things that he said.

About how he wanted someone with nice hair, preferably—long, and soft.

How it didn't matter if the person was taller than him at the time, because he was still growing.

That it didn't matter if the person was a man or a woman—as long as they were smart, kind, and brave.

Those were the important things.

All Xie Lian remembers wanting back then was for Hong'er to never feel ashamed of himself. To never be struck by the self-loathing and anxiety that Xie Lian never knew how to escape on his own.

Knowing now that it worked, that he was able to give him that...it brings tears to his eyes, his lips trembling as he kisses his husband with all of the composure he can spare.

"Oh, love..." the ghost king squeezes his hand, their faces still pressed close. "Don't cry..."

Love.

Just hearing Hua Cheng call him that makes the prince shudder, because...

After so many years alone—feeling tainted, unwanted, and disgraced, like he wasn't worthy of being protected, or even remembered—

Xie Lian *feels* loved.

Unconditional, unwavering affection.

It's not the first time that he's been adored or worshipped, but he's never felt it in his bones. As though it rushes into him with every breath he takes. Filling up the void inside of his chest until that constant sorrow, that dark corner in every room he's in—grows faint.

"...I can't help it," he whispers brokenly, his arm tightening around Hua Cheng's back, even though he couldn't possibly get him any closer than this. "I just...love you, San Lang," his voice is so laden with emotion, it trembles and cracks. "I love you *so much."*

Hua Cheng's expression contorts with emotion—and he can't help but start to move now, slow, powerful rolls of his hips reducing the man underneath him into a mess of gasps, moans, and cries of his name. Fingernails digging into his shoulder, and *gods* , he hopes it bleeds.

"I love you," he speaks the words directly against his lips, something he doesn't say as often as Xie Lian. Not because he doesn't feel it, or because he never wants to—he simply never felt worthy of it.

But now, they're married. They're family.

Who else has a right to say that, if not him?

"I love you so much, it...almost hurts me," his voice grows rougher as they start to move together in an easy, natural rhythm. As if they were meant for this. "Every...single...moment..."

And it's not that Xie Lian could *know* , it's not something that he would ever do intentionally. But every single moment, he's dragging Hua Cheng deeper in.

Like roots growing between the cracks in stone, carving it into something new.

Loving someone really *is* the most beautiful thing a person can do.

Because it's so hard to choose love in a world that teaches you that you will never deserve it.

To allow that love to change you, to make you want to be better, in a society that only sees you as a monster.

But Xie Lian makes that choice easy. And makes it possible for Hua Cheng to choose it again, and again, and *again* .

With every gentle smile. Every single act of kindness. Each strained laugh and annoyed sigh.

His bravery, his patience, and his reluctant anger.

The quiet strength that has never faltered, even when he was at his lowest.

Even his imperfections that he judges himself so harshly for—because they don't make him weak, or cruel. They make him human.

Every single facet makes him fall again, further, and harder.

Xie Lian loves this world, and the people in it. Hua Cheng loves the world because *he's* in it.

And he can't find words to describe that feeling, other than the ones falling from his lips as he moves faster, with increasing fervor.

"So... *beautiful* , it's...like you don't even know..."

The prince shakes his head weakly, trying to turn his face into the pillows to hide his shyness—but Hua Cheng only takes advantage of the exposed column of his throat.

"Don't...Don't say..."

"Gege doesn't believe me?"

His teeth sink in, and he’s almost apologetic when his sharpened canines scrape over the god’s pulse—until he feels Xie Lian’s powerful shudder in response, tightening around him in a flash of pleasure.

Oh.

“Should I show gege what he looks like, like this?”

It’s then there Xie Lian seems to remember the silver butterflies fluttering overhead, all around him, his heart leaping into his throat.

Is Hua Cheng *recording* this?

“Or,” his voice lowers, snatching his God’s attention with ease. “I could take you in front of a mirror next time, so you can see how perfect you are like this…” he was always so cautious with his fangs before, but now, able to *feel* how much the prince enjoys it, he drags them down the column of his throat.

Next time.

Yes, *yes* —

Xie Lian doesn't know if there will ever be a next time—because he doesn't know if they'll ever be able to *stop* .

How does anyone stop, when it feels like this?

But the thought of being made to watch himself—that's too embarrassing.

"I don't…I don't think I…need to see…" Xie Lian slurs, eyes rolling back into his head, but then, just as he's in the middle of *talking* , Hua Cheng's hand tightens around his hip, angling up—

And the next thrust hits so deep, the prince lets out a sharp sob.

"That would be a shame…" his husband muses, fangs scraping over his shoulder, growling as the prince tightens around him. "It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

Xie Lian shakes his head harshly in embarrassment, stammering—but he can't form coherent words.

Anything besides Hua Cheng's name is too much—and even then, it's broken, quiet cries, punctuated by gasps and moans, his body trembling.

It was overwhelming when Hua Cheng caressed that place inside of him with his fingertips. But now, driving into it over and over again —

It's *too much* . It's not enough. And Xie Lian feels almost detached from the rest of himself, focusing only on that tightening knot of pleasure in his stomach. Different from anything he's felt before. Slow building, like a rising tide.

Tears slip down his cheeks from the near overstimulation, his arms trembling—and when the ghost king begins to slow, lifting his head to check on him—

Xie Lian's hips jerk down desperately, crying out;

"D- *Don't stop!"*

And that makes something in Hua Cheng's brain snap.

As if he would ever stop—as if he *could* .

But hearing that draws a rumble from the back of his throat, moving faster, *harder* , until Xie Loan feels his heartbeat fall into sync with his rhythm, pounding in his ears.

And his lips don't stop, either.

His words are barely intelligible, breathless, nearly drowned out by the sound surrounding them—but Hua Cheng hears every single one.

Yes, *yes* , there, right there—don't stop, please don't stop.

Nails scraping into the skin of his shoulders in pace with every thrust.

That tide is riding faster now, building into this slow, overwhelming knot of warm, pleasurable pressure—

And when it crashes over him, it's unlike anything Xie Lian has ever felt before.

His body trembling from head to toe, thoughts melting together, his back arching.

When Hua Cheng pushed him over the edge before—it was always white hot and sudden, *euphoric* , but this—

This is longer, and far more intense.

Xie Lian couldn't tell anyone his own name right now, much less put the sensation to words.

Hua Cheng doesn't ease or slow as his husband writhes and sobs underneath him, even as the overwhelming tightness squeezing around him threatens to steal his *sanity* —

He just works him through it, jaw clenched, his gaze sharp and heated with a single-minded focus.

Easing the prince's leg down from his shoulder as his body begins to grow limp, kissing the inside of his knee reverently, preparing to pull back when—

When Xie Lian's nails dig into his skin sharply, his other leg turning into a vice around his hips.

"No…"

Hua Cheng bites back a hiss, the muscles in his shoulders coiling and tensing from the effort it takes to stop himself from falling under the pull of his own pleasure.

“It…it’s alright, I don’t need…”

In truth, he never would have lasted this long if not for the fact that he was so focused on his lover’s pleasure first, but the body tends to be far more sensitive in the wake of a climax. It might be too much for—

“W… *want you to…”*

Xie Lian’s voice might be fractured and unsteady—but he isn’t asking.

There’s a hint of a demand in his tone.

And once he hears that—

Hua Cheng can’t stop. Can’t *think* .

Hands wrapping around Xie Lian’s hips, claws digging in until he gasps from the sensation.

The prince wraps both arms around his neck, holding him close, and while Xie Lian tried to bite back every sound that slipped from his lips—even now, choking on overstimulated moans and whines—

Hua Cheng makes no such effort.

Groaning next to Xie Lian’s ear, whispering how beautiful he is, how good he feels, crying out for his dianxia over and over again, but never—

“S-San Lang—” Xie Lian pants, eyes half out of focus, hands clutching at his shoulders. “C-Could you…”

“Y…yes?”

“…Say my name,” the prince whispers hoarsely, his voice turned raw from the tears.

His name.

His *name* .

Xie Lian has only ever heard Hua Cheng say it to him once as far as he can remember—and he was *angry* , because the prince had used the soul switching spell in Fu Gu.

But now, as his husband—he has every right to call him that.

He's one of the only people to have ever possessed that privilege.

When that realization hits him, his unbeating heart jumps in his chest.

"…Xie Lian."

The sound of it makes the prince *shudder* .

It's been so long since anyone (aside from the Rain Master, on rare occasions) called him that. The last he can remember was his parents—and it was never like this.

Said with such awe and reverence, like a sutra of the highest kind.

And once he says it, he doesn't stop.

"Xie Lian…"

He says it again, and again, and *again* , sounding more and more undone with every utterance.

"Xie Lian!"

"San…San Lang!"

Calling to each other back and forth in breathless cries, bodies intertwined as though they were made to fit together.

This time, it takes Xie Lian completely by surprise when that feeling rises up in him again, his thighs trembling around his husband's hips as his body clenched down around him again.

Hua Cheng's movements grow slower, deeper, and more erratic.

Starting to pull back again when he feels himself pulse and twitch inside of him, but—

Xie Lian won't let him go.

Arms and legs wrapped around him in a vice, shaking his head when Hua Cheng tries to warn him.

"I-I'm going to—"

Then, he moans one word that stuns the calamity into near silence, his mind going blank.

"Inside."

For a man who could barely manage to ask Hua Cheng to take him without dying of embarrassment, it takes him completely off guard—and it sends him flying over the edge.

Growing still, trembling just as much as Xie Lian now as he pulses and spills inside of him, each holding on to one another tightly as the heat rushes through them both.

And when he collapses on top of him, still panting his name—Xie Lian doesn't think he's ever felt so satisfied. So *complete* .

So grounded with the weight of his husband in his arms, their bodies tightly intertwined.

The tears begin to slow as they fall down his cheeks, his breaths evening out—and the moment he finds himself lucid, he feels Hua Cheng's lips.

Kissing him everywhere they can reach.

His throat, his jaw, all over his face—then his mouth, with a tenderness that makes the prince melt in his arms.

"…I love you," he murmurs, pressing their foreheads together once more, his fingertips stroking away the tear tracks on his prince's cheeks.

And Xie Lian couldn't explain why, after so many centuries without shedding a tear, that brings them to his eyes so easily.

Kissing his husband again, hugging him tightly in his arms.

"I love you too," he croaks, unable to identify the feeling in his chest.

Not sadness, or pain. But not entirely happiness either.

Or maybe it is, but the kind of happiness that fills you up so much, it hurts.

Finding himself wishing desperately that he could reach back through time, and whisper to a boy he once knew.

One who felt such terror, the first time he desired another man. Who laid awake at night, haunted by his own imperfections.

Who watched golden palaces fall, and kingdoms turn to ash.

A young god who knelt before the pyre of his last believer.

Xie Lian wishes now, more than he ever has, that he could reach back and tell that child that there was happiness to be found after all of that suffering. That he could have had that hope to hold onto, in all of his centuries stumbling around in the dark.

Because only now, in the arms of the man who has always loved him so well, knowing that this *isn't* going to be taken from him, that he's *safe* —

Xie Lian begins to ask himself a question that he always assumed the answer to:

Did he deserve it?

The existence of the punishment, the weight of his shackles—it always made him assume that he was guilty of the crime.

Xie Lian never asked what that crime was, or whether he had committed it.

Did he *deserve* the pain, the loss, the loneliness—the shame?

Part of him can't help but think yes, because he's always believed that.

And another side of him, one that has laid dormant for far too long, a seed planted by a boy who fell from the sky long, long ago—

Thinks that no one could ever deserve that.

Not even him.

Hua Cheng's face nuzzles into his neck, kissing his pulse as it begins to even and slow, and still, when he tries to pull back, Xie Lian holds him in place.

"Are you alright?"

"…Yes," the god answers softly, eyes reflecting the butterflies overhead. "…Can we stay like this…a little longer?"

He doesn't want to lose that feeling of fullness, being tied down by the weight of him—not just yet.

“It must be heavy…”

“Yes,” Xie Lian murmurs, hugging him around his neck. “But I like it.”

And Hua Cheng has no argument for that.

They stay that way for what must be at least another hour. Holding one another, the flames flickering around them as Hua Cheng showers him in kisses, words of reverence and affection.

But eventually, when the sweat on Xie Lian’s body cools, and he begins to shiver—the ghost king insists that they move.

Carrying his god from the worship hall of the temple—taking him to the baths.

Xie Lian is far too tired for an actual soak—but he relents to sitting in the water in his husband’s arms. Allowing Hua Cheng to wash him—rubbing soap and scented oils into his hair.

A gesture Xie Lian insists on returning, even if his arms still feel almost stiff with exhaustion—but the ghost king doesn’t complain about the time it takes.

They’ve never bathed together before.

(Well, not when the prince was aware that it was *him* .)

It’s something Xie Lian would have been too embarrassed to even suggest, and Hua Cheng never dared.

But now, the intimacy comes easily.

Having the ghost king’s bare skin pressed against his own. Being carefully toweled dry when they get out—dressed in soft inner robes.

It takes him a moment to realize where they are when he’s lowered into bed—held comfortably against Hua Cheng’s chest.

The same bedchamber he slept in as a teenager, cultivating in this very temple.

Back again, eight centuries later. On his wedding night, in his husband’s arms.

His body tired and pleasantly used—quickly sinking towards sleep, gently urged on by Hua Cheng's hands rubbing his back. Humming a wordless song on his ear. A tune he sang so long ago, on cold nights in Puqi Village.

When dreams take him, he now has no need to remember them.

Sleep is no longer an escape from memory. Waking up isn't something that Xie Lian dreads.

Unlike so many other nights—he sleeps peacefully, free from nightmares or fitfulness.

A man who finally caught a falling star between his hands.

With no intention of ever letting go.

Chapter End Notes

> 1.1 million words later...they fucked! I doubt that breaks the record but that, my friends, is what I call a slow burn.
>
> Also, since 90% of this story has absolutely no porn what-so-ever, you can skip the NSFW chapters or have whatever head canons you want about their sex lives in this story, it does not bother me! I want it to be an enjoyable experience for everyone, and I know people have varying interests and preferences when it comes to ship dynamics.
>
> xoxo, Evie

Born Beneath a Star of Solitude

Chapter Summary

He can feel fingers stroking through his hair—an indicator that he hasn't woken up first—and when he looks up, he meets a familiar gaze.

"Good morning, your highness."

Xie Lian's smile widens as he leans up on his elbows, kissing him sleepily.

Back to using his title—likely out of habit—but that's alright.

He has a title of his own to call him now.

"Good morning, husband."

Xie Lian doesn't wake in the morning until the sun has already risen high in the sky. Birds sing outside the window, wind passing gently through the trees.

The first thing he sees when he opens his eyes is his hand, curled on the pillows next to his head.

The thread of a red affinity knot tied around his finger gleams in the morning sun, drawing a small smile to his lips.

He can feel fingers stroking through his hair—an indicator that he hasn't woken up first—and when he looks up, he meets a familiar gaze.

"Good morning, your highness."

Xie Lian's smile widens as he leans up on his elbows, kissing him sleepily.

Back to using his title—likely out of habit—but that's alright.

He has a title of his own to call him now.

"Good morning, husband."

Hua Cheng lips curve upward against his as he pulls him closer—but

Xie Lian can sense something in the way he touches him. A faint hint of distraction that piques his curiosity.

“Is something on your mind?”

Normally, he would say Xie Lian needn’t bother himself with it. But…

“…Yes,” he admits slowly.

Xie Lian leans his cheek against his chest, seeking out the warmth that always seems to emanate from him. Something that was baffling before—but less so, since Yushi Huang’s revelation.

“What is it?”

“…I’m not sure if there’s a point in saying it.”

He says that so wearily—now, he has the prince’s full attention.

“If it’s bothering you, then there’s certainly a point.”

“…” Hua Cheng releases a long, heavy sigh, resting his chin on top of Xie Lian’s head.

He should have told him about this sooner.

Not because he necessarily had any obligation to—he knows that he doesn’t, and Xie Lian wouldn’t have been angry with him for saying nothing.

Rather than that—because telling his god might help him decide what to do.

So, he does.

Xie Lian listens carefully, eyes widening sharply with shock at certain points—then filling with sympathy. And when he’s told him all of it, and the prince has had a moment to think—he asks him questions.

What he wants, what he *feels*.

Hua Cheng isn’t sure of either. But as Xie Lian speaks with him, carefully walking him through all of the possible outcomes—he starts to gain some amount of clarity.

But regardless of what he decides—he has no intention of acting on it today.

Instead, he spends his morning feeding his husband breakfast, sliding pieces of sliced fruit into Xie Lian's mouth until he pleads that he's gotten full.

Not long after, the prince ends up in his lap—and hours later, they return to the baths once again, pleasantly exhausted.

They'll venture out in a few days—allowing word to trickle down the way it always does. First with Xie Lian's friends, notably disgruntled at having not been invited, but the screaming and bickering that breaks out when they find out is enough to confirm that Xie Lian made the right choice in keeping their nuptials private.

But disgruntlement is not the same thing as disapproval—and when they witness their prince's happiness—shining brighter than they've *ever* seen him—

How could they take issue with it?

For the rest of the Heavens, now aware that Hua Cheng is, at least technically, one of them—offer their own begrudging acceptance.

And as it so often does, acceptance—the act of moving on—brings things that have long since been buried under the surface back into the light.

The seasons begin their slow, inevitable turns. Autumn leaves begin to fall. Cool breezes bring winter snows.

A busy time of year for medicinal and civil gods—but less so for their martial counterparts. Mortals rarely start their battles in the cold.

Aside from Yushi Huang, whose duties peak during planting and harvest seasons, there is no lull in the roles of the Elemental Masters.

The Wind and Water Masters are often busy enough with their duties and their growing son that they're rarely present for official gatherings.

And where their attentions lapse, the thunder master often makes up the difference.

To be expected from Shi Qingxuan's elder brother— *and* the man who is ordered to He Xuan's service for the next ninety nine years, but...

His husband finds it irritating.

"...Pei Ming," he sighs heavily, sounding labored and long-suffering, even as he arches his throat into the emperor's lips, shivering with every kiss pressed against the crook of his neck. "I was supposed to leave an hour ago."

"Supposed to?" The older man grumbles. "Since when are gods forced to operate on a set schedule?"

The thunder master relents for a moment, turning his head to allow his husband to kiss him fully, fingers tangling in the back of his hair, tilting his head back to deepen it, but—

Shi Wudu pulls back.

"No one is forcing me, it's called *time management."* He points out sternly, tapping him on the forehead with his fan.

(Purely ceremonial now—but he still prefers to carry one in a force of habit.)

"You should try it sometime."

Pei Ming's arms remain stubbornly locked around his waist--and while Shi Wudu might surpass them in many other areas, brute physical strength is not one of them.

Leaving him trapped in the emperor's lap, tragically.

"Why should I, when you and Ling Wen manage my time so well?"

He leans in, pressing his lips to the thunder master's throat once more, hunting down that spot beneath his jaw that always makes his eyes roll back into his head—

And he *does* achieve the intended result, a deliciously restrained sigh escaping Shi Wudu's lips.

"Pei Ming."

"Oh baobei, don't be so cruel—”

"Baobei?" He sounds so shocked, half scandalized, that the emperor

can't help but pull back with a devilish grin.

"What, you don't like it?" A grin that widens when he sees the color of Shi Wudu's cheeks. "Oh, you *do* like it."

He can *also* see the muscles in the Thunder Master's jaw working, a surefire sign that Pei Ming has tiptoed far too close to the edge of his tolerance, but he's far too thrilled with the discovery to pay it any—

Thud!

"Ow!" The general whines, not in any pain at all.

Shi Wudu didn't gently tap him with the fan this time, instead choosing to whack him upside the head with it. "There's no need for violence, I won't call you that in front of anyone else..."

(Unless Pei Ming finds it devastatingly necessary, of course.)

"Allow me to manage your time *for you* as you so aptly described it, and remind you that *you* have a meeting this morning as well. *And* ," he glances out the window, checking the height of the sun in the sky. "You're already going to be late."

And just like that, the emperor's expression turns from delighted teasing to sulking.

"...I don't care what anyone else says," he grumbles under his breath. "You'll always be the Water Tyrant to me."

In a cruel and unusual, mocking gesture, Shi Wudu kisses his cheek.

"That's very sweet of you to say."

He tugs at Pei Ming's wrists again, silently demanding freedom—and this time, his husband allows it. Sorrowfully. Pitifully.

"Can an emperor even *really* be late? Nothing would start without me, anyway."

"And *I'm* the tyrant?"

"Somehow..." Pei Ming sighs, forlorn as he watches him pull on his outer robes, adjusting his hair for a moment as he makes his way out the door. "I can't believe you're making me go by myself."

"Ling Wen and Lord Rain Master are accompanying you."

"Exactly," he grumbles.

Both are helpful and responsible separately. Together, they become easily distracted. And by that, Pei Ming means that his friend has the irritating tendency to pull the Rain Master away and throw her over the nearest flat surface whenever she grows bored.

Given his own tendencies, he can't exactly blame her for that, but it often leads him handling the entire affair by himself.

"I'm surprised Blackwater isn't forcing you to go along, since he'll be in attendance."

And during the last meeting Pei Ming attended where both were in attendance, he had to watch his husband serve the man *tea.*

He crushed his own cup at the sight, rendering it to nothing more than jasmine flavored dust.

"Qingxuan is in the mortal realm on business."

Which means someone has to look after his nephew--a task that Shi Wudu would never delegate, adoring the baby as if he were his own.

Pei Ming understands that. He does. It almost makes him wish that they...

"You haven't shaved—and you aren't even dressed."

"Fine, *fine..."* Pei Ming grouses, rising to his feet, stretching his arms over his head as he walks toward the vanity. His robes are still untied, showing a bare, tanned torso underneath as he leans forward, using spiritual power to rid himself of any remaining stubble.

Shi Wudu pauses in the doorway for a moment, watching him appreciatively.

"You could always order He Xuan off on some errand after the meeting, you know."

As emperor, he *can* do that.

"You could join us when you're finished."

The idea of an afternoon spent with his husband and nephew brings a small smile to the emperor's face, and he suddenly seems a little less miserable about the prospect of getting dressed.

"Have I ever told you that you're a genius?"

"Many times."

"And that I love you?"

His mouth quirks up at the corner into a small, lopsided smile. "Once or twice."

Pei Ming's eyebrows raise. "I'm certain I've said it far more than that."

"I can't recall..."

"Forgetting so easily? So cold, baobei—”

A throw pillow hits the back of his head with a *thud!*

"I'll look forward to seeing you later if you promise you'll stop being a *nuisance."*

"I make no such promises, but something tells me you'll look forward to seeing me anyway."

His husband gives him no answer before he slips out of the room—but the soft laugh he hears from the other side of the door draws a wide smile across his face.

Ruling is a burden, yes. One that he never sought out.

But there's a surprising amount of happiness to be found.

A much needed reminder, predating a meeting he hasn't been particularly looking forward to.

Tai Hua and Qi Ying accompany him—under the premise he couldn't attend such a meeting without some form of protection (and Ling Wen and Yushi Huang are not that.)

But each of them volunteered, likely wanting an excuse to see those who would be in attendance.

As such, the journey is relatively quiet for Pei Ming. Lang Qianqiu spends most of it barking at Quan Yizhen to stop being distracted—but he doesn't have to deal with that.

Ling Wen and Yushi Huang are relatively well-behaved for the moment as well. The Rain Master holds the civil goddess's sleeve as they walk, speaking quietly in her private array.

Not good for conversation, but they're both still vertical. He considers that a blessing.

The meeting itself is held on neutral ground. A local tea house with no temples or lairs nearby—and the owners completely oblivious to who their guests might be, all of them using disguises once they enter, taking their seats along a long, low-lying table.

Five gods on one side, and three Ghost Kings (plus one savage ghost) on the other.

And one martial god—who hasn't come to participate, simply sitting by his husband's side, absentmindedly weaving threads for what looks like the beginnings of a belt between his fingers.

It's the first time a meeting of this kind has ever been attempted--and while the ghost realm has always pointedly flouted the structure and hierarchy that the Heavens embrace, Hua Cheng sits at the center.

"Thank you for agreeing to meet with us today."

Ironically, this meeting wasn't Pei Ming or Hua Cheng's idea—it was Xie Lian who made the suggestion to the emperor months ago, before Hua Cheng had even returned.

Encouraging the elder martial god to consider the possibility of a future where the ghost realm wasn't alienated.

"Wouldn't it be silly of us not to?" The newest ghost king mutters, twirling a chopstick between his fingers, having ordered himself a plate of seared meat. And He Xuan, who *didn't* order any for himself, has been picking off of his plate since they arrived.

"Given that each of you is either a god, romantically involved with a god, or *both* , yes," Ling Wen agrees dryly. "Pretending our realms have nothing to do with one another would be quite silly."

Lang Qianqiu glances toward Ren Song, only to meet Crimson Rain's sharp glare.

He's done nothing to discourage the relationship. Interfering in other people's choices has never been his style. But he *has* sent lethal looks Lang Qianqiu's way whenever he so much as glances at Ren Song in his presence.

"It doesn't make us allies, either."

"No," Pei Ming agrees. "But we don't have to be."

There's quite a bit of room between adversaries and an alliance.

"I'm aware of the fact that Jun Wu's policy was to suppress the ghost realm when and where he could. The animosity was largely caused on our end."

It's a taking of responsibility that none of the ghosts present would have expected—but Ren Song seems visibly pleased to hear it.

"Yes," Ling Wen agrees, watching Hua Cheng with a cold gaze. "That, and he slaughtered thirty-three of our own."

Hua Cheng doesn't show an ounce of shame. Doesn't shrink from her gaze, or avert his own.

"I suppose we share a violent streak, Nangong Jie."

Clearly, she's still smarting from the verbal lashing he gave her in Puqi Shrine over the Brocade Immortal incident.

Pei Ming holds up a hand to force her to ease off, smiling diplomatically. "I'd say *slaughtered* is an exaggeration, Ling Wen. They broke their word, and he was owed compensation."

"He challenged them to that duel *knowing* he wouldn't let them walk away alive, your majesty."

"And they didn't have to accept the challenge," Pei Ming shrugs, throwing his hands up. "Nan Yang and Xuan Zhen are still alive and kicking."

Not something that Hua Cheng seems entirely thrilled about, muttering something unintelligible.

"Only because they were too busy doing *god knows* whatever it is they get up to when they're alone, and he was also involved in that business that nearly got Shi Wudu and Shi Qingxuan killed—”

"He wasn't." Blackwater speaks up firmly, swallowing the last of Shuo's food. "He was bound by an oath to me made many years before not to interfere in my business. But he never assisted me. He even tried to change my mind more than once."

That shocks nearly all of them—except for Xie Lian, who gives his husband's hand a fond squeeze beneath the table.

It wasn't exactly self-serving of He Xuan to confess that he had the chance to be talked out of it on multiple occasions—giving Pei Ming and Ling Wen even more reason to despise him, but...the emperor almost seems to respect him for admitting it.

"Then I suppose that adds them to the very short list of gods he *hasn't* tried to kill," Ling Wen grumbles, crossing her arms, and—

"He did it for me."

Everyone turns their gaze to Xie Lian, who has been quiet up until now.

"...San Lang witnessed...a very unfortunate incident between me and those thirty-three officials during my first banishment," Xie Lian explains quietly.

Once he learned which officials were killed, and who Hua Cheng *really* was—it became quite obvious.

"He challenged them to defend my honor."

Xie Lian gives no details—but his reluctance to do so leaves little room for anyone to argue the validity of Hua Cheng's reasons.

"...Is that also why he abducted and interrogated several of my deputies over the years?"

Hua Cheng stiffens, his eyebrows raising sharply. "Are you really so bitter that you would accuse me of something I didn't do?"

"Don't play *stupid,"* Ling Wen glares. "You berated them over the locations of Heavenly Officials in exile, which makes sense *now—"*

"I wouldn't have needed to," Hua Cheng rolls his eyes, gesturing to He Xuan. "He was keeping me apprised of everything the Heavens knew at all times."

"You expect me to believe that? *Who else* would have done that?"

"Hell if I know, but it wasn't *me* —"

THUD!

The two of them stop, looking at Quan Yizhen, who slammed his hand down on the table to gain everyone's attention.

Golden eyes stare them down sharply, gleaming under the lantern lights overhead. "Shixiong has been trying to speak. You're both rude."

In almost comical unison, they turn their heads to look at Yin Yu—who looks like he wants to sink under the table and die a second time, staring at them through his fingers.

"...I was the one who did that, Ling Wen Zhen Jun," he croaks.

"...Huh?"

Hua Cheng, in a rare instance, looks almost comically shocked, his mouth hanging open--and Ling Wen is equally bewildered.

"...You?" She asks incredulously.

"Hua Chengzhu never ordered me to!" Yin Yu explains, waving his hands nervously.

"But I was tasked with searching for information on his highness, and...the best place to look for that sort of information would have been with your palace..."

It gave him a better chance than he would have had of finding information on Xie Lian before Blackwater did. It was the only *important* assignment Hua Cheng ever gave him, and succeeding in it was pretty much his only means of elevating himself in the ghost realm—

And finally, Hua Cheng's eye slides to the right, pointing out;

"You're the only one who doesn't seem surprised."

Ren Song looks up at him with big, innocent eyes, sipping from his tea cup. "I think it's pretty messed up of you to invalidate my reaction just because I'm not *clutching my pearls—"*

"Speak."

"...Okay, I didn't kidnap *anyone* , let me get that straight right now—!"

Hua Cheng presses his fingertips against his temples, already exasperated, and Xie Lian rubs small circles into his back, something he's taken up doing when the calamity grows stressed.

"But he's not very good at interrogating, and I'm a people person."

Lang Qianqiu snorts at that assertion, but before Shuo can snap at him for daring to question his social skill—Ling Wen speaks first.

"...You're the one who traumatized them?" She asks coldly. Ren Song only responds by sending her an unapologetic stare.

"And I'd do it again—he gave me snacks."

Hua Cheng's eye twitches, and Xie Lian rubs his back just a little bit faster, sending a look towards Pei Ming, who seems to be recovering from silent fits of laughter.

"I...I think we've gotten off topic..."

The emperor clears his throat, struggling to keep the mirth from his voice. "See, Ling Wen? Crimson Rain had nothing to do with your troubles, you have no reason to quarrel with him."

"...Yes, I suppose he's just incapable of controlling those who work under him."

Hua Cheng's eye snaps back to her, his mood even less generous than before.

"I don't make a habit of enslaving those loyal to me, you're correct."

Ling Wen stiffens, sitting a little straighter in her seat, but—

Yushi Huang places her hand over the civil goddess's.

"Let it go." She speaks softly, stroking her thumb over Ling Wen's knuckles.

Ling Wen has already lost the argument, only continuing it for the sake of her pride—and they both know it.

"..." The goddess huffs, but sits back, making no more objections.

"...As I was saying," Pei Ming clears his throat, recovering from that brief, chaotic interlude. "There's no reason we can't try to be cooperative with one another in the future."

Hua Cheng rubs his temples for one more moment, lowering his hands to look up at him. "Meaning?"

"...I don't think any of us are naive enough to believe that the destruction of Mount Tonglu won't have repercussions across all three realms," Pei Ming points out. "We're already beginning to see the effects.”

Some good, and some bad.

More powerful monsters and demons are cropping up, no longer filtered into the Kiln through channels of resentment.

But cultivation sects have shown signs of advancing the craft, rising to the challenge.

A rapidly advancing world after thousands of years of suppression.

“It was to Jun Wu’s benefit to keep our realms from communicating with one another. We were easier to control while we were in the dark. But there’s no reason that we can’t share information about rising threats now.”

That’s only practical, and Hua Cheng sees no harm in agreeing

The only threat he could imagine that might actually be relevant to them is the shards of Fangxin and the God Slayer. Xie Lian already told him what became of them, and while Hua Cheng can’t think of another solution…it isn’t ideal.

It’s not as simple as melting them down, either.

It would be like trying to melt down E’Ming, or set Ruoye aflame.

You could, but they would reform eventually, because the resentment inhabiting both weapons would remain.

And the resentment in Fangxin and the God Slayer…is beyond their ability to purify or destroy.

Putting them inside of a Xuanwu and imprisoning the creature under a mountain probably was the closest thing to a long-term solution—

But resentment isn't like spiritual power; a pure form of energy, cultivated by men and entirely under their control. Loss of that control, that crucial balance, leads to Qi Deviation and eventually—destruction.

Resentment can't be balanced, or trusted. It has its own will, steadily working in an undercurrent.

The blades will desire to be found. To be used. Weak minded cultivators would never be able to kill the Xuanwu in order to get to them to begin with. But if someone with a strong mind did...someone powerful enough to take what was inside...

They would be capable of everything Xie Lian saw in his vision.

For good, or evil—and that's the problem with mortals.

You never know *what* they'll do.

"...The ghost realm is always quiet after a Ghost King is released from Mount Tonglu," Hua Cheng murmurs, nodding in Ren Song's direction. "I imagine it will stay that way for some time."

A few centuries, at least. There was over a millennia between Bai Wuxiang's creation and Hua Cheng's, and since then a new Ghost King has been formed every four centuries. With the destruction of Mount Tonglu, it's possible that it could take far longer.

Pei Ming leans his chin on his hand, looking around the tea house—relatively quiet on a winter afternoon in the western countryside, an elderly waitress serving a young couple across the room. Children playing with glass marbles on the steps outside.

He wishes he could say that he expects the same for the mortal realm, but he knows better.

He knows men too well.

Major political players like Yong'an and Xuli have disintegrated in the last two hundred years, and he sees a trend beginning to form.There were some things about the fall of Xianle that were beyond anyone's control—but much of it was spurred on by an ancient, vengeful calamity.

Xuli was destabilized by the gods themselves. The ruling family of Yong'an was slaughtered by Qi Rong's machinations.

All of these interferences—and their disastrous consequences for mortals—were used by Jun Wu to justify his policy of non-interference.

His lie. His hypocrisy. Because he was always pulling the strings behind the scenes.

Xie Lian's shackles were visible, they were obvious—but everyone was being controlled in some way, even if they held onto some pretense of free will.

But only now, with him dead and gone, can one step back and survey the damage.

The effects on the gods, on the ghost realm, have been clear from the beginning. But the scars left on the mortal realm are in some ways far more sinister—

And Pei Ming doubts they, as gods, can undo the result of a historical trend nearly a thousand years in the making.

The continent has adapted culturally around periods of recurring instability. The common people have learned, watching the rapid rise and fall of kingdoms and empires alike, that their governments are weak.

They have begun looking to other sources for security.

When Pei Ming was born, societies were led by ruling families. Nobles and princes were born to their places in life, or won them through conquest. Sometimes they happened to be cultivators, like the Crown Prince of Xianle—but that wasn't a common path.

After all, Xie Lian taking on that role meant that he wouldn't have children. That he *couldn't* continue his family line. The crown would have either passed over him—or he would have been forced to name a cousin from the ruling family in Gusu as his heir.

It was far more common for cultivation schools to include stipulations for celibacy at the time—and as a result, it was also common for those meant to inherit the throne to be kept from cultivation.

Cultivators *served* kings, protected them, but they rarely ruled themselves.

While those from ruling classes did ascend—it was far more often as civil gods. Martial gods of royal blood used to be quite rare. Even Jun Wu's cover story was as a general who *took* the throne, not one who was born to it—because that was more believable at the time.

But with every interference from gods and ghosts alike—mortals struggled to adapt. Mortal soldiers couldn't handle the threats looming from every corner. The only ones who ever seemed to be able to protect them were the gods themselves, and when they wouldn't answer...

Cultivators were close enough.

Powerful cultivation schools like that in Yunmeng began to form. By the time Lang Qianqiu was born, five hundred years after the fall of Xianle—it was considered necessary for him to train in cultivation in order to survive.

Then, when the war between Yong'an and the Crescent Moon kingdom broke out, one teenage girl, a single mortal cultivator was able to turn the tide in Yong'an's favor in one night.

And Banyue *was* skilled—but cultivators of that level are becoming more and more common.

Now, in the most recent example, two cultivators who were barely even of age were able to liberate Gusu from a curse laid out in a plan that could only have been orchestrated by Jun Wu himself. With Xie Lian's help—but with his shackles, he couldn't have done it alone.

Pei Ming doesn't suspect that cultivators will ever displace the gods in their role. Lan An is a once in a generation mind—and it still took Shi Qingxuan to help them save Gusu when Wen Jiao's son returned with a vengeance.

But that isn't his worry.

Cultivators have already begun to supplant governments as a source of security and stability. On one hand, that might be considered a good thing, but on the other...

Tyrants were difficult enough to deal with when they were lazy, spoiled princelings.

A tyrant skilled in cultivation could very well enslave an entire city, like Gusu. Or a country.

Or the entire *continent* , if they became powerful enough.

And cultivation, something that was once considered an art, could become a tool of war.

If there's one thing Pei Ming understands better than anyone, it's war.

It's brutal, bloody—and often wasteful. But it also drives innovation faster than anything else.

If cultivation becomes the new means of holding political power—there's likely to be rapid advancement in the field like nothing they have ever seen. Gods will become more powerful too as a result, but...

The next wars of mortal men will likely be fought between cultivators.

Not by soldiers. Not with swords and canons.

Those battles were already bloody enough. With bodies piled so high, even now, almost a thousand years later, Pei Ming can still remember how it felt, being forced to climb over them.

He can't even imagine the scale of death and destruction that would follow in a war fought between cultivators on Banyue's level. Or, even worse, *Lan An's.*

Gods have interfered in the past to protect mortals from ghosts—but what can they do to protect them from *themselves?*

They spend the rest of the meeting discussing minor details of future communications. Each side making small concessions here and there—and the result isn't an alliance—but it's a far more relaxed posture than what existed between them before.

Small progress—but it's the first meeting of many. One that, eventually, could lead to something resembling cooperation between their realms. Or a lessening of animosity, at least.

He orders Blackwater to find and assist Shi Qingxuan on his business in the mortal realm—something that he doesn't actually *mind* , he's just irritated that it's an order, and that the order came from *Pei Ming.*

Still, he goes.

Ling Wen and Yushi Huang are long gone, having disappeared shortly after the Rain Master stopped her lover from continuing her pointless bickering with Hua Cheng. Quan Yizhen and Lang Qianqiu have also disappeared with the ones they actually came to see, rather than out of duty.

The emperor can't really bring himself to be bothered by that, as he has his own plans to steal an afternoon with his husband.

But, at least for a moment, he finds himself stopped on the road leading away from the inn. Watching a pair of young men in a nearby training field.

Using wooden swords, laughing as they best one another, not seeming even a little bit bothered by the cold.

The sight brings the warmth of nostalgia—and a quiet sense of dread over him, still thinking about the world boys like them will inherit.

A dangerous one.

"...As far as I can remember, I've never seen a Heavenly Emperor choose to walk back to the Heavens. Didn't Jun Wu use a golden carriage, or something like that?"

"...Something like that," the god agrees, looking back over his shoulder. "But you've only known one emperor."

Hua Cheng opted for the 'San Lang' disguise for the meeting. Something that seemed out of place as he discussed the fates of gods and men with the authority of an ancient being—but seems suitable here, walking down a country road on a quiet afternoon.

"So have you."

True. But Pei Ming ascended during the early days of Jun Wu's rule. Remembers, faintly, impressions that people had of the former dynasty.

Jun Wu's predecessor was, according to most accounts, a humble man.

Still, he agrees. "That's true."

Pei Ming glances behind him—searching for some sign of Xie Lian.

"...Where has the Crown Prince gone off to? It's unusual to see you two apart."

(Aside from when Xie Lian visits the Heavens, but Pei Ming can't imagine why Hua Cheng would approach him on his own like this.)

Hua Cheng makes a face, an unreadable emotion flickering across his expression—one that Pei Ming assumes must be annoyance.

"…Xuan Zhen is making preparations for the Winter Solstice celebrations. His highness offered to help him with a new set of robes."

And that explains why Hua Cheng wouldn't have gone along.

"Was there something about those boys that interested you? You were staring."

This is becoming more and more odd by the moment—but Pei Ming knows better to offend a ghost king by brushing him off.

Hua Cheng isn't a social man. He doesn't seek people out unless he wants something.

But Pei Ming has no reason to think whatever he wants might be sinister.

"…They reminded me of myself—there was a training pitch just like that on my father's estate when I was a boy."

He and Rong Guang spent hours sparring together. Until they were exhausted, black and blue—and having the time of their lives.

"Your father was a wealthy man, then?"

"…I suppose," Pei Ming agrees, rubbing the back of his neck. "But I never benefited from it."

Hua Cheng raises an eyebrow, curious, and the emperor sighs."He had over twenty children, and I was the only son—but of his least favorite concubine. He claimed me as a last resort, if one of his favored wives couldn't give him an heir—but I was never family to him."

Pei supposes the only identifiable privilege he had from his father's wealth was the fact that he didn't grow up on the streets—but he wasn't raised with the same luxuries his siblings had.

"…You had over twenty sisters?" The ghost king asks, a little incredulous.

"It wasn't so strange for a wealthy man to have so many children back then," Pei shrugs. There are still plenty of families that large for that matter, even if it isn't practiced among peasants.

"What about you?" Hua Cheng stares, and he asks again; "Did you have siblings?"

“…No.” The ghost king mutters, shaking his head. “I didn’t.”

“…That’s a shame,” Pei Ming says softly.

Just watching his interactions with Ren Song and Blackwater—it’s easy to imagine him as someone’s older brother. A good one, at that.

Pei Ming adored being a brother. The bond he didn’t have with his father never affected his closeness to his sisters. If Qing Yuan had married him, and he had known their son—he would have wanted to have more. To give him that experience.

There’s a sense of belonging that comes from being a part of a large family. One you can’t find anywhere else. Though for immortals like them, not having many loved ones may have been a mercy.

Pei Ming watched his sisters marry. Have children of their own. He helped raise his nephews after Rong Guang’s death—to the point where they often confused him with an actual father figure.

And he attended every single funeral.

“…Was there something you wanted to discuss with me? You’re not usually one for small talk.”

That’s not entirely true. Hua Cheng can speak to Xie Lian for hours on end about the silliest, seemingly irrelevant things—he’s just selective about who he has those conversations with.

Still, Pei Ming isn’t entirely wrong either.

“…It seemed like something was on your mind during the meeting that you didn’t want to say in front of the others,” Hua Cheng shrugs. “I wondered if it was important.”

Pei Ming grows silent, walking down the road once more, leaving the training pitch behind.

“…Free will.” He mutters.

Hua Cheng stops for a moment, staring at the line of his back, as though he’s trying to find something in the set of his shoulders. He himself has always been known as an advocate for personal freedom—but he’s never heard of a god concerned with it.

“What about it?”

"…I always believed that human conflict and suffering was the price we paid for freedom of choice," Pei Ming explains. "But…with the way things are going, we might just be allowing mortals the choice to destroy themselves."

Hua Cheng grows silent once more, thinking that over.

"I don't agree."

"You don't?"

Pei Ming always took him for a nihilist at heart.

"Mortals will always have conflict and bloodshed—and allowing them to have that is a cost of free will." He agrees with that much.

"But stopping them from destroying humanity as a whole wouldn't be depriving human beings of their free will."

"…I fail to see how it isn't," Pei Ming mutters, feeling profoundly exhausted at the task ahead of them.

Another war that he doesn't want to fight.

"Because you're still a human being."

So is Hua Cheng. Xie Lian. He Xuan, and all the rest.

Even Jun Wu, as difficult as that is to remember.

Gods are born human. When they ascend, they're human. If they fail, they're still human.

Woefully, painfully human.

"If some mortals grow powerful enough to cause that much destruction—allowing them to do so wouldn't be respecting free will, because there are infinitely more humans who don't have that ability. Whose choice to survive would be taken away from them by those with more power."

Hua Cheng has had the power to cause as much destruction as anyone ever has. And he's also been completely powerless.

"I suppose you're right," Pei agrees, "but it's difficult to know when and if one should interfere. The last thing I want is to be like…"

His fear is one that Hua Cheng has seen in his husband's face many times.

Seeing someone use power so ruthlessly can make you terrified of wielding it yourself.

Neither of them want to be like Jun Wu—and that's precisely why neither of them ever could be.

"…If the time comes when the gods *must* intervene, you'll know."

The point of no return is never obvious, not until you're looking over the edge, seeing how far you might fall.

When they round the curve in the path, the trees thin just enough for the river to come into view.

"…And what about you?"

"I don't particularly concern myself with the possibility of humanity's future destruction—"

"No, I meant—at the meeting, it seemed as though there was something on your mind, too."

He seemed oddly tense. Ling Wen may have made that worse, but still.

Hua Cheng turns his head away, looking to the river. A tributary to the largest system in the continent. One that ends with a delta in Yunmeng, runs all the way through the central plains, and begins with the glaciers in the north.

The same waters that flowed through Xianle.

"…If you had to choose between living in ignorance about something that would never impact you, or know about something that would upset you, which would you choose?"

Pei Ming stares at him.

That question sounds rather ominous, and— *why* would he ask it?

"…I would always rather know the truth," he eventually answers. "No matter what it's about."

It's always the things he didn't know that have come back to haunt him the most. Or finding out too little too late.

“But…why ask me that?”

Hua Cheng doesn’t look away from the river. Not even once.

“No matter what state his highness was in, you have always treated him fairly. Even when you had no incentive to do so.”

He was the only god who spoke out against the rumors about Xie Lian.

The only one who never gave the prince grief for his closeness to Hua Cheng. The one who took the position of emperor to spare Xie Lian from the burden.

He’s shown himself to be an honorable person.

He’s earned the right to be treated with respect. Something Hua Cheng has never treated lightly.

And if he had said that he’d rather *not* know the truth, Hua Cheng never would have told him.

Part of him wishes that he had chosen ignorance—but it’s too late to go back on it now

After a moment, he reaches into his robes—pulling out something that Pei Ming doesn’t immediately see—

“This should have been returned to you sooner—but I believe it’s yours.”

After he hands it over, it takes a moment of staring for Pei Ming to realize—

It’s a golden belt.

Pei Ming has had countless over the years—but this one, he’d never forget.

It’s the only one that he ever gave away. Many centuries ago, when he was still a freshly ascended god in Xuli.

“…Where did you get this?” He whispers, eyes as wide as they could possibly get.

Hua Cheng's gaze has returned to looking firmly in the opposite direction, his hands clasped behind his back.

"I haven't had it this entire time if that's what you're thinking. And I didn't steal it, either."

Pei hasn't accused him of anything. Hasn't been able to process this enough to formulate a proper accusation, even if he wanted to.

"…Then how did you find it…and how did you know that it was mine?"

He can't see how torn Hua Cheng's expression has become. Hands clasped so tightly behind his back, his knuckles have turned white.

He almost changes his mind three separate times.

"I took it from a grave, four hundred miles northeast of here."

A month ago.

Pei Ming still hasn't been able to look away from the belt in his hands.

"…You…took it from a…" He repeats the words slowly, but he—

He still doesn't understand how Hua Cheng could have known the belt was *his* , or…why he would have…

"When Jun Wu taunted you during the battle of the Heavens, you said the name Qing Yuan." Hua Cheng mutters.

"I knew where she was buried, and that the belt was with her. It seemed right that you should have it back."

That was what she would have wanted.

"…I don't…" Pei Ming swallows hard, struggling to deal with the emotions bubbling to the surface, his face growing pale.

"How…did you know where she was…—? You— *knew* her?"

He's learned a little more about the utter mystery that is Crimson Rain in the last year. Knows that he and Xie Lian were children together in Xianle.

But the gaps in his knowledge are wide, gaping chasms.

That’s by design on his part.

A desire to not be known in such a way by a world that he’s never trusted. Stepping into the light has never seemed worth the risk imposed by such vulnerability. But sometimes…

People earn the right to know the truth.

“She was my mother.”

Pei Ming finally manages to peel his eyes away from the belt, fingers closed tightly around it.

Staring at the young man in front of him, as though he’s never seen him before.

Seeing so many things in his face that seem so obvious now, but—

“… *Your* mother,” he croaks.

Hua Cheng nods stiffly, his lips pressed tightly together.

“But you…you were from Xianle…” Pei Ming can barely speak, sounding like the air has been punched out of him.

“I was born in Xuli. My mother took us to Xianle when I was six years old.”

“…Six years…”

They were in Xuli for *six years* , after she stopped praying? Even when he couldn't find her, when she must have *known* that he was looking—

Pei Ming grows silent again, his hands balling into fists at his sides, his expression tense and pale, struggling to...

"Her husband was the one who killed her, wasn't he?" He finally asks, doing something that Hua Cheng has watched himself do many times.

Ask the questions that he can wrap his head around, first.

"Not with his own hands. He paid a group of criminals. But he was there."

There's no emotion in Hua Cheng's voice when he says it. As if he's speaking about someone else's life, rather than his own.

"...How did they...?"

"It would be difficult to point to one thing," Hua Cheng's jaw tightens. "But I suppose she bled to death."

Pei finally manages to look up at him again, and when he does—he sees that, while Hua Cheng's voice *sounds* frigid, his eyes...

They're in quiet agony.

"...I tried to find him," Pei Ming explains hoarsely. "After I learned of her death. But when I did, he was already—”

"I know." The ghost king replies. Not that Pei Ming looked, though he isn't surprised to hear that. "I killed him myself, shortly after I emerged from Mount Tonglu."

And many, many others.

Every single person he could have attached blame to, he slaughtered.

Until only one person with her blood on his hands remained;

Himself.

And if Hua Cheng hadn't had something remaining tying him to this world, he would have destroyed the last remaining man responsible, as well.

The fact that he hasn't is both a blessing and a curse.

"...I looked for you, too." Pei Ming says quietly, feeling so pitiful, caught between struggling to admit his failures, and pleading against any perceived indifference.

"When I heard what happened to Qing Y—to...your mother," it's hard to say it, harder to *believe* it, to even wrap his mind around it— "They told me her son—you—were probably dead, but I still looked. I just...there was so much death in Xianle, and I couldn't find—”

"I know." Hua Cheng averts his gaze, struggling between the knowledge that he can't avoid this, and the fact that he doesn't *have* these kinds of conversations. Not with people who aren't his god. "Dianxia told me...that you asked for permission to search Xianle back then."

And, he told Hua Cheng that Pei Ming still spoke of his son after Shi Wudu's death. Of how the loss and regret still haunted him.

That was what made the ghost king wonder if *not* telling him was crueler than the truth.

Hearing the way Pei Ming reacted to what Jun Wu said...Hua Cheng could tell, even then, that he...

His mind always goes back to his first days in the Kiln, remembering what Zhao Beitong told him—watching his memories of his mother.

What it means, to be born beneath a star of solitude.

He remembers the fondness in his mother's eyes, when she spoke of her time with his father. How he was a soldier, and they had loved one another.

He thinks about how she...

"But she never stopped praying."

Pei starts, his eyes filling with confusion as he listens to him explain—

"She brought me to one of your temples often, and she would pray to you. I don't know if she ever tried to tell you about me before—but she did try to convince me to pray on the day we left."

He watches the struggle on Pei Ming's face. Swallowing down the frustration he felt towards Qing Yuan before, for never telling him. The surprise, the confusion.

And finally, as the reality of what must have happened sets in—anger.

"...Jun Wu."

He knew who the boy was. That he was Pei's. That would have been enough to intervene in Qing Yuan's prayers.

To stop them from receiving his help.

And that also explains how, in the six years he scoured Xuli—he never found them.

Qing Yuan was crafty—but even she couldn't have hidden herself so well. Only a god could have.

And there was only one god at that time who would have had the knowledge to do so.

"...Why would he have even cared?" Hua Cheng mutters.

He was no one, back then. Neither he nor his mother had any importance in the schemes and machinations of the Heavens.

Pei Ming presses his forehead against his palm for a moment, taking long, deep breaths.

"...Why do you think Bai Wuxiang murdered you?" He mutters. "Jun Wu could never stand the idea of one of his playthings loving something more than him."

Xie Lian's attachment to him was reason enough.

But Pei Ming was, even back then, the most powerful martial god remaining in the Heavenly Court. And he supposes Jun Wu must have viewed him...as little different from the hounds he used to keep.

Useful, as long as they're loyal.

"...But you didn't even know I existed," Hua Cheng shakes his head. "You thought my mother had spurned and abandoned you—”

"And I would have given up my godhood, if I was forced to choose between this life and the two of you."

Pei Ming says it with no doubt. No hesitation.

He already had plans, the moment he knew of his son's existence. To find him and bring him back to the capital. Maybe live with him on his mortal estate until he was old enough, then bring him to the Heavens as a deputy.

Plans that grew less hopeful as time went on.

Pei couldn't sleep back then. He couldn't eat. He was harsher than he needed to be. Lax in his duties.

He spent every single day he could spare searching for him for nearly ten years. Thinking about how, if his son was alive, he would be frightened. Alone.

Maybe he was sick. Maybe he was one of the children who had been forced to fight in the civil war. He could have been on the streets, cold and starving.

If he was alive, he *needed* him, and Pei—

Pei had all of the power of a god, and it felt like sifting through endless grains of sand. Finding nothing in the end but an aching, unending chasm of grief.

Realizing that if his son was alive, he would be a grown man by then. Pei should have found him.

But he never did.

Which meant, in all likelihood, that his son was dead.

And all Pei Ming wanted *then* was to give him the dignity of a proper burial. To find his remains, along with his mother's, and return them to the family ancestral hall.

He asked the emperor, pleading for his help.

And when Jun Wu cast his spells, looking far and wide—he told Pei Ming that there was nothing to be found.

That the ashes of his lover and son had likely been scattered by those who murdered them.

He held Pei Ming as the man wept for the family he lost. Comforted him, as he knew the truth. As he lied, and stole, and murdered.

And Pei Ming's greatest mistake was trusting him so blindly.

It feels like a repeating pattern that he can't escape.

He refused to betray the King of Xuli. Slaughtered those who were loyal to him to keep a mad, power-hungry fool on the throne. Even if Rong Guang was wrong in so many of the choices he made, even if they tried to force Pei down a path he didn't want—

Pei regretted his choice.

He trusted Jun Wu, when he told him that his lover and his son were gone. Beyond his help.

He trusted him, and they suffered as a result of that faith.

He listened to Shi Wudu, when he said the emperor's interest in him was as a mentor. That there was nothing to worry about.

He didn't step in to protect him when Jun Wu held him closer in his orbit. Assuming that Shi Wudu was being honest, that he was just a young, ambitious god—fostering a friendship with the emperor was a means for securing his and Shi Qingxuan's futures.

And hindsight is a cruel teacher, but—

Pei Ming still sees the Prince of Xuli, agonized and terrified, dying in his arms, whispering to the general—

'What did I do wrong?'

Only to hear them repeated again, by another young prince, one without a malicious bone in his body.

Remembers watching as Xie Lian, still a *teenager* , was forced to his knees in the grand ancestral hall. Eyes heartbroken as he looked to Pei, one of the only ranked gods in the court who did not scorn him back then, silently asking:

'What did I do wrong?'

And he knew that it was nothing.

He knew that Xie Lian was a good child. That he only tried to help. That whatever law bound him to be punished for the fall of Xianle was unjust and cruel.

But Jun Wu seemed so *certain* when he protested. Gently reminded him that he had never been taught to understand such laws, and encouraged Pei Ming to look for his son, rather than protect someone else's.

And Pei Ming listened.

Because he was so desperate to find him.

“…And I’m sorry,” Hua Cheng stiffens, startled by the sound of Pei Ming’s voice, looking up to find—

To find the emperor’s eyes filled with tears.

“I am *so* sorry that I wasn’t there.”

The ghost king doesn't know how to respond to it.

He's only ever seen one person weep for him. One person who cared enough to mourn, or apologize to him.

And he never thought he would experience that from anyone else. It wasn't something he craved, or felt lacking in. His God's love and acceptance was all he needed, but—

That doesn't mean he feels nothing, watching someone else display that emotion now. Even if it also draws out confusion.

"…You don't need to be."

"Of course, I—"

"I know you must have had fantasies in mind, when you imagined what your son must have been like."

People who never even have children imagine them in the back of their minds. And if you do, but you never get to see them grow…

It's natural to wonder what would have been.

"And I wasn't." His voice is firm, dispelling any romanticism of it all.

"I wasn't a kind, honorable, or well-mannered person. I had blood on my hands before you even knew I had been born. I was never going to be what you wanted. And now that you know that, you can—"

"You were a child."

Hua Cheng falls silent, his lips frozen in mid-sentence.

"You should have been protected and looked after. No matter how ill-mannered or dishonorable you think you were." Pei shakes his head. "And I am *sorry* that I wasn't able to give that to you."

Crimson Rain doesn't react immediately, his expression guarded.

But slowly beginning to see.

Something he caught a glimpse of, when Jun Wu taunted the general before, telling him that his son had been hideously deformed.

That he wouldn't have cared.

Words that are easy to say in the heat of emotion, but now—they seem sincere.

Hua Cheng has experienced love that came from gratitude. From shallow admiration. Or affection that has been hard earned and carefully treasured. But when his mother died, he lost more than just her. Something he thought he would never experience again.

A love that comes without conditions. That isn't severed with time or distance.

A parent's love.

The affection of a father that…wanted him.

Not one who cast him and his mother aside out of boredom. Who never cared. Who never looked.

Realizing that almost hurts more than indifference.

Thinking about how his life could have been different. Now, it feels as though something was stolen from them both.

Maybe he could have met Xie Lian under different terms. Done more to help him.

And his mother…

"…Even if you had known," Hua Cheng speaks slowly, choosing his words with utmost care. "I don't think my mother would have wanted me involved with the gods. I think that's why she left."

Pei Ming grimaces slightly, knowing that it's probably true.

"Given that you ended up a god yourself, she wouldn't have had a say in that in the end," he points out, and—

Hua Cheng doesn't miss a subtle note of pride in his voice.

"And you…know where she's buried?"

The ghost king takes a deep breath.

"…I do."

"In Xianle—?"

"Yong'an, actually."

Pei Ming's eyebrows raise, and Hua Cheng braces himself.

"No one would help me," he explains quietly. "I couldn't dig a grave or build a pyre by myself."

He was too small, back then.

"But I couldn't leave her there either."

If he was too small to dig a grave, or build a pyre—he was too small to carry a grown woman. But he still did. Even if it took hours. Even if he was too tired to move for nearly a day afterwards.

"…The best I could do was get her to the river."

He dragged her all the way through the poorer neighborhoods of the city. Out of the gates, and down the hill leading to the riverbed.

So far—and many people saw, but not a single soul stopped and offered to help.

Hong'er knew why.

He never went out again with his right eye uncovered after that. Not unless the bandages were pulled from his face, or—

Or if Xie Lian asked to look.

"…I cleaned her." As best as he could. "Gave her as many flowers as I could find."

Placed them in her hands, her hair.

She deserved more, but it was all he could do.

"…Years later, I heard a story of a young woman's body being found in a dried riverbed in Yong'an, covered in flowers. The villagers buried her and made a grave marker. When I went to look and found the belt…"

He knew it was her.

He built her a more formal grave after that—but never took the golden belt. Always thought it was better off remaining with her. That someone like him had no use for it.

Until very recently.

Hua Cheng could show him someday—but not today.

That would be too much.

“…I’m sorry for what I said, back in Ghost City,” Pei Ming mutters—something that Hua Cheng had nearly forgotten by now. “You’re far from heartless.”

“I wasn’t holding it against you.”

Not when he knew just how much Pei had been suffering when he said it.

Hua Cheng isn’t a particularly tolerant or forgiving man—but he understands that kind of pain, and he couldn’t blame him.

From Pei Ming’s perspective, Hua Cheng had seemed like an accomplice.

“You don’t have to apologize just because of what you know now.”

“I know, but…” Pei Ming shakes his head. “In the months since then, I’ve come to see you differently.”

Fighting beside him in Mount Tonglu—and again in the battle against Jun Wu.

He’s seen the man that the entire world has written off as cold and unfeeling be compassionate and loyal.

Pei Ming doesn’t say it, knowing that Hua Cheng probably wouldn’t know how to respond to it coming from him—

But by the time the battle was over, his opinion of him had already changed.

“…I never knew enough about you to have an opinion,” the ghost king admits.

He knew that Pei Ming had treated Xie Lian fairly. That he conducted his business with some manner of honor.

As such, Pei was one of the few gods he didn’t despise—but the lack of a bad opinion doesn’t translate to a good one.

He was neutral before.

“…You’re welcome to know more about me,” Pei Ming offers cautiously. “I’d like the chance to get to know you.”

This was the part of telling him that Hua Cheng felt so apprehensive about.

Because he doesn’t *know* what he wants.

Doesn’t know if he needs it, or if he has to *need* it to accept it.

“…We can discuss it,” he agrees cautiously. “But it would have to be…slow.”

And heaven knows both of them have plenty of time for that.

There’s so much more to say. So many things that each of them want to know—

But Pei Ming needs time to wrap his mind around the truth—and Hua Cheng has let his guard down enough for one encounter.

Still, when the conversation slows, and parting seems inevitable…

“What name did she give you?”

And Hua Cheng can’t help but be struck by a brief glimpse of irony.

He asked his mother what his family name was countless times, and she always said to wait until he was older.

Now he’s older, and his father asks him for his given name.

A name that was stolen from him for so long, it almost feels surreal, saying it now.

“…Hong.”

There’s a small, bittersweet curve to Pei Ming’s lips.

“…Hong’er, right?” The way Hua Cheng stiffens with surprise is answer enough.

It’s exactly the kind of nickname Qing Yuan would have used. Even if it’s almost impossible to attach a childhood pet name to a man who has grown to be synonymous with fear and violence—

But Pei Ming can see it.

“…I don’t know what reaction you expected from me,” he murmurs, turning his head to look at the long, winding road back home.

It was clear he didn’t expect a *good* one, from the way he broached the subject. How firmly he tried to lower Pei’s expectations.

“But I wasn’t disappointed.”

There are many emotions running rampant in his chest at the moment. Loss, anger, guilt, and shock—

But also happiness, and even more so…

Pride.

Hua Cheng grows quiet, watching as they bid farewell, and go their separate ways.

Maybe Pei Ming heard his response—and maybe he didn’t.

A quiet, but clear:

“Neither was I.”

He practically sinks into Xie Lian’s arms when he returns that night. Not physically tired, but for some reason, he feels like he could sleep for another year.

And in his god's embrace, it feels like he really could. His cheek resting against his chest, listening to the slow, comforting sound of his heartbeat. Xie Lian's fingers tangled in his hair, combing out invisible knots that hidden curls are prone to.

"I know that was hard."

This is normally the point where his husband would play it off, saying that nothing is difficult for him. Nothing is ever a strain. Xie Lian has nothing to worry himself about.

But this time, he only manages a tired grunt.

"It's over with."

"You say that as though he reacted poorly," Xie Lian murmurs—but he already knows the answer before Hua Cheng shakes his head, burying his face deeper in the front of his robes.

Crimson and white today, a sight that always makes the ghost king hold him tighter.

He hasn't even taken the time to return to his true form, still pressed close in the shape of a teenager—but Xie Lian has never minded.

"Did he say anything about the wedding?"

Hua Cheng lets out a surprised snort against his chest, one that makes Xie Lian squirm ticklishly.

"Why would he ask about that?"

The prince shrugs, spreading his legs so his husband can lie more comfortably between them, his arms around Xie Lian's waist.

(With no other intentions *now* , but that will likely change within the hour.)

"He might have wanted to come if he—”

"That's why I never would have told him *before."*

"San Lang..." Xie Lian bites his lip, not knowing whether to laugh or cry.

"I wouldn't change a thing about that night."

Nor would he, a subtle reminder that Xie Lian didn't invite anyone either.

But it's a little different when it comes to blood relatives, and Xie Lian doesn't have any of those left.

"I'm glad to know San Lang doesn't have any second thoughts."

His tone is lightly teasing, and his husband lifts his head, eyes flashing playfully.

"All of my thoughts are about you, gege." He leans up, placing a kiss on his neck, his chin, then his lips with every word. "First, second, and third."

That draws a soft, embarrassed sound from the prince—one that Hua Cheng has come to know by heart. Prompting it is a victory.

"San Lang... can you not be like this?" There's no force behind the words, he doesn't *mean* them, and the ghost king shakes his head, kissing him breathless.

"I'm afraid not. Is gege having second thoughts now?"

"..." Xie Lian leans up on his elbows, kissing him once—chastely.

"No," he murmurs, carefully pushing his husband's hair behind his ear. "I could never."

Hua Cheng's smile widens, the setting sun casting his face in a warm glow as it passes through the window, sinking down to steal another kiss.

"Good," their fingers become intertwined. "Because I'm looking forward to a long, prosperous marriage."

Xie Lian has no doubt that he will.

Because if there's one thing Hua Cheng has always managed, it's achieving what he sets out to do.

And in this case—nothing could make the Crown Prince of Xianle happier.

Your Most Devoted Believer

Chapter Summary

> The days grow longer and warmer, and visits grow more frequent. Hills that long stood empty and overgrown slowly coming back to life.
>
> And finally, on the last day of summer, Mount Taicang finds itself teeming with cultivators and ghosts alike once more.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Their first winter together is quiet and filled with warmth. Watching Hong Li chase Ruoye through the snow. Afternoons spent in the forge in Ghost City, flames crackling in the hearth as Hua Cheng works, his god reading (and watching) from the corner.

In spring, they're often in Puqi Village to help with the planting, Bolin and Xiao Hua having become fixtures among the locals.

With Xiao Hua's younger brother often accompanying them, two young children in tow. A boy and girl, often found playing on the hillside by the shrine.

Lang Qianqiu will often appear in a disguise of his own—one that always makes Hua Cheng roll his eyes—and the six of them will sit down for dinner together at the end of the day. Shuo cooks for himself and the others—but Hua Cheng only eats what his husband makes.

Xie Lian likes to think that he's getting better—but when Lang Qianqiu turns green and starts having hallucinations after one sip of his soup...

Well, Hua Cheng likes it, and that's what really matters.

Culinary disasters aside—there's something about sitting around a table together, watching Shuo and Lang Qianqiu bicker, Hua Cheng telling the children stories, Ruoye and E'Ming bustling around to monitor the food left on the stove that draws an immutable smile to his face.

There's a celebration near the beginning of summer for He Bai's first birthday, and the child is already walking— *far* too fast, sneaking away from his parents every time their heads are turned.

Always caught by his uncle before he can wander out of the palace grounds.

Or, if he doesn't get that far, he'll be herded back towards the others by Bai Ze, the feline deputy's tail flicking above his head as he nudges the little boy through the garden.

Whining at the prospect of being deterred from chasing a particularly interesting mouse.

"You have to be more careful, or you're going to lose track of him," Shi Wudu scolds, sapphires dripping from his ears, braided into his hair—part of the regalia for an imperial consort–-and Shi Qingxuan sighs pitifully.

"I am! He likes getting lost!" He moans. "You've seen him do it! He wanders off into the strangest places, then laughs when I find him like it's the funniest thing in the world! He loves stressing me out—he wants me to have a heart attack and die!"

"I doubt it's that sinister," his elder brother replies dryly.

Just then, a giggling voice calls through the air—

"Baba!"

And the moment he hears it, any vexation drains from Shi Qingxuan's face, replaced with a beaming smile as he kneels down to swoop the little boy up in his arms, holding him on his hip.

"Look at you!" He croons, nuzzling their noses together. "Running so fast! What are you in such a hurry for?"

All he receives is nonsensical children's babble in return, but he always responds as though the conversation is far more two sided.

"I see, I see, sounds serious..."

One of the deputies from a lower martial palace watches them curiously, sipping from his glass of wine.

"...Does he call you that in your female form as well, Lord Wind Master?"

Shi Qingxuan glances up, his eyes round.

"Hmm? Oh, no—he calls me 'mama' when I'm like that."

"Doesn't it get confusing for him?"

Shi Wudu raises one eyebrow, but Shi Qingxuan simply smiles even brighter, shaking his head.

"No, he always knows it's me."

"Even a toddler can grasp that much," the Thunder Master points out, his tone turning sharp.

"...No, no," the deputy smiles, waving one hand awkwardly. "You misunderstand, I only meant—how do you know which one of you he's calling for?"

"Oh," Shi Qingxuan laughs. "It's obvious, watch—baobei, where's baba? Can you point to baba?"

The little boy sits up a little in his father's arms, turning his head and squinting through the crowd, emerald eyes gleaming in the sun, until—

"Baba!" He points victoriously, tugging on the front of Shi Qingxuan's robes, and, as if on cue, He Xuan looks up at the sound of it.

"See?" Shi Qingxuan turns back to the deputy, practically beaming with pride. "It sounds completely different!"

The middle court official pauses, lips slightly parted, because *he* couldn't hear a difference in the baby's tone at all, but—

"Of course it does," Shi Wudu smiles, ruffling his nephew's hair, "he's so smart, just like his uncle—”

"Gege," Shi Qingxuan whines, "you could say he got it from me!"

"Or me," He Xuan grumbles, having walked over after hearing his son calling for him.

"Sorry," Shi Wudu places a kiss on the child's forehead, spurring happy babbling from He Bai, reaching up to grasp his uncle's hair in his fists. "I was being realistic."

"Gege—!"

It's the first Heavenly Gathering where all of the ghost kings are present—and *invited* .

It's not quite so surprising that Ren Song would be in attendance—Lang Qianqiu often brings him along to such events, but Hua Cheng is a pleasant surprise.

Well, a pleasant surprise to some—a mildly terrifying one to others.

Still, Shi Qingxuan greets them with eager delight, and He Bai is equally excited to see the prince, reaching out to be held.

Xie Lian visited quite often before Hua Cheng's return—and is one of the few gods the boy isn't shy around. The prince is just as eager to hold him, hugging him close as Hua Cheng and He Xuan exchange brief greetings, but...

Crimson Rain's gaze is repeatedly drawn back to the sight.

Clothes are almost an expected gift from Xie Lian—and a welcome one —

But the bangle is a surprise.

Too big for him—one that he'll have to grow into, but that was the point. Made from gold and pearl—designed to keep malicious ghosts away, as the crown prince explains.

Both gifts are supposedly from him, with no one else taking credit, but...

Shi Qingxuan sends Hua Cheng a knowing, thankful smile.

And, much to the surprise of the Heavenly Court—it's more and more common to find Crimson Rain and the Heavenly Emperor together. Having quiet conversations on the edges of things.

Rumors have begun to circulate about a history between the two, and neither have made an effort to confirm or deny it.

But sometimes, if you happen to look at just the right moment—you might catch the sight of the ghost king laughing.

Not with arrogance, or viciousness.

And if you look to the side, you'll find the emperor smiling. Similar to the way that he always has, but now—

Now, Pei Ming's smiles always seem to reach his eyes.

Summer is long and slow, one day drifting lazily into the next, like pages turning in a slight breeze.

He Xuan builds a new lair--asking for yet another loan from Crimson Rain, something that almost seems to offend Shi Qingxuan and his brother, but as he explains—

He's owed him money for so long, it feels strange when he doesn't.

Xie Lian takes to sparring again, for the first time in nearly eight centuries—and now, he has someone who can keep up with him.

E'Ming and Mo Ye flash as they clash together over and over again, neither gaining the upper hand over the other—and neither wanting to.

Feng Xin and Mu Qing occasionally join in when they visit, the former even striking up the nerve to cross swords with Hua Cheng at one point—

A mistake, as the ghost king is none too gentle about it, but…

Xie Lian can’t help but smile at the progress.

Or watch them interacting together, and wonder what could have been.

Mu Qing joins in occasionally, giving more of a challenge—but he seems just as content to sit with the prince beneath the maple trees, fingers drifting through blades of grass as they read together.

Some nights, they end up stretched out beneath the stars, Xie Lian excitedly explaining how much the constellations changed in the last eight centuries, since he saw them last.

And when he falls asleep, his husband is the one to carry him home.

Something Feng Xin always used to do on nights like this—but the martial god doesn't seem to mind having someone take over that role.

He's too busy looking at dark eyes and silver hair, perpetually cold fingers grasping his own as they walk home, side by side.

The days grow longer and warmer, and visits grow more frequent. Hills that long stood empty and overgrown slowly coming back to life.

And finally, on the last day of summer, Mount Taicang finds itself teeming with cultivators and ghosts alike once more.

Children running and playing in the trees and swings—Guzi helping a smaller girl with silver hair onto one of them, protective as he makes sure she doesn't trip over the tree roots she can't see.

Several climb around on Dian Dian's back where the beast sits at the forest's edge.

Despite being a famed, ferocious creature, the forest demon seems content to tolerate it, ears flicking back and forth as he listens to the sounds of the mountain. The rain master's bull sunbathes beside him, tail swishing lazily in the grass.

And while many of the children present are enjoying the swings—one soars higher than any of the others.

Screaming and giggling as he tumbles through the air, carried by gusts of wind, only to be caught in his father's arms and tossed into the sky again.

Jet black hair sticking up in every direction, and never once afraid of falling.

His other father watches with a fond gaze, watching as Shi Qingxuan catches him again, holding him close as he giggles with excitement, asking to go again.

"She's advancing too much on your right."

His eyes snap back down to the game board with a sigh, seeing where the white tiles are relentlessly encroaching. "I can see that."

"I hope that's part of a strategy."

If it was, he wouldn't say it out loud, not with Ling Wen watching him like a hawk.

"I'm already doing you a favor, don't be a nag."

"You're hardly doing anyone a favor," Ling Wen shrugs, spinning another tile between her fingertips.

Shi Wudu has played her countless times over the centuries—and he hasn't beaten her once.

Neither of them have ever beaten Pei Ming—but small stepping stones first.

At the moment, the emperor is busy anyway.

Holding a scorpion snake by the space beneath its jaws, scolding a teenage girl, her head hanging sheepishly.

“You do realize there are mortals here?”

“Yes…” Banyue mumbles, fiddling with one lock of hair nervously.

“Then what would possess you to bring the snakes?!”

“…I didn’t bring them, they just…follow me…”

“For what?”

“They get lonely,” she mumbles pitifully. “And they like Pei Su gege…”

Pei sends his deputy an annoyed look, only for the younger official to suddenly become very interested in his own boots, kneeling down to examine whether or not they’re fastened properly.

“You do realize that this is *technically* a family event, don’t you?”

Pei Su grimaces.

He still hasn’t adjusted to that news, the fact that it technically makes Crimson Rain his senior, or the fact that he was beaten into a pulp in the sinner’s pit by one of his own *ancestors* .

“That’s why I agreed to come, General.”

“Then could you also make sure your friend here doesn’t throw anything with fangs for the rest of the day?”

“I didn’t…” Banyue stops, biting her lip.

It’s a little bit difficult to deny when she was the one who told Pei Ming that throwing the snakes was her *only skill.*

Something that Pei Ming doesn’t entirely blame her for, but—

Why on earth was that the main spell Hua Cheng taught her? It couldn’t have been healing the sick? Or summoning columns of flame?

It *had* to be deadly serpents?

“…If you’re still mad about the time they bit you—”

“Water under the bridge,” Pei Ming mutters stiffly, flexing his fingers at the memory.

It still stuns him that Xie Lian was bitten on the hand by one once, then continued through the desert for hours without medical assistance.

“…Why don’t you two go and do something romantic? Like a walk in the forest, or watching the sunset—and you could take the snakes with you—”

Banyue goes from sheepish to shy at the suggestion, the tips of her ears turning red, but Pei Su is quick to reach for her hand.

“That sounds like a good idea to me,” he murmurs, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze.

His general wouldn’t understand enough about the snakes to know—but they’re just as respondent to her anxiety as they are to their own—

And Banyue’s never been much of one for crowds.

“…Are they actually together, you think?” Shi Qingxuan asks, holding He Bai against his hip as the two walk off into the tree line, his head tilted curiously.

“How long were you listening?”

“Oh, the entire time—you can’t be a gossip if you aren’t *also* a bit of a snoop.”

“Something tells me, after everything people have heard this year, that would be a nonstory. Besides, I thought you hated Junior?”

“I didn’t hate *him* ,” He mutters, combing his fingers through He Bai’s curls. "I just associated him with *you* , and I thought you were giving him an unfair advantage in the middle court, and—”

"How did that advantage help him when the cards were down?" Pei Ming's question isn't necessarily antagonistic, but—

It makes Shi Qingxuan feel blatantly incorrect, and therefore a little defensive.

A feeling that he forces himself to swallow down, admitting;

"...You were more even handed about his situation than I expected you to be."

"Pei Su wasn't the one you hated."

It's not a question, but it still brings a guilty twist to the Wind Master's lips.

"...I didn't hate you, either." He mutters, bouncing He Bai to keep him from growing restless. "I was just..."

He mutters the word under his breath, and Pei Ming frowns, struggling to understand.

"What?"

"I...wasalittlebitenvious—"

"I don't—?"

"I was *jealous* , okay?! Geeze!"

Pei Ming pauses, turning his head to give Shi Qingxuan a mildly dubious look, and he holds up one finger to stop his train of thought.

"Don't think I haven't already guessed that my brother would have talked to you about it *before* —it's not anything *gross* —it's just always been the two of us, and I didn't know how to..."

That's practically *exactly* how Shi Wudu explained it to him before--but that doesn't necessarily mean that Pei Ming finds it reasonable.

"Your brother never seems threatened by your relationship with Blackwater."

"Well, he isn't *now."* Shi Qingxuan huffs.

And it's not that his friendship with 'Ming Yi' ever left his brother feeling threatened about their own relationship. Not before everything came out. He just told Shi Qingxuan that Ming Yi wasn't good enough for him, and that he was up to no good.

One of those things was true.

"But it's different."

"I don't see how."

"Because I—I *need* him," Shi Qingxuan mutters, holding his son just a little closer. "I'll always need him. But he...He doesn't..."

"..." Pei Ming sighs heavily, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"...Okay," Shi Qingxuan mutters dryly, covering He Bai's ears so he doesn't hear him swear. "I am *never* being fucking vulnerable with you again—"

"You know, you might annoy the shit out of me, but I know you have lots of good qualities," the general grumbles. "I used to think one of them was being perceptive about other people's feelings."

"Hey—"

"Short of having children of his own someday, there's quite literally no one on this earth that your brother will *ever* love as much as you."

Shi Qingxuan falls silent.

"You weren't conscious when he found you on the terrace of Cascading Wine," Pei Ming continues, struggling to keep his voice calm as he remembers that moment.

The terror and agony in Shi Wudu's voice. The only time he ever slapped Pei Ming away, blind with fear and grief.

"I don't think I've ever heard anyone scream like that."

And knowing that makes Shi Qingxuan feel so much worse for the things he said when he woke up, but—

"And when we were on that island, and he knew you were in danger—do you know what he told me?"

He turns his head, leveling the Wind Master with a stern stare.

"He said that if I *ever* chose to protect him instead of you, he would never forgive me."

Shi Qingxuan's eyes grow round with shock, his lips parting into a perfect 'o.' "He...he actually said that?"

Pei Ming doesn't see how that could possibly be a surprise. Shi Wudu's near pathological dedication to his brother is one of the most dependable things he's ever seen. You could bet your life on it.

"I knew that about him from the very beginning, and I never wanted to change it."

Because Pei Ming would have done the same for his sisters. Would have done it for his son, if he'd had the chance to raise him.

And from what he's learned about He Xuan—and admittedly, most of what he's learned about the man has been against his will—he understands that just the same.

Elder brothers often do.

Shi Qingxuan grows quiet, processing that information, and...

His expression softens.

"...Well, if we're sharing secrets..." He glances back over his shoulder, making sure that his brother is still totally preoccupied with the game between Ling Wen and He Xuan. "...There was a reason I didn't like you from the beginning."

Pei Ming's eyebrows raise curiously.

“…He was always staring at you when you weren’t looking,” Shi Qingxuan grumbles. “And he wouldn’t let me say a bad word about you!”

“…That early on?”

“As soon as we came to the Heavens,” Shi Qingxuan confirms with an annoyed huff.

"At first I thought it was because he didn't have time to be social before, he was always so focused on protecting me. It made sense he would make friends once we came here, and I was safe. But..." He can't help but look a little sour. "He could never take his eyes off of you."

That was different from friendship. Shi Qingxuan had friends. He had *many* friends, but never someone he felt so innately drawn to, to the point where he had to make a point not to look at them. Not to think of them.

And that made it feel...threatening.

Because Pei Ming wasn't weak, or frightened of anything. He was just as charismatic as Shi Qingxuan, and he wasn't a source of constant burden and trauma. The Reverend of Empty Words wasn't tied to them through any fault of Shi Qingxuan's, but it was still bound to *him.*

Shi Qingxuan never doubted his brother's love for him, he just...

Pei Ming's friendship came with no drawbacks. But being Shi Qingxuan's brother came with *so many*.

And what if he was a liar, like the ones who had stolen from them in the past?

What if he was cruel, like their uncle? Or greedy, like their cousins? And—

Shi Qingxuan was shielded from so much, but not from everything.

Ever since they were small, his brother had been uncommonly beautiful.

And Shi Qingxuan was raised as a *girl.*

He knows what men do when they see beautiful things. How shallow and unkind their affections can be.

It makes him utterly miserable now, to think about how his suspicions were placed on the god who wanted to *help* , all while...

All while the emperor he *trusted* , even looked up to when he was younger, was the one hurting him.

"...But...I know you love him," Shi Qingxuan eventually concludes, leaning down to kiss the top of his son's head, closing his eyes.

"I do," Pei Ming agrees earnestly.

Shi Qingxuan doesn't know if he believed that before. Not until he saw Pei Ming holding his brother's "body" in the streets of the Heavens.

Saw a depth of pain and grief that mirrored his own.

And then, Pei Ming was able to put aside centuries of differences for his memory.

To protect Shi Qingxuan, and make sure he and his unborn child were looked after—all because it was what his brother would have wanted.

Honor might make a man feel bound to act—but it doesn't make him so immediate, or sincere.

But love will.

"...And he's the happiest when he's with you," the Wind Master admits reluctantly.

He's always been aware of the fact that Pei Ming was his brother's first love, even if he didn't want to believe that it was requited. Or that it would last.

But...they're family now.

Pei Ming isn't a rival for his brother's attention, or the source of a happiness and stability that Shi Qingxuan always took away from.

He's his brother.

In *law* . But a brother nonetheless.

"Keep that up...and I suppose I could *stand* to learn to like you."

There's a slight smile in his voice as he says this—

As though he already has.

Pei Ming can't help but smile back, glancing back over to where his husband is seated, and...

"Does it ever seem strange to you?"

"What?"

"...How close they are. After everything that happened."

Shi Qingxuan turns his head, watching as Ling Wen and He Xuan place down tiles, his brother quietly nagging the ghost king about every move he makes—

And he smiles.

“…Did you prefer it when they despised each other? Because as I recall that was much more *violent.”*

Pei Ming can’t help but scowl. “Obviously not. I just…”

Jealousy isn't the right word. Or maybe it *is* but—even if he knows Shi Wudu is alive now, that they can go home together, that he can hold him, he can protect him—

The grief left its mark. It isn't so easily forgotten.

He can't see the scar on his husband's throat and forget how it felt to lose him. Or the *rage* he felt towards the man he thought was responsible.

He can move on, just not that quickly.

And he struggles to understand how everyone else *can* .

"…I don't know if I understand how they were able to forgive one another," Shi Qingxuan murmurs, looking back down at his son. "But they're more alike than you realize. I think…that makes them understand one another."

In a stroke of irony—it's been nearly two years since Jun Wu's demise and his brother's return, and in that time …*he's* been the one to help her see things about He Xuan that he just didn't understand before.

And he couldn't have, because He Xuan didn't *let* himself be known.

But with his brother's help…Shi Qingxuan finds himself piecing the edges of him together, forming a more complete picture. One that He Xuan himself lost sight of long ago.

"If you got to know He-Xiong yourself, you *might* start to see what I mean."

"…I wouldn't hold your breath," Pei mutters, glancing down at the two of them. Watching the warmth in Shi Qingxuan's gaze when he brushes He Bai's hair from his eyes.

…And maybe there *is* someone he could stand to get to know better—even if it's not He Xuan.

Getting to know someone beyond your first and worst assumptions *can* lead to things you never expected.

Thwap!

“Ow!”

“I said not to try and help with the food,” the teenager grouses. “It has to be edible.”

“…Not all Heavenly Officials are shit at cooking, you know!”

Lang Qianqiu leans over his shoulder, scowling as he watches his partner stir the simmering mixture.

“I don’t trust someone who barely knows how to tie his own shoes to roast my meat.”

“I know how to tie my—!”

“Which heavenly officials are terrible at cooking?”

Lang Qianqiu pauses, spinning around with almost comical speed, hands clasped behind his back.

"G-Guoshi!" He laughs nervously. "I didn't realize you were standing there!"

Xie Lian smiles, glancing back and forth between him and Ren Song, who seems entirely focused on the food.

"I wanted to make sure Shuo didn't need any help."

The ghost king glances up, smiling beatifically. "It's well handled dianxia, but you're welcome to help if you'd like."

Lang Qianqiu sends him an open mouthed, offended look. "You just said—!"

"Dianxia asked you a question."

"...I...ah..." The martial god swallows hard, turning back to his former teacher. "...I heard Nan Yang is an awful—”

"Oh, Feng Xin's cooking isn't bad at all," Xie Lian corrects him earnestly. "He learned during my first banishment."

Mu Qing has always been the *best* cook among the martial gods, but Feng Xin is certainly not the worst.

"...Qi Ying," Lang Qianqiu croaks, his eyes darting around, hoping not to see a very dark, very *long* shadow with silver bells and butterflies in tow. "His food is awful!"

"Not true," Shuo shakes his head.

"How would you know?!"

"Who do you think was making me snacks up until Yin Yu came back?"

Lang Qianqiu sends him a pointedly betrayed look, and Xie Lian pats his arm, letting the subject drop.

"Are you hungry?"

"...Yeah," the prince of Yong'an sags with relief, grabbing a bowl as he leans towards the pan Shuo has been working over. "I...probably was just saying things I didn't mean...because I was hungry—”

"It's not completely cooked yet," Shuo frowns, pushing his spoon away. "You'll make yourself sick."

"..."

"You could have some of my three volcanoes lamb stew," Xie Lian offers with a serene smile. "San Lang just finished a bowl, but there's plenty left."

Lan Qianqiu's smile fades, his expression growing pale. "Three...volcanoes...?"

"San Lang's been helping me make the flavors a little sharper," Xie Lian explains. "He's always preferred spicier foods."

"...But...why three?" Lang Qianqiu's voice cracks slightly, peeking over Xie Lian's shoulder to stare at the pot on the counter behind him.

"Three kinds of peppers!" Xie Lian beams, explaining how they've been growing them in the garden behind the temple, all while Lang Qianqiu begins to look fainter. "And Mount Tonglu created three ghost kings, so it's a bit of wordplay—”

"Then you should really try some!" The martial god exclaims, grabbing Shuo by the shoulders. "It's named after you!"

"Oh," Shuo looks up with round eyes. "I would, but I don't eat lamb. It reminds me too much of Qi Qi, y'know? I can't do it."

"Qi Qi isn't even close to a—!"

"If you don't want any, it's alright," Xie Lian smiles graciously, holding up his hands to dispel any tensions. "Spicy foods like that aren't for everyone—”

"True," Shuo muses. "Not everyone can be such a tough guy like Hua Chengzhu. Such grit."

"..." Lang Qianqiu scowls. "...I'd love to have a bowl guoshi, thank you."

The Prince of Xianle brightens, spooning out a portion for him as Shuo hunches over in the corner, shaking with silent laughter.

"But you did make a good point, maybe I should see if Blackwater would like to try some..."

Xie Lian muses, tapping the end of the ladle against his chin as his student stares down at the bowl in his hands, not much different from the sight of a man walking towards the executioner's block.

"That's a great idea, your highness!" Shuo crows with a fanged grin.

Lang Qianqiu looks up at the ceiling in a silent prayer, forcing a spoonful into his mouth.

And for a moment, he manages to chew, his expression presently surprised.

Until he begins to sweat.

"...Maybe you should have had water first," Shuo mutters, *slightly* concerned.

"Should I get him some?" Xie Lian asks, watching as tears well up in his student's eyes.

"...I don't know if he could open his mouth to drink it..." Shuo tilts his head to the side, eyeing how Lang Qianqiu's jaw has practically locked around the spoon, still in his mouth.

"If *I* was lucky enough to be fed by my plum blossom's family I certainly wouldn't complain, or make such an embarrassing scene!"

That seems to spur the martial god from his temporary out of body experience, wheezing and choking—

"W—What is HE doing here?!"

Xie Lian shrugs, rubbing the back of his neck. "I suppose it was a bit of an open invitation..."

"Yin Rong!" Shuo's eyes widen as he sets his spoon down, stepping away from the pot. "You're alright!"

So many mortal cultivators passed during the battle--he hadn't been sure.

"Ah!" Heaven's Eye laughs, placing his hands upon his hips. "As if anything could keep me from finding my way back to you for long, my dearest!"

Xie Lian supposes it isn't all that strange that he's here—Lan An and Xiong Li did, along with a few mortal friends of Shi Wudu's.

To be more accurate, he appointed Jiang Ning as a deputy shortly after his return to the Heavens. But *Jin Feng* is still very much a mortal. Not to mention countless spirits and demons from Ghost City mingling with the other guests.

Still, in spite of Heaven's Eye's heroic declarations, Xie Lian wouldn't give *him* any of the stew, as he's not entirely sure that it would be medically advisable. He—

"...Goodness, what's happened to you?" The cultivator huffs, looking Xie Lian up and down.

The prince pauses, reaching up to touch his hair self-consciously, making sure it's not too terribly askew after running around for hours on end. "...What do you mean? Is something on my face?"

"No, no... it’s that evil essence from before! It's gotten even worse!"

"...Huh?" Xie Lian stares, hands still frozen in his own hair, while Lang Qianqiu sputters, having sunk to the ground on his hands and knees.

"O...Of course he d-does, you... *idiot* ...he's with a...ghost a-all day!"

"Right," he agrees faintly, nodding in agreement, but—

"No, it's different from before!" Heaven's Eye frowns, stroking his beard—which has somehow gotten even longer and more magnificent than it was before. "It was like a stain covering the surface of his body, particularly around the head! But this—”

"I feel fine," Xie Lian explains weakly, trying to interrupt that train of thought. "There's really no reason to be concerned—”

"This is coming from the *inside* of his body! All over!"

The prince's smile is strained, frozen in place.

Shuo pauses, his expression that of genuine confusion.

"...What do you mean? How does that even—”

"It's as though he's been filled to the brim with evil essence! He's practically overflowing with it! It's completely unnatural!"

Xie Lian doesn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"...It's not...it's really not that serious..."

"Your highness, I would not downplay the seriousness of this. It's as though your entire body has been doused in it from the inside out! And the outside is covered all over too! You're practically bathing in —”

"I'm really not—!"

"It's almost as if you've been *drinking it—!”*

Lang Qianqiu makes a sound like he may or may not be dying, and when Shuo looks down at him—

He can tell it's not *just* from the stew.

Slowly, the dots begin to connect in his mind, and he bites back a horrified groan.

Xie Lian is currently debating the ethics of developing a memory wiping spell, exiling himself for another century, or faking his own—

Then, an arm wraps around his waist, silver vambraces gleaming, and he practically sags back against his husband's chest.

"Instead of spouting nonsense, why don't you focus on your own problems and enjoy the food?" Hua Cheng asks coldly, his thumb rubbing circles into the prince's side in order to soothe him.

"You of all people should be concerned!" Heaven's Eye cries. "It's not natural for a god to be so stuffed with evil! Practically bursting with it! I don't know how he's not *leaking*—"

Xie Lian chokes, holding up a hand to silence him, shaking his head vehemently. "There's no need to describe it so vividly—!"

"And he's not the only one!"

Everyone in the room freezes, and when Heaven's Eye points his finger, Shuo practically jumps three feet in the air.

"I'm a *ghost* , you idiot! Of *course* I have—!"

"You're stained with Heavenly Light!! That's not natural either!!!"

"..."

"..."

The entire room falls into shocked silence (aside from Lang Qianqiu's pained wheezing), and Shuo's knuckles grow white around his spoon.

"...But not *filled to the brim* , or whatever, so I don't know why you're —"

"Ren Song," Xie Lian croaks, feeling viciously betrayed.

Shuo can't bring himself to look at him, turning red from his collarbones, all the way to the tips of his ears.

"I'm *sorry* , what do you expect me to do when he's—?"

"It's not as severe, but it's inside you too! I'm no expert on ghostly anatomy, but that seems—!"

"You know," Hua Cheng has been deathly quiet, so when he does speak, it startles everyone listening. "I think I misjudged you, Daozhang."

Xie Lian and Shuo stare at each other in confusion, the latter mouthing, 'Daozhang?' with raised eyebrows.

"You seem *more* than worthy of courting Ren Song. Since you're so...concerned."

Shuo's eyes widen with horror. It's not that Hua Cheng ever *actually* interfered in that matter—but he allowed Shuo to *imply* that he did, to spare him any discomfort.

Crimson Rain's eyes drift down towards Lang Qianqiu's hunched, trembling form on the ground.

"You'll just have to deal with rivals first, I suppose."

"Rivals...?" Heaven's Eye questions, his expression going from that of euphoria to shock and *anger* . "You..."

His beard quivers with rage.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO MY PRECIOUS LITTLE PLUM BLOSSOM?!"

"He's NOT—” Lang Qianqiu gags, clutching his throat. "—HE'S NOT YOUR ANYTHING, YOU SENILE PIECE OF—!"

"Could you both *NOT—?!"*

"San Lang," Xie Lian mumbles, still burning with shame as he's guided out of the room. "Lang Qianqiu can hardly put up a fight right now..."

"Shuo won't let him *die* ," Hua Cheng mutters darkly, shooting one dark look over his shoulder as they step outside. "He'll be fine."

Of course he will, but Lang Qianqiu wasn't even the one who started that conversation, it wasn't his fault—

But when they step out onto the hill, and he catches sight of the sun slipping beneath the trees, his protests die in his throat.

They've watched the sunset together nearly every day since Hua Cheng's return. In different seasons. On opposite sides of the continent.

And every single time, Xie Lian remembers his first sunset without him, sitting on the seawalls in Lang'er Bay.

A beautiful sight, but one he couldn't appreciate then. Not when he had just lost Wu Ming. Not when Hong'er wasn't there to watch it with him.

But now, he's found himself able to enjoy the sight of them again.

Sitting with his husband on the hillside where he grew up.

Surrounded by friends and comrades, gathered here to celebrate the marriage of a Crown Prince and a Ghost King.

Belatedly, and only at Mu Qing and Feng Xin's insistence. Not because they were eager to accept his husband, but...

Xie Lian's happiness should be celebrated.

He can see them both now, standing at the bottom of the hill. Mu Qing holding Xiao Feng's hands as the boy stumbles through practice steps, making his way towards his father's waiting arms.

Part of him feels like he's celebrating their happiness, too.

Quan Yizhen is standing to the side of the cottage, watching the fighting going on through the window, gold bars clutched in his hands—only for Yin Yu, who has a rare day off, to usher him off towards the tables with gentle scolding.

Music drifts through the air, Lan An plucking gentle notes from his guqin as Xiong Li sings along, his voice adding to the easy ambience of twilight.

"I wish my heart were made of glass, within you might behold..."

He Xuan and Ling Wen have long since finished their game, and now, after so many years of watching in distant, restrained silence—

A Princess of Yushi asks someone to dance.

"Upon my heart your name lies, written in letters made of gold..."

Xie Lian's eyes drift down to his fingers, intertwined with Hua Cheng's. His husband's sleeves are rolled up to the elbows—and he finds his own name there, standing out against his skin in black ink.

"...In letters made of gold my love, believe me when I say..."

Xie Lian leans his head against his shoulder, briefly closing his eyes.

Breathing in the smell of the forest, woodfire smoke, and home.

"...You are the one that I will adore, until my dying day."

"San Lang?"

The ghost king hums, kissing his hair in acknowledgement. "Yes?"

(And when you're on some distant shore, think of your absent friend.)

Xie Lian turns his face into his sleeve, thinking back on how many times these arms have held him. How small and fierce they used to be. How they feel like they could swallow him whole, now.

He thinks of the ones who aren't here. By death, betrayal, or choice. How unrecognizable his life might seem to him, if he was forced to try to connect the links between beginnings and ends.

But tapestries aren't simple lines of continuance.

They're made of intertwining threads.

Moments that might seem painful, or pointless. Unable to see the design around you, stumbling blindly from one row to the next.

But eventually, when you pull back, you see the masterpiece you never knew you were making.

A mosaic of love, pain, and hard learned lessons.

"...Thank you," he whispers.

(And when the wind blows high and clear, a light to me pray send...

When the wind blows high and clear, pray send your love to me.)

"For what?"

The prince cracks his eyelids open, watching as day turns to night, stars beginning to peek through.

Some of them glitter and shoot across the horizon, a meteor shower that has always come with the end of summer. Children run through the grass, reaching up high—as though they could catch them between their fingers, and make a wish.

Xie Lian did the same, when he was small.

Thinking he could just catch one, and he could make a wish of his own.

"...For believing in me."

But catching one star is enough to last a thousand lifetimes. A radiance that even a blind man can see clearly.

(That I might know by your light, how time has gone with thee.)

The music grows softer, more distant as Hua Cheng shifts, pulling the prince into his arms, bells chiming softly as they intertwine.

Clink, clink!

Pushing locks of hair from his face as he leans forward, pressing their foreheads together.

(As time draws near...)

Hua Cheng doesn't say not to thank him. Doesn't deflect the love and gratitude he still doesn't feel as though he deserves, knowing that it's freely given.

Instead, he whispers the words he's said so many times before—with a sincerity that never wanes or fades.

An oath that Xie Lian doubted, then denied—but now believes with all of his heart.

No matter how much time passes, no matter what name or face he carries.

A lost orphan, a slain soldier, or a blood-soaked calamity.

Hong'er, Wu Ming, or Crimson Rain Sought Flower.

No matter the state of him, because it's always him.

The greatest blessing the Crown Prince of Xianle has ever been given.
The boy who fell from the sky, who then caught him every time after.

The man who will never let him fall again.

"I am forever your most devoted believer."

For you, I will become invincible.

Chapter End Notes

This is the end of the main timeline of this story! I will be posting a two chapter epilogue, then a Q & A chapter to answer any questions anyone has in regards to the story, as well as posting any other helpful information that comes up! If you have any questions that you want answered, feel free to go ahead and submit them! If it's material that is included in the epilogue, I won't answer in the Q&A, but otherwise I'm happy to clear up any points of confusion remaining!

xoxo, Evie

By Heaven Official's Blessing

Chapter Summary

> “Didn’t you say they were high school sweethearts or something? It’s weird you’ve never introduced us.”
>
> “…Something like that,” he agrees, looking away.
>
> “It’s not weird. His family is loaded, his dads are probably just busy—”
>
> “He never said they were loaded!”
>
> “He didn’t have to. You can just tell when someone grew up with money.”

Chapter Notes

> **Please read the beginning and end notes for this chapter, as they're pretty important!**
>
> **CONTENT WARNINGS: This fic is not tagged for mpreg because it is never shown or discussed, but if you are uncomfortable with it being implied then this chapter might be triggering.**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

TWO THOUSAND YEARS LATER

"Are you even listening?"

"Obviously not, dumb ass. He's wearing headphones."

"Oi," the teenager reaches forward, pulling at a white cord until it slips from his friend's ear. "Earth to demon king."

His head turns, and a pair of dark sunglasses stare back at him impassively.

“Did you hear me?”

“…No,” he answers shortly, turning away again. “I’m on the phone with my uncle.”

“…Oh,” Tang Chao winces as the cord is tugged back out of his hand pointedly.

On his other side, his sister doesn’t even look up from her phone, fingers typing away.

“He was going to ask if you were coming to our birthday party this weekend,” Tang Min explains flatly—and her brother winces, because he was going to *sell* it a little better.

“My parents are going out of town—”

“I have a family thing, sorry.”

“You always have a family thing, and it’s just *one night—!”*

“It’s a wedding,” he explains gently, sounding somewhat sympathetic. “I really can’t skip.”

“And bugging him while he’s on the phone with his uncle isn’t helping,” his sister reminds him flatly.

“…Right.”

They fall back a couple of steps as they pass through the intersection, crowds jostling around him as he places the headphones back in his ears.

“Sorry about that.”

“Did someone try to mug you or something?”

His uncle's incredulous tone makes him bite back a laugh.

"No, someone was inviting me to a party."

"...Was it one of those twins?"

"..."

"A'Ming, I do not like that boy. He smokes, he doesn't take anything seriously, he's a distraction from your studies—"

< *He's harmless, and he's been a good friend to me.* >

"Don't answer me in the communication array, you know your parents don't like you using that without supervision after the incident."

< *Why should I get in trouble for something gege—!* >

"A'Ming."

He huffs a sigh, lowering his voice.

"...My dad said it was good for me to have friends my own age," he mutters under his breath. "That's why we moved here, remember?"

Something his uncle vehemently disagreed with, but mostly because he would miss them dearly.

Which is a little silly, because they still see them *all the time* , they just aren't neighbors anymore.

"...Do you want me to pick you up?" He finally asks, changing the subject. *"We weren't coming that way, but it's better than riding one of those smelly death traps—"*

"Trains are one of the safest modes of transportation," the teenage parrots, as though he's already had to say it a thousand times. "I'm meeting baba at the shrine—and I like riding the train after school. It helps me unwind."

"...Are you worried about something?"

"No—"

"Is it because of entrance exams? Because you don't need to be. And if you did, I could just make a few calls. You know I helped deliver one of the

board members. He doesn't know that, but it's all subliminal, you know—"

"Uncle. I'm *fine."*

His tone turns gentle, losing its annoyance from before. "I understand you're only asking because you care, but I promise I'm fine. I miss you, and I'll see you in a few hours—okay?"

"…Alright ," reluctant agreement comes from the other end of the line. *"You're going straight to the shrine?"*

"Cross my heart." He agrees lightly, taking the steps down to the station two at a time. "I'm going underground, so I have to hang up now."

"Fine."

"…Love you."

That always makes his uncle's tone soften.

"…Love you too, A'Ming."

He hangs up with a sigh, rolling his shoulders as he reaches down to loosen the collar of his school uniform.

It used to be suffocating, how protective the adults in his life became as he grew older. But now, just shy of seventeen, he knows why. Still, it seems a little silly for anyone to worry. It's not like anyone ever lets him go anywhere *alone* .

The occasional wriggling under his collar is enough of a reminder of that.

"So…who's getting married?" Tang Chao asks, right on his tail.

"My cousin."

"So—you were just on the phone with—?"

"What? Oh—no, he's not Mu Qing's kid. He's—" he scrunches up his nose, struggling to describe exactly how they're related in a way his friend could understand. "Technically a second cousin…once… removed?"

"…And you have to go to his wedding?"

He winces, a little sheepish from how that sounds. “I have a really close-knit family—and he’s best friends with my—”

He steps out just a little too far, nearly missing the next step down—only for a hand to reach out and grab his arm.

“You really shouldn’t wear those down here,” Tang Min points out flatly, eyeing the sunglasses on his face before she lets go of his sleeve. “They mess with your depth perception.”

“…Yeah,” he agrees, grabbing the railing before he continues down the rest of the stairs. “It’s just kind of a pain when I don’t wear them in crowded places.”

She can understand why. With the glasses on, he looks like a normal student. Well put together, handsome, courteous—no one gives him any trouble.

But when he doesn’t…

“Your parents can’t let you skip?”

“I don’t think he *wants* to skip, didi. Stop being rude.”

“They would let me if I asked,” he mutters. “But I want to go.”

“Weird.”

“I like spending time with my family, the horror.”

“I wish I enjoyed spending time with mine,” Tang Min sighs, earning an annoyed stare. “Don’t feel bad—he’s only bothering you about coming because he thinks it’ll make that underclassman from the archery team show up.”

“Why would that matter?”

“Because she *likes* you, idiot.”

The mention of that makes him frown, squirming with discomfort.

“…But you’re going to the wedding anyway,” Tang Chao mutters quickly, seeming to sense his anxiety. “Don’t worry about it. So…is it nearby?”

“Up north.”

"Oh. Near the capital? That's where your parents met, right?"

"…No, they're from further west, in the interior." It's so different now from what his father has described about his childhood—he struggles to connect the two, but still.

"Didn't you say they were high school sweethearts or something? It's weird you've never introduced us."

"…Something like that," he agrees, looking away.

"It's not weird. His family is *loaded* , his dads are probably just busy —"

"He never said they were loaded!"

"He didn't have to. You can just *tell* when someone grew up with money."

"I can't!"

"You think girls think smoking is sexy. You're not observant."

"Why are you being such a bitch today?!"

Their bickering fades into the background as they reach the platform, crowding around as they wait for the train, but…

He frowns, craning his neck to try and see above the crowd.

Something isn't right.

"…Hey…" he mutters, both of his friends speaking over him in the constant roar of the station. "…Are they pushing that kid, or—?"

At first he thought that must have been the case, watching a pair of shoes stumble across the yellow line.

But the closer he looks…there's no one shoving him from behind. And he can't imagine who *would* , it looks like a middle schooler, but—

He watches the boy bite his lip, hesitating as the intercom bellows overhead, announcing the incoming train.

Then, he lunges.

"HEY!"

He shoves past his friends, elbowing his way towards the edge of the platform, hearing them call after him in a panic;

“What are you—?”

“Hua Ming!”

All they hear his him barking out a word in a language they don’t recognize, then—

A blinding flash.

For a moment, everything comes to a halt. The shouting and the chatter. The rattling of cars in the street overhead. The roar of the incoming train.

The boy’s arms and legs ache from the fall onto the tracks, but…

He isn’t dead.

When he looks up, he sees a gleaming ray of light overhead, encircling the people standing on the platform—every single one of them frozen in place. Some in the middle of speaking, pointing, one man stopped in mid-cough. Even the escalators have stopped. The headlights of the inbound subway are blinding from behind him, but—

The train isn’t moving either.

And next him…is a high schooler.

Breathing hard, having landed on the tracks just beside him on his hands and knees, a once pristine school uniform now rumpled. When he looks up, the boy jumps, shrinking back instinctively.

As anyone would, seeing a pair of blood red eyes staring back at him, gleaming almost unnaturally under the station lamps.

But, once you look past that…He has a kind face, and a concerned gaze.

“…Shit.” He sits back on his heels for a moment, pressing his hands to his temples. “Shit, shit, *shit!”*

The younger boy swallows hard, the gravel on the tracks cutting into his palms, but…

He reaches forward, lifting up a fallen pair of sunglasses, handing them back to him.

The teenager glances down at them, then back at him, and whispers something in a language that the child couldn't possibly understand, making some sort of sign with his hands—

Then, everything goes dark.

When he wakes up again, he's back on the platform.

A jacket folded and slid underneath him to support his head, commuters standing around him in a circle as they try to wait and see if he's alright.

"…Do you think he needs an ambulance? I didn't see him fall…"

"It'll be okay."

Kneeling beside him is a teenager—

One with dark brown hair, neatly pulled back.

Sunglasses obscuring his eyes.

"I'm pretty sure he just fainted." The older boy mutters, rummaging around in his backpack, pulling out a bottle of water. "What's your name?"

"...Mo Shen," he manages to answer hoarsely, averting his gaze as the stranger--Hua Ming, from the way his friends were calling to him--hands him the water, indicating for him to drink up.

"...Is there anyone I can call for you?"

He takes a long drink, growing silent.

The lack of a reply is its own answer—

There's no one.

He must be younger—Hua Ming can tell that much from the pitch of his voice, and by looking at his face. But he's tall for a middle schooler—thin as a rail, with long legs. All knees and elbows, wild hair, and dark eyes. The bruises on his forearms are hard to ignore. Deeply discolored, layers upon layers of them.

If he *does* have somewhere to go—it might have been the reason he leapt over the edge of those tracks.

The high schooler looks down in his bag again, fumbling around for a moment before pulling out a bun wrapped in plastic, holding it out. "Eat this."

He hesitates to take it, but—

"Your adrenaline is going to crash, and you'll feel sick if you don't eat something."

"..." He pulls at the wrapping after a moment, taking a slow, cautious bite. Almost as if he expects Hua Ming to yank it out of his hands the moment he expresses any desire to eat it.

But...he doesn't.

He steps away for a moment, speaking quietly on the phone.

"...Are you calling the cops?" Mo Shen asks when he returns, watching him with nervous distrust.

Hua Ming kneels beside him, staring back at him mildly. "Why would I do that? You haven't done anything wrong."

Because he's suicidal runaway, and they both know it.

"...Do you want to wait with you?" Tang Chao asks, rubbing the back of his neck as he watches another train approach. "It might take a while to figure out what to do--"

"It's okay," Hua Ming shakes his head. "I already called someone, I'll wait with him."

"Aren't you gonna be late—?"

"I gave myself about an hour of a cushion before I had to meet up with my parents," he shrugs. "I was planning on stopping by the library, but this is more important."

...Of course he was.

"...See you after fall break then, I guess..."

Mo Shen sits up as the high schooler sits down beside him, cross legged as he scrolls through his phone. Not asking any questions, all while not necessarily being standoffish either, and...

He has layers around his face cropped slightly shorter, falling in front of his eyes.

His fingers twitch before he shoves his hands in his pockets, biting his lip.

"..." Hua Ming glances over at him, raising one eyebrow. "Are you still hungry? I have another—”

"Are you wearing colored contacts?"

He freezes, his lips parted, and Mo Shen swallows nervously.

"...No," he tilts his head to the side. "But when did you see my eyes?"

The middle schooler frowns, about to point out how he stared right at him on the tracks, but—

For some reason, it feels like he's not supposed to *remember* that.

"...Must have been the angle from when I woke up on the ground," he mumbles awkwardly, his throat dry, but—

He seems to believe him.

"Well. I came by them honestly, no accessories required."

"...Contacts might be easier, if you don't want to wear sunglasses all the time."

Hua Ming considers that, sitting back for a moment, pushing his glasses up and on top of his head, pushing his bangs back with them.

Mo Shen's face feels oddly warm.

"I wear these when I want to avoid people thinking I'm a delinquent or something." He shrugs.

"But I'm not wearing something uncomfortable all the time just to make other people feel comfortable. They're dry," he explains, wrinkling his nose. "And they burn.”

But, interestingly enough, *he* doesn't sound uncomfortable with his eye color.

"You...don't care otherwise?"

"Nope," he shakes his head, smiling. "I got them from my dad."

And as his other father was saying for most of his childhood—Hua Ming's dad is one of the most handsome people there is.

"You—?"

A pair of official looking men in dark clothes come down the station steps, walking towards them.

Hua Ming didn't call the *police* , but it's unusually cold for this time of year—and even if it was safe for him to sleep on the streets...

After that, he shouldn't be alone.

Thankfully, his father's assistant runs group homes that they own in the area. Even if he doesn't stay long term...he'll have a place to sleep tonight.

"...Are you gonna be okay?"

The younger boy nods stiffly—but Hua Ming doesn't seem to believe it. Not entirely.

"...Here," he mutters, digging around in his backpack for a pen and paper, bracing them against a nearby concrete pillar as he jots something down, handing it over to him. "You can call me if you run into any more trouble, or...if you need someone to talk to."

Mo Shen looks down at the crumbled, lined piece of sheet paper—the name 'Hua Ming' scrawled across the top, with a phone number carefully written underneath.

"...Okay," he mumbles, holding it tightly, feeling almost shell shocked by the rapid turn of events.

"...I hope I didn't make you late—” he starts, stiffening when he feels a hand ruffle through his hair.

"That doesn't matter," Hua Ming shakes his head, smiling with a warmth that makes it difficult for Mo Shen to breathe. "I'm just glad I met you today."

Mo Shen doesn't know what to say to that, watching with wide eyes as the older boy walks towards the next train, just arriving, the newcomers taking him by the arm, gently leading him towards the station exit—only thinking one thing.

That he *has* to see him again.

The commuter crowd has already passed—and by the time Hua Ming takes his seat, other than one elderly woman sleeping in the car corner, he has the compartment to himself.

And as such, he pulls back his collar with a hiss.

“Ruoye! I said to catch him, not *the entire station!”*

The end of the silk bandage wriggles out, curving up, almost like it’s staring up at him—

“Don’t look at me like that,” Hua Ming whispers. “I’m not allowed to use you unless *my* life is in danger! I could get in *so much trouble!”*

Luckily no one *saw* , thanks to the array Ruoye cast. But it could have been dangerous. If he had stopped that train for more than a minute, it could have caused a collision. And then who *knows* —

“…I’m gonna tell them,” he mutters, as if part of a two way conversation. “I mean. Probably not *this weekend* , they’re gonna have a lot of stuff going on for the wedding. And even if I don’t—Yin Yu is gonna tell them anyway. So don’t look at me like that, I’m not keeping secrets.”

The overdeveloped sense of guilt would say otherwise, but…

As a lifelong, habitually considerate young man, that isn’t surprising.

Either way—he *is* looking forward to the trip, and he has the entire ride to the shrine to calm down, and forget anything happened.

(As long as Ruoye stops *looking at him* like that.)

On the other side of town, it’s quiet in the shrine.

Incense burning on the altar, lights flickering dimly overhead.

When the doors swing open, a familiar voice bleeds through.

“We’ll both be there,” Xie Lian confirms, setting his bag down. “He’s just about finished for the day, anyway.”

There's worried babbling on the other end of the line—which the god constantly reassures, holding the phone against his cheek as he walks to the altar.

It's not *needed* but helpful if someone walks in—he doesn't appear to be talking to himself.

(He prefers to get through the workday without being mistaken for a raving lunatic, if possible.)

"Alright—see you then." He taps the screen, ending the call and pocketing the device.

His hands come together for a moment in prayer, head bowed as he stands before the altar—

But a persistent smile tugs at the corners of his lips.

"…I certainly hope no one's trying to sneak up on an old man while he's praying. I have no one to protect me…"

He says that, even when Hong Li can be seen in the corner—half asleep, but watching him with one keen eye, tail flicking lazily across the floor.

Creeeaak…

Life is the most baffling thing, and time can turn anything on its head.

A sound that once brought him nothing but *terror* is now the noise that makes him crack a smile, stepping back from the altar—holding his arms out as something comes crashing down from the rafters.

An expression that turns stern once he catches a little boy in his arms.

"What have I told you about climbing?"

Almond shaped, amber eyes—just like his own—stare up at him innocently.

"…That I could break my neck," he admits shamelessly. "I wasn't sneaking, though!"

Xie Lian's eyebrows raise. "Is that so?"

His son nods, arms wrapping around his neck as Xie Lian holds him against his hip. Maybe a little too old to be held like this—but always happy when his father does it.

“I was making sure no one *else* was sneaking up on you!”

The prince does his best to be unmoved.

“You can’t do that from the ground?”

He shakes his head, loose pieces of raven hair falling across his forehead. “You wouldn’t understand! I’m small, I’ve gotta attack from the sky! Like *a hawk!”*

“…Someone’s been listening to their Shuo gege a little too much.”

Besides, Xie Lian has never been considered a *large* person—but he’s never had to climb into the rafters to get the upper hand, either.

“…And you’re not old, Baba!” He changes the subject quickly, reaching up to pat his hand against Xie Lian’s cheek. “You don’t have wrinkles!”

Maybe not. But if Xie Lian could have gray hairs, his eldest and his youngest would be to blame for *every single one of them.*

“…Thank you, A’Liang,” he sighs, “but your baba is older than he looks.”

Both of them, to be sure—even if Hua Cheng chooses to look older these days. It makes it seem a little more believable that they could have a son that was about to take university entrance exams. Of course, Hua Ming knows *exactly* how old they are, but Hua Liang…

After he proudly declared to his pre-school class that one of his fathers was a ghost, well…

They took one look at the shocked, then offended stares—and realized they needed to go a little *slow* with explaining things to the boy as he got older.

He’s almost seven now, and Xie Lian wouldn’t say they’ve hidden anything from him, but…

He’s not in the loop, either.

“…How was school?” He finally asks, a little exhausted with that train of thought—and Hua Liang shrugs.

“Boring. I like it better when you and Dad teach me.”

Xie Lian prefers it that way too—but it isn’t good for socializing him either.

“Any new friends?”

“…Kinda?” The grade schooler makes a face, thinking about it. “I let someone play on the swings with me.”

“…Let them?” Xie Lian tries not to sound too tired.

He’s a little bit too much like Xie Lian’s husband at times. Wild, assertive to the point that it’s often mistaken for aggression, loyal, but extremely choosy about those he spends his time with—

And not the type who would develop strong social skills in isolation, hence the move to the city when he started school. Xie Lian *thinks* it’s helped—he’s made one friend, at the very least. A slightly terrorized first grader, but a friend.

“…Baba?”

“Hmm?”

“You’re in charge of all the others, right?”

He’s not exactly aware of the full context of what that means, but Xie Lian nods. “I am.”

“…Then who do you pray to?” Hua Liang asks with wide, curious eyes.

They’ve never instructed their children to pray to anyone. Hua Liang prays to him sometimes when he’s in trouble, or his grandfather when he wants sweets.

Hua Ming is old enough to understand that you don’t *just* pray in order to receive favors—gods need prayers in order to survive.

As such, he methodically prays to his loved ones on rotating days, and his parents every morning.

He never misses a single day.

"…I pray to your father, sometimes." Xie Lian murmurs, pushing Hua Liang's hair behind his ears. Dark, prone to curls and waves. It's always nearly braided over his shoulder when they send him to school—and a mess when he comes home.

"But…this isn't baba's temple."

Xie Lian bites back an affectionate smile. He's only ever been to their temple back home, on Mount Taicang—never any of the others, so naturally, he assumes that's the *only* one.

"No, but this isn't a temple, A'Liang."

"…I don't get the difference. You pray here."

There are a lot of nuances between classifications between shrines and temples, but in this case it's much more obvious.

"…Well, the goddess worshipped here isn't around anymore," Xie Lian explains carefully, pointing to the divine statue behind the altar. A woman with a hammer in one hand, a sword in the other. Butterflies etched into the sleeves of her dress, a crown upon her head.

"…But if she's gone…how does praying to her do anything?" His son frowns, staring up at a face made from marble and stone.

Xie Lian rubs his shoulder, resting his chin on top of his head. "We don't always pray because we want things from people," he explains quietly. "Sometimes we just want to feel close to people we can't see anymore."

Hua Liang turns his face into his shoulder, pressing close.

He's never been eager to accept physical affection from those outside of the immediate family—at times coming off as quite cold. But with Xie Lian, he's never been anything less than clingy, always eager for an opportunity to steal moments of affection that he's happy to give.

"…Who was she?" His voice is muffled against Xie Lian's shirt—but his father answers nonetheless.

"One of your ancestors," he explains quietly. "Your father's friend—and teacher."

The first martial goddess. The first forge master of the Kiln, creator of Ghost Kings.

More martial goddesses have ascended in the last two millennia. More ghost kings have been forged.

But she will always be the first—and her sacrifices have never been forgotten.

“…” Hua Liang stares at the figure, arms still wrapped around his father’s neck—then offers a small wave of greeting. “Do you miss her?”

Xie Lian glances back up at the statue, his eyes somewhat distant.

“…We both do.”

His son looks back up at him, familiar with that tone in his voice. "Are you sad today?"

If there's one thing Xie Lian has learned since having children of his own, it's that they ask the simplest questions with the most impossible answers.

Hua Liang is used to one father's temper. He provokes and tests it, not as often as he'd like—it's difficult to stretch the patience of a man who has lived nearly three thousand years—but Hua Cheng's moods never worry him.

But Xie Lian's occasional bouts of sadness make the child anxious.

Too young to understand that no one can be happy all the time, and that even if Xie Lian *is* sad, it doesn't mean that he did something wrong.

"...No," his father murmurs, kissing his forehead. "I'm excited. It's a special day."

"...Do I have to dress up this time?" Hua Liang mumbles, wrinkling his nose in annoyance.

"Yes," Xie Lian agrees, smiling even as his son scowls. "But *I'm* excited, because my little A'Liang looks so handsome when he dresses up—”

"Baba!" The child whines when Xie Lian nuzzles his face against his cheek, giving him a few loud, smacking kisses that make him squirm with embarrassment. Never too old to be held like this, but maybe just a little past the point of being kissed like a *baby* .

"It's true!"

Hua Liang huffs and cranes his neck to get away—uselessly—when the sound of the door sliding open catches both of their attention. And no matter how much time passes, Xie Lian still spins around with a smile, eyes brightening.

"San Lang!"

His husband drops his own cellphone into the pocket of his jacket, reaching down to ruffle Hua Liang's hair when the boy jumps down, rushing over to greet him.

"Is A'Ming not here yet?"

"No," Xie Lian shakes his head, walking over to greet him with a kiss. (Hua Liang gags a little, wriggling out from where he was squished between them.) "The train must be running late—he hasn't called."

And if there was serious trouble—he would have, one way or another.

That seems to be enough to abate Hua Cheng's concern.

He has Ruoye today, after all—and if something serious enough had arisen for him to be in danger with that much protection, they would have already heard.

"How was your day?"

"Busy," Xie Lian sighs, wrapping his arms around his neck. "But with the Earth Master's wedding, I suppose that's to be expected. And you?"

"Boring. Miserable. Away from you..." He tacks on another kiss with every answer, smirking as Hua Liang huffs with annoyance.

But Xie Lian knows there's more to it.

Hua Cheng doesn't have a hair out of place—but he smells like blood. Subtly so, not to the point where most aside from a god could tell—and not his own. It isn't unusual for him to finish a day of work smelling like that, but it doesn't imply that the day was *boring* .

"Have you heard from the other one?"

"Yes," Xie Lian sighs. "He says he'll be running a little late—but he was obviously always going to come."

"How is *he* going to be late? He lives closer than the rest of us." The emperor shrugs helplessly, and Hua Cheng rolls his eye. "...At this rate, we'll have to send Yin Yu after A'Ming, I don't want to deal with another panic attack from—”

"Here!" The doors swing open again, revealing their middle child—breathing hard, clutching his school bag over his shoulder.

"Gege!" Hua Liang excitedly rushes over, hugging him around the middle. "I let someone play on the swings with me today!" He declares proudly, earning a tired hug from his older brother in return.

"That's great, didi...what, you *let—?"*

"What happened to you?" Hua Cheng eyes him suspiciously, looking at the dirt on the knees of his school uniform. Hua Liang comes back in worse shape every single day, but it's unusual for Hua Ming to even have a wrinkle in his jacket.

"...I fell in the station," Hua Ming shrugs. "I'm okay, though!"

Before he can look away, a pair of fingers grab him by the chin, forcing him to look the Ghost King in the eye.

Hua Ming swallows hard, remembering not to smile, because he always smiles nervously when he's lying, but...averting his gaze and laughing awkwardly gives it away.

"...We'll talk about it later," Xie Lian offers, placing a hand on his husband's shoulder. Hua Cheng relents, letting him go—and Hua Ming practically sags when they turn away from him, getting ready to activate the travel array.

"Are you in trouble?" Hua Liang whispers loudly.

"...No," Hua Ming whispers back—this time at an appropriate volume.

"Because if you are, I have some tips."

"I'm not—”

"If you make yourself throw up, they'll have to be nice to you, because you're sick."

"That's manipulative—didi...have you been doing that? That's dangerous, you could hurt yourself—!"

"I'm the one asking the questions here!"

"Boys," Xie Lian calls back over his shoulder, a set of symbols glowing on the floor tiles. "It's time to go."

Hua Ming walks over without hesitation, dragging a far more reluctant Hua Liang with him. Despite being eager to get sick for *sympathy* , he has a tendency to get nauseous using the travel arrays.

Which Hua Ming understands—but you get used to it eventually.

Xie Lian lifts Hua Liang back into his arms as soon as he gets within reach--he still struggles to walk through the array himself. By contrast, Hua Ming grabs Hua Cheng's hand loosely, squinting as they're enveloped by light. It feels a little bit like being squeezed and stretched as you pass through the neck of a glass bottle. Pressure, like you might lose your breakfast—but bearable.

(He much prefers traveling on dr—)

"Baba!" Hua Liang tilts his head back so far, it aches. "You're huge!"

Xie Lian tips his own head back, taking in the sight of his divine statue. This isn't even *close* to the biggest one—only standing at a little over twelve meters, but for the inside of a building...it's fairly big. As would be expected for the imperial city.

Hua Cheng is depicted by his side, holding his arm—as if guiding him forward.

"There's an even bigger one down south," Hua Ming points out. "It's over one hundred and fifty meters."

Xie Lian winces, remembering how his husband got...carried away with that one.

"...Dad didn't make this one, right?" Hua Liang peers up at Xie Lian's face, carved from marble, embellished with gold. "Baba, why does everyone else make your statues with Ruoye on your face?"

Hua Cheng and Xie Lian glance at each other, sharing a knowing look.

"...It's a long story," Xie Lian murmurs. "And both of you need baths—and to get dressed, we're going to be late if we don't hurry."

In truth, Xie Lian has never minded the fact that he's still worshipped as a blind god. In part because public perceptions have changed so much. Martial gods still have their place within the Heavenly Court—but combat doesn't play the same role in modern life as it once did.

Cultivation sects still exist. They still learn martial arts and weapons skills in order to protect people from unnatural threats, but...

No one is *just* a martial god anymore, not if they still continue to exist and thrive. The last major 'traditional' martial god that Xie Lian can think of, trained in the old ways, ascended fifteen hundred years ago—and now, he's also known as a god of crossroads.

Mortals pray to him in times of indecision, looking for guidance.

People worship for more than just protection, or material rewards—now, they look to subjective concepts as well.

And justice, a concept Xie Lian has become heavily associated with—is meant to be blind.

"Why do I have to take a bath?" Hua Liang whines as they lead him towards the back rooms. "If we're already gonna be late, we should just go! Is it a *whole wedding?"* He's practically dragging his feet, and Xie Lian snorts.

"Not as elaborate as the last wedding we went to."

Full blown daoist ceremonies are rare these days—though in their family, for obvious reasons, they tend to engage a bit more with tradition.

"Really?"

"Remember, he's marrying a *normal* girl," Hua Ming reminds him, slipping out of his school jacket. "They did a civil ceremony with her parents this morning."

"So…she *knows* about everything?" Hua Liang eyes grow wide, and Xie Lian bites back a nervous laugh, remembering how awkward the first introductions were.

"She does now, yes. The ceremony and reception with the heavenly court is what's happening tonight--and since they're already married, they aren't doing a full--"

"If they're already married, can't we just show up when they bring out the food?"

"A'Liang."

"Alright," Hua Cheng lets go of Hua Ming's hand, grabbing his youngest up--but unlike Xie Lian, he doesn't carry him gently from his hip, instead choosing to let him dangle over his shoulders, crying out in protest. "That's enough complaining for one afternoon."

Always one for the dramatics, Hua Liang practically wails, watching his father and brother while hanging upside down, arms flailing.

"Baba, we just did the array—I'M GONNA THROW UP!"

"No, you're not."

"I AM!"

"Then it's a good thing you're about to take a bath."

They disappear through the door, and before Hua Ming goes to follow, he feels a hand on his shoulder.

“Dad—?”

“You know, even if something was wrong—I would only want to help you, right?”

Hua Ming swallows hard, slowly turning around to face him.

“…Yeah, I know…”

Xie Lian searches his face for an answer, squeezing his shoulder gently. “Mu Qing spoke to me after he called you. I know what time you went into the station.”

And he knows it took an extra hour.

“…It’s nothing that bad,” Hua Ming mumbles. “I just didn’t want to mess up the—”

“You’re not messing anything up,” Xie Lian presses his palm against his cheek, just as he did when he was small—watching as his son relaxes and leans into it, soothed. “You’re here. You aren’t hurt. That’s what matters. I just don’t want you to think you can’t talk to me.”

If it was his oldest acting like this—he would be far more concerned.

But Hua Ming holds himself to such unfair standards. A habit Xie Lian is all too familiar with.

"…I used Ruoye to save a boy who jumped onto the tracks," he whispers. "I don't think anyone else saw, but…"

"…And was the boy alright?"

Hua Ming nods. "…I had one of Yin Yu's men take him to one of the group homes. I don't think he had anywhere to go. I know it was a risk, but I—"

He falls silent when his father pulls him into a hug, his throat tight with emotion.

"You didn't do anything wrong," Xie Lian reassures him, stroking his fingers through his hair. "It's never wrong to help those who need it when you can."

"…Are you going to tell dad?"

"He won't be angry with you either, you know."

Xie Lian senses that he *does* know that, but…They both know just how protective Hua Cheng can be over him in particular. Xie Lian is no different. He can't help it, after the things they've lived through.

"But—if it will put your mind at ease, we can tell him tomorrow."

Hua Ming rests his head against his chest—still shorter than him, something Xie Lian is constantly relieved about, dreading the possibility of a sudden growth spurt robbing him of the ability to hold him like this.

"…Okay," he agrees, hugging him back tightly.

It's nice sometimes, to take extra moments like this, and feel small again. Held in his father's arms—and know that everything is going to be alright.

"…Now, hurry and wash up." Xie Lian pulls back, kissing his head. "You smell like you fell on the subway tracks."

Hua Ming winces, but doesn't disagree—turning to follow his brother and father into the inner chambers of the temple.

Xie Lian hangs back for a moment, watching his own figure, hewn from stone. Sword in one hand, flower in the other.

A reflection he's learned to live with.

The north is a land much changed. Once the battlefield of struggles between nations. Then, the home of ancient strongholds. The ancestral seat of the oldest and most powerful cultivation sect. Now, it is host to cities larger than anywhere else on earth.

Their gods are wealthy and held in high esteem—worshipped in temples beneath towering structures of steel, but never dwarfed by them.

The seat of the god in question can be found in one of those high rises—but that is not where they gather today.

Instead, they meet in an ancient place.

It was easier to separate themselves from mortals thousands of years ago—building their capitals on towering mountains and secluded islands.

Now, with modern technology, they're hidden with a vast network of arrays.

Passing beyond those boundaries can feel as though one is traveling backwards in time, from one age to another.

Structures feel ancient, clothes more traditional—swords and bows become a common and natural sight.

Here, at the edge of the forest—it feels far more similar to the time when he was born. Memories that he feels far removed from, in a world that has become so changed.

But some things remain the same.

Like his mother, biting back tears at the sight of him.

"…You look so handsome," they finally choke out, taking his face between their hands. Far taller, having inherited his father's height—

forcing them to reach up. “Doesn’t he look handsome?”

“…Yes,” his father agrees—for the tenth time that hour. “And he’s late.”

“There isn’t a strict schedule—”

“Qingxuan.”

They bite their lip, leaning back to take in the sight of him one more time—dressed in red wedding robes.

“…I’m just so happy for you, baobei,” they whisper.

He Bai hugs his mother close, glancing at his father over their shoulder

“I know,” he murmurs. “I love you both.”

It’s not quite the same as bowing to one’s parents in a traditional ceremony—but he wasn’t ever raised in a *traditional* manner—

(Despite his uncle’s—who may as well be a third parent—best efforts.)

And this tradition—one that came into popularity in the centuries after his birth—is meant to be carried out *before* any of the traditional ceremonies—

But it’s also the first time in hundreds of years that a god has married a mortal.

A choice that shocked his parents, who had waited so long for him to find someone to share his life with—and his bride to be, when she learned the truth.

But it’s one of the few choices he knows he won’t regret.

He steps away from his parents, turning back to the forest.

Feeling around the trunk of a nearby maple—finding the telltale knot around the base.

A red thread, leading up the mountainside.

One that he carefully winds around his finger as he walks, making his way through the dark.

A tradition born from the story of star-crossed lovers.

Holding onto one thread as you make your way through the brambles and wilderness—until you find your love waiting for you at the mountain’s peak. Dressed in red and gold, face shrouded in a bridal veil.

And once you take their hand—both ends of the thread become intertwined.

Fates forever joined.

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimers:

As far as setting goes, I am intentionally vague in the epilogue. Due to the fantasy elements of No Paths Are Bound, this is a modern cultivation setting, and also an alternative history due to the long term impacts of the actions of the characters on the mortal realm. The politics and cultural dynamics of this setting are not intended to accurately represent what we know in the modern era for that reason, but this is the same geographic and cultural setting--just moved further into the future. This is also an international society as a result, but I choose not to touch on that because I don't find it particularly relevant to the plot of the epilogue.

There is a line in the novels where MXTX discusses how gods come and go with cultural changes, somewhat breaking the fourth wall by implying that a god of horses would be made irrelevant by cars--so what you see of the gods portrayed in the epilogue is how I believe the Heavenly Court would have been impacted as mortals became more and more modernized. The move away from martial gods, the emphasis on more subjective matters of worship. It was also pointed out to me by a friend as I was writing this on twitter that blindness being associated with justice is not necessarily a concept rooted in Asian--particularly Chinese culture--and some people drew connections between Xie Lian being

depicted as blind with Themis (a greek goddess of Justice). This was entirely unintentional on my part! I used to mention it in my author's notes quite frequently, but I am a law student. As a matter of fact, I'm in my final semester! As a result, I've been so drilled with the concept of blind and impartial justice over the years--and I see the Lady Justice Statue every single day when I walk into my classroom buildings and courtrooms--that I made the connection somewhat subliminally! It was a really wonderful learning experience for me however, because we often don't realize just how much our view of subjective subjects like justice, law, and impartiality can be influenced by our cultural backgrounds!

Finally, with regards to the characters now having children: this can very much be a death of the author issue if you are uncomfortable with mpreg. I go out of my way not to describe any details related to conception or the means by which they were born for that reason! I might cover it in extras written after the story's conclusion, but within the main story the only character shown as pregnant is Shi Qingxuan, which I did not tag as mpreg because in this story Shi Qingxuan is a genderfluid femme character.

What's Next

I will be putting up the final part of the Epilogue tomorrow--and you will see the chapter count increase to 152 when I add the Q & A / Postword, but chapter 151 will be the last with any story related content, and I plan on putting both up on the same day. If you have any further questions that you would like to see on the Q&A, feel free to comment below!

xoxo, Evie

No Paths Are Bound

Chapter Summary

Those are pages from a different story.

One that hasn't started yet.

He still has this one, for now.

Autumn days surrounded by family. Quiet, with the security that comes from being home. Content with something that his own parents didn't have, when they were young;

Knowing that there will always be a place for him.

Chapter Notes

Here we are at the final chapter of this story! I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He walks back down the other side, hand in hand with his new bride—and when the trees begin to clear, and the stars come into view—

There's laughing, and music—and the sight of his family awaiting him, cheering for the newlyweds as they walk into the pavilion.

Embraced first by his uncles, then bowing to the emperor as a sign of respect—one that is returned, until Xie Lian dispenses any formalities and pulls him into an embrace of his own.

From the tables nearby, Pei Yitong watches her cousins, her chin resting against her palm.

"Doesn't it ever seem weird to you that they only ever had one kid?" A voice pipes up next to her ear—and when she looks over, she finds Hua Liang there. Sitting halfway in and out of his chair, somehow already having his hands on a plate of food.

“I mean—it's been thousands of years.”

Pei Yitong lifts her head, looking at him with one raised eyebrow. “It took your parents nearly two thousand years to have you and your brother, did it not?”

“Yeah,” Hua Liang agrees, gnawing on a chicken bone.

"But they had the other one *way* before either of us—" he pauses, looking at his aunt before he lowers his voice to an obnoxious whisper. "He was an *accident.* Gege told me—"

"I did *not,*" Hua Ming whispers furiously, dropping into the seat next to him. "You can't just walk around telling people—"

"Not *you,"* Hua Liang hisses back. "Ren Song gege told me!"

"...Oh," Hua Ming leans back, slightly deflated from his previous stance. And...the more he thinks about it... "Oh gods, he probably *did..."*

And Hua Ming can't imagine that his older brother would actually care about that label, if anything, he'd probably find it funny—but his *dad* would care quite a bit if he heard that.

"...Well," Pei Yitong snorts, "my cousin was an accident too—and my aunt swore off ever doing that again."

Her uncle always seemed a little more interested in having more than they did—but Pei Yitong's parents have had enough children by now to make for a crowded family.

“I suppose you should be glad your parents didn’t feel the same way,” she concludes, watching as her own fathers stand near the front of the wedding party. One congratulating the bride and groom, while the other grabs one of her elder brothers by the ear, scolding him.

She was the one who spied him sneaking bottles of liquor into his robes before they left home—and, as was inevitable, his stash ended up being discovered.

“Where is my nephew, by the way?”

She’s a thousand years younger, and he *loathes* it when she calls him that.

“…He called dad and said he would be a little late,” Hua Ming mumbles, winding a lock of hair around his index finger.

“If your father wasn’t one of his favorite people on earth—I would start to think he *enjoys* making him worry.”

Hua Ming sighs.

"…It sure does feel that way sometimes," he mutters under his breath, reaching over to pick a piece of meat from Hua Liang's plate, popping it into his mouth. "But he just…does his own thing. It's not malicious."

"Ren Song gege says he's a shithead."

"Didi!"

Hua Ming doesn't necessarily disagree, but his older brothers are away often enough that, when Hua Liang swears, everyone assumes it's his fault—

"Did something happen with you?" Pei Yitong looks Hua Ming over curiously. "You're wound even tighter than usual."

"No—"

"He's in trouble!"

"I'm *not* in—!"

There's a rush of wind overhead—one that makes all three fall silent, looking towards the sky.

Burning bright against the rising moon. Growing larger, closer, until its shape comes into view.

The bride gasps, her eyes widening as she holds He Bai's arm tightly, even if he seems perfectly relaxed.

"Is that a—?!"

A *dragon?*

One with scales of crimson and gold, but the guests don't react with fear. In fact, the children present jump up and cry out in excitement.

Its body coils as it grows closer to the ground, glowing brightly—but by the time it grows near, its form shrinks and shifts—

Revealing the visage of a young man.

Landing lightly on his feet before the newlyweds, a charming smile in place as He Bai rolls his eyes.

"You've outdone yourself, Hua-Xiong."

“You *did* say not to bother showing up late unless I was able to make a grand entrance,” the new arrival shrugs.

“I was simply following instructions.” He turns to the bride, leaning down to kiss her hand. “And *you* must be the lovely Jia Kang, pleasure to meet you.”

They’ve met before, back when she and He Bai began dating seriously—but he wore a different face back then.

“…The pleasure is all mine,” she mutters, clearing her throat as she lets go of He Bai’s arm, attempting to put on a brave face. “…You must be Hua Bolin. He Bai has told me all about you.”

His eyebrows raise sharply. “Has he really?”

“As much as I can bear repeating.”

The martial god winces, clutching his heart in feigned offense. “It’s bad luck to make a guest cry at a wedding, He-Xiong.”

“I’ve never heard of that tradition, and if ever see you shed a tear, I’ll start preparing for the end times.”

“…Fair,” Hua Bolin shrugs, “but I was only late because I was searching long and hard for a *gift—”*

He Bai crosses his arms.

“—and other things that I can’t say. Official business. Anyhow, here.”

He tosses something over that Jia Kang barely manages to catch.

Surprisingly heavy between her palms, and when she looks down to examine it…

“An…egg?”

The size of a football, the same color and firmness as obsidian.

“…What kind of egg is it?”

“No idea,” he shrugs. “Found it in a demon lair. But you’re a scientist, right? Enjoy.”

Jia Kang stares down at it, then looks back up, eyes wide.

"…I'm a physicist…" She mumbles faintly.

"Oh? Might look nice on a dining table then."

"…Thanks," He Bai said. "We love it."

He's given Bolin far more ridiculous gifts before—he can't complain.

From the Cheshire grin on the God of the Central Plain's face—he seems to know that.

"I thought you might."

Across the pavilion, a silver haired official clutches his stomach, laughing until his ribs ache.

"Mu Qing—"

"I don't care what everyone else says, he takes after you!"

Xie Lian sinks in his chair, and Hua Cheng stares at him quizzically, raising an eyebrow.

"What?"

"The—the parade!" Their friend wheezes, and once Feng Xin realizes what he's referencing, he nearly chokes on his wine.

The emperor hides his face behind his hands.

"It was before you showed up," Mu Qing explains, setting his own glass aside, loose locks of hair pushed back behind his ears. "His highness decided arriving behind hundreds of mounted Calvary wasn't impressive enough—"

"No, no—" Xie Lian croaks. "I thought it was more realistic! Because I was supposed to be…"

A god, as hilarious as that sounds now.

"Guoshi and everyone else was panicking looking for him—and then he came flying down from on top of a building." Mu Qing concludes.

"It was the way people thought gods descended from the heavens back then—"

"And you'd know all about that *now."*

Xie Lian practically sinks under the table, all while Feng Xin struggles to catch his breath, and Hua Cheng doesn't seem amused at *all* by that joke, but—

"See? I wasn't *that* late," he feels a familiar hand land on his shoulder, then a greeting kiss against his cheek.

"I believed you," Xie Lian replies patiently, knowing that the statement is aimed more at Hua Cheng than it is at him. "How did it go?"

"Mostly fine."

He says *mostly*, because Mu Qing has already leaned over to roll up his sleeve, scowling at the sight of a deep gash in his forearm, still bleeding sluggishly.

"You couldn't have cleaned up a little before flying over?"

"I already did for the most part," he whines. "But you always finish it off the best. Clean edges and all that."

Which implies that his arm was likely nearly *amputated* before, but he tries not to focus on the details.

And having his arm locked in Mu Qing's grip doesn't stop him from reaching over to give his other father a one-armed hug.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd think you didn't miss me," he sighs, only for Hua Cheng to give a sharp eye roll, reaching out and returning the embrace.

"You say that when you're the one who's always running off on your own."

"Blame the emperor," their son shakes his head with a long-suffering sigh. "Working me to the bone. You don't know what it's like, the pressures of being the first b—"

One sharp look from Hua Cheng sends him leaning back against Xie Lian, resting his cheek against his shoulder pitifully.

"I'm just kidding Baba, you're patient and generous, don't send me on patrol in ghost city again, diē is a tyrant—"

"Would you stop moving?!" Mu Qing snaps, prompting him to sit stock still.

And once he does, Xie Lian asks him more seriously—

“Anything to report back?”

That’s enough to drain the silliness from his expression, bringing him back to business as he leans close to speak next to his father’s ear.

“The problem with the rift is getting more severe. You might need to intervene personally before…”

The sound of the party swells around them, drowning out their conversation to anyone not sitting at their table—and back on the far side of the pavilion, a newcomer drops down between Hua Ming and Pei Yitong.

“How does A’Liang have food already?” He grumbles.

His sister glances over at him sympathetically. “He always has food. Dad might have given it to him.”

“Unfair…” He groans. “I’m a kid too! I’m a growing boy!”

Pei Yitong snorts, swatting his hand when he reaches for Hua Liang’s plate.

“You could have eaten earlier.”

Pei Xiang rolls his eyes with an annoyed huff, unaided by the undeniably smug look on Hua Liang’s face as he chews, trying to distract himself by looking away.

Catching sight of the emperor’s eldest son, speaking with his father as Mu Qing patches up his arm.

“…How does he have the tattoos, anyway?” He mumbles, swinging his feet under his chair as he examines the patterns of ink across Hua Bolin’s forearm, going further up under his sleeve. “Wouldn’t they heal since he’s a god?”

Hua Ming shrugs.

"He got some of them when he was mortal," he explains, eyeing the prominent scar on the right side of his brother's face. Running from his brow bone, to deep down his cheek.

There are some reminders of their mortal lives that even gods cannot wash away.

"But most of them heal after a few weeks, then he gets new ones."

Not always as frequently or extensively as he does now—Ren Song says that's only an addition that came about with the aid of machines.

Now his brother, ever the artist, can do most of them himself in a relatively short amount of time.

He's offered to give them to his younger brothers, once they're old enough—something Hua Liang is horribly excited about, but Hua Ming is slightly more wary.

Pei Xiang almost asks what it's like, having a brother that much older—as a thirteen-year-old sitting beside his five *hundred* year old sister, all while his other siblings range up to nearly a millennia, well—

He already knows.

“…Well,” he crosses his arms, kicking back in his seat. “One day that’ll be us! Two martial gods, doing whatever we want, getting all the girls we—”

“Deputies,” Pei Yitong rolls her eyes. “And I doubt you’ll be getting any girls.”

“Jiejie…” He groans, the tips of his ears turning red. "Don't be mean!"

He might be complaining, but Hua Ming feels nothing short of relieved, looking down at his own plate as dinner begins to be served, attendants milling about.

"Someday you'll be happy to have someone to keep you grounded."

"As opposed to what?" A voice pipes up from behind them.

Hua Liang jumps with surprise as he's lifted out of his seat, prepared to shout in protest—until he sees who has him.

"Gege!"

Pei Yitong rolls her eyes, watching as Hua Bolin drops back into his seat with Hua Liang in his lap, holding one arm around the boy's waist as he sets down his own plate.

"A bad influence."

The martial god shrugs, his smile slightly less boisterous. "There are worse things."

"..." Hua Ming sets down his chopsticks, reaching over to squeeze his arm. "I'm glad you made it—was there trouble?"

He looks down at his forearm, where the wound was bleeding before—only to find it's already completely disappeared.

His older brother shakes his head, his gaze warm as he reaches over to pat his cheek.

"I'm just fine, didi. And what about you? Learning well?"

"My classes aren't too bad this semester—”

"He doesn't mean *normal* school," Hua Liang crosses his arms.

Right.

"*I* started using real swords this week," their little brother declares proudly, holding his head high.

"Really?" Bolin exclaims, eyebrows raised.

"They aren't sharp."

"That doesn't mean they aren't real!"

Hua Ming holds up his hands in surrender, slightly exasperated.

"Sorry...It's going fine."

Better than fine, actually. He's enrolled with a cultivation sect in the city, he's at the top of his class—but he can't help but feel like he's cheating, or has some sort of unfair advantage—even if his parents have always insisted otherwise.

"That doesn't sound very enthusiastic," Hua Bolin muses, chewing on a mouthful of braised pork. "Maybe we can work on it while I'm home."

The mention of that makes both of his younger brothers perk up, and he smiles.

"I just finished my patrol--you think I wasn't going to come and see you while you had a break from school?" He clicks his tongue, feigning hurt. "So little faith in your gege..."

"Can we go riding?! Oh—oh, can you and gege fight with sharp swords? I know I can't, but I can watch—!"

Hua Liang babbles excitedly, his food forgotten—but the greatest reward might be the smile that news pulls from Hua Ming.

No matter how kind and loving your parents might be—there's a weight that comes to the reality of their lives. One that drops over you like a curtain once you're old enough to understand it.

It's hard enough for him, at his age.

Even harder on a sixteen-year-old.

He saw the weight of that anxiety drop over Hua Ming a year ago and recognized it—knew it well.

Now, he does as much as he can—as often as he can—to make that gravity of it feel a little more bearable.

"*Fine*, fine...but maybe a movie too, while we're at it? Have mercy on your poor gege, he's so tired..."

"From what?" A familiar voice drawls. "Stirring up nonsense? I *know* dianxia and Hua Chengzhu taught you gift etiquette..."

“Ren Song gege!” Hua Liang beams, almost euphoric to have all of his brothers together—and Hua Ming seems just as pleased.

“Were you late too, or—?”

“No, unlike the other one I have *some* manners,” Shuo rolls his eyes, kissing Hua Ming’s head as he ruffles Hua Liang’s hair. “But someone has to run the arrays around this place when everyone else is at the party,” he explains. “And *I* couldn’t put the seals back up until this shithead showed up—”

Hua Liang giggles madly at the swearing, and Hua Ming winces.

“Gege, if you say that in front of him he’s gonna repeat it, and Baba and diē are gonna think—”

“Trust me, A’Ming, they are *never* going to think it was you,” Ren Song snorts.

Ironic, because he has heard the middle child swear more than once—but never in front of Hua Liang.

Hua Ming shrinks a little from that reminder, fighting the urge to jut out his lower lip.

"It could have been me," he mutters. "I mess up."

Sometimes, badly. Maybe even in front of an entire station of—

"Be grateful that you'll never be the problem child," Hua Bolin soothes him. "Heaven knows our parents need *one* son that doesn't keep them up at night."

"I don't!" Hua Liang cries, a steamed bun halfway to his mouth.

Hua Bolin snickers, "You give them more nightmares than the rest of us combined!"

As he says this, he tickles the boy's sides, making growling, biting noises next to his ear—like he means to swallow him whole—and Hua Liang shrieks with laughter, food forgotten.

Hua Ming can't help but smile, his gaze slowly returning to his other older brother.

Not quite dressed for a wedding—still wearing a leather jacket and hiking boots from the workday, but he spent the afternoon and early evening in the forests surrounding this place maintaining the array, so no one could blame him for that.

...Do you know where he was?

Shuo meets his gaze, eyebrows raised.

I thought you were banned from using the communication array for now.

Hua Ming bites back a scowl.

Because of that mess with gege, not because of—

I know, I know. But don't worry so much about Bolin. He's fine. Dianxia and Chengzhu didn't seem worried, did they?

Hua Ming looks over at his parents. The way the emperor leans comfortably against his husband's side, Hua Cheng's arm around his waist as they converse.

…*No.*

Then you have nothing to worry about, either.

He says that, but…

He remembers how tightly his father hugged him when they spoke in Tonglu Hudie's shrine today. How his other father gripped his hand when they went through the array.

They aren't panicked, but they both seem to have something on their minds. It isn't nothing.

With them, that could be something as minor as Hua Liang's behavioral problems at school—or as serious as an impending war. It's impossible to know.

And given what happened to his brother in the last war—it's a frightening thought.

…*Okay.*

Ren Song gives his shoulder a reassuring squeeze, giving Hua Bolin a little more grief before going to greet his husband, and the festivities continue.

Eating until they're stuffed full—laughing, exchanging stories, a few of them taking to the floor to dance.

Among them the former General of Xuli and Queen of Yushi, now lifelong friends. The mother and father of the groom. The thunder master and his eldest daughter.

Relatives and deputy gods mill about, watching the fireworks, handing around sparklers.

Apparently, the Heavens weren't always like this.

Two emperors ago, there was a man who pitted them against one another. Who kept them distant, distrusting, and competitive.

He's spoken of very little now. Only used as a cautionary tale.

Hua Ming has asked about him before, and received little in the way of an answer.

It's not something his father likes to talk about.

Some tyrants are better left forgotten.

As the night grows deeper, it’s easy to believe that they have been. Even with the mid-autumn festival approaching in the next week—no one shows a competitive zeal or an ounce of concern.

But Hua Ming does notice something, hanging towards the edge of the crowd.

His older brothers standing near the doors to the pavilion, having a quiet, somewhat tense conversation—eventually disappearing inside.

“…A’Ming? Where are you going?”

He stiffens when one of his uncles calls over to him, not turning around.

“…Bathroom! I’ll be right back!”

It's a bit of a task, walking around the side of the building, making it seem as though he's going towards the restrooms—only to climb up onto the trellis, scrambling for hand and footholds, struggling to be silent, only to feel something wriggling around his neck.

"...Don't look at me like that," he whispers.

(Ruoye cannot look at him in any way, not in this form--and if it could, they wouldn't be making eye contact at the moment.)

"You were supposed to go with dad after we got here!"

But Ruoye is with him so often now, it forgets.

"...I'm not snooping, this isn't their house either." Technically *they're* the ones snooping around in the earth master's palace, not him. "And I wouldn't have to sneak if they told me anything."

He doesn't even expect to know everything. Just a *little*, if it's important. And in his experience, the only way to know about anything is...a little bit of sneaking around.

Which is how he ends up on a narrow outcropping next to a third story window, leaning back against stone walls, his breathing muted as he listens closely.

"...We lost three," Hua Bolin admits, rummaging around in his friend's liquor cabinet until he finds something that strikes his fancy. "One of my own deputies, too."

"...I'm sorry," Shuo sighs. "Was it quick?"

"We have no way of knowing—and don't apologize, he wasn't my choice. It was a political appointment. He didn't know what he was doing. He wasn't qualified to be there. So, he got himself killed."

The ghost king winces at the glibness.

"Maybe so. Still, it's a loss."

"Maybe. But he was perfectly comfortable with his father pressuring the court into giving him a position—he should have been comfortable with living and dying with the consequences of taking a role he wasn't qualified for."

Harsh, but Shuo can't find fault with his logic.

He abandons scolding him for it, and moves on. "Is that how you hurt your arm? You got too close to it?"

Bolin pauses for a moment, knelt in front of the cabinet before straightening with a bottle of liquor in hand.

"...My arm got pulled inside of the rift. Technically."

"...What?" Shuo questions flatly.

"I was planning on going *all of the way in,"* the martial god huffs, pouring himself a glass. "But it destabilized. Anyone stupid enough to be too close behind me got sucked in or incinerated."

"You *planned* that?"

"...It's not as if someone wasn't going to have to do it eventually, gege. It's getting worse. Mortals are starting to become interested in it. Cultivators are getting into border disputes *just* to control the land around it. We need to try to understand more before..."

Bolin grimaces, knocking back his drink in a single swallow.

He's lived through one cultivation war. He has no desire to experience another.

"...It's a miracle Mu Qing was able to put your arm back together at all, then." Shuo grumbles. "Does dianxia know what you did?"

"...And he's pissed at me, so you don't need to give me a lecture. I'm *sure* I'm gonna get one before long."

But Hua Bolin knows the emperor better than most. Probably better than anyone, short of his father.

If he didn't go, eventually, it would be Xie Lian.

And he's one of the very few to come close to him in power who *also* happens to be slightly more disposable, no matter how much it would horrify his parents to hear him say that.

"But I learned something."

That pulls Ren Song from his anxious anger.

"...What?"

Many theories have been spun about regarding the Rift since it appeared many centuries ago. At first a small crack, slowly widening into an area that none may approach.

Some think of it as a new evolution of Mount Tonglu, a source of power. Others see only poison and ruin.

"...It's a bridge," Bolin rasps, reaching up to rub his temple with one hand, setting down his empty glass. "I heard things. Saw things."

"...Bridge to what?" Shuo mutters, leaning back against the couch in his shock.

"No idea. Even dad didn't know what to think of it."

And if *Xie Lian* didn't even have the slightest guess as to what it could mean—it's less likely that anyone else could, either.

"All I know is that there are cultivators on the other side. And if I could hear them—there's a possibility they could hear us."

The sheer fact that Bolin survived nearly being dragged inside implies that he could cross, even though he isn't quite that suicidal. And if he could--theoretically, someone could come from the other side.

"...Did they seem dangerous?"

"How would I know? I only saw flashes."

And each one seemed to be different. Showing different times. Different places. Different people. It's hard to say if each one even existed within the same realm, or multiple.

"...One of them seemed dangerous, though. If something like him came through..."

Hua Bolin's parents would have to be the ones to deal with it. He doesn't think mortal cultivators would stand a chance.

They didn't seem to in the visions he saw, anyway.

"What was his name?"

"...Mo...something? It's all a blur."

Shuo grows silent for a moment, deep in thought as the martial god pours another drink, offering it to him.

"Sounds like the best solution is to find a way to close the damn thing."

"We already would've if we knew how," Bolin grumbles, refilling his own glass. "And I struggle to feel any pity for the cultivation sects panicking over it *now."*

"I think it would shock people to know how harsh you can be in private, didi. You play the carefree vagrant so well," the ghost king comments dryly.

"Wei Wuxian warned them there would be consequences to destroying the Yin Tiger Tally." He shrugs. "They chose not to heed that warning. Now the hens have come home to roost. You're telling me you *don'*t resent the fact that we're the ones cleaning it up?"

The gods aren’t blameless, particularly when it comes to the amulet’s creation, but—

Hua Bolin is entirely innocent in that matter, so Shuo finds his anger understandable.

“…Have more faith in your father. If it becomes necessary, he’s more than capable of dealing with it.”

He knows that. He’d be a fool not to know that.

But it can be exhausting, watching someone you love give so much to a world that often gives so little in return.

“He shouldn’t have to,” he eventually replies, taking a long, burning swallow.

On that, they both agree.

Outside, Hua Ming leans forward slightly, heart pounding in his chest. Digesting everything he heard. What it could mean. What he…

Mo…something?

And in his distraction—his foot slips.

He has enough discipline not to cry out, arms flailing as he slips over the side, but—

Someone catches him before he even comes close to hitting the ground—and when he feels a silver vambrace against his cheek…

He knows exactly who.

Cracking one eyelid to see his father staring down at him, unimpressed.

“…Hi…”

“How was the bathroom?”

“…Fine,” he croaks.

Hua Cheng says nothing, watching him filter through an awkward smile, nervous laughter, before finally cracking like an egg.

“…I wasn’t spying, I was just—!”

“Listening to things they wouldn’t say in front of you?”

He almost agrees—then bites his lip, properly chagrined.

“…I was worried,” he admits, his voice much smaller now—

And his father’s expression softens.

“…The party’s starting to wind down. Your father already took A’Liang home. Do you want to stay?”

He always gives him a choice—but if they’re going to talk, Hua Ming would rather not wait around all night to do it.

“…No,” he mumbles, shaking his head, hearing the all too familiar sound of dice rattling in his father’s pocket.

This kind of array is the most comfortable, even if it’s not practical when all four of them travel. Just the sound of the sharp clacking of dice reminds him of being small, half asleep in his father’s arms as he was ferried from one place to the next.

Not to their home in the city—they won’t be going back there until classes resumes. No, when the area around them comes back into focus—it’s the place where he was born.

The gentle, sloping hills and forests leading towards Mount Taicang.

Hua Cheng used to carry him all the way home on his shoulders—something Hua Ming dearly misses now, but he doesn’t complain when his father sets him on his feet.

“A’Ming.”

“…Yeah?”

Hua Cheng looks him in the eye.

The only one of his children to inherit the feature he lost.

Something he once felt such self-loathing and shame over—but he can’t bring himself to look at his son’s eyes and see something monstrous.

“…You know, no matter what happens, your father and I are going to keep you safe.”

It’s not a question—but he answers anyway.

“…I know,” he whispers.

Never, not even for a moment in his entire life, has he ever really doubted that fact.

“…And I’ll keep him safe.”

Not because Xie Lian *needs* it—but simply because he’ll always put his own welfare last.

So, Hua Cheng always puts it first.

Not just from enemies, or unforeseeable dangers.

After so many years together, he's learned to protect his god from his own self-destructive tendencies, when the time calls for it.

Hua Ming knows that, too.

He hangs back for a moment, shivering in the autumn breeze.

"...I just...I don't know how to..." He struggles to explain, biting his lip—but his father doesn't rush him, or prompt him to say anything else.

As always, he patiently listens.

"...If something happens, I...I don't want to be useless," he finally admits.

"And I know I'm still a kid, I know no one expects me to be able to...but I just don't think I could stand to sit by and watch—”

He stops, his throat growing thick when his father's hand lands on top of his head, forcing him to stop.

"A'Ming."

He swallows hard.

"...Understand one thing: there are many people in this world who will always be helpless. You are not one of them."

He knows his child well—and he knows that, like his husband, a gentle nature doesn't translate to weakness.

It can hide so much underneath.

"And even if you *were*," he grasps Hua Ming's chin gently, guiding the teenager to look up at him. "When have we ever said that you had to be perfect?"

"..."

He doesn't give an answer. There isn't a need for one.

Not when he surges forward into his father's arms, allowing himself to be held tightly. Eyes squeezed tightly shut as he allows a deep exhale, the tension easing from his shoulders.

Managing a smile when he feels a wraith butterfly land in his hair.

One thing you learn growing up surrounded by those who are untethered to time is that everything has its season. You have to let things flow from one chapter to the next.

The boy from the train, everything he overheard—

Those are pages from a different story.

One that hasn't started yet.

He still has this one, for now.

Autumn days surrounded by family. Quiet, with the security that comes from being home. Content with something that his own parents didn't have, when they were young;

Knowing that there will always be a place for him.

Inside the temple on Mount Taicang, long since converted to a family home, the emperor sits on the edge of his youngest's bed, smoothing the blankets over his legs.

"Baba..." Hua Liang yawns, fighting to keep his eyes open. "...Are you cheating?"

Xie Lian smiles.

"No."

In truth, he's just exhausted from traveling all day, playing with his cousins and stuffing himself full at the ceremony—and now, he's ready to sleep.

But in Hua Liang's mind, this could only be a deception. The result of a spell or incantation. He could *never* be sleepy.

"...I don't wanna sleep," he mumbles, fighting valiantly to keep his eyes open. "Tell me another story! ...The one with the goats!"

Xie Lian purses his lips, reaching over to push his hair back from his forehead.

"You *look* sleepy..."

"I'm not!" He whines. "I'm not ready to sleep yet!"

"I could lay down with you if you don't want me to go," Xie Lian suggests gently, something his son normally balks from, insisting he can sleep by himself.

(Even with Hong Li at the end of his bed, and several night lights.)

“…No,” Hua Liang’s jaw locks stubbornly—as Xie Lian expected—

“I don’t wanna have a nightmare.”

But he wasn’t expecting him to say *that.*

“…A nightmare?” He questions softly, searching Hua Liang’s face for an explanation. “What do you mean?”

He’s stubborn, as usual.

Not answering when Xie Lian asks, just repeating that he isn’t tired, he wants to hear another story about the goats, until—

“…Hua Ming gege and Pei Xiang were talking earlier,” he mumbles, like the words are being pried out of him with a pair of tongs.

“And Pei Xiang kept saying ‘once we’re martial gods,’ like it was definitely gonna happen, but then Pei Xitong said they’d just be deputies, and—”

Xie Lian has never gone out of his way to impress their reality upon his children—but he’s never hidden it either.

But he didn’t think they’d have this conversation so soon, or—

“But what if I don’t become a god?” Hua Liang mumbles, something he would only ever ask Xie Lian, and never in front of anyone else.

“…If it’s what you want, when you’re older, I can appoint you to be —”

"What if I die?" His son whispers.

Xie Lian grows still.

Because of *all* of the questions he thought his son might ask—

He wasn't prepared for that one.

"What if I die, and it makes you sad forever?" Hua Liang repeats, his lower lip beginning to tremble.

"…Oh," he finally manages to pry his lips open, to speak—his voice coming out unsteady and hoarse. "Nothing is going to happen to you—"

"But what if it does?" Hua Liang presses, and his father grows silent, looking back down at the sheets, smoothing them all over again.

But eventually, as always—he gives him an answer.

Glancing around his bedroom. The stuffed animals and toys littering the floor. Crayon drawings taped to the walls on colorful paper.

"…I would miss you forever," he finally replies, choosing every word carefully. "But I would remember the way you make me laugh. How you're always thinking of me. How smart and curious you are—and thinking about those things would make me happy. Because I love you *so* much."

"…But how do you know?"

His voice wobbles with sadness and uncertainty—and Xie Lian can't stand it anymore, laying down beside his son and pulling him into his arms.

"…Your father and I lost each other," he explains. "Many, many years ago. And I didn't see him again for a long time."

That's difficult for Hua Liang to imagine. In his entire life, his parents have never spent more than a day apart at a time.

"…You mean when he became a ghost?"

Xie Lian nods. "And I was *so* sad for so long—I didn't think I could ever be happy again."

The kind of anguish that consumes you. While your loved one is reduced to ash and bone, you endure a different form of living decay.

Weathered away by grief.

“…But you found each other again,” Hua Liang points out.

“We did,” his father agrees.

“But after that…I never wanted to feel that kind of pain again. So, when I found out we were having Bolin…I was worried about the same thing as you.”

Maybe it should be frightening, hearing his father empathize with him like that—but it isn’t.

It’s…comforting.

“…And we almost lost him, when he was close to your age.” Xie Lian recalls quietly—and his son can’t see how dark his eyes become when he says that. The roiling emotions beneath his gaze.

Remembering how his child was almost taken from him.

“I have *never* been that scared.”

He had thought he was beyond feeling that kind of anger anymore. That he had conquered it, when he sent his tormentor to the afterlife in peace.

Not knowing there was a rage that even he hadn’t experienced before. One that brought out sides of him that were long forgotten.

“…*You* were scared?” Hua Liang asks, disbelieving.

He’s never seen his father scared of anything.

“Of course I was,” Xie Lian murmurs.

It nearly paralyzed him.

All of his focus in the years that followed went into teaching his son everything he knew.

So nothing could ever threaten him again.

Greatness was never Bolin’s choice—more so a result of Xie Lian’s overwhelming fear.

"But, no matter how much I missed your father—or how much pain I was in—I never wished that I hadn't met him."

Not once.

"And no matter what happened—I never would have regretted having your brother."

Even if he had been so *frightened* of the grief—

The moment he held his son in his arms for the first time—that overshadowed everything else.

"…And when Hua Ming was born, and then you—I was still scared, but I was also excited."

Because he knew how much they would be loved, and protected. The kind of life he and Hua Cheng could give them.

He holds Hua Liang closer, tucking his head under his chin.

"I'm not going to let anyone hurt you. But if something *did* happen to you—I would miss you every day. But only because I would love you every day."

Grief might pick you to the bone—but it's a symptom of loving something you can no longer see, feel, or touch.

But it never outweighs it.

Xie Lian would never sacrifice that joy to escape the pain.

You can't live a life with meaning without experiencing loss.

You can't construct golden palaces and expect them to never fall back down.

That was never the point of building them.

"…And what if I become a ghost?" Hua Liang mumbles—his voice less tense and frightened than it was before. "What if I get lost?"

"…Then I'll find you," his father replies. "And you can haunt me for the rest of my days."

That makes the boy smile, wriggling closer in his arms.

"…I still don't wanna sleep," he admits, his voice muffled against the front of Xie Lian's shirt.

His father smiles.

"I don't think that's going to be your call."

"…But what if I have a nightmare?"

"Then you'll have a nightmare," He murmurs. "And when you wake up, I'll be here. And none of it will be real."

Dreams might end. Memories might fade.

But so do nightmares, and so does pain.

And when you wake up, it's nothing more than a dimming, ugly reminder.

Like so many other things.

He doesn't even realize that he's fallen asleep with him—not until arms carefully slide underneath him, as they have many times before, carefully lifting him out of bed.

He doesn't open his eyes—not quite yet.

But he smells smoke, the forest, and a faint hint of iron.

And he smiles, fingers tightening in the front of his husband's jacket—prompting Hua Cheng to lean down and kiss him, knowing exactly what he wants without a need for words.

The door slides shut behind them with a soft *click*.

"…Where are the other two?" Xie Lian rasps, his voice rough, still a little groggy.

"Asleep."

"Both of them?" He doesn't manage to keep the surprise from his voice, and Hua Cheng smiles.

"On the couch downstairs. We were watching a movie."

"…A'Bolin must have been tired," Xie Lian yawns, turning his face into his neck. "He's a night owl, like you."

His husband hums in agreement. “Given the day he had—that’s not a surprise.”

That’s certainly true. They’ll have to talk to him about it tomorrow. Give him the lecture he undoubtedly knows is coming—

But for now, they can be like this.

Hua Cheng can carry him into their bedroom, shutting the door behind them.

He can lay his god down on their bed, while the fireworks explode in the distance, the Heavens celebrating the Earth Master's marriage, showers of sparks gleaming through the window.

And Xie Lian can watch him undress, setting his jewelry on the bedside table.

Watching his movements with familiarity and fondness, patiently waiting for him to come to bed.

"Thinking much about the festival tomorrow?"

"...Oh, no," Xie Lian snorts, shaking his head. "The deputies have done nearly all of the organizing. I just signed off."

They'll have all three of their sons home—and he'd much rather focus on that.

"...But I've heard rumors from Ling Wen that A'Bolin *might* hit fifth place this year."

It's a long shot—most of the gods remaining in the upper court are so ancient and well established that there's been little vertical movement in the rankings for a *long* time, but there's a chance.

"I almost would rather he didn't—his ego is nearly unbearable as it is."

"Hmm..." Xie Lian bites back a smile, rolling onto his side as he watches his husband shrug out of his shirt, setting it aside. "I wonder who taught him to be so confident."

The calamity glances back over his shoulder, eye flashing playfully. "Certainly not me, gege."

Xie Lian shakes his head, his own eyes sparkling with amusement. "Of course."

"I beat him down every chance I get."

"As you should."

"If he hasn't cried by dinner, I call it a waste of a day."

The emperor rolls onto his back with a laugh, clutching his stomach.

He's obviously joking, but that's the point of it.

To say something so ridiculous, it gets Xie Lian to laugh.

"...Hua Ming climbed the side of He Bai's palace during the reception," Hua Cheng finally adds, climbing into bed.

Xie Lian sits up, staring.

"What?"

"All the way to the third-floor window."

"Between him and A'Liang and the *climbing—"*

"To eavesdrop on Shuo and Bolin," Hua Cheng concludes. "About what happened today."

"...How much did he hear?" Xie Lian half groans, wiping a hand down his face.

"Enough to be scared."

He falls silent for a moment, considering that.

It's not surprising. Hua Ming has never been a 'out of sight, out of mind' kind of person in the way that his brothers are. He worries. He fixates.

Xie Lian understands.

"He spoke to you about it?"

"He didn't have much of a choice," Hua Cheng shrugs. "I caught him in the act. You know what it's like when he tries to play it casual."

Yes, he's more than aware.

"...I suppose that's another thing we'll have to talk about tomorrow," he mutters.

"Another?"

"...It's nothing that bad," Xie Lian reassures him. "I just told A'Ming we'd wait to talk about it until after the wedding was over."

To some parents, that wouldn't exactly be comforting to hear—but Hua Cheng doesn't seem bothered by it.

If it was that serious, his husband wouldn't wait until tomorrow to discuss it.

"You haven't fallen asleep in A'Liang's bed in ages."

It's not exactly a question, and it doesn't need to be.

"...He was worried about having nightmares," Xie Lian murmurs. "...He asked me what would happen if he died, and if I would ever be happy again."

Hua Cheng blows out a long, heavy sigh, contemplating that conversation, how difficult it must have been.

"I wonder what prompted that."

"...I think anything can, at that age."

A time when children start thinking about the world beyond what's immediately in front of them. When things begin to feel a little too terrifying, close, and real.

What's funny is—Xie Lian can't remember Hua Ming ever being worried about himself dying one day.

When he began learning more about gods and cultivation, he suddenly became terrified that his parents might fade away at some point, even as they constantly assured him that was not a near possibility. Praying anxiously morning and night.

And when Hua Liang asked Xie Lian about death—it wasn't for childish, or selfish reasons.

It was because he didn't want to cause his parents any pain.

Their eldest risked his life today, likely with the hope that if he did, Xie Lian wouldn't have to.

"...What are you thinking about?" Hua Cheng murmurs, reaching down to brush his fingertips over his god's cheek.

Xie Lian looks up at him, his gaze turning contemplative.

"My choices, I think."

The ghost king's thumb rests against his forehead, as though he could reach in and taste his thoughts from that alone.

"Which ones?"

Rather than answer immediately, Xie Lian sits up on his elbows.

Swinging one leg over Hua Cheng's hips, shifting until he's comfortably settled in his husband's lap.

One of his favorite places to be, as they've discovered over the centuries.

"...Can I ask you something, San Lang?"

Large hands settle comfortably on his waist.

"Anything."

"...Those eight hundred years we were apart," Xie Lian murmurs.

They've been together twice as long now, but the ache is still memorable.

"When you were looking for me...did you know what you wanted when you found me?"

His brow furrows.

"...I'm not sure I know what you mean."

He reaches up, pressing his palm against his god's cheek. "I wanted to serve you. To protect you—”

Xie Lian catches his wrist, tilting his face down to kiss his knuckles thoughtfully. Tracing the indents from the heavy rings his husband wears with his lips.

"I know," he agrees. "But..."

He remembers how *painfully* certain Hua Cheng was back then, that Xie Lian would be disgusted by him. That he could *never* return his affections.

"...The favor I owed Wu Ming. You said you knew from that day in Lang-er Bay that you wanted me to marry you. Was that always your hope?"

Hua Cheng falls silent, watching his face intently—seeming to try to discern his mood, but...

"...I dreamed of it often," he admits. "What you would say. How beautiful you would be. But my imagination didn't do the reality of it justice. And...I had desires, but I never felt entitled to you—"

"I know," Xie Lian whispers, their faces illuminated by the fireworks through the window.

Remembering the words Hua Cheng said, fading in his arms after they defeated Jun Wu.

'If your dream is to save the world—then my only dream is you.'

"...But dianxia is incorrect about one thing," Hua Cheng explains, squeezing Xie Lian's fingers.

"I am?"

"I didn't realize I wanted to marry you in Lang'er Bay," he shakes his head, pressing a kiss against his jaw.

"I knew the moment I saw you."

Xie Lian's heart skips pleasantly in his chest, even if he tries to keep his tone politely skeptical.

"You were so young, San Lang—"

"I know," he agrees, his nose brushing across his skin in a way that, even after so long, still makes Xie Lian shiver. "But from that moment on, I never dreamed of anything else."

His prince hugs his arms around his neck, his face pleasantly warm.

"...You were never the one lacking in imagination," he eventually mutters under his breath, pressing his forehead against the bare skin of Hua Cheng's shoulder.

His skin should be cold—but it never is, always warm to his touch.

"Gege?"

"...I've probably told you plenty of times before—”

"You can tell me again, I'll always listen."

Xie Lian sighs. "...When I was small, guoshi asked me what I would do if I had one glass of water, and two men were dying of thirst."

And there were supposed to only be two answers:

First, you could split the cup of water between the two men. In which case neither would receive enough water, and both would die.

Or, you could choose to allow one to live by giving him the entire glass, forsaking the other.

When he asked Feng Xin the same question later, he became frustrated —saying that he didn't want to choose, and not to leave it up to him.

When Mu Qing was asked, he said he needed to know more about the two men in question. What kind of people they were, what they could do.

But Xie Lian--he stubbornly advocated for the existence of a third option.

That he would simply find another cup of water, and make sure both men lived. Stubbornly refusing to accept the two obvious and ultimately cruel choices.

It was a metaphor for godhood. He understands that now. The idea that if you try to be everything for everyone, you'll ultimately help no one.

There might be a grain of wisdom to it—but not as much as there was in the third option, if you ask him.

"And why are you thinking of that now?" Hua Cheng asks, his fingertips rubbing gentle circles into the small of his husband's back, something that always makes the prince melt into him like a sleepy barn cat, and now is no different.

"...I never imagined this."

His words are half muffled, but Hua Cheng understands him easily, leaning his head against the top of his.

"Never imagined what?"

Even after all of this time...it's so hard for him to admit.

"I...never imagined a third option for myself, San Lang."

When he realized that he would never want a wife, the way his parents imagined life for him—he thought he only had one other option.

Cultivation. A life of celibacy, and ultimately...loneliness.

There are plenty of people who don't need marriage or children to be fulfilled.

For the longest time, Xie Lian counted himself among them. He had friendships. He had the love and respect of his people, then his believers.

And he told himself that was enough.

Then, he lost it all.

Then, Hong'er found him again.

And one person's love outshone the peak of godhood. Fulfilled Xie Lian in ways he never could have imagined before, when life was always about what he could offer to others.

Never about how simple and fulfilling it is to be *happy*, sharing your life with someone else.

It took losing him for Xie Lian to understand that. Only recognizing how warm and comfortable he had become in their little life when he was trapped alone in the cold.

And in eight hundred years, Xie Lian never sought out company like that again.

He didn't always push it away when companionship presented itself—he taught Lang Qianqiu for those years. Formed his attachment to Banyue...

But even when he met Hua Cheng, even as he was falling in love with him again, it didn't occur to him.

He never thought Hua Cheng might love him back. Even when he realized that it was *Hong'er*, he was so afraid that he might not love him in the same *way*.

Even when he was back, and they had the rest of their lives to spend together—Xie Lian never thought to ask for marriage.

Once Hua Cheng said the words, he wanted it so *badly*. Once it felt like he was *allowed* to imagine the ghost king as his husband, he couldn't stand another moment of waiting.

But he just never knew how to ask for it. Never knew how to...

"...I never imagined I could have been this happy," Xie Lian finally manages to croak out the words, his voice thick with emotion.

He never would have imagined living this peacefully for this long. Having children of their own. Loving them so *deeply*, it's almost frightening.

Even in a world that isn't perfect, when *he* isn't perfect, when he makes mistakes, fails, loses his temper, takes steps backwards after coming so far—

Even then, he couldn't imagine himself being happier than this.

When he was explaining it to Hua Liang--how much he loved him, his brothers, his father—

All Xie Lian could think of was how Hua Cheng, a child who came from nothing, was able to dream so fiercely. To see options even a prince didn't dare to reach for.

And in that moment—he was so *thankful*.

"...I suppose I'm just trying to thank you," Xie Lian concludes. "For making me so—”

He reaches down to brace his palm against the mattress, wincing—something Hua Cheng immediately notices, leaning down to check his palm.

"...It's nothing," Xie Lian reassures him. "I forgot to put some reports away earlier." He pushes the folder aside, allowing it to land on the floor with a *thud*, holding up his hand—

Allowing Hua Cheng to see the paper cut on his thumb, rapidly healing.

An undecipherable expression passes across his husband's face, watching as the tiny wound fades away, leaving a single drop of blood behind. And to Xie Lian's shock—

He looks so *emotional.*

Dragging him forward, hugging him so tightly, he nearly loses his breath.

"...Thank *you,*" he whispers, sinking back into the pillows with Xie Lian in his arms.

"But...I was in the middle of—"

"For being the best reason I could ever have."

Xie Lian's eyes swim with emotion, burning with tears that finally slip down his cheeks, one by one.

Caught in the double meaning, words spoken between life and death.

'If you can't find a meaning in this life—then allow me to be that meaning.'

'I still have someone precious in this world.'

'I pray to never rest in peace.'

If there is one glaring piece of evidence in favor of his own worth, it's that.

That Hua Cheng is here for *him.*

That, for thousands of years, Xie Lian has been enough.

Their hands and lips seldom part now, as though this is the only way they know how to catch their breath.

Xie Lian can seldom look back over the long, daunting expanse of his life and say that he's forgiven himself for every mistake. That's he's always been worthy of the love that's been given.

But in that time, he's learned to move past words like deserve and worth.

Learned to see the adoration in his husband's eyes when he wakes every morning. The companionship in his friend's voices when they laugh together. The trust in the way his sons hold onto his hand.

He could never cheapen their feelings by questioning if he was worthy of them.

That wasn't always something that he could see. So lost in his own suffering, walking a narrow path, where someone had shut every single door, then scolded him for fumbling towards the window.

But, as he told his son, that grief wasn't isolated in its existence.

Xie Lian missed Hua Cheng every day—over two hundred and ninety-two thousand of them—

Because he *loved him* for every single one of them.

Grief is just loving something that you can no longer feel, see, or touch. Its own form of blindness.

Xie Lian has clung to that tiny thread of faith, clawing his way forward. He has been reduced to his very foundations, and that love allowed him to be kind, even when that kindness was a raging act of defiance.

But even through all of that—he was never alone.

Someone was watching over him.

Waiting without hope of acceptance or reward—only wanting to take his hand, and lead him through the dark.

To give him a glass of water after he gave away his own.

Even when Xie Lian thought he had lost him--he came back.

He came back over, and over, and over again. And now he's here, kissing his god breathless—whispering words halfway between love and prayer.

You can't save everyone. Sometimes, you can't even save yourself, or control the paths your life might take.

But the third path isn't always so elusive.

Often, it's as simple as accepting help.

Allowing someone to believe in you—even if it's just one.

One is all it takes.

And by Heaven Official's Blessing; No Paths Are bound.

ARTWORK INSPIRED BY THIS STORY

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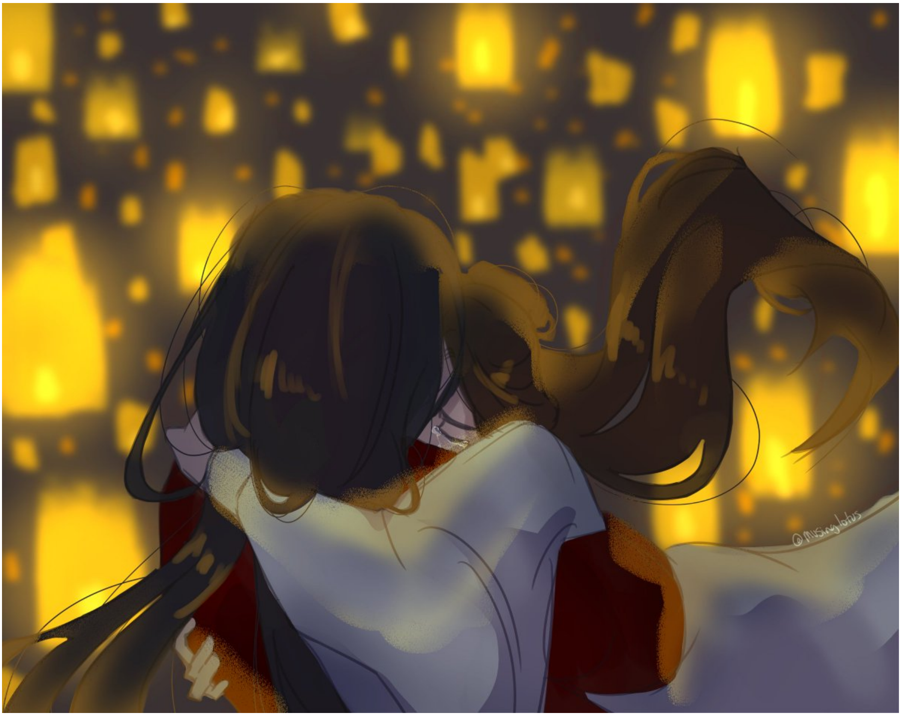
ROWAN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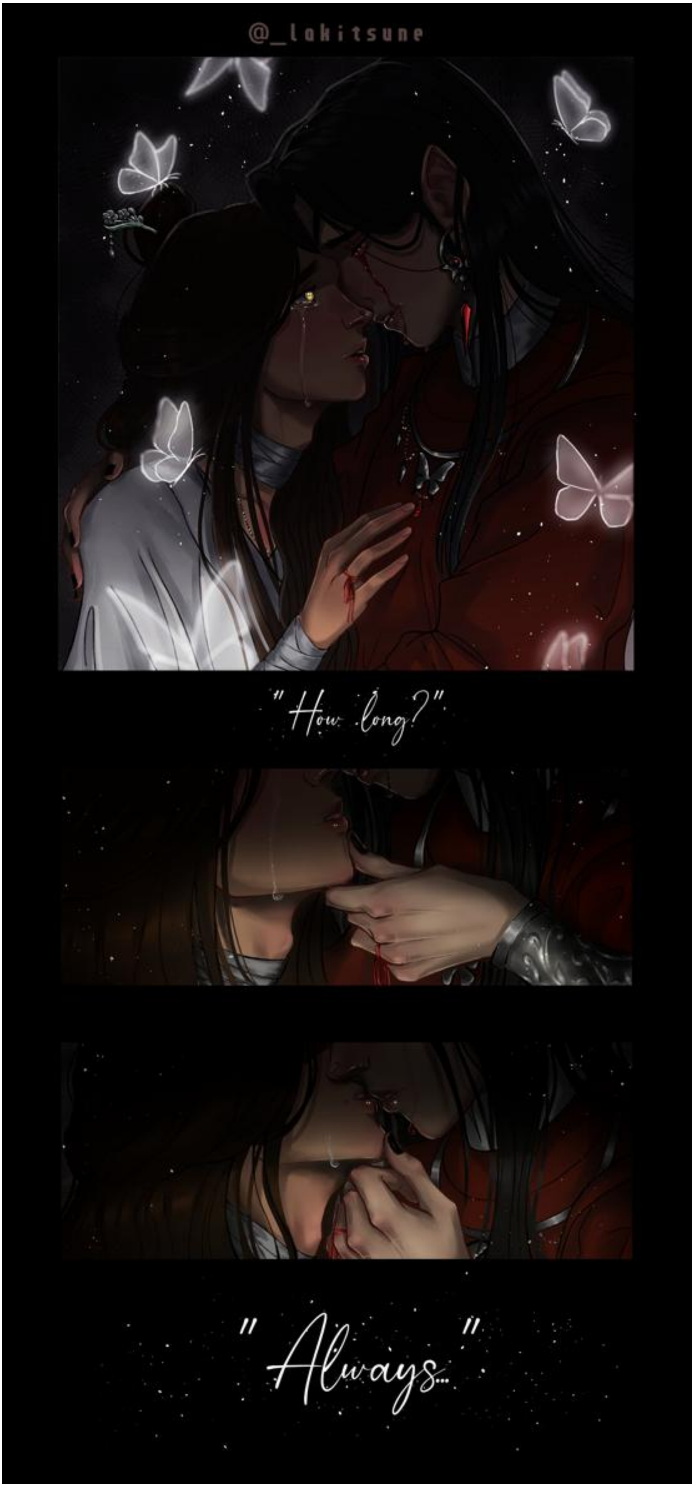
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"How long?"
"Always..."

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LAKITSUNE

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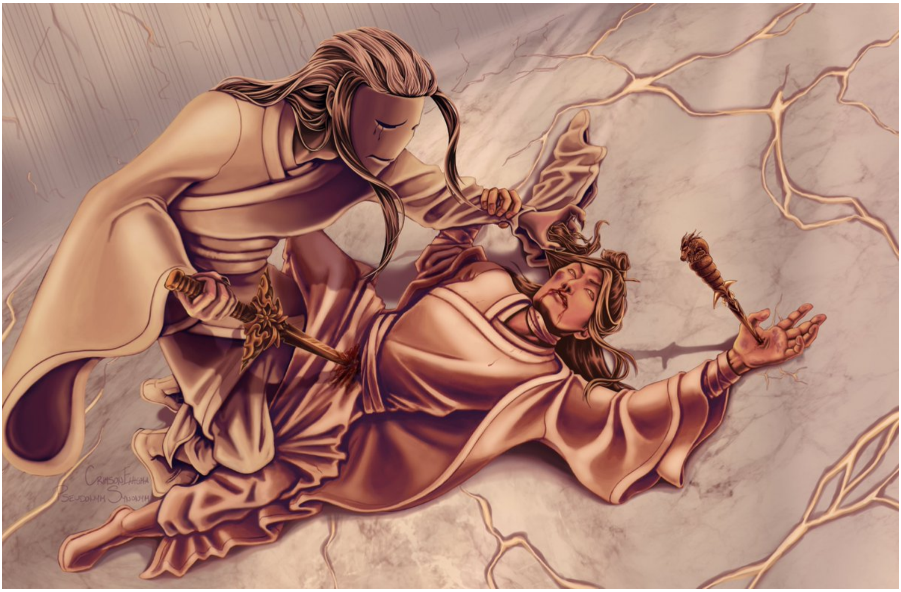
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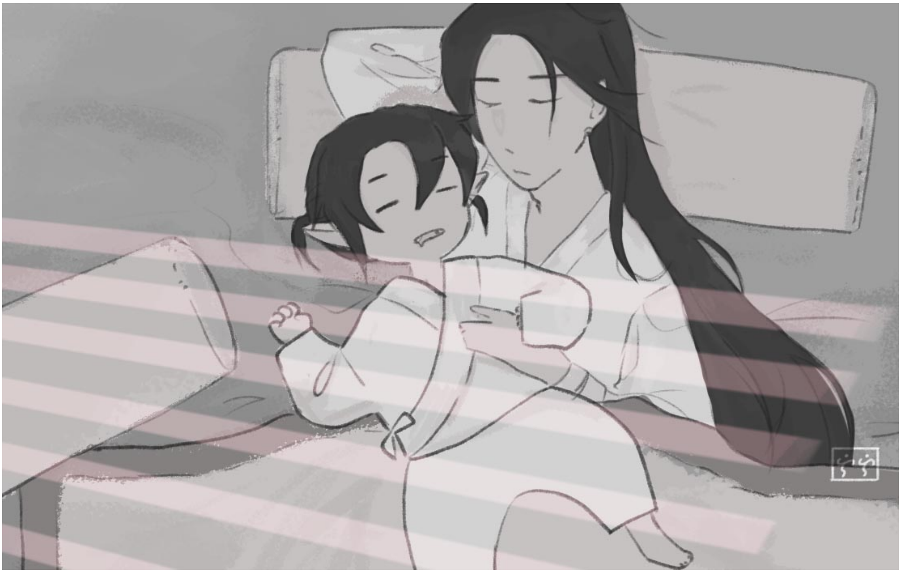
(XIE LIAN + BABY REN SONG)



LILI

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you all so much for following this story! I'll say the rest in the afterword
>
> xoxo, Evie

Afterword / Q & A

Chapter Summary

More will be added to this over time, but for now, here is a note from me and a few questions and answers. I know it might seem excessive, but for a fic this long doing things like this helps me stay organized!

Afterword

First, I want to thank all of you so much for taking the time to read and support this story! I know it's extremely long and that it isn't perfect, but it's one of the most ambitious writing projects I've undertaken, I've gained a lot of confidence, and I've learned so much from it! Writing is a skill you have to practice in order to improve—and while I don't think I'm perfect, and I still have lots of areas where I want to grow and improve, I do think that this story helped me grow a lot as a writer! And I never would have had the motivation to continue to the end without so much kind words of encouragement and support!

I would also like to thank all of the artists who made pieces for this story, people who wrote inspired fics, made edits on TikTok, or just recommended the story to your friends! It created what I can only describe as a community around this story, and I've loved getting the chance to speak to and get to know many of you. Thank you to all the translators who have taken on this behemoth of a project, bringing it to even more people—and thank you to Imaginary Canvas for their beautiful comic inspired by the series! I cannot even begin to explain how flattered, honored, and humbled I have been by all of it.

This story was so special to me, and I will always be grateful to all of you who stuck it out with me, some from the very first chapter. I know this must seem like I take myself a little too seriously, but I worked on this project every day for ten months, and now that it's over I almost feel the need to add a postmortem.

I know it’s silly to be so emotionally attached to a fanfiction—but I can’t help as though I’m leaving an old friend behind. But I hope to keep going, to keep improving, and I would be forever grateful to those of you who come along for the ride.

By Heaven Official’s Blessing, No Paths Are Bound.

xoxo, Evie

Questions Submitted via Ao3 and Twitter

Will there be a sequel?

In short, yes. First, I plan on writing several extras in the form of oneshots that will trace events in the post canon. But after that I plan on writing another long-fic in the same universe that will center around MDZS. Eventually I'd also like to write one centered around SVSSS too to round it all out, but I'm taking things one step at a time for now!

Did you think it was confusing making the title of this fic the title of the third novel?

In retrospect, I absolutely do, but unfortunately, this was not intentional. I read the fan translation by Suika prior to the Seven Seas translation being licensed, and as I think many people can empathize with, I didn't actually know the names of the individual novels when I started writing this story. I just really enjoyed that phrase from the books, it seemed very central to the story to me, so I chose that as a title. This is pretty on theme for me, because you know how a lot of Ao3 authors say, 'Sorry, I'm bad with summaries?' That's me, but with titles. I'm terrible at naming things, it haunts me day and night.

How did you come up with the concept for No Paths Are Bound?

Initially I was intrigued by the cursed shackles, and the role they play in TGCF. I also couldn't help but wonder how differently Book 4 would have played out if Xie Lian was blind. Originally, my only intention was to write drabble exploring that—and once Hong-er's death unfolded, I kept going. Then, by the end of a week, I had rewritten TGCF Book 4, and I didn't want to stop. Other people didn't want me to stop, either. That continued on with writing Hua Cheng's backstory and the 800 year gap, and by then I had written so much new lore and added enough new plotlines that I wanted to round the story out and into its conclusion!

What is Hua Cheng's communication password in No Paths Are Bound?

This can really be a death of the author kind of question, just because I don't think there is any answer that could satisfy the hype around it (in TGCF canon, at least.) But I wrote it with the mindset that it is something along the lines of 'fuck me.'

Is Shi Wudu Qing Yuan's Reincarnation? Is Hua Cheng the reincarnation of the original San Lang?

From my reading experience, lots of xianxia novels cover the topic of reincarnation very differently depending on the world in which they take place—in No Paths Are Bound, most people have very little connections to their past lives, and it's impossible to know who you once were. I won't confirm or deny whether or not those two are reincarnations, because I think it's really more enjoyable if that's left up to the reader. What I will confirm however is that Zhang Wei, Zhao Beitong's first son who died in infancy, is later reincarnated as Wei Wuxian.

What was engraved on the bottom of the hairpin Pei Ming gave Shi Wudu?

"From the Scar." It's a saying that used to be spoken often by soldiers of Xuli, basically stating that strength grows from scar tissue.

Were there any alternative endings or did you change anything for how you expected No Paths Are Bound to go?

I think the biggest thing (tw// sexual assault) that I changed was that Bai Wuxiang was actually going to sexually assault Xie Lian while posing as Feng Xin—but I ended up deciding that it didn't work for the story line, and it felt like the wrong direction to go in.

Out of every character, which did you enjoy writing the most?

Shi Wudu and Mu Qing would be in a tie for that one! I love writing sharp and thorny characters with lots of subtext, and TGCF canon leaves a LOT of leeway with how you can write their internal thought processes and motivations.

Did you ever think you weren't going to finish No Paths Are Bound? Are you surprised it's this long?

Yes and yes. I almost stopped while writing the 'Way of Older

Brothers' chapters because I just didn't think anyone was interested in reading about it. I'm glad I kept going! And I initially only thought the story was going to be ten chapters long!

Are there any arcs you would change/add if you could?

I would definitely cover more with book 2 looking back on it, especially with regards to Feng Xin—and I would have written Ling Wen and Bai Jing's backstory in the 800 year gap.

Did HC and XL ever figure out they were in each other's dreams?

Hua Cheng did, post-canon—but Xie Lian still can't remember his for the most part.

For MDZS, are we starting off in the past like in NPAB?

Yes, we are! I love the way MXTX uses flashbacks, but it's easier for me to write in a more linear timeline.

With the MDZS sequel, will you be doing the pairing of LXC and JGY?

I don't know, to be honest! I love the novels and their adaptations, but I haven't read a ton of fanfiction yet that wasn't heavily wangxian focused. For that reason, I don't really have a lot of firm side ships in that fandom that I like, and haven't made many firm decisions for what pairings are going in the sequel. Aside from wangxian of course—and I also really enjoy Sangcheng, so that ship will be in it for sure!

Why was there such a heavy focus on children in the epilogue?

I find that, while the genre is moving forward in so many ways (there are actual happy endings in queer stories for example, something that just wasn't happening decades ago)—it's still not the norm to show LGBT characters growing older, getting married, having children. Those stories exist, but they aren't as common—especially not in BL. One personal fact about me, the author, is that I have two fathers. And it's important to me as a gay person—raised by gay men—to show that being gay isn't always synonymous with being estranged from your family, and that what we perceive as the happy ending with a husband, dog, and a few kids isn't a heteronormative concept. As a fic writer there isn't much I can do to chip away at that—but I try, and it's a common theme throughout my stories.

How did Mu Qing share his past with Feng Xin and Xie Lian?

(Content Warning for Answer: Rape, Childhood Sexual Abuse) This is going to be covered more so in an extra that surrounds Fengqing and their relationship, but Mu Qing had a panic attack a few months after the final battle—and in the midst of that, he admitted to Feng Xin that he had been raped multiple times by Qi Rong's father over an extended period. Mu Qing and Xie Lian have not had as explicit of a conversation about it, but Xie Lian was able to infer quite a bit from what he overheard in the Inn, and what Mu Qing told him before they were attacked by Jun Wu during the final battle.

How did you make the links between all of the characters and their background stories?

For a lot of it, the framework actually exists in TGCF canon, I just fleshed it out and expanded on it more. I love the novels fiercely, but I would sometimes feel frustrated by how interesting the side characters were, but we learned so little about them. I think the starkest example of this would be the way I wrote Shi Wudu and Shi Qingxuan's backstories in No Paths Are Bound, because a significant amount of it was just expanded from references made in canon. It's canon that the Shi family was tormented by the Reverend of Empty Words since Shi Qingxuan's birth, and its canon that their parents died when the brothers were very young. There is also an observation made in Book 5 that Shi Wudu's downfall was to some extent orchestrated by Jun Wu because he had become a threat to his power. The fandom often portrays him as a very cruel, villainous character—and I understand why—but when you look at the bare bones of his circumstances in the novel, I actually found quite a bit of tragedy and a potential for heroism in it.

Another character where the backstory takes major divergence—Mu Qing's—was done in the way that it was, because I always thought a lot of his behaviors that tend to be perceived negatively were very similar to trauma responses from victims of abuse. There is nothing in canon that suggests that he was abused the way that he was in this story, but the details of him having a dead father, younger siblings to support, and struggling to survive are all true. Children in positions like that are far more vulnerable to being preyed upon. CSA is an extremely personal subject to me, and I find it cathartic to explore the impacts and the recovery process through storytelling. Aside from the abuse, I also wanted to take advantage of the third person omniscient point of view I was writing in to highlight how difficult Xie Lian and Mu Qing's circumstances were, and that there was more nuance in their relationship.

Jun Wu also had big changes in his background story—and the reason for that was simply that his story and the way it was written was one of the only things in TGCF canon that I disagreed with, because it always felt like there was such a severe disconnect from Bai Wuxiang's actions in Book 4—which were blatantly indefensible—and the way the narrative treats him after he's revealed to be the same person as Jun Wu. The two characters never felt like the same person to me, and I found Bai Wuxiang far more compelling as a villain, so I decided to shift the story into a direction that both highlighted the disconnect between the two while also bringing the dark underside to the character more into the light. And that is not a criticism of TGCF at all—if I didn't love and respect the story as much as I do, I wouldn't have created a project like this—but it was just a fun creative exercise for me to explore!

How did you create your OCs?

I grew up in an era where self-insert OCs were the peak cringe factor that anyone could add to a fanfic, so for a long time, I didn't. But as I started writing my own original stories more, I began to feel a little more comfortable with the character creation process. And I often find that, when you want to bridge a gap between something that's canon and what you want to happen in your story, you don't have to twist canon characters into a pretzel to make it work—sometimes, it makes sense to add new characters in there. When I add OCs in any story, it's typically because I see a gap where the character would fit naturally, and because there isn't a canon character that could fulfill that role.

The first and most obvious character is Zhao Beitong, who was created initially for the purpose of fleshing out Hua Cheng's backstory. MXTX is intentionally vague about it, wanting the character to be mysterious—and works that to great effect within the novels. But in No Paths Are Bound, that meant I needed to be creative in writing his backstory. He wasn't formally trained in cultivation, and was only a foot soldier in the army—so how did he gain the skills to become a Ghost King? To me, the most obvious answer was that he had a teacher, and it made the most sense to me that he would have learned those skills in Mount Tonglu. So, I was left with a situation where I needed to create a character that was a fixture in a location where Ghosts routinely slaughter each other until only one remains. There's a point in the novels where Hua Cheng explains that each of the mountains in Wuyong has a name that corresponds to a stage in life, and it was heavily implied that Mount Tonglu was meant to represent birth. And the more I thought about it, the process of creating a Ghost King felt almost gestational. So, I thought to myself; What if the driving force behind Mount Tonglu is a mother? What if she was the one who taught Hua Cheng his skills? There wasn't a canon character who could have filled that gap who *also* would have had ties to the Kiln. Mei Nianqing was as close as anything as I could think of, but it didn't make sense to me that he would help Hua Cheng, or even be present in that scenario.

That was when I knew I had to make a new character, and when I stopped to think about it…The only substantial mother figure in TGCF is Xie Lian's (for obvious reasons.) But when it comes to fathers…Jun Wu is the first father figure I think of in TGCF, not the King of Xianle. That made me think that I wanted this new character to have been Jun Wu's former wife, and I wanted them to have had children together. The story developed naturally from that point, because so often we're shown these intelligent, heroic men who live and suffer in these stories…but often they climb on the backs of women to get there, and they never credit the women in their lives for their support, or their success. Stories that don't center around women can still show gender disparities and prejudice, and I really wanted to take the choice to show that.

Shuo's character initially wasn't meant to have the as much plot relevance as he would later come to by the end of the story. Initially, characters like Shuo, Bao, Yanlin, Xiang, and Fai, were created because we simply don't have a cast of characters to place around Hua Cheng after he ascends as a Ghost King, and He Xuan and Yin Yu didn't come around for quite some time. And I think since the canon shows him as so solely focused on Xie Lian, it might feel a little unnatural to see him interacting with and having attachments to other characters—but it wouldn't be a very interesting story if he spent 800 years in a dark room by himself, staring at the wall. And of course he *does* look for Xie Lian—but I wanted to explore what he's like when he *isn't* around Xie Lian. TGCF is told solely from Xie Lian's point of view, so we *only* see the side of Hua Cheng that is on display around him. But if you listen to how other characters describe his actions over the years, it's a mixed bag. The Heavens make him seem like a blood thirsty madman—but if you read closely in the scene where Xie Lian and Hua Cheng are stuck in Qi Rong's Inn in Book 3, and you listen to the mortal cultivators complain about him…many of his actions actually come off as fair, and considerate—even when Xie Lian wasn't involved at all.

I couldn't really imagine Hua Cheng with a 'best friend' or anything like that—I didn't think he would necessarily be willing to allow someone into his life that way. Xiang and Fai were meant to explain the gambling background and the birth of the gambler's den—as well as why the Shi family would later become so cursed, and while Hua Cheng had good relationships with both of them, that didn't necessarily show off a different side to him. So, I asked myself— "Is there a character in a position where Hua Cheng wouldn't push them away, and they could get close to him?" And the most obvious answer to me was a child that was dependent on him.

That was the initial motivation between creating Bao, Shuo, and Yanlin. On one hand because they gave me an opportunity to display a softer side of Hua Cheng without Xie Lian necessarily needing to be present—but there was a little more to it. There are already trios in TGCF like the Xianle trio and the three tumors—and the idea of carrying that through to three, low level ghosts was bittersweet to me. Initially, my plan was to kill all of them off. Which I did initially with Yanlin—which was meant to display the struggle for Hua Cheng, who even as someone who is undead, still has to watch people come and go from his life. Holding onto this world for someone precious to him, but that person is constantly being kept away from him. Bao's death was always intended to show the continued animosity between Hua Cheng and Qi Rong, but I still had Shuo left, and I was wondering what to do with him.

Initially, my plan was to make him age to the point of being middle-aged and pair him off with Jian Lan (which is hilarious to consider now) and end up as a step father of sorts to Cuo Cuo, because I thought that would make for a slightly more satisfying ending. But it felt a little too strange to me to jump from a character who had been portrayed as a child to a grown man—and if I did, I'd lose the reason I placed those children around Hua Cheng in the first place; to show a softer, paternal side to him. So, I made him a teenager once we got to the time period of Book One. The name "Autumn Twilight Shrouding Forests" was taken from a classical Chinese poem—because all of the Calamity Titles sound lyrical, and I'm no poet. But it's also a direct reference to his time spent trapped by Lang Ying on the forests of Mount Tonglu, and the Autumn reference comes directly from being raised by Hua Cheng, who is strongly associated with that season. I never planned on pairing him of with Lang Qianqiu—their chemistry was just surprisingly good, and I liked the dynamic, so I took the plot from there. The plan was for Shuo to be dispersed on the Terrace of Cascading Wine and not come back—but I thought that might take too much attention from the importance of the Blackwater Arc. After that, I planned on killing him off when he confronted Bai Wuxiang on Mount Tonglu—but I felt like it would be too much of a downer to have Hualian finally get their happy ending, and now they're left mourning their adopted child. It felt a little too cruel. And if I was going to bring him back—the only way that made sense was to make him forged into a new Calamity, so here we are!

If you ever look at Shuo's character and think he seems a little too informal, or you find yourself empathizing with him—that's intentional. He's meant to be a stand in within No Paths Are Bound for the common people. He wasn't rich, or a prince. He didn't work in a palace or win any battles. He was just a normal child in Xianle, and by creating him and humanizing him so much, it's meant to bring forth all of the pain and sorrow that Bai Wuxiang's actions caused. Because there were millions of other Shuos, Baos, and Yanlins in Xianle—who never did anything wrong, and still had to suffer from the carnage caused by people with incredible amounts of power and privilege. It's easy to brush over the mass deaths of blank identities from centuries ago—but it's harder when they have names, faces, and personalities. That was also why he had such a meaningful exchange with Bai Wuxiang towards the end—it's meant to be an almost allegorical backlash to his crimes against the weak as a whole.

How did you name your OCs?

As I'm sure has probably become abundantly clear to any native speakers who have read this story: I am not. In fact, my understanding of mandarin (even though I am trying very hard to learn) is poor. This makes naming Chinese characters difficult, because there is so much deeper linguistic and cultural context behind a character's name than you can originally realize. I did my best to research name meanings for important characters to ensure that I picked nothing that meant something embarrassing, and I would enter the names in social media databases to make sure people who had those names actually existed (that's usually a good sign) and went from there. But I was not always successful in this effort. (For example, I learned from my friends who are native speakers after the fact that the name 'Hua Ming' is essentially the Chinese equivalent of Timmy Turner, and that ruined my life a little bit.)

Another point in my naming that is likely controversial is the fact that Hua Ming and Hua Bolin seem to be named after other characters. Hua Ming does not use the same character's as Pei Ming to spell his name, so they are similar but different--and in Hua Bolin's case, I assumed that since the ancestor was so far removed (several thousand years worth) that it wouldn't really count as a point of disrespect and/or bad luck, but if that was incorrect of me I do apologize!

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